33 Re-conceptualizing Security Research with Individual Level Data

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33.1 Introduction

A half-century ago Kenneth Organski proposed that in the hierarchy of nations, a balance of power among dissatisfied challengers is the precondition for global war (Organski 1958). To support this 'Power Transition' proposal he used a single point of evidence: the relative gross output of Prussia and France prior to the 1870 conflict. The discovery that a balance in overall capabilities led to war was path breaking and challenged the prevailing theory that a balance among major contenders leads to peace. What made Organski's claim unusual is that, instead of asserting this relation and relying on previous authority for support, he provided evidence to sustain his contention that nations wage serious war when there is a power transition.

Organski's insight is remembered today because the propositions advanced have since been empirically supported, expanded, and generalized (Organski/Kugler 1980; Kugler/Lemke 1996; Tammen/Kugler/Lemke/Stam III/Abdollahian/Alsharabati/Efird/Organski 2000; Lemke 2002). Numerous replications and extensions now show that major powers wage severe war when their capabilities are at parity, their preferences diverge, and alliance commitments are weak. The policy implications of these arguments have been explored for the coming transition by Asian nations led by China and India (Tammen/Kugler/Lemke/Stam III/Abdollahian/Alsharabati/Efird/Organski 2000; Kim 2002). These arguments have been formalized and extended to conflicts among minor nations (Lemke 2002; Efird/Kugler/Genna 2003). We now know that Organski overreached when he implied that serious war is always waged even when the rare power parity conditions are present, but we also now know that when a balance of power is reached serious war is likely. Major wars are waged only when contending parties fundamentally disagree about the rules that ensure a status quo in world politics but do not when they agree on fundamental principles (Werner/Kugler 1996).

Consider recent evidence. Britain was overtaken by the United States in the later part of the 19th century and, despite past conflicts, accepted and supported the transfer of leadership to the United States. British policy created the 'special relationship' that still binds these two powers. At the same time, however, Britain failed to find an accommodation with the rising German state after the 1870 unification. When these nations reached power parity they waged two devastating World Wars to determine who would dominate world politics. In the end both failed. The United States and the USSR emerged as the dominant powers following World War II. This case is excellent because it is now clear that the mere overtaking of Britain by Germany did not cause the two World Wars. Following World War II the recovery and unification of Germany lead to the cooperation between Germany, France, Italy, and England. The European Union is peaceful because member nations agree on the status quo and support it.

The concern with power transitions did not stop with the settlement of disputes within Europe. Today the rise of China and India forecasts the possibility of a confrontation with the United States and the Western World. Mearsheimer (2001) for example, disregarding the more current empirical literature on power transition adopting the early parity argument made by Organski (1958), forecasts an inevitable confrontation between the United States and China as the latter overtakes the United States and achieves dominance during this century. The "tragedy of the great powers" presumably leads anarchical nations to seek preponderance, and immolate each other in the process.

The empirical studies of power transition supported by evidence differ from this apocalyptic prediction (Kugler/Tammen 2004). Power overtakings are as dangerous as they are inevitable. These rare conditions set the necessary but not sufficient condi-
tions for major wars to erupt among contending powers. However, and this is a big however, in order to generate a major conflict nations must be dissatisfied with the rules and norms that regulate world politics.

A conflict between China or India and the United States as the Asian giants emerge from the shadows of underdevelopment is far from inevitable. Rather, it is the behaviour of national decision makers in each of the contender nations that will determine if they are satisfied or dissatisfied with the rules and norms governing world politics. If during the overtaking period a pair of these nations sees each other as devastating competitors whose presence impedes their progress – major war – that today includes nuclear exchanges – cannot be excluded. If on the other hand these nations join – as did Europe in the EU – in stable arrangements that provide legal means to resolve disputes, the preservation of peace is likely (Tammen/Kugler/Lemke/Stam III/Abdollahian/Alsharabati/Efird/Organski 2000).

Why do I contend that the new transition perspective is superior to the previous well-established principles of a balance of power or more recent plausible arguments about the tragedy of great power? The simple answer is that the empirical record supports the conditional inferences made by power transition. Clearly empirical correlations do not imply causation. Relying on flimsy ground may be dangerous as the consequences of another World War could be devastating for humanity.

Reason for optimism rises because the transition patterns proposed by Organski that relate power parity and dissatisfaction to severe conflict have been formally deduced from a number of perspectives. Using game theory, expected utility, and most recently structural equations and dynamic stakeholder models, the conditions for conflict and cooperation have been identified and found consistent with the original transition logic at the conventional and nuclear level. Similar patterns have emerged at the conventional and the nuclear levels (Kugler/Zagare 1987; Bueno de Mesquita/Lalman 1992; Zagare/Kilgour 2001; Abdollahian 1996; Alsharabati 1997). Our state of research is not such as to declare power transition as the theory of major war, but it is now a major contender because of the multiple support from inductive persuasiveness, deductive consistency, and empirical support.

The point I wish to make is that powerful insight based on strong logic can – even with a single point – produce theoretical insights that when tested extensively can challenge and overtake previous entrenched paradigmatic propositions. The insights gained from single case studies or a few observations are, of course, simply preconditions to knowledge. Only after the patterns are formalized and corroborated by empirical replications can we argue that, given our knowledge at a point in time, the underlying propositions are robust and their results may be used to generalize and explain the underlying phenomenon. Falsification always looms large, but policy recommendations based on theoretically and empirically grounded propositions may then be useful additions to the decision maker’s common-sense analysis.

To achieve these goals we must have effective models for the phenomena under considerations, agree on testing and data collections procedures, and provide clear guidelines for future replication and validation of results. I start with data collection because a frequently undervalued effort is the key to growth as a discipline.

### 33.2 Data Construction

Attaining useful theoretical propositions, therefore, requires replication – and replication requires effective data collection. This is no easy task. In academia, intellectual rewards are still much higher for theoretical innovation than replication, or empirical testing and certainly data collection. Thus, much effort is devoted to formulating alternate theoretical perspectives, paradigms, or programmes that may be used to explain a given phenomenon. Proportionally much less time and effort is devoted to construct reliable and valid indicators that can substantiate or reject these theoretical formulations. In my view this equation should be rectified, for discovery is the sum of both.

Einstein was a superb theorist who in a brilliant few years restated the rules governing our physical environment in relative terms. His ideas are now well known, if not yet fully understood. Empirical support for his main theoretical propositions came only grudgingly. It took decades before predictions about time and space distortions were confirmed by observing minute disparities in the position of a star during a solar eclipse. Few outside of the close net community of physicists know the names of the observers available from <http://www.albert-einstein.org>.

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1 For extensive commentary on Einstein’s work and access to archived materials, see the online official archive available from <http://www.albert-einstein.org>.