Revisionist powers are driving the world’s crises

By Gideon Rachman

China is likely to emerge the challenger to the US-dominated global system

The headlines are dominated by regional crises – in Ukraine, in Iraq and in the South China Sea. But is there a common thread that ties together these apparently unconnected events?

One global theory is advanced by Walter Russell Mead, a professor at Bard College, in a recent piece for Foreign Affairs, entitled “The Return of Geopolitics”. Prof Mead’s piece, together with a rejoinder by Professor John Ikenberry of Princeton University, offers a way of thinking through current patterns in world politics.

The shape of the world order that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union is fairly easy to define. Its key characteristics included a globalised economic system, functioning multilateral institutions and – most important of all – an unchallenged role for the US as the most powerful player.

The debate is about whether that system is now under threat. Prof Mead asserts that “China, Russia and Iran never bought into the geopolitical settlement that followed the Cold War and they are making increasingly forceful attempts to overturn it”. The crisis in Ukraine, which was taking shape as Prof Mead wrote his article, provides a vivid illustration of his thesis. Russia’s anger with the post-1991 settlement has led it formally to annex Crimea. China’s increasingly assertive territorial claims and Iran’s obvious dissatisfaction with the regional order in the Middle East form the other pillars of the argument. Prof Mead calls these three countries “revisionist powers” and argues that while “they haven’t overturned the post-Cold War settlement但他们已经将一个不受挑战的状态转变为一个受挑战的状态”.

Prof Ikenberry responds that “Mead’s alarmism is based on a colossal misreading of modern power realities”. As far as he is concerned, “China and Russia are not full-scale revisionist powers, but part-time spoilers at best”. The US, he points out, has “military partnerships with over sixty countries, whereas Russia counts eight formal allies and China has just one (North Korea)”. All told, the “military capabilities aggregated within this US-led alliance system outweigh anything that China or Russia might generate for decades to come”.

America is also the beneficiary of favourable geography because it is “the only great power not surrounded by other great powers”. The US also promotes ideas with global appeal, while Russia and China “have no appealing brand”.

http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/fb9a5ba6-fd4d-11e3-96a9-00144feab7de.html?siteedition=intl
If Russia fails to escalate the Ukrainian crisis, it could yet be argued that the Putin government decided the costs of a full-scale confrontation with the west were too high.

Above all, however, Prof Ikenberry believes that the so-called “revisionist powers” are not really revisionists at all. They will not challenge the American-led world order because, ultimately, they benefit from it. He argues that “Although they resent that the United States stands at the top of the current geopolitical system, they embrace the underlying logic of that framework, and with good reason. Openness gives them access to trade, investment, and technology from other societies.” What is more, Russia and China are big powers with vetoes at the UN. Their interests are protected by the current system because – “they are geopolitical insiders”.

So which of these two analyses is more convincing? I should declare an interest. Back in 2010, I published a book called Zero-Sum World that predicted increasing geopolitical competition between the west and the governments in Beijing and Moscow. It always seemed likely to me that a relative decline in American power would provoke challenges to the US-led world order. So, naturally, I am sympathetic to Prof Mead’s arguments that current political developments do indeed demonstrate the failure of the west’s efforts to “shift international relations away from zero-sum issues toward win-win ones”.

That said, the debate is hardly settled. The rise in tensions in Ukraine and in the seas around China seem to fit the zero-sum thesis neatly. But neither Russia nor China has yet made a definitive break with the US-dominated global system. Indeed, if Russia fails to escalate the Ukrainian crisis, it could yet be argued that the Putin government – faced with sanctions – decided that the costs of a full-scale confrontation with the west were too high.

Iran more obviously matches the profile of an outsider, revisionist power. On the other hand the Iranian regime, impoverished by sanctions, seems to be trying to break its way back into the international system, by seeking a deal over its nuclear programme.

Over the long run, China is surely the most important potential challenger. Unlike Russia it is a rising power and, by some measures, now the world’s largest economy.

Beijing has not yet attempted anything as reckless as the seizure of Crimea. And China adopts a lower profile on global issues outside its region than Russia does. But a pattern of more assertive Chinese behaviour in disputes with its neighbours, including some American allies, is now obvious.

Whether China is truly seeking to remake the global order or simply to become more assertive, within the current framework, is a debate for the seminar room. What does seem clear is that China’s traditional emphasis on economic growth is now increasingly accompanied by more nationalistic postures on political and security issues. That, in turn, is leading to an increase in tensions with China’s neighbours and with the US.

You can call that the “return of geopolitics”, or you can call it the rise of a “zero-sum world”. But whatever the terminology, it looks like a dangerous trend that is gathering momentum.

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as told us, people ALWAYS play with fire - be that of war or the stock market.

DonWilliams

Sigh. Humanities majors.

"Now if the estimates made in the temple before hostilities indicate victory it is because calculations show one’s strength to be superior to that of his enemy; if they indicate defeat, it is because calculations show that one is inferior. With many calculations, one can win; with few one cannot. How much less chance of victory has one who makes none at all! By this means I examine the situation and the outcome will be clearly apparent."

~Sun Tzu

I don’t see any hard data and numbers here. Much less ..er.. math.

Richard Gordon

Superb column. While I have the greatest respect for Prof Mead views, I am more inclined to agree with Prof Ikenberry. Of the three countries, China is the country most likely to succeed in carving out a new world order. On the other hand, even if it could, would it really want to? Moreover, I believe it is making fundamental mistakes in its relationships with its neighbors of making unilateral demands of to give up sovereignty over territories. What ever the mistakes of the US foreign policy, they have never done the same with the rest of the world. For that reason, the rest of the world and the US system will prevail. China will no doubt try to improve its position in the current system, but that can be easily achieved within the existing framework.

John Steed

A country’s citizens who are able, whether consensually, collectively or otherwise, to restrict their families to one child in order to avoid global overpopulation is a State whose ideas are to be reckoned with.

Don10984408

Why is there an assumption that because the US is the most powerful nation, that this creates some form of “global order?”

Only mutually agreed goals and standards of behavior to achieve them would do that. The weakness of the UN as a world body, especially relative to military alliances like NATO, highlights the absence of a world order of any sort. Trade is commerce, not governance.

behcettin

It’s not all that complicated really. China has about 4x population of US. So, if China were 1/2 as successful as US (in GDP per capita), it’d be 2x size of US -- no partners need inquire.

But for any of this to happen China desperately needs natural resources. US strategists have figured this out very well this by 2000, and one would be incredibly naive to think that the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan (along with further expansion into Central Asia) had nothing to do with putting a wedge into China’s land based resource stream (oil and other resources).

Russia and China know this just as well, yet there are facing the dilemma that their previous isolation hasn’t been a splendid one. Now we’re at a point where the West (led by US) are bullying this duo into further concessions and trying to bleed them in the long term without cutting them off the system.

DRSH31

We have to stop assuming that China will make all the same mistakes the west has made! maybe they learned what not to do from us! I don’t believe for a second that China wants to rule the world and I don’t believe they will try to start an empire like the British, French Portuguese, Dutch etc did.

I think they are more about building a sustainable future for themselves and for the rest of the world.
The issue the US has is that it does not want any other countries with a differing mind set rising to power. I suppose its about trust! I think its human nature not to trust. We do not want to give too much or allow another to succeed for fear that we will lose what we have.

With regards to Russia, I don't think they are a threat to the world order. They certainly do not have the economic strength to challenge the US and I don't believe they ever will have. The threat from them is the same threat that always generates within the west, the threat of trying to gain an advantage by force!

Moogle

@DRSH31 I would be more cautious against to guess how Chinese or American government to behave in the future in terms of being rational. Even in Chinese history, China had overestimated its own powers (like during the wars with Korea and British East Indian Company in the 7th century and the 19th century).

Failure to recognise that people often fail to recognise past failures is a major fallacy. They always think this time will be different... in the end, it isn't different.

Andre Barsony

I would call it the good, old "use of nationalism for the internal consolidation of totalitarian regimes". Period. I agree that it is dangerous because it can lead to unintended consequences but it would be a mistake to attribute it to anything else.

Yusuf ISIK

It is striking and worrying to note that there is no mention of Europe in an evaluation comprising the main forces and trends in world politics by such an articulate writer as Gideon Rachman and the pieces of texts he relates. Maybe this is due to the need to focus on the particular points highlighted in the article. Still, despite its recent serious problems, the EU and in general Europe need to be counted among the fundamental forces affecting the world's perspectives, including with respect to universal values.

about_truth

@Yusuf ISIK

Of course, no need to mention the Europe anymore, because, Europe is just another junior foot soldier of the US in the world - whatever the US decided, the Europe will follow without questions asked....

Only once when the French asked questions about the Iraq WMD stuff, ended up the French Fry was renamed as "Freedom Fry" on the US parliament restaurant manual...LOL

O.J.

History is written by victors, therefore, to call some powers revisionist today is in effect calling them challengers who are keen to revise the current version of history to define the future course of history.

Prof Mead's entire thesis is merely identifying powers that want to change world history. The question then is whether these powers will be successful in changing the course of world history? Here, evidence is mixed: ex-soviet countries look back at Soviet Union, not modern day Russia as a template for the future. Within China itself, most people (not in the cities) look back to a bygone era where capitalism with Chinese characteristics had not taken root.

If there is a threat to American hegemony, it is not going to be from China or Russia, but from ideas which are far more to the left (Piketty) than the current regimes in America/China/Russia embody.

Alpha Male

@O.J. Indeed, a modern 'Roosevelt' may yet arise, despite the effects of QE to date.
Dear Gideon,

Congratulations on spurring a very lively debate over these issues, even if the comments tend to be of variable quality.

It really is all about balance of power politics though, isn't it? in the 90s, there was one dominant superpower / hegemon, the US, and thus there wasn't much room for others to seek revisions to the global order (whether those be in terms of territory, privileges, recognition, political or economic gains, or whatever).

However, throughout history, it is those who are satisfied with an existing situation (or fear uncertainty or deterioration) who are for the status quo, and those who wish to make changes for whatever reason who become revisionist.

Europeans are even more status quo than the US (which has a strong adventurist streak) because they fear they have the most to lose, and wish to keep what they have. Up and comers - either real or imagined ones who overstretch themselves - invariably want something, and while a positive sum outlook can create win-wins, all humans measure themselves against others, so what I have relative to what you have comes into play as well. If the balance of power is in my favor and I can get more, then the incentive is very strong to do so. If not, then I best not try to do too much and instead try to keep what I have (e.g. status quo).

So-called 'Revisionists' tend to get the bad rap - the word certainly has bad connotations - but perhaps the status quo is not as just and fair as status quo powers like to believe. It also depends on the issue of course, as there is a huge difference between annexing another country's territory on the one hand, and seeking a stronger presence at the IMF or fairer free trade rules on the other.

Following up on my earlier post, I would first submit that what is referred to as "world order" or "global order" can with equal validity be referred to helluva of a global disorder (with its caliphate of jihadis) chiefly of America's making.

China this year would become the world's largest economy by PPP terms. It still has much distance to cover though and needs a peaceful environment to develop further, and such a peaceful environment is its essential need. Getting into a war of any kind would not help, and neither would an unstable neighbourhood. But its sheer size dictates some actions as well.

China's view, validated by its experience, is that there is more than one valid set of socio-economic policies and political models. It does not wish to question the policies that others follow, and it does not accept others questioning the Chinese path. It sees this mutual tolerance as in instance of peaceful coexistence.

Its size mandates actions to ensure its interests. Its existing situation in multilateral institutions (IBRD, IMF, WTO, ADB, Shangri La dialogue, etc) leaves it with little say. It is therefore visibly in the process of developing alternative institutions which would properly reflect its concerns as it sees them. In the field of currency we see the CMIM, widespread bilateral currency swaps, and renminbi centres with the end result (or the whole) not yet in sight. In the field of trade we see a rush to sign FTAs or equivalent. In the field of financial assistance we note its announcement of an infrastructure bank. In regional security we see the SCO and CICA. Yet others may come up.

In context of the neighbourhood, China seems to believe that a prosperous neighbourhood provides for greater security. We see this in economic and communication linkages, where China frequently gives more than it gets. Of course China gains in influence.

In terms of territory (I do not wish to get into the merits of claims here), Chinese view is that this comprises a core interest and sees it conterminous with sovereignty. We had the Hainan incident where America ended up with offering "two apologies" and footing the bill for board and lodging of the aircraft crew as well as the packing and freight charges for the aircraft.

China has been attacked from its coastal areas in 19th century. It will therefore continue to project its interests along its coastal areas. It does so in small incremental steps careful that the action does not lead to armed hostilities. But it is not claiming land in the middle of nowhere thousands of miles away. a la Pitcairn Islands, Diego Garcia, etc.

I do not see the current situation as China v the west. Firstly, I think the west itself consists of two blocks that is the US and EU, besides Japan. Secondly, I can see much visible effort both in EU as well in China to avoid confrontational issues and cooperate for mutual economic benefit. This is my tuppence worth on China, and I shall do a separate post on Japan.

@Realist Keep 'em coming!
What do you think? That a nation of 300 million should set the “global rules” and be able to intimidate and coerce the entire planet of 7 billion for forever? Sounds like an American wet dream to me.

That nations like China, Russia, and to a lesser extent Iran are now trying to live by their own rules instead of those set by a nation far far away should not be surprising. The onus is on America to accept the new reality and to carefully manage its relative decline. Stop bamboozling Ukraine and the Philippines into thinking that they can poke at Russia’s or China’s eyes with the promise of US military support. Instead, coax Ukraine into paying her overdue gas bills. And coax the Philippines to discuss issues calmly with the Chinese, instead of blowing it out of proportion. The US is as much to blame as the Russians or the Chinese for fanning the so-called crisis. As for the Middle East, how’s the nation-building project going on there?

As for that sixty-nation alliance that Prof Ikenberry trumpets as a testament to US-led military might, I can only laugh because it seems that only the US is putting all the money and effort while the others are just riding along with it. Even so, the agendas of each of these nations are not necessarily always aligned with that of the US. Example, France still going ahead with that Mistral ship to Russia. Hmmm, a paper tiger can still look scary though.

People have to wake up from the dream that the USA is appealing to the world. survey shows time and time again that a plurality of people think the usa is the greatest threat to world peace. usa - 24% china -8%

I think that Prof Ikenberry underestimates China’s obsession with its sovereignty, its passion for being a rule-maker and not a rule-taker. I also believe Prof Ikenberry vastly underestimates how thoroughly sick the American people are of micromanaging the world’s affairs.

@David Seaton I am none too keen on any “great powers” hypothesis whatever the source or whatever the view of the role of “great powers”, but Mr. Seaton is likely correct.

While Mr. Ikenberry apparently believes there is something admirable about this:

"The US, he points out, has ‘military partnerships with over sixty countries’"

many USA citizens, all who pay attention and go beyond self-interested propaganda, think just the opposite. Similarly, “because, ultimately, they benefit from it.”

This is a sweeping statement that I doubt many average people in the world agree with.

This statement from Mr. Rachman himself “if Russia fails to escalate the Ukrainian crisis” is ludicrous. It is the USA government, without any backing from its citizenry and despite the blanket propaganda from the government itself, that has worked since the dissolution of the soviet system more than 20 years ago to sow discord in former soviet republics, notably in Ukraine, and finally has facilitated a coup d’état in Ukraine with consequent violence and turmoil.

What would China offer the world if it had its “proper” place?

How would the world be better?

I think and hope that China would “offer” what it’s been doing in Asia/Africa/Latin America. A “nation of traders”, China would look to 2-way development of commerce …insist on negotiations in settlement of disputes. Non-interference in other sovereigns affairs. Beijing would know that bombing others’ not the way forward. Right or wrong, things will not always turn to one’s liking. Others need not always bend to one’s will. Harmony will not always be the given. War is never justified except on defensive ground. All wars unleash destructive forces, it’s inhumane.
RiskManager
@naoyb @chgeen China certainly does a good job supporting the North Korean regime. Is this the Chinese world you envision, one devoid of any morality and run on purely mercantile interests?

about_truth
So, you want North Korea to be like the Iraq? with millions of people being starved and killed and suffers subhuman livings simply because of you do not agree with their political leaders way of conduct the governing business?.....If so you are no slightly better than Saddam or Jing Zhen En, etc.

Political system in different countries may be different, the way to improve the situation is show those running a not effective governing system teh better way of governing through sincere engagement in friendly discussions and pursvations, not inventing a lie to launch a war and dropping bombs.....

There are no 'good wars' - in any war, it will be the ordinary people in the war zone suffers the most, not the leaders of any war party....

RiskManager
@about_truth @RiskManager @naoyb @chgeen Hmm, millions starving in Iraq? Are you confused with Syria where millions are being starved as pacifists the world over wring their hands?

And why must not supporting and sustaining North Korea mean it must then be invaded, something you simply assign to me as a belief with no other basis than your own prejudice? Why not take a good look at yourself first? Why do you say these things?

As for "good wars", would you say fighting say the Nazis as they were industrially slaughtering 6 million Jews, Gypsies, Communists and homosexuals was not a "good war", a "just war"?

I would say that was a "good war". If you agree then there are such things as good wars. You might work back through your ideas from this starting point. At some point in your journey you will find the transition from "good war" to unjust war.

As for Iraq, why not ask Iraqi's? You can ask Iraqi's as they have the freedom to say what they want without fear of oppression. Or at least the ones not being brutalised by ISIS do.

Nothing is black, nothing is white, everything is grey.

I propose that blanket pacifism in all cases as you propose is simplistic and leads to human misery on a grand scale. I would also agree if you said that war is not always the answer, indeed it rarely is the answer. But sometimes, you have to fight. Ask a Christian in Mosul today and please, don't say it is all whoever your bogey man is fault, today is today and whatever the past, today you sometimes have to fight whose ever fault it is that you find yourself there

about_truth

Right, lets talk about Syria.... Is that a direct result from the western supported armed rebellion which turned out to be a long and violent civil war now? without the active western countries' support in the beginning, there would be no Syria civil war in the first place..... Why don't you tell whose money these Syrian rebels are spending? whose arms are these rebels using?... and never mention that the west stirred up Syrian civil war and support the armed rebellions in Syria, including the extremest groups among the rebels, is the cause of the millions suffering in Syria now, ... and also the ISIS reseracted crisis in the Iraq and Syria - where do they regained strength? and how? ....

Syria's problem is almost an exact duplication of the Iraq scenario - a regime led by a person disliked by western political leaders, hence western leaders supported effort to tople the regime... hence lead to Iraq regime been overthrown by teh west direct military invasion resulting a whole mess of people suffering in millions; and Syria regime was trapped in a brutal civil war fighting with armed rebels sponsored and supported by the western countries, still leading to millions people suffering, and the reseraction of the ISIS which regained its strength with the money and arms it gained to fight the Syrian civil war against Syrian's government.....
It is just another typical results of west trying to overthrown a government simply because its leader being not liked by the west, like the Iraq one.... The only thing the west has not done in the Syria case is the direct military invasion like the Iraq one, but the results are the same: millions ordinary people there are suffering.. but not the leaders of the war parties.....

As ask for Iraqis? I think it is you need to ask what the ordinary Iraqis about their lives ! - if they still have a live to talk about, and that may be a long time away.... so when you don't have food and cloth, what your freedom of speech can do? can the slogan of freedom of speech be able to fill your stomach and keep you warm from the cold winter? .... You are live in a plentiful and comfortable conditions and have no idea what those people need more urgently, but for your own selfish political opinions, you invoke for destroy those people’s very lives for your own selfish political point gaining, that is very cruel and brutality to those victims of the violence....

about_truth

@RiskManager

As for teh "good wars" - it does not exist in this world. as for those wars you are talking about. I would not going to fall into your political trap of "political correctness" - you go to look at the whole thing from all aspects of them (not just the propagandas), and form your own judgement....e.g. WWII - just think about the death tolls. Russia, 21 milliom; Germany, 9 milliom; China, 36 millom. France........ what for? anti-Nazis? give me a break please, not such simple propaganda explanation of the WWII please.... it is a political war of dominance of the world powers! just like the WWI, so please learn how to look into the true nature of teh event before draw your conclusions.....

@RiskManager

Aggression is a symbol of uncivilized human behaviour, more civilized the people are, the less aggressive the people become....and the easier to negotiate for settlements for any disputes.... Therefore, there is no place in the 21st Century now, we will still trying to invoke wars wherever there is a problem in the world.....

Even the “drug wars”, has them worked? It seems the drug problem is becoming increasingly bigger and bigger despite the endless “drug wars”... Why?.....the causes of drugs are not resolved, what do wars can achieve? Not much am afraid.....

The “anti-terror war”, has it be able to resolve the terrorist attack problems? ... No, it actually makes the terrorist attack much worse than that of before the anti-terror war started, isn’t it?!... the same reason – the cause for the terror attacks have not been resolved, and the wars only make it confontations bigger and bigger. hence terror attacks become increasingly a threat to everyone nowadays following the anti-terror wars ....

.......... (and that is one of the key problems with the US, it is more like a war monger, and too eager to use military force on any problems identified, hence create a whole messy chaos around the world......

O.J.

@naoyb @chgeen you speak for more than 1.2bn people. Just how did you invent that? Did you patent it at least?

@chgeen

Just think the good lifes since the 1980s to 2000s enjoyed by the western countries....much of it is based on China's engagement into the world economy and supplied with the world with plentiful economically affordable goods to the world .......

Without China's involvement in the world economy, during those 40 years, western countries would never be able to afford to give its population such a massive scale affordable good livings for so long..... (they might have overly did it and end up with too much debts build up in their system, hence the 2008 financial crisis.....)

1. It is always a pleasure to read stuff written by those who possibly “trash” experience. The world seen from ground up though looks roughly as follows.
2. After USSR ended, United States increased its defence spending whilst the Europeans reduced it to benefit from the “peace dividend”. When the time came only US could take up the Balkans, further increasing its military authority over Europe. America it seemed was of the view that military intervention offered the solution to all problems.

3. EU’s efforts to consolidate a newly unstable periphery in its post Soviet East lead to expansion of EU at an unprecedented pace. The new EU members though, the new Europeans, looked more to the US rather than “old Europe”, thus increasing American influence in EU and in NATO.

4. EU became an American ally in the manner of follow the leader, no questions asked. Ms Merkel was denied even the knowledge of the files NSA had on her, and yet remained fully compliant. She had no choice. This outcome was in sharp contrast to European expectations at the end of USSR- the widespread view was that a world of more equal happy nations was on the horizon with greater reliance on UN mechanisms.

5. Whilst Gulf war I (and up to a point Gulf war II) helped the US overcome what is called the Vietnam syndrome (that is that Americans get a bashing when fighting on Asian mainland), what followed in Iraq and Afghanistan was not helpful to the American psyche.

6. Prolonged reliance on military intervention and “nation building” efforts in West Asia drained the American Treasury. The approach had not worked in the desired manner. Mr Obama arguably backtracked, relying on more “cost effective” methods (world wide 24/7 snooping and drones) to take care of American interests, giving up on “nation building”.

7. The Ukraine developments brought up the question of EU’s unstable periphery. Though America was able to push the EU into signing agreements with Ukraine, it was unable to get EU members to see the need for the stiff sanction that it had in view. The Russian position it seemed had offered “old Europe” some leverage vis a vis the US, as military intervention by the US in this case was clearly not a feasible or desirable approach.

8. America can henceforth do what its finances permit. And the question then is how far can the show travel from here on give the shape of America’s public finances.

9. The planned post WW II order is not what obtained in the Cold War era, and neither did that order obtain in the post Soviet world (which became one of an American effort at outright domination). I hope to follow up with a separate post on China.
calculatingly or out of nationalistic zeal have very little concern for the reactions that it will incur on the world. When the US took over global hegemony from GB, it was peaceful not just because of the anglophile factor than everyone assumes, it was because of a common vision of the future (i.e. a world of general peace, free trade and the rule of law). China seems to have determined that this framework, which has enriched it (perhaps more than any other country in the world) is now more limiting than it is beneficial. The problem for China is that it has to crash and break the current system to make that possible and thereby remove the system which has enriched much of the rest of the world. I honestly don't know if China can be amicably incorporated into the current system without the West ceding core principles and appearing to appease. One other major question is how would the rest of America's allies really aid in case of crisis. As an American, no offense to my many European friends but I don't really see you pulling your weight - your can't even guard your own single flank nor do you appear to have the interest. I want to say interesting times we live in, but scary times might be more appropriate if the current course holds. Peace all... enjoy the World Cup!

Professor Ikenberry needs to review his history:
"Openness gives them access to trade, investment and technology" - the pre-WW1 international system was based on free trade "openness" and Germany then had as much to lose as China has to lose today.
Russia and China - insiders with veto at UN - Russia had a veto at the UN throughout the Cold War and a look back to the 1930's and the revisionist powers attitude to the League of Nations might undermine his optimism.

Geopolitical competition has always existed and will always exist. The task of every generation is to prevent the competition turning into the chaos of war.

An article on "revisionist" powers and no mention of Japan?

The opinions presented in the article seem to ignore a very important factor: that we evolved into a globally interconnected and inter-dependent human system.
Each and every individual and nation is tied together as if trapped in the same spider web, or as many people express it we are all sitting on the same boat.
And the boat is sinking because we still do not understand the implications of a global, integral world.
The previous polarized, fragmented, "enemies vs allies" world-view has become obsolete.
This is why the US or the UK for example is losing influence and efficiency not necessarily because they themselves got weaker or due to bad politicians.
In a global integral system only mutually complementing negotiations and action can work, there are no great heroes, great leaders, brokers only equal teamwork.

@ZGHermann Truly we are marionettes holding each others string. Actually this: \url{http://www.illuzia.net/en/videos/clips/g20} (click 'g20' if you end up at "embryo" on general illuzia site) puts in a more "picturesque," and perhaps more accurate and to the point manner.
The 21st century is a world of vast economic, ecology/climate, and social (your Arab "Spring," becomes my Occupy Wall Street, becomes his European riot) mutual dependence. Specifically, economic power is very distributed now. Further, classical military might is greatly weakened by the economic realities, as well as a distribute, unclear enemy, new global terror and insurrection capabilities, and the advent of cyber warfare and mobile WMDs.
When put all together, we find that in the 21st century, power can be modeled as the degradation from simple spheres of influence to a full realization of "fractal basin boundaries." [Some pretty pictures of the math of this are located here: \url{http://www.chaos.umd.edu/misc/...} I'll try to give a basic introduction shortly.]
Where the world was heading in the mid 20th century, and has now passed through, per the basic picture of George Orwell's "1984,"-- is three spheres of influence, Oceania (America/Europe), Eurasia (Soviet Bloc), and Eastasia (China and allies in Far East)--and through client states, local poles of power also began to grow -- but three is already the critical number.
Imagine a metal pendulum on a long thread, if there is a single magnet on a surface below and I release the pendulum from anywhere, it will settle over the magnet. If there are two identical magnets at some distance and I draw a line between them, if release the pendulum to either side, that’s the magnet it will go to.

But say there are three magnets laid out as vertices of an equilateral triangle. One would think that one just draws lines from the center to form 3 equal “pie” pieces—and the pendulum goes to the magnet of a given piece. It may start that way, but if it passes to the side of the given magnet where there is partial cancellation from the magnet closest to that side, the third, farthest magnet, may prove the dominant influence. But on the way over to it, similar cancellations occurs, and cancellations of cancellations, etc. -- forming the fractal basin boundary effect.

Something along these lines has been happening with ever greater speed into the 21st century regarding spheres of influence--and the projection of power from any given entity--including “superpowers” is getting ever weaker.

This has happened in natural communities throughout history, and they joined in an altruistic-like manner to exert a joint, complex control that turned chaos into homeostasis. The human heartbeat, for example, is a complex fractal encompassing muscular and geometrical effects of the heart and circulatory system in a manner to control flows and counter flows at different scales simultaneously. If that control beat begins to simplify towards a simple sine wave, you can bet that the flat line of coronary arrest is coming shortly.

Indeed, we learn learn to work as one mutually responsible team in this very global 21st century world, or we will get to see that flat line the hard way.

Jeannick

@engineer_sci @ZGHermann Your example presuppose a fractal basin with limits of influence, try to think of an explosive substance being stimulated into a new, freer level of entropy, there is a lot of logic in thinking so much nuclear energy now trapped into weapons yearning to go free

who are we to argue? we trapped it in there

shuichi seto

In the process of trying to recreate the new Middle Kingdom, the country with the world’s second largest economy will learn at some point in time that the peripheral subordinates will not follow it in the same way as they did back then.

CharlesSimmmonds

China has real problems in projecting its power...its access to blue water is blocked by a string of actively or latently hostile powers...Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, Vietnam...it does not have good relations with any of its neighbours apart from North Korea, Pakistan and possibly Burma. Even its relations with Russia are problematic as China has never renounced its claim to the Amur region (Outer Manchuria in Chinese terminology) or as far as I am aware to Outer Mongolia, which is still effectively a Russian protectorate.

naoyb

@CharlesSimmmonds

China had 14 unsettled border issues, 13’s been taken care of. All Settled - including the Sino-Russian border. Only border dispute left’s with India.

China’s now occupying part of Indian territory. Beijing had asked for the part of Tibet that imperial Britain had enclosed inside the McMahon line marking off the Indo-Chinese border. Nehru said no.

A border war broke out in 1962. The whole world blamed China for starting the fight, "even the BBC", said former Australian diplomat Gregory Clark. Sitting in his Canberra office, Clark saw live transmission of Indian soldiers first stepping into the Chinese side. It took the world a decade to acknowledge the truth, writes Clark in JapanTimes online.

By that time though, the image of an aggressive China’s been seared into peoples’ mind.
in acknowledging the truth.
to walk across the first steps into drawn

Leah Harvey
@naoyb @CharlesSimmonds You lost me with the first sentence... I assume you mean "Land Border"? And that you place more weight on land borders than sea borders, for some reason.

philip copley

It’s interesting to fold Gideon’s assertion into the contextual history.

The ego of Americans after WWI was enlarged to fit the size of their country; they took a commanding role in world affairs and participated in trading with other countries. The United States fit the definition of a world power now and after WWI. It had the army, the production, and most of all it had the nationalism of a country that was on top of the food chain. Fast forward a few years and America was on its knees economically and the world was beset with marauding expansionism and land lust. France seized Syria, England Cyprus, Germany Poland, Italy Africa, Ireland Ireland.

Flushed with their success against Germany and Japan in 1945, most Americans initially viewed their place in the postwar world with optimism and confidence. Within two years of the end of the war, a new form of international tension—Cold War—emerged to erode that confidence.

The conclusion of the Cold War brought with it an assumed pre-eminence of U.S. power, both soft and hard. But alas, preeminence has morphed itself into global omnipotence.

On the bright side, its darker before the dawn. There was distributed prosperity that followed the wars and filled the interbellum. It seems, when the U.S. is faced with a serious rival, prosperity is more evenly divided because the policies to thwart the rival require the support of the populace. Sharing the prosperity is part of this societal pact in times of external threat. While there is every reason to think this time is different, history’s cheat sheet tells us it never is.

Felix Drost

Ikenberry seems to assume people act rationally.

Rather than charm Vietnam and bring it into a security fold, China angers it and pushes it into an alliance with the US. This Chinese behaviour is not wholly contrary to Ikenberry’s thinking but does put a lot of pressure on it.

China’s like Iran’s leadership is deeply divided between those who wish to maintain power at all costs (even contrary to economic self interest) and those who want to open up and engage the outside world. The former need an enemy (Japan and the US in China’s optics, Israel and the US for Iran). The latter want economic growth, world class institutions and a wealthy middle class nation, their outstretched hand is genuine.

But nothing about China’s provocation of Vietnam is in the interest of China’s global footprint. It would be hugely detrimental to China if Vietnam would return China’s brinkmanship over China’s 9 dotted line claims in kind. China depends on stability in the South China sea and the straight of Malacca for its trade, and much of Chinese trade and almost all of its energy imports sail past the more than 3000 kilometers Vietnamese coastline. And even if Vietnam would refrain from any action it would make Vietnam and others very weary of Chinese motives.

What’s powering the drive for the 9 dotted line other than a petty revanchist foreign policy? China has started to teach its Children about a ‘century of humiliation’ that foreign devils caused. China’s rise is peaceful they say, it only is claiming what already is China’s and what was taken from it. By that yardstick, large parts of Siberia and Mongolia aren’t safe either. The petty egos of revanchist expansionists don’t care about benefits from an American order instituted by European imperialists.

Putin has demonstrated in Ukraine how easy it is to manipulate people when there is no alternative source of information. His approval rating reached 80% over his handling of the Crimea crisis. And the more people invest in that narrative, the less they are inclined to believe in that they have been manipulated. China is going down the same path. Prof. Ikenberry ought to take note.

Jeannick

Felix the relation between China and Vietnam is a very troubled one

Without boring you with two thousand years of it, check the Chinese Vietnamese border war of 79 and the proxy conflict between the Kmers rouge and Vietnam .
Felix Drost

@Jeannick I've referenced the '79 war in many earlier posts. (see https://www.google.com/webhp?q=china+vietnam+site:ft.com+%22felix+drost%22+1979#q=china+vietnam+site:ft.com+%22felix+drost%22+1979 )

Vietnam is at peace now with the US, has always been in a cold war with China. Vietnam has always felt the pressure from the north and is just as paranoid about Chinese intentions as most border nations are. But it certainly is one thing to seek accommodations, another is to fundamentally provoke Vietnam by a territorial grab of what in all fairness ought to be territory under dispute.

Jeannick

@Felix Drost @Jeannick checked you contribution , as always ,it is well worth the reading . I would certainly commend it .

the proxy Cambodian war was a superb example of cold war cynicism at it most repellent , no one , less of all the do gooders NGOs came unblemished from it

about_truth

@Felix Drost @Jeannick

Please don't lie - you know perfectly, Vietnam will never be at peace with the US as long as its VC is staying on power...... So please don't try to manipulate this.

Vietnam may be able to get closer to the US fold for a while when US see the need for it, but the end result will be very much like what the ex-Libya leader got at the end of the day. If Vietnam thinks it can become a US ally and be able to fight with China with the US support, than the VC deserves to become the 2nd Gaddafi at the end and with Vietnam, a 2nd Libya though it may not be called 'Arab Springs' but a "Vietnam whatever"....... US's record on doing such is pretty "good"... the central Asia's colour revolutions; mideast's "Arab Springs"; Europe's "Ukraine revolutions"......so seeing a VC fall in an Asia's "Vietnam whatever" would be a pretty nature thing for the US minds......

about_truth

@Felix Drost

True, very easy to manipulate people, and you knows it better than most of the people, so you are doing just that here....