ANALYTICAL ESSAY

Assessing Change in World Politics

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This introductory paper of the presidential issue examines IR theory's problems and prospects in understanding when and how change happens, especially peaceful transformations in world politics. The ISA 2017 Baltimore conference was aimed at taking an assessment of our understanding of change, its different manifestations as well as implications. The papers in this special issue deal with important questions on different markers and manifestations of change in world politics. The implications might range from epochal transformations to limited changes in the international system, especially within and between regions to incremental changes in how international treaties and global governance initiatives are promulgated, which in turn produce long-term and/or short-term changes in the architecture of world politics. It also addresses the following questions: How do different IR paradigms address change? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Can we understand change sequentially or cumulatively or combining their insights? How do material and ideational factors link together in generating change?

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During the past three decades, world politics has witnessed unprecedented changes. In 1991, the Cold War ended with little violence and, prior to that, the Berlin Wall fell, and East and West Germany united peacefully. After two decades of near-unipolarity characterized by American dominance, the power structure of the international system is currently witnessing challenges by a resurgent Russia and a rising China; simultaneously, other emerging powers such as India and Brazil have made efforts at exerting their influence, especially through international institutions. The onset of intensified globalization brought massive changes to wealth creation; innovations in global information, communication and transportation technologies; and the dissemination of ideas and norms, both good and bad. The inequalities of economic globalization have generated considerable discontentment among Western electorates; deglobalization has suddenly become the operating word to describe the need to halt growing disparities between socioeconomic groups. In 2016 alone, two monumental events occurred expressing this discontentment: the referendum by the British electorate to leave the European Union (EU) and the election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States (US). The resurgence of right-wing parties in Europe and the potential unraveling of the EU further cause much concern.

The strategies and campaigns waged by violent nonstate actors since the 9/11 attacks have brought attention to the changing nature of warfare, especially in the poorly governed spaces of the world. The sudden collapse of several authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa and the failure of political elites to bring about proper governing structures are generating intense violence in many states in the Global South. The intersection of domestic and international level factors is all the more evident in these ongoing conflicts. Liberal societies, especially in Europe, are facing major challenges in terms of the meaningful integration of minorities from growing levels of migration.

Much of international relations theory is poorly equipped to understand change, especially the kinds mentioned above (Buzan and Jones 1981). Standard realist theories have little to say about change, especially peaceful change, although varieties of classical geopolitical theories have accounted for some form of change (Deudney 1997). A major criticism of structural realism has been its inability to locate the sources of change, especially those arising from domestic structural variables (Keohane 1986). Moreover, the perspective cannot explain the evolution of the modern international system from its feudal predecessors (Ruggie 1986). The realist penchant to focus on continuities, based on the assumption of an anarchical system, places considerable limits on explaining the extent to which fundamental alterations have occurred in state behavior over the ages. By bringing in domestic- and individual-level factors as intervening variables and structural modifiers, neo-classical realism has made an advancement, at least in the study of change in foreign policy behavior (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Loebell 2016). The major alternate paradigm, liberalism, proposes several strategies for change, and constructivism has focused on ideational change. Constructivists, in general, focus on the processes involved in change and the long-term outcome, as they view change as "ubiquitous." A challenge for both of these paradigms is their limited appeal when explaining change in non-Western societies or relations among them. Moreover, liberal societies and liberal institutions need not always produce progressive outcomes. For instance, how do we explain Western democracies, including the US, generating reckless ideas, leaders, and war decisions? Rash strategic myths and ideas in the twentieth century caused two world wars (Snyder 1991) and many bloody regional interventions (notably Vietnam and Iraq). We still have little sense as to how some social and political ideas, particularly strategic myths, change—while others become embedded. We need more understanding of how states and international institutions can adapt peacefully to transforming world politics in all key domains and regions.

Postmodern and critical theories have offered much insight into change, especially on normative issue-areas of order, justice, and equity. For instance, Robert Cox (1981, 129) offers a distinction between "problem-solving theories" that focus on reforming existing social, institutional, and power relationships on the margin and "critical theory" that does not take them "for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing." Feminist theorists (e.g., Tickner 2001) also deal with normative changes on macro- and microfoundational levels.

This special presidential issue, assembled following the successful ISA Convention in Baltimore in February 2017 on the same theme, revolves around some key questions surrounding change. In particular, we seek to explore how the major paradigms address change and the strengths and limitations of these approaches. Nineteen short articles were selected to address change in crucial domains of international politics. The articles deal with approaches to analyzing and understanding change; the aim here is not to offer a uniform grand theory or explanation but to highlight contending approaches to different areas of international change that deserve individualized analyses.

Types and Markers of Change

The starting point is to explore the different kinds of change in world politics and the key markers of such changes for analytical purposes. The magnitude of change matters as not all change produces the same level of outcome or consequences to international politics. The analytical types range from epochal transformations at the systemic level to medium and short-term changes—especially within and between regions—and to incremental changes in how international treaties and global governance initiatives are promulgated. These in turn produce long-term and/or short-term changes in the architecture of world politics. A prominent theme in the study of change is its type: short-term, long-term, epochal or transformational, or episodic and random. Short-term change need not be long-lasting in its impact or it consequences. Epochal or transformational changes are rare, but they do occur in world politics. In the past, often they were preceded by major wars or the end of a major rivalry like the Cold War. These epochal changes in the international system signify fundamental shifts in economic and military power structures and resulting alterations in the control and management of international order. The changes could reflect the crumbling of an established order or the birth of a new one. More in-depth categories of change at the system level are offered by Phillips (2011, 6–7) by distinguishing among "positional change," involving the power and prestige of different actors; "institutional change," when key international institutions are changed; "purposive change," when moral purposes and international institutions are altered; and "configurative change," when unit differentiation principles occur along with alterations in the "constitutional values and fundamental institutions" (Phillips, 7).

The changes at the system level could trigger changes in regional orders and the foreign policy behavior of states in most affected areas. Rapid change could be learning events that affect how states conceive their role in the international system. The role conceptions may encourage elite to seek military/security preponderance and/or trading state orientations (Rosecrance 1986). The postwar settlements inherent in the Treaties of Westphalia (1648), Utrecht (1713), the Congress of Vienna (1815), Versailles (1919), Potsdam and Yalta (1945), Bretton Woods (1944), and San Francisco (1945) generated fundamental changes in the number of actors and the rules of international politics—notably, the norms that govern their relationships and the responsibilities states undertake.

On these lines, Kal Holsti (2004) has offered several categories of change that include: "trends," "great events," "great achievements," and "significant social/technological innovations." In his perspective, some key concepts of change include: change as "replacement," "addition or subtraction," "increased or decreased complexity," "transformation," "reversion," and "obsolescence" (Holsti 2004, 6–17). These could be caused by technological innovations and mass change in the importance of a given factor of production for economic activity. Along with these, the role of technology and its impact on both political economy and military strategy needs to be assessed, as well as the interaction of systemic-level and individual state-level forces. Technological changes generate revolutions in military affairs with far reaching consequences to internal, regional, and international orders.

It is also crucial to focus on markers of change; for example, to understand when and how we know change is occurring. Assessing the markers of change is always cumbersome, as change, like beauty, could well be in the eye of the beholder. Markers of big changes are made easier by the matrices available, but those of lower level changes are more difficult to locate, demanding painstaking microlevel analyses. Change within the system and change of the system are two different phenomena, and the markers may be different for each of them. The former involves change in the number of units, their power structure, and their relations; the latter denotes alterations to the basic principles by which the system is structured and the

institutions that govern their policies and the norms and practices that define their conduct (Gilpin 1981). Locating the markers for systemic-level change is easier than those of lower-level changes. The critical role that hegemonic powers play in this process is significant, as the rise and decline of major powers is the crucial marker of change in both dimensions. The parameters of structural power that include both material and ideational power, as well as production of knowledge, are important considerations here (Strange 1987). Change in institutions and their impact on structural power of hegemonic actors need to be addressed as well.

Gilpin (1981), for instance, classifies system change as change in the character of the basic actors. The change from city states to empires and then to nation-states are examples of system change. Systemic change is illustrated by leadership change from one hegemonic power to another, while interaction change is caused by phenomena like shifts in alignments of different states (Gilpin 1981, 40–49). Waltz's (1979) version of system change is based on structural attributes of the system, and, in his view, change rarely happens as anarchy is a constant in international politics. In his perspective, change from one distribution of power to another is a possibility, but even this is rare. This argument proved to be incorrect as just a decade after his publication *Theory of International Politics* (1979), a major systemic change occurred with the end of the Cold War. Constructivists like Wendt question the Waltzian assertion by arguing that structural change does occur when "relative expected utility of normative versus deviant behavior changes" and when actors redefine who they are and what they want (1999, 336–37). The privileging of either continuity or change offers avenues for intellectual debate but often has pigeonholed the IR literature, as the international system is characterized by both change and continuity, but not to the extreme in either camp's versions.

Daniel Deudney (1997) has identified several types of changes: rapid, gradual, progressive, sequential, developmental, and cumulative—and each of these requires different measures and methods, especially in gauging their varied consequences and impact. Additional value exists in exploring when and how new international institutions are formed and what causes their change of functions, power structures within, ability to handle specific issue areas, and possible decline or transformation. With this background discussion, we now focus on specific aspects of change that the contributors cover in this special issue.

Sources and Agents of Change

The first section of the special issue deals with "analyzing and explaining change." What role do war and violence play in ushering change? The starting point of material sources of change are economic, military, and technological factors that allow different units to achieve different capabilities. Demographic changes, such as huge population movements from within and without of states, as well as climate-change, are factors that have shaped the contours of national and international politics. Beyond the nation-state, there are also forces, both ideational and transnational, that states cannot control. Ideas ranging from grand strategies to principles and standards of behavior of states can be propellers of change. The global economic forces arising from capitalism, free trade, and new methods of production, all connected to increasing globalization and economic interdependence, can have tremendous impact beyond the nation-state. The key agents of change can vary from states to social classes and individual actors, especially national leaders. The transnational social, political, and economic forces, including multinational corporations and social movements, could play an even larger role in offering both opportunities and constraints to national elite. In addition, the grand strategies of states need to be assessed in order to see if they contribute to peaceful or violent change. It is also imperative to understand when and why countries abandon peaceful strategies and adopt more belligerent attitudes toward achieving their goals (Paul 2017). Under

intense globalization, these grand strategies themselves may change to include less forceful varieties, such as soft balancing, which rely on institutions and limited ententes (Paul 2018).

A question arises as to what motivates these actors to seek change: does change come inadvertently as externalities of their choices and actions in different realms? Great power interventions, such as the 2003 Iraq War and the ongoing wars in the Middle East, generated forces that original initiators never calculated. Material versus ideational reasons could be parsed out, as they are interrelated. States seek change to obtain better deals for themselves and/or are motivated by concerns of justice rather than crude national interests. Population groups and social movements may seek change, facing conditions such as high economic inequality. Agents who put forward strong ethical arguments for change—which in the past helped in demolishing several well-entrenched social institutions, such as slavery and colonialism—(Crawford 2002) could achieve significant social changes. Individual leaders may seek change for instrumental or normative reasons, and the ideological orientations of leaders may be the source of the specific change they seek. Institutions, both domestic and international, can act as agents of change in many domains (Finnemore 1996). The individual agents can operate more effectively when the external environment changes, and those policymakers with new ideas can make use of the "windows of opportunities" (Checkel 1997, xi). The Gorbachev phenomenon is the critical case that has attracted most attention in recent years. The challenge of determining how much the individual leader mattered versus the environment is always present. Jervis (2013, 158) suggests employing "comparisons and counterfactuals" in order to "see if different leaders or different kinds of leaders follow different policies in similar circumstances, and whether the same person or similar people behave in ways that are consistent over time, especially when the context changes."

The articles in this symposium deal with some of these selected agents of change. Kal Holsti, for instance, in a short yet succinct essay examines the big changes that have occurred in international politics in the past four hundred years. He sees a series of efforts by states and statesmen to avert warfare, both internal and external, which was often fought over what are considered mundane matters today. The sources of these changes have been, at the macro level, wars and revolutions and, at the individual level, ideas, norms, and the beliefs of important historical figures. Aseema Sinha brings forth a neglected but crucial source of change in dominant IR theories, especially of the structural variety, that is the role of nonstate and private actors who can shape global change in different domains. These nonstate forces could be social movements and NGOs that seek specific policy changes and value orientations within and outside nation-states. Despite the merit of this argument, there is a risk of over attribution to nonstate actors; however, it remains to be seen how we can parse out the specific role of state, nonstate actors, and social and economic forces in causing specific change in world politics.

A historical-sociological approach is offered by Sandra Halperin. She brings forth the transnational influences of church-state separation in Europe and its unintended consequences for change in different regions of the world, especially in the context of change in the contemporary Middle East. Mary Kaldor argues that the disjunction between the speed with which changes take place and the inability of existing institutions to adapt generates crises in the system. The American order created at the end of World War II is currently undergoing such a crisis under the weight of revolutions in information and communication technologies, global interdependencies, climate change, and scarcity of resources. Subjective and disruptive change is highlighted by Dan Deudney, who analyzes the role of technology in bringing forth changes to international violence, global environment, and the processing and dissemination of information. Technological changes are thus intimately related to social and political transformations.

Peaceful or Violent Change?

Any discussion of the sources of change generates questions for an important dimension of change in international politics: whether it is preceded by violent or nonviolent processes. Power transitions and great power accommodations have occurred without war and conflict, although a majority of them were preceded by violence (Kupchan 2010; Paul 2016). Similarly, regional transformations from conflict to peace and the reverse to conflict have happened (Miller 2007; Paul 2012), although nonviolent resistance has been successful in changing outcomes more than acknowledged (Chenoweth and Stephen 2011). In her article, Neta Crawford contends that change has been a norm rather than exception as part of the evolutionary process in international politics. She calls for more explorations of nonviolent change, in particular the rapid revolutionary change happening as part of fundamentally evolutionary processes. Global governance patterns could be very important in obtaining peaceful or violent change. But what can upset peaceful change? Miles Kahler, for instance, contends that factors such as fragmented regional institutional orders and the turn toward nationalism and populism in advanced countries bode ill for peaceful change. Innovations in global governance structures that incorporate nonstate actors may be a more fruitful route to obtaining peaceful change. Deborah Welch Larson highlights another dimension of global governance; that is, the efforts by rising powers to create parallel institutions within the existing international order. She finds that peaceful change may depend on how established powers adapt to these efforts and respond to the need for reforming global governance institutions. This is indeed a major change from previous historical patterns where rising powers attempted to destroy the existing institutional order through violent means. It is not only the rising powers that are helping to create new institutional norms, but the smaller states in different regions are also agents of change. J. Andrew Grant develops the analytical perspective of agential constructivism and advances several insights regarding the importance of African state—and nonstate—actors as norm makers, shapers, and antipreneurs via an empirical case study of the conflict-free diamond norm. W. R. Nadège Compaoré advances a complementary argument concerning African state actors. She contends that African states have created new norms in the mining sector, which seem more adaptable to the needs of the relevant actors on the continent. New critical areas, such as global climate change governance, are currently lacking proper institutions, and, according to Sikina Jinnah, they may be necessary to obtain peaceful change. The demand side of new institutional governance is all the more apparent in the global climate-management arena.

Are all peaceful changes good? Using a neoclassical realist approach, Jeffrey Taliaferro, Steven Lobell, and Norrin Ripsman contend that the prospects for peaceful change depend on the expectations of a declining hegemonic power of the inevitability of change and its inability to resist it due to economic and material weaknesses and costs as well as domestic constraints making it hard to resist change. Making a pitch for open-mindedness on nonviolent change, they contend that not all peaceful change is desirable for international order, as one hegemon can be replaced by another through peaceful means, but the resulting order need not be peaceful. For instance, an important question we face today is whether the shift from American-led order to China-led order can be peaceful, even if it occurs in the absence of war. Although there is merit in this observation, change brought about by intense violence can also produce nonbenign aftereffects that linger on, as is evident in the case of the India-Pakistan and Arab-Israeli conflicts.

An analytical area where additional work is necessary is status considerations and their impact on causing conflict or cooperation in the international system. Russia's behavior cannot be devoid of this important variable, yet, as Andrej Krickovic and Yuval Weber argue, IR theory has developed very few tools to analyze it rigorously. As

Arie Kacowicz and Benjamin Miller contend, the illiberal turn in the West is boding ill for both systemic- and interactive-level processes, the former dealing with major power transitions and the latter with territorial adjustments. These are significant factors in determining if we can obtain peaceful change or not. It is compounded by the rise or resurgence of illiberal China and Russia. The latter theme is picked up by John Owen who reminds us of the past victory of liberalism over fascism and communism. However, the effectiveness of the liberal model is under challenge today not just by rising powers but by the processes within Western democracies. To him, while liberalism is under challenge, in terms of both domestic and international order, it does not mean the automatic demise of its central tenets.

Explaining Change

The methodology of explaining change has always been a challenge for IR scholarship. Unlike other disciplines, such as sociology, IR has yet to develop a fruitful methodology or mechanism by which one can measure change or explain the critical forces that bring about change. Moreover, a puzzle-driven, as opposed to a paradigm-driven, approach might be more useful in explaining change. Eclectic approaches may have a better chance to explain change in different theaters of the world and domains of world politics. Anders Wivel and Ole Wæver, for instance, contend that the interaction between material and discourse variables is causing the changes in Europe. This type of mixing of realist and Copenhagen school approaches might produce a better account for Europe's transformation than single-level explanations based on systemic- or domestic-level factors. Taking a different approach, focusing on both domestic and international environments, in order to understand changes in China's foreign policy behavior, Kai He and Steve Chan assert that Chinese leaders "tend to be more risk-acceptant when facing a deteriorating situation and more inclined to pursue a moderate approach when facing a benign environment" (page number TBA). Questions that remain unanswered include who creates the environment and whether Chinese policies themselves may be generating environmental changes in the Asia-Pacific region in particular. Technology has also played a significant role in the type of change that we have witnessed in the past, and the trend is likely to accelerate in the future. One such technology is lethal artificial intelligence, and Denise Garcia contends that this technology could determine stability in international and regional orders. The above examples highlight the crucial role of institutions in obtaining peaceful change.

Challenges for IR Theory and Future Research Trajectories

IR scholars often grapple with the following questions: How do different IR paradigms, including critical perspectives, address change? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Can we understand change sequentially, cumulatively, or by combining their insights? How do material and ideational factors link together in generating change? The articles in this special issue show that, although we have witnessed immense changes, our theoretical understanding of change—its manifestations, markers, causes, and consequences—remain limited at best. Effectively, we may think of change from different levels of analysis and focal points. The reason for the limited grasp of change may very well be the peculiar ways by which IR paradigms have evolved. Realism looks for persistence rather than change, while liberalism seeks a certain kind of normative change and, as a result, has limited explanatory power over why wars happen or for the violent change that illiberal forces help shape in international politics. The premium is on liberal mechanisms and interactions among liberal states. Constructivism has made much progress, but, despite some recent efforts at analyzing "bad norms," there is an overemphasis on positive ideas and intersubjective norms that can make a difference in

capturing certain kinds of change. However, without giving material forces adequate importance or explaining why bad norms arise, we may not get a holistic picture of change. Scholars have started to work on these, as evident in works on "norm antipreneurs" (Bloomfield and Scott 2017) or rightwing activists who struggle to demolish progressive forces and their ideas (Bob 2012).

Theoretical pluralism may be necessary to address change in its different manifestations. There is little value in rejecting material forces—such as power competition between rising and declining states or among rising states themselves. It is equally important to explore when ideas matter and the sorts of ideas that propel different changes. Macro- and microlevel processes within the agent-structure context are useful for analytical purposes. Global-, regional-, subregional-, national-, and subnational-level changes all have relevance to IR, as the domestic-international divide is irrelevant in many such contexts. Dichotomies based on systemic continuity versus constant change also have limitations. A better approach would be to identify structural factors that appear constant and those that change and the conditions under which they occur. We also need better explanations as to why change is not always linear and some good changes return to the previous state of affairs after a period of hopeful progression. The illiberal turn in Western democracies, the increase of racial and religious intolerance, and the resurgence of authoritarianism after a period of democratic transition in various countries, especially in the Global South, show that change is not always progressive or linear. A fruitful avenue is to explore why the status aspirations of countries change after a period of time (Larson and Shevchenko 2003; Clunan 2009) and what can be done to accommodate them. In addition, more studies of how norms on warfare—especially the acquisition and use of weapons of mass destruction—have changed are also welcome (Tannenwald 2007; Rublee 2009). An important unanswered question is whether these positive norms remain intact in the long run, or do they alter when new leaders emerge with different ideas?

If anything, these articles show the virtue of pluralism and diversity in IR research on international change, as adhering to a single method or sole paradigm will leave a large number of issues or puzzles unexplained in the study of change. The debate on types and markers of change will continue, even when agreement eludes on the causes of change, similar to the study of war or the outbreak of peace. Clusters of research agendas need to be developed on different types of puzzles related to change and transformation. The topic of peaceful change is one such cluster that deserves greater attention from IR scholars.

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