7

Patience, Evolution and Change in World Politics

The evolutionary mechanism proposed above as an explanation for the dynamics of asymmetric territorial conflicts reflects a general phenomenon which is relevant to a very broad array of contexts. In particular, there are grounds for viewing it as a key component of power transitions, which underlie both the rise and fall of states and empires and are related to the eruption of major, system-wide wars.

As noted in Chapter 2, many scholars and observers of international relations have referred to normative or ideational change as a component of power transitions. While we may not be able to obtain direct evidence of the evolution of patience, it does offer a novel explanation of a very familiar, indeed prevalent, phenomenon.

7.1 The empirical prevalence of power transitions

Evidence of changing power relations within the international system ranges from suggestive historical examples to more systematic, quantitative findings. Much of the empirical literature on the subject has explored the relationship between conflict and dyadic transitions in material capabilities (Organski and Kugler, 1980; Anderson and McKeeown, 1987; Levy, 1987; Houweling and Siccama, 1988; Gochman, 1990a; Huth, Bennett and Gelpi, 1992; Huth and Russett, 1993; Geller, 1993; Wayman, 1996). Others have examined power cycles for single states, attributing the evolution of a state’s capabilities to dynamic processes involving the availability of resources and the state of industrialization and productivity levels (Doran and Parsons, 1980; Doran, 1985, 1989). These studies show cumulative evidence demonstrating
the prevalence of power transitions as an important facet of inter-state relations, as well as an important correlate of conflict and war.

The idea that changes in the very structure of global politics are rooted in altering power configurations goes back at least to Thucydides and has been extensively explored in modern scholarship (Organski, 1958; Modelski, 1972; Gilpin, 1981). For the last five hundred years at least, it has been argued that a series of world powers – Portugal, the Netherlands, Great Britain and the United States – has successively dominated the international arena, reflecting the existence of a ‘long cycle’ of global politics (Modelski, 1978; Gilpin, 1981: 204). In this vein, it has been noted that changes in the global distribution of power tend to culminate in ‘global’ or ‘hegemonic’ wars that signal the respective rise and decline of the world’s dominant powers (Gilpin, 1988).

Empirically, then, it is clear that power transitions are a central feature of global politics that, when pertaining to the world’s dominant powers, display an important relationship with major instances of international war. What explains such transitions has, in turn, been the subject of much study.

7.2 Existing explanations

Material factors – The basic notion of power in social science is broadly accepted to entail ‘the ability of one person or group to change the behavior of another person or group’ (Huntington, 1997: 83). As noted in Chapter 2, the conceptualization of power in international relations has most often emphasized material – primarily military and economic – factors.

Power transition theorists typically refer to material factors such as systems of communication and transportation, military technology and the nature and size of a state’s economy (Gilpin, 1981: 56). Such factors are argued to obey a ‘law of uneven growth’ leading to a differential growth of power among states. A state’s material capabilities expand – through territorial conquest or economic growth – as long as it achieves increasing returns on such expansion. Such increasing returns, initially fuelling rapid expansion, eventually diminish, slowing the pace of expansion until an equilibrium is reached. Once a steady-state is reached, several combined influences tend to diminish the state’s capabilities: inherent internal and external influences increase the proportion of national income devoted to consumption and protection at the expense of productive investment, leading to a fiscal crisis. This, in turn, is augmented by the diffusion of its technology to competing