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Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order

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Rethinking the World

GREAT POWER STRATEGIES
AND INTERNATIONAL ORDER

JEFFREY W. LEGRO

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Great Power Ideas and Change

In world politics, leaders look ahead for signs of the next wildfire. Not surprisingly, they often focus on the foreign policy ideas of major states. Will Japan adhere to its post-World War II pacifism or take a turn toward militarized autonomy? Is China bound for integration in the international system, or for a Qing-era isolationism, or a rebellion against the existing order? Might Germany one day leave behind its integrationist mind-set and revive a revisionist foreign policy, one that seeks to overturn the dominant international norms? Perhaps most important, some wonder whether the United States will persist in turning its back on the international institutions and political-military commitments built over the past sixty years in favor of a new Pax Americana.

Such enduring great power ideas matter because they guide foreign policy and are a building block of international life.¹ Yet sometimes they radically change, usually with earthquake-like effects. Consider, for example, how Mikhail Gorbachev's "new thinking" fundamentally altered both the Soviet Union's actions and the cold war dynamic that had dominated world politics for forty-five years. Other seismic shifts have similarly marked international life over the past two centuries. When Japan emerged from two hundred years of isolation in the 1860s, a new era of great power relations in Asia began. And when the United States adopted an internationalist outlook after World War II, it spearheaded an unprecedented level of development in the institutional texture of world politics.

Yet, just as international order is made by national ideas, so is it unmade. Ideas do not always shift in the direction of harmonious engagement. When Soviet Russia rejected the dominant ethos of the international arena in 1917, a new source of tension and division frayed global politics. Similarly, when the United States reverted to aloofness from major power com-

mitments after World War I, the nascent League of Nations was disabled and the seeds of the Great Depression were sown. And when Germany once again embraced continental domination in the interwar period, a second world war took wing. In some instances states turn toward integration in international order—what Hedley Bull called “international society”—the dominant rules, institutions, and norms that characterize the international system.² In other situations, nations understand their interests as best served by separating themselves from that society, or even by dramatically revising it. This variation begs for analysis.

Despite the importance of these ideational transformations, scholars and policymakers have few tools with which to understand and anticipate them. Those who have paid the closest attention to the importance of the international system have paid less attention to the sources of change in that system.³ Hedley Bull and his associates, for example, focused on the nature and different forms of international society, not on its dynamic transformation. They ignored one of the primary sources of change in international life—the collective ideas of major powers. What is clear is that states have often differed in their reactions to international rules—some accepting them, others not. Such attitudes can enhance or undermine overall order.⁴ International relations specialists since World War II have explored in detail the importance of power, the influence of institutions, and the role of domestic politics in world politics.⁵ In these studies, the collective ideas of nations are often pushed to the wings: they are marginalized as “cheap talk,” a side product of more central causes, or post hoc justifications.

Starting in the 1980s, however, some scholars have devoted considerable effort to correcting this oversight by intensive study of the way ideas (norms, beliefs, identity, etc.) at the international, national, and subnational levels have affected politics.⁶ What remains a puzzle, despite the volume of this literature, is why collectively held (or group) ideas sometimes radically *change*. Max Weber compared ideas to “switchmen” who work the railroads: they point actors, like trains, down tracks in some directions and divert them from others. This famous metaphor, however, begs a critical question: What decides the direction of the switch?

Adherents of psychological and constructivist approaches have paid serious attention to ideas, yet they also illustrate the problem. The psychology literature in international relations has illuminated the dynamics of change in the ideas that individuals hold. Not surprising, given its focus on the human mind, psychology has been less helpful in explaining how individual ideas come together to affect (or in many cases *not* affect) national ideas, such as those that guide foreign policies.⁷ Constructivists, by contrast, have focused on collective ideas and illuminated their influence theoretically and empirically in a variety of national and international settings. They have also shown how ideas have played a role in periods of political change.⁸ Yet general explanations of change in the ideas themselves are rare. And to

push the issue one step further, how ideas shape their own transformation, if they even do, remains an enigma.

Given this lacuna in the academy, policymakers—and those who would try to influence officials—face a challenge. In the absence of some general notion about the transformation of ideas, we cannot begin to think about likely outcomes in ongoing specific cases. For example, consider two big contemporary phenomena in world politics: the “rise of China” and the Bush “foreign policy revolution.”

China’s rapid economic growth and prominence has naturally been a focus of research.⁹ Considerable analysis, and much of the debate, has highlighted questions that link power to behavior. Will China’s emerging power lead to revisionist goals? Will it produce armed conflict as China ascends in power and other countries (e.g., Japan and the United States) decline in relative terms?¹⁰ As important as these questions are, what they miss is the way that international relations are shaped not just by the power states have but the *ideas* the states hold about how that power should be used.¹¹ Power, of course, is a tool, and ideas about the uses of tools vary considerably.¹² Power does not determine ideas nor do power transitions among states inevitably lead to conflict. After World War I, the United States emerged as the most powerful country on earth, but U.S. government involvement did *not* expand during the interwar period. China’s power has been growing since World War II, but it has adopted a range of different ideas toward the international system. And in terms of power trajectories, Britain and the United States *did not* go to war with each other at the turn of the twentieth century, even as the United States surpassed Britain as the dominant international power.¹³ In these cases enduring ideas (e.g., how much to integrate into the extant international order, which states to align with) played a central role. Positing such a role for ideas does not explain their sources, however. Lacking such an explanation, we are handcuffed in considering, for example, how China’s power trajectory will shape world politics.

Perhaps even more important is whether the United States is currently undergoing a foreign policy revolution. Since the end of World War II the United States has systematically favored active engagement in world affairs, a commitment to a liberal and open international order, and the development of multilateral practices and institutions. Many believe that in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks the United States adopted a new and fundamentally different compass for navigating in the world arena.¹⁴ The new orientation features accentuated American unilateral action, the preventive use of force, and an expanded geographical vision of the areas appropriate for aggressive democratization (e.g., moving beyond the Western hemisphere into the Middle East). Clearly, if such a transformation becomes orthodoxy, it will have huge implications for the United States and the world. Thinking about such a possibility demands a broad framework.

How do we account for the transformation—or continuity—of national ideas about international politics? Where do we even begin?

My short answer is that we start where we want to end—with ideas. New foreign policy ideas are shaped by preexisting dominant ideas and their relationship to experienced events, sometimes reinforcing the continuity of concepts and infrequently leading to their radical change. Yet that is still only the beginning of the story. To explain this complex variation means assessing not only ideas but how ideas interact in regular ways with the demands of strategic circumstances and domestic political pressures. Ideas, strategic circumstances, and domestic politics are typically treated as logically exclusive alternative approaches to explaining change or stability. Here I attempt to develop a synthetic explanation that captures their interactive effects. Why and how this happens is the longer account that follows.

My aim, then, is to gain some insight into the general determinants of the foreign policy concepts of various nation-states. By unraveling the general sources of foreign policy conceptual change we may also see new possibilities for future diplomacy and social action. In this chapter I lay the foundation by clarifying what it is I hope to explain, the conceptual and historical puzzles involved, the broad outlines of the argument, and why it matters.