

**Discerning Revisionism and Status-Quo  
Commitment:  
Comparing China and the United States**

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# What Would the Weatherman Say?

- **Bob Dylan: You Don't Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind is Blowing**
- **Donald Trump: From this Day Forward, It's Going to be Only America First – America First**
- **Xi Jinping: Many of the problems troubling the world are not caused by economic globalization. There was a time when China also had doubts about economic globalization, and was not sure whether it should join the World Trade Organization. But we came to the conclusion that integration into the global economy is a historical trend.**

# Inferring Intention/Motivation Is Hard

- **But this Inference Lies at the Heart of International Relations Discourse**
- **Rational Theorists Point to the Commitment Problem as the Key to Impeding Interstate Settlement**
- **Realists Debate about Balance of Power (Waltz) versus Balance of Threat (Walt)**
- **Liberals Similarly Argue States' Intentions (or Characters) Are Critical in Determining their Behavior (e.g., "Democratic Peace")**
- **Opportunity and Willingness (Most and Starr): Individually Necessary and Jointly Sufficient for Policy Choice (i.e., It Takes both Means and Ends)**

# How Do They Treat Intentions/Motivations?

- **Realists Take the Easy Way Out: By Assuming All States Are Alike (Human Agency Are Trumped by Structural Constraints), and Proclaiming “It Is Better to be Safe than Sorry”**
- **Liberals Claim Domestic Institutions and Culture Shape Intentions/Motivations (Suggesting, for example, Democracies Are More Peaceful)**
- **Constructivists Warn that Knowledge and Power Are Inseparable, and IR Narratives Are Inevitably Products of Social and Political Construction**

# What Do Power Transitionists Say?

- War Is Likely **ONLY** If a Revisionist, Rising Power Approaches or Overtakes a Status- Quo Ruling State
- Revisionism and Status-Quo Orientation Refers to a State's Intention or Motivation to Challenge or Defend the "International Order"
- Current Literature Resorts to Definitional Fiat instead of Taking on the Difficult Task of Determining Intention/Motivation by Empirical Analysis
- That is, They Type Case States, Assuming Ruling States to be *Necessarily* Committed to the "Status Quo" whereas Rising States to be *Almost Always* "Revisionist" (Except for the U.S. when It Was a Rising Power)
- By this Sleight of Hand, Framing Discourse so that Whenever a Rising State Has a Quarrel with a Ruling State, this Dispute Becomes Defined as a *Systemic Challenge* to the *Entire International Community (!)*
- Importantly, Power-Transitionists Take for Granted that the Meaning of "Status Quo" Is Obvious (Commonly Agreed on) – when in Fact It Is Subject to Intense Contestation because States' Different Reference Points!
- For Example, What Was the U.S. or China the Defender or Challenger of "Status Quo" in the Korea War, and Was the U.S. and Soviet Role in the Cuban Missile Crisis?

# Important Clarification and Caution!

- **Again, Revisionism Refers to A State's Acceptance or Rejection of "the Rules of the Game" – or the "International Order," the Ordering Principles of International Society (English School)**
- **This Concept Does NOT Refer to a State's Attempt to Alter the Distribution of Power to Its Advantage, or to Advance its Standing in the Interstate Hierarchy**
- **After All, Which Country Does Not Want to Improve Its Relative Position?**
- **The Concept of Revisionism Would Otherwise be Trite and Obvious – a Truism**
- **It Would Also Make a Rising Power, Ipso Facto, into a Revisionist Power, thus Rendering Power Shifts and Revisionism Redundant and Duplicative in Power-Transition Theory**
- **This Definition Would Also Mean the U.S. Was NOT a Status-Quo Country When It Was Rising, and therefore Poses the Puzzle Why the Anglo-American Transition Was Peaceful**
- **In Reality, All States Can Play Offense and Defense Concurrently – Subverting and Challenging Some Norms in Some Situations (as Norm Entrepreneurs) while Defending Others in Other Situations (e.g., Responsibility to Protect vs. Sovereignty as "Organized Hypocrisy," Libya vs. Rwanda, Self-Determination for Falklands vs. Crimea, "Enhanced Interrogation Technique" vs. Torture)**
- **Thus, Revisionism and Commitment to International Order Are NOT a Binary Matter! They Are NOT Fixed! AND They Are Issue- And Situation-Dependent!**
- **They Should Be Used as Analytic Concepts Rather Deployed as Rhetorical Device (Critically or Approvingly)**

# Shuttling Logic

- **What Is the Rationale for Power Transitionists' Attributions?**
- **Existing Rules Were Established by Ruling or Previously Established States to Benefit Themselves to the Detriment of Latecomers**
- **Latecomers Did Not Have Voice in Setting these Rules**
- **In Short, Ruling or Established States Have the Largest Stake in Preserving the Existing Order, whereas Rising States Are Dangerous Because They Are Gaining Increasing Power to Undermine this Order**
- **But Shouldn't A Ruling State Has Less Incentive to Defend this Order Now It Has a Smaller Stake in It, and a Larger Incentive to Revise it to Arrest Its Relative Decline while It Still Has the Greatest Capability to Effect this Change?**
- **Indeed, Why Should a Dominant Ruling Power Restrain Itself from Changing the Existing Order Even when It Is Gaining More Power (Mearsheimer)?**
- **And, Why Would a Rising Power Want to Revise the Order that Has Enabled Its Rise thus Far?**
- **After All, Hasn't Its Rise Given It a Larger Stake and hence a Greater Incentive to Preserve this Order?**

# Analytic Confusion or Deliberate Obfuscation?

- **Confusing the Interstate Distribution of Power with the International Order**
- **Changing the Existing Distribution of Power Does NOT Mean Challenging the Existing International Order!**
- **Henry Kissinger characterizes International Relations: “a set of commonly accepted rules that define the limits of permissible action and a balance of power that enforces restraints where rules break down, preventing one political unit from subjugating all others”**
- **All States Would Prefer to Improve their Relative Power Position, but This Motivation Does NOT Mean that They Intend Necessarily to Undermine the International Order**



# But What Does International Order Mean?

- **English School (e.g., Bull, Goh, Hurrell, etc.): International Society or Order Based on States' Shared Expectations, Common Understandings, and the Routine Practices Constituting Norms, Rules, Principles, and Institutions**
- **Requiring Minimally Acceptance of the Legitimacy and Desirability of Multilateral Engagement and Coordination (versus "My Way or the Highway")**
- **Pillars of International Order or Society:**
  - **The Principle of Sovereignty (Juridical Equality and Domestic Autonomy)**
  - **Mutual Acceptance of the Legitimacy of Ruling Elites**
  - **Inviolability of International Boundaries**
  - **Sanctity of Treaties and Agreements**
  - **Mutual Respect of Spheres of Influence**
  - **Shared Rules for the Use of Force**
  - **Multilateral Consultation (Conferences, Consortia, Congress)**

# Historical Misrepresentation

- **A State Can Be Expansionist But Not Revisionist, or Vice Versa, or Be Both Expansionist AND Revisionist**
- **Wilhelmine Germany and Imperial Germany Were Expansionist (and Aggressive and Bellicose) But Not Revisionist**
- **Earlier Years of the USSR and PRC Were Non-Expansionist But Revisionist**
- **Napoleonic France, the U.S. in the Late 1800s, Nazi Germany, and the USSR during the Cold War Were Both Expansionist and Revisionist**
- **Revisionism Defined to Mean Seeking to Introduce New Rules, Norms, and Principles: e.g., Republicanism (to Displace Monarchical Rule), Manifest Destiny, Monroe Doctrine, Racial Hierarchy, Class Revolution, Dictatorship of International Proletariat)**

# What about States' Intentions/Motivations?

- **Intentions/Motivations Are Not Fixed; They Can Change!**
- **Intentions/Motivations Are Not Tied to States' Relative Positions in the Interstate System, or Whether They Are Rising or Declining**
- **Intentions/Motivations Are Issue Dependent; A State Can Seek to Change Some Rules in Some Issue Areas while Trying to Change Them in Other Issue Areas (Foot and Walter)**
- **Thus, States Can be Norm Entrepreneurs Seeking to Subvert Some Old Norms (e.g., Sovereignty in SOME Cases) and Promote Some New Norms (e.g., Humanitarian Intervention and "Responsibility to Protect" in SOME other Cases) while Resisting Change in Other Cases (e.g., Human Rights for Immigrants)**
- **Remember that the Rules, etc. of International Order Are Always Contested!**
- **One's Reference Point Matters!**
- **These Rule, etc. Are Not a Matter of Black-and-White Allowing Analysts to Assign Different Countries to Binary Categories of "Revisionist" or "Status-Quo"**

# So What About China?

- **Resorting to Multiple Indicators to Track Change over Time**
- **China used to support insurgent movements, reject international accords on arms control or U.N. peacekeeping missions, and belong to only a handful of international organizations**
- **Today, Beijing advocates non-interference in others' domestic affairs, is party to most international treaties (including arms control) and contributes more to peacekeeping missions than the other P4, and its level of participation in IGOs and NGOs is comparable to its peers**
- **It finds itself usually in the majority in U.N. rollcall votes (see below)**

# And the United States?

- **It Now Openly Promotes Regime Change Abroad**
- **Advocates the Doctrine of Preventive War**
- **Bypasses the United Nations in attacking Iraq, Libya, Serbia, Syria**
- **Has Withdrawn from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the Arms Trade Treaty, the Joint Plan of Action (the Iran Nuclear Deal)**
- **Has Declined to Ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban, or to Join the Treaty to Ban Landmines, the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Seas, the Kyoto Treaty, the Paris Climate Accord, the International Criminal Court**
- **Has Also Withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the UNESCO, the ILO, the Human Rights Council, the Global Compact for Migration, the Basel Convention (to Regulate the Interstate Transfer of Plastic Wastes) – and in an Earlier Era, Declined to Join the League of Nations and the International Trade Organization (the Havana Charter)**
- **And Has Insisted on Renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement (Its Replacement, USMCA, Is Still Waiting for Congressional Approval)**

# Who Is More Inside or Outside of the International Community?

- **The United Nations as the Most Authoritative Voice of International Community**
- **United Nations General Assembly Rollcall Votes (1971-2015)**
  - **USA: 21.9% yes, 54.2% no**
  - **China: 78.8% yes, 3.3% no**
  - **U.K.: 42.3% yes, 25.8% no**
  - **France: 43.8% yes, 20.9% no**
  - **USSR/Russia: 72.5% yes, 9.7% no**
  - **Benchmark (Votes by All Member States): 75.1% yes, 4.7% no**

# Another Look at Who Is More Out-of-Step with the Rest of the World

- **Use of Veto Power in the United Nations Security Council (October 1971-February 2019)**
- **USA: 82**
- **China: 12**
- **U.K.: 24**
- **France: 14**
- **USSR/Russia: 35**

# Final Thoughts

- **Revisionism Is Not Part of a Rising Power's DNA**
- **Whether It Becomes Revisionist Depends in Part on Whether the Existing Order Is Open or Welcoming**
- **That is, How this Rising Power Is Treated by the Established Powers**
- **Japan's Exclusion Due to Racial Discrimination Is an Important but Overlooked Lesson**
- **If Established States Refuse to Make Adjustments to Recognize the Changed Distribution of Power, Rising States' Revisionism Is Not the Only Cause of War**
- **The Fault also Lies with the Psychological, Political, and Institutional Impediments Preventing the Established States from Trimming their International Roles and Downsizing their Sense of Self-Importance and Entitlement in View of their Relative Decline**
- **A Rising Power *Can* Become More Satisfied, and a Declining Hegemon *Can* Become More Dissatisfied!**
- **Thus, Revisionism and Commitment to the International Order Are NOT Fixed Traits!**



# Concluding Remark

- **“If the distribution of benefits mirrors the distribution of power, no state can credibly threaten to use force to change the status quo and the risk of war is smallest. If, however, there is a sufficiently large disparity between the distribution of power and benefits, the status quo may be threatened regardless of what the underlying distribution of power is” (Powell 1999: 199)**
- **In Other Words, Wars Happen Because States Disagree about Their Relative Power and hence the Amount of Benefits that Their Relative Power Should Accord them**