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Article

Understanding change in times of crises: US–China competition and the prospects for peaceful change

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Abstract

This essay explores the nature, causes, and prospects of three types of international order transitions: systemic, institutional, and systems transitions. It argues that peaceful change remains possible despite growing turbulence in the context of US–China competition. Historically, systemic transitions, marked by shifts in the distribution of power among great powers, were often driven by crises and wars. Today, however, nuclear deterrence, defensive military technologies, and the increasing agency of non-great powers create greater space for nonviolent systemic transitions. At the institutional level, states are pursuing strategies such as soft balancing, economic statecraft, and informal multilateralism to manage great power competition and shape rules, norms, and practices, fostering the possibility of peaceful institutional transitions in global governance. Looking further ahead, the rise of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies may diffuse power beyond states, empowering corporations, NGOs, and other non-state actors. This could drive a more profound systems transition, fundamentally altering the structure and actors of the international order itself. While risks of technological overreach and geopolitical conflicts persist, this essay concludes that the trend toward low-violence great power rivalry, the growing agency of non-great powers, and the diffusion of critical technologies can collectively steer the international system toward more peaceful transitions in the context of US–China competition than in previous eras.

Introduction

While most observers of international affairs agree that we are witnessing a period of profound transitions in the international order, there is less consensus on what precisely is changing, and even less clarity on the concept of "change" itself. This essay addresses four interrelated

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questions concerning change in international politics: First, what constitutes change or order transition in international relations (IR) and why does such a transitional change occur? Second, how do order transitions take place? Third, what are the prospects that this will happen peacefully? Last, why might US–China competition be more peaceful than widely perceived? We conclude that peaceful change is possible, despite the turbulence currently evident in the international system. This conclusion is based on the logic of today's trend toward low-level violent approaches in great power rivalry vis-a-vis one another, the growing agency of non-great powers, and the diffusion of critical technologies during this period of order transitions.

We contend that international order transitions can be categorized into three types: systemic, institutional, and systems transitions. Major systemic transitions are typically triggered by crises across multiple domains. Recent developments, such as the 2008 global financial crisis, ongoing humanitarian crises in the Middle East, democratic backsliding in the United States and other countries, the weakening of key international institutions, and the Russia–Ukraine war, reflect a broader pattern of order disruption that signals deep and ongoing structural change in the international order.

However, echoing the hopes of E. H. Carr,[1] we argue that peaceful change remains possible for "systemic transition" in the 21st century. What actually is peaceful change? The *Oxford Handbook of Peaceful Change in International Relations* provides a useful definitional range from minimalist to maximalist notions of peace.[2] On the one side of the continuum, there is negative peace: "a [. . .] change in international relations and foreign policies of states, including territorial or sovereignty agreements that take place without violence or coercive use of force." On the other one, there is positive peace:[3] "transformational change that takes place non-violently at the global, regional, interstate, and societal levels due to various material, normative and institutional factors, leading to deep peace among states, higher levels of prosperity and justice for all irrespective of nationality, race or gender."[4]

We suggest that while the USA will strive to maintain its hegemonic position with various strategies, its relative decline appears inevitable. President Donald Trump's erratic foreign and trade policies, intended to restore US hegemony, may accelerate American decline rather than reverse it. Nonetheless, the doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD) continues to act as a powerful deterrent against direct military confrontation among nuclear-armed powers.[5] This suggests that the future systemic transition, even if driven by severe crises, may unfold more peacefully than in the past. Unlike the European era of great power rivalry, which was shaped

[1] E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1939).

[2] T. V. Paul, "The Study of Peaceful Change in World Politics," in T. V. Paul et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Peaceful Change in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 4.

[3] On negative and positive peace, see Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1969), pp. 167–91.

[4] T. V. Paul, *The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), p. 4.

[5] For supporting the MAD and nuclear peace arguments, see Kenneth N. Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (2012), pp. 2–5; Robert Rauchhaus, "Evaluating the Nuclear Peace Hypothesis: A Quantitative Approach," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (2009), pp. 258–77; Charles L. Glaser and Steve Fetter, "Should the United States Reject MAD? Damage Limitation and US Nuclear Strategy toward China," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2016), pp. 49–98; Elbridge Colby, "If You Want Peace, Prepare for Nuclear War," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 6 (2018), pp. 25–34. For critiques and debates over MAD, see Scott Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Scott Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: An Enduring Debate* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013); Joseph Cirincione, *Bomb Scare: The History and Future of Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The End of MAD? The Nuclear Dimension of US Primacy," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2006), pp. 7–44.

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by "short war illusions"[6] and the "cult of the offensive,"[7] today's major powers are constrained by military technologies that favor deterrence and defense over offensive strategies.[8]

Moreover, states are increasingly turning to institutional and non-military strategies—both bilateral and multilateral—to advance their interests, facilitating a more peaceful "institutional transition." These strategies include soft balancing, institutional balancing, buck-passing, and economic statecraft.[9] While asymmetric and proxy wars remain possible, shared transnational challenges such as climate change and global pandemics may foster cooperation, even amid the weakening capacity of formal international institutions. In this evolving landscape, informal groupings like the G20 are likely to play a more important role.[10]

Finally, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution has the potential to reshape the very nature of political authority, empowering multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and wealthy individuals to assume more prominent roles in global governance, thereby driving a profound "systems transition."[11] While powerful states will undoubtedly seek to harness AI to enhance their control and reinforce their status in the international hierarchy, they will not be the only influential actors.[12] Much like the internet revolution, which enabled both state and non-state actors to gain prominence, the development of hybrid AI systems may lead to a competitive landscape involving multiple players vying for strategic advantage. A radical technological breakthrough, such as a foolproof offensive capability monopolized by a single great power or coalition, could alter this dynamic. However, such a scenario appears unlikely in the near term because of the rapid diffusion of advanced technologies.

The US–China competition is not only one of the most salient manifestations of ongoing order transitions in the international system but also a defining force in shaping their trajectory and outcome. Its intensification signals both a potential *systemic transition*, driven by shifts in the global distribution of power, and an *institutional transition*, evident in the contestation of rules and norms within global governance. Whether these dynamics will culminate in a broader *systems transition* remains uncertain, particularly given that both Washington and Beijing continue to operate within the logic of state-centric great power politics, despite the transformative pressures of technological change, including the rise of AI.

This article proceeds in four parts. First, it outlines the three types of order transition—systemic, institutional, and systems transitions—and explains the conditions under which they

[6] Lancelot L. Farrar Jr., *The Short-War Illusion: German Policy, Strategy and Domestic Affairs, August–December 1914* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 1973).

[7] Stephen Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1984), pp. 58–107.

[8] Charles L. Glaser, "A Flawed Framework: Why the Liberal International Order Concept Is Misguided," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2019), pp. 51–87; Thomas X. Hammes, "The Tactical Defense Becomes Dominant Again," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Vol. 103, No. 4 (2021), pp. 10–7. For critiques, see Keir A. Lieber, "Grasping the Technological Peace: The Offense-Defense Balance and International Security," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2000), pp. 71–104; Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The New Era of Counterforce: Technological Change and The Future of Nuclear Deterrence," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (2017), pp. 9–49; Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The Rise of US Nuclear Primacy," *Foreign Affair*, Vol. 85, No. 5 (2006), pp. 42–55.

[9] See Robert A. Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2005), pp. 7–45; T. V. Paul, "Soft Balancing in the Age of US Primacy," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2005), pp. 46–71; Kai He and Huiyun Feng, "If Not Soft Balancing, Then What? Reconsidering Soft Balancing and US Policy toward China," *Security Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2008), pp. 363–95; Kai He, "Institutional Balancing and International Relations Theory: Economic Interdependence and Balance of Power Strategies in Southeast Asia," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2008), pp. 489–518.

[10] T. V. Paul, Anders Wivel, and Kai He, eds., *International Organizations and Peaceful Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025).

[11] Klaus Schwab, "The Fourth Industrial Revolution: What It Means, How to Respond," in Zeki Simsek et al., eds., *Handbook of Research on Strategic Leadership in the Fourth Industrial Revolution* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024), pp. 29–34; Glenn Diesen, *Great Power Politics in the Fourth Industrial Revolution* (London: Tauris, 2021); Corneliu Bjola and Markus Kornprobst, *Digital International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2023).

[12] Fatima Roumate, *Artificial Intelligence and the New World Order* (New York: Springer, 2024); Lee Kai-Fu, *AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley, and the New World Order* (New York: Harper Business, 2018).

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emerge in the international system. Second, it examines how these transitions unfold during periods of crisis. Third, it considers three possible scenarios for peaceful order transitions. Fourth, it analyzes the US–China competition to illustrate why, despite intensifying rivalry, peaceful change remains possible. The conclusion argues that while cautious optimism is warranted, the path toward peaceful change is fraught with challenges that will require prudence, creativity, and wisdom from policymakers from both established and rising powers.

What is "Change" and why order transitions?

One key weakness in the existing IR literature on international order is the lack of a clearly theorized framework for understanding order transitions.[13] From a realist perspective, international order is synonymous with the international system, which is defined by the distribution of power among states.[14] An order transition corresponds to a power transition, in which a dominant power is supplanted by a rising challenger. Such transitions are often associated with heightened instability, military conflict, and even major wars.[15]

For liberalism, international order consists of a dense web of international organizations, regimes, and legal frameworks, typically created and maintained by the hegemon in collaboration with its allies.[16] An order transition, therefore, implies a fundamental transformation in the rules, norms, and regulations underpinning these institutions. Since institutions possess a degree of autonomy within the system, their survival is not necessarily contingent on the continued dominance of the hegemon. This logic underpins Ikenberry's influential argument that the relative decline of the USA does not automatically entail the demise of the liberal international order.[17]

In constructivism and the English School, the international order is grounded in shared norms, values, and broader intersubjective understandings that provide its normative foundation.[18] The US-led liberal order established after World War II is thus understood as being constituted by prevailing liberal norms, such as human rights, democracy, and rule-based cooperation, although additional "orderly" norms are also embedded to differentiate order from disorder. Order transitions within these approaches are driven by shifts in collective ideas and normative frameworks. However, because the evolution of norms is indeterminate and context-dependent, such transitions cannot be captured through linear causal mechanisms.

[13] For excellent research on the liberal international order, see Martha Finnemore, Kenneth Scheve, Kenneth A. Schultz, and Erik Voeten, "Challenges to the Liberal International Order: International Organization at 75," *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 2(Special Issue), 2021.

[14] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001); Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History* (New York: Longman, 2003).

[15] A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1958); Ronald Tammen and Jacek Kugler, "Power Transition and China–US Conflicts," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2006), pp. 35–55; Jack Levy, "Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China," in Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng, eds., *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp.11–33; John J. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2010), pp. 381–96. For critiques, see Steve Chan, *China, the U.S., and the Power-Transition Theory: A Critique* (London: Routledge, 2008).

[16] G. John Ikenberry, "The Rise, Character, and Evolution of International Order," in Orfeo Fioretos, ed., *International Politics and Institutions in Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 59–75.

[17] G. John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West—Can the Liberal System Survive?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 1 (2008), pp. 23–56; David Lake, Lisa L. Martin, and Thomas Risse, "Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on International Organization," *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (2021), pp. 225–57.

[18] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977); Jeffrey W. Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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Instead, they are typically understood retrospectively, emphasizing historical and contextual interpretation.[19]

Order and order transition are still contested in mainstream IR scholarship. In this article, drawing on Robert Gilpin's insights[20] into international change and integrating the three IR paradigms, we identify three types of order transition: systemic, institutional, and systems transitions.[21] A *systemic transition* refers to dramatic changes in the distribution of power among great powers. It is rooted in realist insights. Power transition theory suggests that such shifts often lead to war between rising and established powers—a phenomenon popularized as the "Thucydides Trap."[22] However, the most recent example of a systemic transition, the end of the Cold War, was relatively peaceful, marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transition from a bipolar to a unipolar order led by the USA. This peaceful transition offers hope that such changes can occur without war in the future, too.

Today, China is widely viewed as the leading candidate to challenge the declining unipolar order, potentially pushing the system toward bipolarity or multipolarity. The Chinese strategy, unlike those of the European rising powers of the 19th and 20th centuries, aims at a peaceful rise, sometimes using a gray zone asymmetric strategy of limited force, and, hence, direct large-scale offensive action of the World War kind may not recur easily. We do not preclude intense crises, limited regional conflicts, and even large-scale wars, including possibly over Taiwan,[23] as the existing hegemon, the USA, is responding with increasingly strong economic and military strategies to thwart China's rise, but these are unlikely to lead to a major war between the two.

An *institutional transition* occurs at the institutional level, or the rule-based structures that underpin the international order. It stems from liberalism in IR theory. Institutional transition includes regimes, international organizations, and international law—what some refer to as "secondary institutions." As the most dynamic layer of the international order, it is where states interact most frequently. Institutional transitions occur when these rules or mechanisms are substantially altered due to shifts in state interests or the power dynamics within institutions.[24] Importantly, not all institutional changes qualify as an order transition. We must distinguish between core and peripheral institutions. For example, the changes in voting shares at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) do not, in themselves, constitute a transformation of the Bretton Woods system. A real institutional transition would occur, for example, if China assumed leadership of the IMF and introduced no-strings-attached lending practices, fundamentally altering its operational logic. However, thus far, China is acting as a defender of many international institutions while attempting to create new institutions, with only partial success, that are

[19] Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980–2000* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Charles Kupchan, "The Normative Foundations of Hegemony and the Coming Challenge to Pax Americana," *Security Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2014), pp. 219–57; Bentley Allan, Srdjan Vucetic, and Ted Hopf, "The Distribution of Identity and the Future of International Order: China's Hegemonic Prospects," *International Organization*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (2018), pp. 839–69; Barry Buzan, "China in International Society: Is 'Peaceful Rise' Possible?" *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No.1 (2010), pp. 5–36.

[20] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[21] Andrew Philipps suggests three similar types of order transitions: configurative, positional, and institutional changes of international order. See Andrew Philipps, *War, Religion and Empire: The Transformation of International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Also see Kai He and Huiyun Feng, "Introduction Rethinking China and International Order: A Conceptual Analysis," in Huiyun Feng and Kai He, eds., *China's Challenges and International Order Transition: Beyond "Thucydides's Trap"* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), pp. 1–26.

[22] A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics*, 2nd Edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968); A. F. K., Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Melbourne and London: Scribe Publications, 2017).

[23] For a pessimistic view on the Taiwan issue, see Oriana Skylar Mastro, "The Taiwan Temptation: Why Beijing Might Resort to Force," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (2021), pp. 58–70; M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Potential Lessons from Ukraine for Conflict over Taiwan," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2023), pp. 7–27; International Crisis Group, *Preventing War in the Taiwan Strait* (Brussels: ICG Report No. 321, 2023).

[24] Paul, Wivel, and He, *International Organizations and Peaceful Change in World Politics*; Anders Wivel and T. V. Paul, *International Institutions and Power Politics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

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aimed at capturing the space left by some of the declining Western-led institutions, especially in the economic realm.

The third type of transition is "*systems transition*," occurring when there is a fundamental shift in the organizing principles of international order within its normative foundations and/or in the nature of its political units. "Systems transition" resonates with a constructivist perspective. While the modern international order is grounded in the principle of sovereignty, alternative structures such as heteronomy, suzerainty, and empire have existed in the past.[25] The European Union's supranational integration in the 1990s and the post-Cold War rise of humanitarianism and interventionism have challenged core Westphalian principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. The ongoing war in Ukraine has shaken the norm against the use of force and challenged the principle of territorial integrity enshrined in the United Nations Charter.[26] Yet it is premature to conclude that these developments amount to a "systems transition" in the international order, since sovereignty remains deeply entrenched and widely upheld as a foundational norm by most states. Looking ahead, advances in AI and quantum computing, as part of the broader Fourth Industrial Revolution, may empower non-state actors—such as multinational corporations and even individuals—to play increasingly prominent roles in world politics, with both positive and negative repercussions.[27] While a full systems transition has yet to occur, such trends suggest that future international relations may not be exclusively managed by sovereign nation-states.

Table 1 summarizes important features of the three types of order transition. The relationship between these three types of transition—systemic, institutional, and systems—is neither linear, sequential, nor deterministic. Instead, they are deeply interrelated and reinforcing. For example, changes in one domain may reinforce shifts in another. Military competition at the systemic level may drive institutional transformation, as victors seek to reshape international rules to consolidate their gains. Conversely, institutional changes, such as new trade arrangements or security alliances, may provoke systemic tensions among states. US–China competition both reflects and propels the systemic and institutional transformations underway in the international order. The approach in which the two powers engage in their rivalry will play a decisive role in shaping the trajectory and outcomes of order transitions across both dimensions.

The prospect of a systems transition, a fundamental reconfiguration of the organizing principles and norms of international order, remains distant, though no longer inconceivable. While it remains uncertain whether AI or another transformative technology poses an existential threat to humanity or challenges the legitimacy of the nation-state as the primary actor in international relations, the implications are significant. If humans retain control over AI and the nation-state endures as the basic unit of global politics, then both systemic and institutional transitions may be managed incrementally and peacefully. However, if AI or another transformative technology fundamentally alters the nature of political authority, governance structures, or war-fighting capabilities, international relations may enter a period of revolutionary transformation—a true systems transition, unlike anything seen before. The USA and China will encounter similar challenges in the future development of AI, even as they compete for dominance and control over the technology.[28] As such, AI represents not only a key domain

[25] Andrew Philipps and Jason Sharman, *International Order in Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[26] Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro "Might Unmakes Right: The Catastrophic Collapse of Norms against the Use of Force," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 104, No. 4 (2025), pp. 80–93.

[27] Stephane J. Baele et al., "AI IR: Charting International Relations in the Age of Artificial Intelligence," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2024), pp. 1–30; Valerie Hudson, *Artificial Intelligence and International Politics* (London: Routledge, 2019); Denise Garcia, "Algorithms and Decision-making in Military Artificial Intelligence," *Global Society*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2024), pp. 24–33.

[28] Jeffrey Ding, *Technology and the Rise of Great Powers: How Diffusion Shapes Economic Competition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024).

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Table 1 Three types of order transitions.

Type of transition	Definition	Theoretical underpinnings	Main driver	Key mechanisms	Historical examples
Systemic Transition	A fundamental change in the *distribution of power* among major states that alters the structure of the international system (e.g., unipolarity, bipolarity, multipolarity)	Realism	Great powers within the system	Military and economic power shifts among major powers	The end of the Cold War, marking a shift from a bipolar to a unipolar system
Institutional Transition	A substantial transformation in the *rule-based structures and mechanisms* that organize interstate behavior within the existing system	Liberal Institutionalism	Great powers and key institutional actors	Changes in regimes, international organizations, and international law	The shift from the classical gold standard to the Bretton Woods system after World War II; the replacement of the League of Nations with the United Nations in 1945
Systems Transition	A fundamental reconfiguration of the *organizing principles and normative foundations* of international order, including the nature and legitimacy of political units	Constructivism	Political leaders and norm entrepreneurs	Shifts in ideas, norms, and legitimacy principles	The Peace of Westphalia (1648), which replaced a medieval order based on religious hierarchy and imperial suzerainty with the modern sovereign state system.

Sources: See Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Kai He and Huiyun Feng, "Introduction: Rethinking China and International Order: A Conceptual Analysis," in Huiyun Feng and Kai He, eds., *China's Challenges and International Order Transition: Beyond "Thucydides's Trap"* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), pp. 1–26.

of rivalry but also a potential focal point that will shape the broader contours of US–China competition.

How do order transitions take place?

Order transitions often start with an intense crisis. Crisis serves as both a catalyst and an important source of information on what works and what does not, helping to create the political momentum for crafting and agreeing on new solutions. Consequently, in the past, some international crises have driven adjustments to the international order, leading to its

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strengthening and prolongation of lifespan. Other crises may signal that (parts of) the order is faltering or leading to undesired or unacceptable consequences, but without creating the necessary political incentives for change.

Order transitions typically take place when several crises combine into a "wicked crisis," that is, a complex linkage of crises, where the attempt to solve one crisis tends to aggravate others. The current state of the international order is an ideal example of this dynamic. The ongoing crisis in the international political economy has led to increased economic nationalism and bilateralization of trade relations, decreasing economic interdependence in some areas. Leading states, including the USA and China, have attempted to weaponize interdependence, with only limited success. At the same time, the past decades have seen a radical increase in technological interdependence, increasing the power and agency of private actors such as "tech giants," some with decisive influence over critical infrastructure, as in the case of Starlink. This contributes to an ongoing legitimacy crisis across democratic societies, which is, in turn, exacerbated by an increasingly conflictual international environment, leading to increased surveillance and restrictions on individual rights in domestic societies, as well as an increasing acceptance of spheres of influence and human rights violations abroad.

The interconnectedness and complexity of the "wicked crisis" reflect the characteristics of the current international order. Mounting tensions between China and the USA, Russia's war in Ukraine, and the Trump administration's increase of tariffs on imports from both allies and adversaries, as well as the questioning of key aspects of global governance, illustrate that the power of and relations between great powers remain crucial to international order. However, the restraint of both the USA and China to avoid direct confrontation and war, the incapacity of Russia to win a war many experts believed would be over in months, and the inability of the Trump administration to deliver on promises of peace in Europe and the Middle East exemplify that while great powers remain influential agenda-setters and continue to impact international relations, they face multiple international and domestic constraints when seeking to implement foreign policy decisions as well as radical agendas on order and change. Very few countries have buckled under the Trump administration's tariff pressures as they expect the USA will itself back off due to the inflationary effect these policies have on the American economy.

Therefore, in a highly complex and interconnected order like the present, systemic transition is likely to resemble a tug-of-war rather than a gladiatorial battle with one unequivocal winner. The technology of the day, in both conventional and nuclear areas, does not allow for quick victory based on offensive strategies and doctrines, as European political and military decision-makers believed before both World Wars. Given the presence of nuclear escalation, contemporary great power rivals will most likely destroy each other and will not come out unscathed to claim victory. However, it is worth emphasizing that nuclear deterrence cannot eliminate the possibility of lower-level or inadvertent conflicts among nuclear powers. Ongoing military modernization and evolving doctrines, such as limited nuclear options and the development of dual-use technologies, risk undermining the stability once afforded by mutual deterrence. Increasing loose talk on nuclear use and nuclear testing by Presidents Trump and Putin also generates much uncertainty to the nuclear order.[29]

In great power competition, a tug-of-war is likely to include lengthy battles over the importance, design, and decision-making mechanisms of international institutions central to the workings of international and regional orders (institutional transition) and the organizing and normative principles of international order (systems transition). While these battles will most likely fall short of a great power war, this does not preclude other types of conflict, including

[29] For the danger of possible nuclear escalations, see Caitlin Talmadge, "Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (2017), pp. 50–92; Colby, "If You Want Peace, Prepare for Nuclear War," pp. 25–34; RAND Corporation, *Keeping a U.S.–China Conflict over Taiwan under the Nuclear Shadow* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2024).

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proxy wars in the world's key regions. In contrast, when war is neither a realistic nor a desirable instrument for great powers striding over the future of the international system, including their identity as great powers (systemic change), these powers are likely to resort to a combination of political, economic, and military tools located in a gray zone or continuum between peace and war. Located toward the more peaceful end of this continuum, we find the great powers' attempts at manipulating other states' position in the "international pecking order."[30] These attempts may include the opening and closing of embassies, state visits, and support to, or opposition against, major cultural and sporting events such as the Olympics or the soccer World Cup as well as selective drafting and support for resolutions and other expressions of opinion.

Moving further along the continuum, we find the great powers' attempts to weaponize the international political economy, especially its chief component, interdependence. This involves great powers taking advantage of their leading positions in highly asymmetric networks to collect strategically valuable information and deny network access to rivals.[31] More broadly weaponization may include the strategic and targeted use of sanctions, tariffs, export controls, and banning of particular goods from some countries or excluding them from state contracts and critical infrastructure (increasing costs not only on the rivalling great power but also on allying or partnering with the rival) as well as economic aid and preferential trade agreements for own allies and partners (thereby increasing the costs of defection).[32] Examples in the US–China rivalry include the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and US tariffs on Chinese imports and pressure on its allies to exclude Huawei from competitions on the provision of national 5G networks.

Still further along the continuum but remaining below the threshold of war, we find low-intensity conflicts, typically at fault lines and in buffer zones between spheres of influence. These conflicts typically are "hybrid" in combining various tools of subversion, propaganda, misinformation, and disruptions of infrastructure flows (e.g., power cuts) with low-intensity military conflict involving both states and non-state actors such as (more or less) private military companies. However, the impact of economic fragmentation on the risk of war should not be underestimated. The ongoing trade and technology wars between the USA and China have weakened economic interdependence, thereby undermining the liberal argument that interdependence fosters peace. As Thomas Christensen cautions in his notion of "mutually assured disruption," processes of decoupling and techno-nationalism may heighten insecurity and inadvertently accelerate regional militarization.[33]

Non-state actors may be useful instruments for great powers, allowing them more or less plausible deniability of involvement in conflicts, but at the same time, they often have considerable agency of their own. As exemplified by the Russian Wagner Group, their business model may combine military and policing tasks with propaganda and consultancy services for a number of governments and commercial activities such as mining.[34] Serving in several countries, they provide infrastructures and facilitate flows for the exchange of goods, services, and ideas between and across sectors. While traditional great power wars privileged states, as

[30] Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[31] Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No.1 (2019), pp. 42–79.

[32] See, e.g., Y. S. Lee, "Weaponizing International Trade in Political Disputes: Issues under International Economic Law and Systemic Risks," *Journal of World Trade*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (2022), pp. 405–28.

[33] Thomas J. Christensen, "Mutually Assured Disruption: The New Logic of U.S.–China Rivalry," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 103, No. 1 (2024), pp. 33–45.

[34] Karen Philippa Larsen and Anders Wivel, "Foreign Policy Instrument, Actor, or Infrastructure? Conceptualizing the Wagner Group in Sudan," *African Security* (2025), https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2025.2531319.

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both leaders and followers, a great power tug-of-war is likely to increase demand for this type of non-state actors, and therefore to increase their number, importance, and leverage.

The developments associated with the fourth industrial revolution described above will further increase the impact of non-state actors on how order transitions take place. Big tech companies provide platforms that are central to communication, data storage, information, business, and, increasingly, surveillance and intelligence. The sources of innovation, change and fusion of technologies that will serve as the technological foundation of future orders are largely outside the control of states. The increasing importance of non-state actors adds to the complexity of order transition. Non-state actors have little interest in institutional transition other than keeping the institutions ineffective in constraining their agency and behavior, but at the same time, their agency and behavior are likely to have an impact on the organizing and normative principles of international order, i.e., systems transition.

Rising powers, as well as small states and middle powers, are also likely to play a role in how orders transition. Focusing on reducing risk in an increasingly volatile international environment, many seek to hedge their security bets by focusing on strategic autonomy and refusing to bandwagon with either of the great powers.[35] Even when stuck in highly asymmetrical relationships, some of the weakest states in the international system have successfully diversified their political commitments and loyalties and taken advantage of the institutions of international society to promote their values and interests.[36] Despite their diversity, these states have a shared interest in promoting an institutional transition that will secure an institutional order allowing them opportunities for voice and influence. They are likely to pursue this order by a combination of increased cooperation among themselves and by demanding concessions from the great powers in return for support. Most interestingly, they are reluctant to form bandwagoning military alliances with great powers, unlike the past European-era and the Cold War–era experiences.

In sum, today, great powers face greater obstacles to implementing their agendas than those of previous eras, and they are bound by a complex web of international institutions, diplomatic practices, international law, and security interdependencies, in addition to being tied to global supply chains and financial systems. The trajectory of US unipolarity highlights the dangers of overstretching and the obstacles and costs associated with scaling down and refocusing commitments, even when the rationale behind these commitments was tied to the protection of the previous order. In this situation, systemic great powers like China and the USA risk being the first victims of any breakdown of order.[37]

Consequently, even when unsatisfied with the status quo, they are unlikely to walk into a Thucydides Trap, risking it all in a systemic great power war. Military "hard" balancing will remain central, but mainly for deterrence, protection of spheres of influence, and limited proxy wars, determining disputed borderlines between the spheres (for the great powers, preferably by proxy to avoid direct confrontation). Spheres of influence, albeit in weakened forms, will allow the great powers to avoid the costs of systemic engagement while creating political and economic spaces where they can more easily implement their agendas for change and transition.[38] Whereas previous order transitions constituted an expansion of international

[35] John D. Ciorciari and Jürgen Haacke, "Hedging in International Relations: An Introduction," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2019), pp. 367–74.

[36] Jack Corbett, Yichong Xu, and Patrick Weller, "Norm Entrepreneurship and Diffusion 'From Below' in International Organisations: How the Competent Performance of Vulnerability Generates Benefits for Small States," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (2019), pp. 647–68; Tom Long, *A Small State's Guide to Influence in World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

[37] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

[38] Stacie E. Goddard, "The Rise and Fall of Great-power Competition: Trump's New Spheres of Influence," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 104, No. 3 (2025), pp. 8–23.

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societies,[39] the current transition constitutes a remaking of regions in what risks being a Cold War between great power spheres of influence.[40]

This has significant implications for the way institutional transition is occurring. Previous orders transitioned through a great power war with clear winners and losers, which typically destroyed the core institutions of the previous order before new institutions were constructed by the winners. Until a global war–winning coalition emerges, the Cold War and post–Cold War institutions are likely to persist, as no one has the interest or capacity to close them down. Some institutions may face further marginalization due to a lack of funding and political interest from the great powers, e.g., the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), while others may be recalibrated to fit the new order.

Sphere-of-influence politics will create a need for institutional infrastructures, either inside the shell of old institutions, taking advantage of and adapting practices and structures already in place (e.g., NATO), or for creating new ones. Soft balancing will be a central instrument for continuing change and potential transition within and between spheres of influence with great powers, using institutional mechanisms to bind actors or deny each other's legitimacy.[41] The first months of the second Trump presidency was an example of this, as the USA was withdrawing from more inclusive institutions to rebuild US-led institutions with better opportunities for excluding unwanted partners, but with limited success. New institutions, such as the G20 and BRICS Plus, could assume a greater role as reforming existing ones becomes too onerous.

These developments do not in themselves constitute a systems transition, a fundamental reconfiguration of the organizing principles of international order, but they do provide some clues as to how such a transition may occur in the future. Regionalization is likely to reinforce bifurcation of the international system, leading to several parallel and coexisting international societies[42] or multiplexes[43] and the risk of the Kindleberger Trap: the failure of great powers to provide global public goods and meet systemic and planetary challenges.[44] Facing these challenges, is peaceful change still possible?

Prospects for peaceful change

What are the prospects for peaceful change today? This is not an easy question to answer. Students of IR cannot predict how world politics will look in the future. Two main challenges stand in the way. First of all, human beings can sometimes do all kinds of unpredictable things. Yet their agency is crucial. Peaceful change requires actors to work together towards building peaceful relations with one another. In the case of a minimalist peace, these actors may be confined to great powers, and they may be entirely utilitarian in trying to establish minimalist peaceful relations. In the case of maximalist peace, the pool of actors needs to be much broader, and their decision-making compass must feature a considerable amount of *Idealpolitik* as opposed to *Realpolitik*. Even when most actors have embarked on a trajectory of peaceful change, the process can be undone as disrupting peaceful relations tends to be easier than building them. Second, the repercussions of shifting material contexts on processes

[39] Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds., *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[40] T. V. Paul and Markus Kornprobst, *The New Cold War and the Remaking of Regions* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2025).

[41] He, "Institutional Balancing and International Relations Theory," pp. 489–518; T. V. Paul, *Restraining Great Powers: Soft Balancing from Empires to the Global Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

[42] F. Costa-Buranelli, "'Do You Know What I Mean?Not Exactly': English School, Global International Society and the Polysemy of Institutions," *Global Discourse*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2015), pp. 499–514.

[43] Amitav Acharya, Antoni Estevadeordal, and Louis W. Goodman, "Multipolar or Multiplex? Interaction Capacity, Global Cooperation and World Order," *International Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 6 (2023), pp.2339–65.

[44] Joseph Nye Jr., "The Kindleberger Trap," Project Syndicate, Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 2017.

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of peaceful and violent change are difficult—if not impossible—to predict. In the early 20th century, for example, the Second Industrial Revolution nurtured widely held beliefs that new military capabilities made it advantageous to strike first and disadvantageous to wait for the attack by the other and defend. This misperception—it was actually the other way round—played an important role in the outbreak of the First World War.[45] Writing this piece during the Fourth Industrial Revolution, we are mindful of how unpredictable technological developments will impact state strategies and world politics in general.

These are important *caveats* for any kind of informed guesses for looking into the future. Yet it is possible, working within a plausible range of agential and structural variation, to reflect upon contingent scenarios and counterscenarios.[46] There are three scenarios for peaceful change: peaceful coexistence, adaptable concerts, and inclusive governance. The first one is found at the minimalist and the third one at the maximalist end of the spectrum of peaceful change. Adaptable concerts are located in the middle. Each of these scenarios also has counterscenarios. These are hegemonic war, flexible oligarchy, and selective sovereignty. We consider, for the time being, peaceful coexistence the most realistic scenario for peaceful change.

Peaceful coexistence was first mentioned in the 1954 Sino-Indian Agreement called *Panchsheel* (five principles). The 1955 Bandung Conference elaborated upon these principles in a multilateral context. Two years later, the United Nations General Assembly defined it as "peaceful and tolerant relations among States, in conformity with the Charter, based on mutual respect and benefit, non-aggression, respect for each other's sovereignty, equality and territorial integrity and nonintervention in one another's internal affairs, and to fulfil the purposes and principles of the Charter" (UNGA 1236 (XII), 14 December 1957). From 1956 onwards, the concept made it into great power politics. Nikita Khrushchev applied the concept to the East–West antagonism, postulating that the two different systems could coexist side by side without fighting one another. Hegemonic war, therefore, is the opposite of peaceful coexistence.[47] But so are, in line with the Bandung Conference and the UNGA resolution, wars waged by major against lesser powers, wars by proxy waged by great powers in the "periphery," and wars pitting lesser powers against one another.[48] The non-aligned states often made this an article of faith in their annual conference resolutions and UN activism.

As long as peaceful coexistence is not confined to relations among superpowers but extends to inter-state relations more generally, as postulated at Bandung and the UN General Assembly, it can accommodate the kind of systemic transition that we are witnessing in today's international order. Powers may wax and wane, and they may drift apart ideologically, socially, and economically. But they stick to mutual relations in the vein of peaceful coexistence. This does not require much institutional transition, if any. Take the United Nations, for example. Even without any kind of UN reform, such as the re-composition of the Security Council, the organization remains as compatible with pursuing peaceful co-existence as it was in the mid-1950s. Peaceful co-existence comes down heavily on state sovereignty rather than human rights. But this, too, is not incompatible with the UN Charter. After all, it rests upon Article

[45] Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," pp. 58–107.

[46] Steven Bernstein, Richard Ned Lebow, Janice Gross Stein, and Steven Weber, "God Gave Physics the Easy Problems: Adapting Social Science to an Unpredictable World," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 6, No.1 (2000), pp. 43–76.

[47] Nikita S. Khrushchev, "On Peaceful Coexistence," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 38, No.1 (1959), pp. 1–5. For a discussion of Khrushchev's motives, see Philip E. Mosely, "The Meanings of Coexistence," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 41, No.1 (1962), pp. 36–46; Theodore Otto Windt Jr., "The Rhetoric of Peaceful Coexistence: Khrushchev in America, 1959," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (1971), pp. 11–22.

[48] For similarly broad understandings of peaceful coexistence in the scholarly literature, see Russell H. Fifield, "The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence," *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 52, No.3 (1958), pp. 504–10; Wen Jiabao, "Carrying Forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in the Promotion of Peace and Development," *Chinese Journal of International Law*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2004), pp. 363–71; Sophie Richardson, *China, Cambodia, and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

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2(4). Peaceful coexistence would mean that states would put more emphasis again on not breaching the territorial integrity norm. The fact that the overwhelming number of states have not recognized any of Russia's territorial aggrandizement at the expense of Ukraine shows that territorial integrity is still an important norm, even though it has come under pressure in today's crisis-ridden era and amid the renewed desires for spheres of influence by the three leading powers, the USA, Russia, and China.

Adaptable concerts are the second scenario of peaceful change. With existing research strongly tied to the 1815 Congress of Vienna and the ensuing Concert of Europe, IR scholars conceive of concerts as comanagement of international affairs by an enduring circle of great powers.[49] In today's world, this is unlikely to happen. On the one hand, there is multipolarity. There are great powers, most importantly the USA and China, but also Russia. On the other hand, there is multiplexity.[50] Agency comes out of the regions. India, very much a rising power, is a case in point.[51] It has the power to considerably assert itself in South Asia and, beyond that, in the Indo-Pacific. Adaptable concerts are the comanagement of international affairs by great and regional powers. Depending on what is to be comanaged and where, the composition of the concert varies. There is no longer a set circle of powers ruling the world. Victory in major wars was an essential to the creation of concerts of the past, a condition that is absent today.

Adaptable concerts may very well be best suited to accommodate the systemic transition peacefully. It would provide room for the broadening circle of great powers and regional powers. Furthermore, adaptable concerts could comanage international affairs beyond matters of war and peace and build suitable institutions for doing so. As much as the *Acte final* of the Vienna Congress institutionalized the world's first international organization (for navigating the Rhine River),[52] adaptable concerts could find innovative solutions to pressing problems of our times. In contrast to such possible institutional transitions, there would be no systems transition. The world would remain Westphalian. Albeit at first glance attractive to address world politics in the 21st century, adaptable concerts also have their drawbacks. Most importantly, there is a slippery slope from adaptable concerts to flexible oligarchies. Power is with the mighty states. It is they who comanage the globe and regions. Such an order could always degenerate into the rule of the powerful over the powerless for the benefit of the former rather than the latter.[53]

Finally, *inclusive governance* is the third and most remote scenario of peaceful change. A multitude of actors, arranged horizontally rather than vertically, govern the world. This includes governing into policy areas and issues long understood as being squarely located within the domain of national sovereignty. This far-reaching kind of peaceful change amounts to a triple transition: Not only are there systemic and institutional transitions, but there is also a systems transition. Actors empowered by their economic or technological capacities would be among the governors. So would experts, and, more generally, global and regional stakeholders in matters of war and peace. Inclusive governance would, *qua* institutional arrangements, establish a (more) level playing field on which they would meet. This entails a far-reaching institutional transition away from a state-based international order to a "legitimate stakeholders" world.

[49] Matthew Rendall, "Russia, the Concert of Europe, and Greece, 1821-29: A Test of Hypotheses about the Vienna System," *Security Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2000), pp. 52–90; Jennifer Mitzen, "Reading Habermas in Anarchy: Multilateral Diplomacy and Global Public Spheres," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 99, No. 3 (2005), pp. 401–17.

[50] Acharya, Estevadeordal, and Goodman, "Multipolar or Multiplex?"

[51] Paul, *The Unfinished Quest*.

[52] "Acte final du Congrès de Vienne" ("Final Act of the Congress of Vienna"), 9 June 1815, https://mjp.univ-perp.fr/traites/1815vienne.htm.

[53] The literature is rather vocal about contemporary tendencies into this direction. See, e.g., Margarita Fajardo, *The World That Latin America Created: The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America in the Development Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021); Nicholas Lees, "The Brandt Line after Forty Years: The More North–South Relations Change, the More They Stay the Same?" *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2021), pp. 85–106.

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From a normative perspective, inclusive governance has several advantages. It tames the power of the mighty, empowers the exploited, and provides opportunities to provide sufficient global governance supply for the enormous demand of global governance in virtually any issue area, ranging from preventing interstate to intrastate wars, from governing trade to financial flows, from sustainable development to countering climate change, from international criminal to socioeconomic justice, from human rights to pandemic preparedness.[54] But inclusive governance does not come easily. The systems transition that it entails would require a range of actors to forgo power and empower others. This applies in particular to states and, among them, great powers, but even to tech giants who would suddenly have to share power with advocacy groups that seek to curb the influence of these companies. Even if such a systems transition—along with the institutional one that it requires—would be on its way, it could be derailed easily. It could degenerate into a system of selective sovereignty where powerful states and even non-state actors assert their de facto sovereignty and govern into the affairs of lesser powers.

The next section zooms in on how the dynamics between two key actors are likely to affect these scenarios of peaceful change and counterscenarios of violent change. Does great power competition between the USA and China point more toward peaceful change or violent change? If so, what kind of peaceful- or violent-change scenarios?

US–China competition and possible peaceful changes

The US–China competition is both a symptom and a catalyst of ongoing order transitions in the international system. Shifts in relative power between the two states signify a systemic transition, with the possibility that a contested form of bipolarity may emerge. Such a configuration could, under certain conditions, produce a relatively stable and even peaceful systemic transition.

Since the end of the Cold War, the USA has retained its position as the world's dominant military power. Although China has narrowed the gap, the disparity remains considerable. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), US military expenditure in 2024 reached $997 billion, which constituted 37% of global defense spending and was greater than the combined outlays of the next nine states. In contrast, China's defense budget stood at $314 billion.[55]

Economically, the USA continues to hold the world's largest nominal GDP, estimated at US$29.18 trillion in 2024 by the IMF. China, in second place, reported a nominal GDP of US$18.75 trillion.[56] The long-term trajectory, however, points to a narrowing gap: in 1960, the USA produced around 40% of the global output, while China accounted for only 4%. By 2024, the USA share had declined to 26.5%, while China's rose to 16.6%. Measured by purchasing power parity (PPP), China has already overtaken the USA since 2017. Yet, in terms of GDP per capita, China still lags far behind, ranking roughly 75th globally in 2024—below countries such as Poland, Chile, and Romania, according to the World Bank.[57]

[54] Markus Kornprobst, "Mind the Gap! Globalization and Deglobalization in Today's Inter-Epoch," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 26, No.1 (2025), pp. 2–9.

[55] "The United States Spends More on Defense than the Next 9 Countries Combined," Peter G. Peterson Foundation, 5 May, 2025, https://www.pgpf.org/article/the-united-states-spends-more-on-defense-than-the-next-9-countries-combined/.

[56] "Comparing United States and China by Economy," *Statistics Times*, 16 July, 2025, https://statisticstimes.com/economy/united-states-vs-china-economy.php.

[57] "GDP per Capita," Worldometers, https://www.worldometers.info/gdp/gdp-per-capita/.

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The future of US hegemony and the resilience of unipolarity remain subjects of intense debate, particularly in light of China's rise.[58] Much depends on the metric of power employed. By military standards, US unipolarity appears robust, but economic indicators—especially PPP—suggest an increasingly bipolar international order. Looking ahead, the coming decade is likely to be marked by the continued relative decline of US power and the steady rise of China.[59] While other states are unlikely to close the gap in either economic or military terms, we are more likely to witness a transitional period of contested bipolarity, particularly pronounced in the Indo-Pacific. The defining dynamic of global politics in this period will be the deepening and intensification of US–China strategic rivalry. This era need not last more than two decades, as by 2050, large economies such as India, Brazil, and Indonesia will narrow the gap in economic size and market capabilities. India is projected to become the second-largest economy after China overtakes the US economy.[60]

As Kenneth Waltz argues, bipolar systems are more likely to maintain stability between the two poles because of the structural balance of power they produce.[61] In a similar vein, Robert Ross suggests that an emerging bipolarity between maritime and continental power blocs—led by the USA and China, respectively—could generate stability in the Asia–Pacific region.[62] This form of "bipolar stability," reinforced by nuclear deterrence and the defense-dominant nature of modern military technology, contributes to the prospect of a relatively stable systemic transition in the international order.[63]

At the same time, persistent regional flashpoints, including tensions across the Taiwan Strait, the Korean Peninsula, and the South China Sea, pose serious risks of military conflict and even regional war involving both the USA and China. Yet, given the constraining effects of bipolarity and nuclear deterrence, such crises are unlikely to escalate into a full-scale hegemonic war. Even in the event of proxy conflicts, both Washington and Beijing are expected to exercise restraint, recognizing the catastrophic costs of escalation.

An institutional transition is also unfolding alongside US–China competition. In this domain, the USA has assumed an increasingly revisionist role, while China and other emerging powers often act as defenders of existing institutions. Although the USA and its Western allies continue to dominate the major economic organizations, such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO, rising powers, including China and India, have steadily expanded their influence within them. At the same time, the United Nations and its affiliated agencies, including the WHO, remain central pillars of postwar multilateralism, particularly in the realms of security and humanitarian affairs. Yet their credibility and effectiveness have been increasingly questioned in light of ongoing crises, such as the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the accelerating effects of climate change.

[58] Michael Beckley, "China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2011), pp. 41–78; Evan Braden Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2014), pp. 115–49; Jennifer Lind, "Back to Bipolarity: How China's Rise Transformed the Balance of Power," *International Security*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2024), pp. 7–55; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2015), pp. 7–53; Christopher Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (2012), pp. 203–13.

[59] Lind, "Back to Bipolarity."

[60] "The World in 2050," PWC Global, February 2017, https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/research-insights/economy/the-world-in-2050.html.

[61] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

[62] Robert Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first Century," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1999), pp. 81–118.

[63] Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb"; Rauchhaus, "Evaluating the Nuclear Peace Hypothesis"; Glaser and Fetter, "Should the United States Reject MAD?"; Stephen Van Evera, "Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (1998), pp. 5–43; Glaser, "A Flawed Framework"; and Hammes, "The Tactical Defense Becomes Dominant Again."

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In response to the limitations of these traditional institutions, new platforms such as the G20 and the expanded BRICS have emerged to complement, and at times challenge, the Western-dominated order. Rising powers—most notably China, India, and Brazil—have used these forums to elevate their global standing. By contrast, smaller powers remain largely marginalized, with limited influence over agenda-setting or decision-making in these bodies.

The USA, particularly under President Trump, has acted as a revisionist power by directly undermining existing multilateral institutions.[64] The second Trump administration in 2025 marked a more forceful application of the "America First" agenda, which included withdrawing from key agreements and organizations such as the Paris Climate Accord, the UN Human Rights Council, UNESCO, and the WHO. In parallel, Trump launched a global tariff war that challenged the very foundations of the rule-based trading system under the WTO. While these actions were justified in Washington as efforts to correct trade imbalances and protect US industries, they weakened fundamental principles of multilateralism, including non-discrimination, reciprocity, and legal predictability.

The current institutional order thus faces pressures or even experiences crises from both the hegemon—the USA—and rising powers, particularly China and the BRICS coalition.[65] An institutional transition appears inevitable. Both Washington and Beijing have increasingly relied on non-military tools such as soft balancing, institutional balancing, and economic statecraft to shape or create institutions aligned with their strategic interests. This reliance on non-military means suggests that the institutional transition may prove more peaceful than often assumed.[66] Systemic and institutional transitions also interact: shifts in material power can precede institutional change, while institutional contestation may, in turn, accelerate systemic transformation. Yet the stabilizing effects of nuclear deterrence, the defense-dominant nature of modern military technology,[67] and the likely emergence of a bipolar configuration in the international system all point toward a US–China rivalry that will remain constrained within institutional rather than military channels.

AI may represent the most profound potential driver of a future systems transition, insofar as it challenges the centrality of the nation-state as the fundamental unit of world politics.[68] In this scenario, sovereignty—long considered the bedrock norm of the international order—could be eroded or supplanted by new principles regulating relations among political and technological entities. For example, advanced AI systems might empower transnational corporations, private technology firms, or even decentralized networks to rival or constrain the authority of states. The prospect that decision-making, surveillance, and coercive capacities could be increasingly outsourced to or dominated by AI raises questions about whether sovereignty itself can remain the organizing principle of international relations.

At present, however, the USA and China approach AI primarily through the lens of great-power rivalry.[69] Both states invest heavily in AI research, infrastructure, and military applications, viewing superiority in AI as a source of economic competitiveness and strategic advantage. Washington emphasizes national security concerns, particularly in restricting China's access to cutting-edge semiconductor technologies, while Beijing integrates AI into its industrial

[64] Steve Chan, Huiyun Feng, Kai He, and Weixing Hu, *Contesting Revisionism: China, the United States, and the Transformation of International Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Kai He, Huiyun Feng, Steve Chan, and Weixing Hu, "Rethinking Revisionism in World Politics," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2021), pp.159–86.

[65] Alastair Iain Johnston, "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2019), pp. 9–60.

[66] See Paul, Wivel, and He, eds., *International Organizations and Peaceful Change*.

[67] Charles Glaser and Chaim Kaufmann, "What Is the Offense-defense Balance and Can We Measure It?" *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (1998), pp. 44–82.

[68] Roumate, *Artificial Intelligence and the New World Order*; Lee, *AI Superpowers*.

[69] Eric Schmidt, "AI, Great Power Competition and National Security," *Daedalus*, Vol. 151, No. 2 (2022), pp. 288–98.

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policies and military–civil fusion strategy. Yet despite this competition, both countries also face common risks from AI, including threats to cybersecurity, the dangers of autonomous weapons systems, and the destabilizing effects of deepfakes, disinformation, and algorithmic bias. These shared vulnerabilities could incentivize US–China cooperation, particularly in establishing global norms to safeguard state sovereignty, regulate the military uses of AI, and mitigate existential risks.[70]

Indeed, limited but important examples of US–China cooperation on AI governance already exist.[71] Both countries participated in early Track II dialogues facilitated by think tanks such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Beijing-based Center for International Security and Strategy, which explored principles for AI safety and crisis management. In November 2023, Washington and Beijing both signed onto the Bletchley Declaration on AI Safety, a multilateral initiative launched by the UK, which recognized shared concerns over the risks of frontier AI models.

At the United Nations, both the USA and China have actively, and cautiously, participated in the CCW's Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on lethal autonomous weapons systems. Their involvement in sessions throughout 2024, including discussions on human control, risk mitigation, and adherence to international humanitarian law, signals mutual recognition that AI's military applications require international oversight.[72] While progress has been slow because both countries are quarreling about some key definitions, this engagement illustrates how even adversarial powers can find common ground in regulating technologies that threaten systemic stability, echoing the logic of Cold War–era arms control, though on a different technological battlefield.[73]

This dual dynamic offers a degree of optimism for the future of international order transitions, particularly with regard to the prospect of a "systems transition." If both Washington and Beijing perceive that unrestrained AI development could undermine their own sovereignty and security, they may find incentives to coordinate. Initiatives such as the European Union's AI Act and the OECD's AI Principles provide precedents for global governance frameworks that could, in principle, accommodate both powers. The participation of the USA and China in such efforts, however limited, underscores a growing recognition that AI governance cannot be managed unilaterally.[74]

At the same time, caution is warranted. The transformative role of AI in international relations may be overstated or, at minimum, requires more time to evaluate. Much of the current debate revolves around generative AI technologies, such as large language models, whose long-term societal and political implications remain uncertain.[75] While AI could eventually disrupt sovereignty and alter the very structure of the international system, its impact is still unfolding, contingent on technological advances, regulatory responses, and public acceptance.

[70] James Johnson, *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Warfare: The USA, China, and Strategic Stability* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

[71] Huw Roberts, Emmie Hine, Mariarosaria Taddeo, and Luciano Floridi, "Global AI Governance: Barriers and Pathways forward," *International Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 3 (2024), pp. 1275–86.

[72] See United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), "Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW): Group of Governmental Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems," https://meetings.unoda.org/ccw/convention-on-certain-conventional-weapons-group-of-governmental-experts-on-lethal-autonomous-weapons-systems-2025.

[73] "Nations Meet at UN for 'Killer Robot' Talks as Regulation Lags," Reuters, 12 May 2025, https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/society-equity/nations-meet-un-killer-robot-talks-regulation-lags-2025-05-12/.

[74] Roberts, Hine, Taddeo, and Floridi, "Global AI Governance"; Sabine Mokry and Julia Gurol, "Competing Ambitions regarding the Global Governance of Artificial Intelligence: China, the US, and the EU," *Global Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 5 (2024), pp. 955–68.

[75] Laurence Fletcher and Costas Mourselas, "Elliott Says Nvidia Is in a 'Bubble' and AI is 'Overhyped,'" *Financial Times*, 2 August 2024, https://www.ft.com/content/24a12be1-a973-4efe-ab4f-b981aee0cd0b; Greg Rosalsky, "10 Reasons Why AI May Be Overrated," NPR, 6 August 2024, https://www.npr.org/sections/planet-money/2024/08/06/g-s1-15245/10-reasons-why-ai-may-be-overrated-artificial-intelligence.

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For now, AI should be seen less as an immediate driver of a systems transition and more as a potential force whose significance will depend on the interplay of technological innovation, state strategies, and international cooperation.

Regarding the three possible scenarios of peaceful change, peaceful coexistence is the most plausible outcome if the ongoing systemic transition results in a bipolar configuration. In such a world, US–China competition will persist, and likely intensify, but the two powers will be compelled to find ways to manage rivalry without tipping into open conflict. The presence of nuclear deterrence significantly reduces the likelihood of a full-scale hegemonic war, even though technological advances, such as cyber capabilities and hypersonic weapons, may lower the threshold for limited nuclear use. Peaceful coexistence, therefore, represents a pragmatic balance: Washington and Beijing would simultaneously compete for influence while cooperating on pressing global and transnational challenges, ranging from climate change to global health, where unilateral action is insufficient. This outcome would mirror earlier instances of "competitive coexistence," such as the US–Soviet détente of the 1970s, albeit under conditions of deeper economic interdependence today.

An adaptable concert becomes more likely if systemic transition produces a multipolar system rather than bipolarity. While the USA and China currently dominate in both military and economic terms, systemic shocks, such as global recession, financial crises, or protracted trade wars like those initiated under the Trump administration, could erode their relative advantages. Such conditions may allow other powers, including India, Brazil, Indonesia, and key European states, to narrow the gap and assert greater influence. A multipolar configuration would create incentives for adaptable power-sharing mechanisms, reminiscent of the 19th-century Concert of Europe, albeit under contemporary conditions of globalization and institutional density. In this scenario, a concert of multiple great powers could emerge as a way to stabilize the order and mitigate the risks of rivalry, though coordination challenges and collective action dilemmas would remain significant.

Inclusive governance is conceivable if the USA, China, and the majority of states recognize that existential transnational threats, such as climate change, pandemics, and potentially uncontrollable AI development, demand collective solutions. Unlike peaceful coexistence or adaptable concerts, inclusive governance requires a high level of mutual trust, recognition of common interests, and the willingness to prioritize shared survival over narrow national advantage. Although normatively appealing, this scenario faces serious obstacles. The self-help logic of anarchy, relative gains, and entrenched sovereignty concerns often lead states to privilege national interests over global cooperation, even in the face of shared risks. Inclusive governance is thus most likely to materialize only if transnational challenges escalate to the point of threatening the very survival of states or humanity as a whole. In that sense, while pandemics and climate change have already underscored the need for collective action, it may be the uncertain trajectory of frontier technologies such as AI that finally compels states to embrace a more inclusive and coordinated model of global governance.

Conclusion

We fully acknowledge that contingencies such as the Taiwan crisis, nuclear escalation, or a trade war could trigger military confrontation between the USA and China. Military escalation is also possible in the European theater if Russia, Ukraine, and NATO countries cannot find a *modus vivendi* on the Russia–Ukraine conflict. However, our analysis suggests that war is neither the only nor the most probable path to order transitions in the emerging world system. Such transitions may follow multiple trajectories, with leadership, particularly by major powers, playing a key role in steering the system away from degeneration and increased fragility. Unilateral solutions and aggressive expansion are unlikely to succeed, as they fail to attract allies or persuade

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adversaries. Despite efforts by the USA, Russia, and China to forge new spheres of influence or pressure states into alignment, bandwagoning coalitions have not emerged—an encouraging sign for the autonomy of sovereign states. Compared to previous eras, non-great powers today possess greater agency in navigating international transitions. They prefer strategic autonomy to strategic dependencies, even if tying with a major power has temporary benefits. While the possibility of a technological breakthrough in both military and civilian domains that disproportionately empowers a single actor or coalition cannot be ruled out, such a scenario appears unlikely in the near term, given the rapid global diffusion of advanced technologies.

Even with periodic crises, peaceful systemic and institutional transitions are more likely to occur within the context of US–China strategic competition. Contemporary military technologies, particularly nuclear weapons, reinforce deterrence and defense, reducing the plausibility of "short war" illusions among great-power rivals. The emerging, though contested, bipolarity between the USA and China may also serve as a stabilizing structural buffer, making a peaceful systemic transition more feasible. At the institutional level, the predominance of non-military instruments in great-power politics, such as soft balancing, institutional balancing, and economic statecraft, further supports the prospect of a relatively peaceful transformation in global governance. At the same time, the rapid advance of AI and other frontier technologies poses unprecedented challenges by threatening the very foundation of the international order: the sovereignty of nation-states. Yet this shared vulnerability could create incentives for Washington and Beijing to engage in strategic cooperation aimed at resisting a disruptive "systems transition." Ultimately, navigating this turbulent period of order transition will require prudence and political wisdom from both powers, as well as recognition that cooperation is as essential as competition in shaping the future of the international system.

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Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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