

Robert Gilpin, War and Change in International Politics, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. Ch. 1- 5

General argument:

Gilpin presents an implicitly rationalist, expected utility argument for international relations: An international system is established because actors enter into social relations and create structures to advance their interests. The structure and distribution of benefits thus will reflect the dominant interests within the system. As the dominant interests change over time (usually waxes), actors who will benefit from a change in the system will seek to change the system to get a more favorable distribution of benefits.

- Equilibrium is achieved when no one will gain from changing the system.
- A state will attempt to change the system if expected benefits exceed expected costs.
- To seek change, a state will use territorial, political and economic expansion until the marginal costs of further change are equal to or greater than the marginal benefits
- Once equilibrium is reached, it's unlikely to maintain, since the costs of maintain the status quo (for the dominant power(s)) will rise faster than capability to meet these costs.
- If the dominant power(s) can't resolve a disequilibrium, then the system will change to reflect the new redistribution of power (usually through hegemonic war)

Two sources of change: 1. change in the international distribution of power, defined as the military, economic, and technological capabilities of states, and 2. change in domestic preferences (redefinition of the national interest), due to changes in domestic politics

Unit of analysis:

Structures (distribution of power)

States as reflective of the interests domestic constituents

(Third + Second image)

Main hypotheses:

The world tends toward equilibrium, where the distribution of benefits mirrors the distribution of power in the system.

Equilibrium is never lasting, however. Changes in distribution of power and states interests → Disequilibrium

Inability to restore equilibrium → Change to new equilibrium, usually through war

Assumptions:

- States's preferences are formed by domestic competition, but once the preferences are formed, states behave like individual utility maximizers.
- Everything can be explained by expected utility theory – cooperation, lack of cooperation, coercion, etc.

Empirics: Basically none. Some ad-hoc references to history of past empires, rise of nation states in Europe, etc. Western-centric and totally absent a research design. Consequently there's little proof of any of his arguments – not replicable or falsifiable and tautological in terms of what he's explaining (change – what is change is given by the theory, selection on the dependent variable!)

Critiques:

This argument is NOT predictive and actors do not maximize utility in terms of actual decision-making processes, but are assumed to behave as if they were maximizing utility. Gilpin admits particular historical factors account for change in real time and space – he's merely trying to draw large a theoretical picture of underlying patterns. Of course unless he is presenting a post-hoc generalization, which of course he wouldn't want to admit, he has to be presenting some kind of causal argument, which should be predictive, *ceteris paribus*. So when he claims his argument is not predictive, does he mean it simply can't generate precise predictions since we don't know all the other stuff that's not held constant, or because his theory itself is not supposed to be a law-like generalization?

It looks like post-hoc theory generalization to me, no empirics, not falsifiable in any way.

Interesting because it can easily be applied to current American situation – continuing dominance is more costly than U.S. can maintain, so it is on the demise, and if it cannot give up power to rising challengers there will be a war?

Such broad theory is obviously highly suspect, esp. since there are no empirics whatsoever. Functionalist theory of state-formation and international-system formation. Changes in the international system, the DV, is explained by states pursuing their interest, but changes of interest, or the real sources of change are contingent, non-theoretical things (rise of modern capitalism and the nation state, for example). So of what use is this theory? It is at best descriptive of some large patterns, but it cannot be *explanatory*.

This fits in with so many theories in IR – neorealism, Offense-Defense balance, domestic sources of change, learning, etc. – takes them all and throws them into the hot pot. It's the shabu shabu of IR ☺ Yes there's rise and decline of major powers in the world, but is it explained by expected utility theory as applied and aggregated all the way up into the international system (a theory which is supposed to be a theory about microfoundational behavior of individuals), I'm not sure.

Specifics: (Read if interested)

Remainder of Chap 1 is setting out definitions:

- **State objectives** – conquest of territory, influence over other states, control of world economy.
- **International system** – diverse entities interacting regularly with each other, regulated by some form of control. There are three forms: imperial or hegemonic, bipolar, and what he calls balance of power (multipolar)
 - The mechanisms or components of the system of control are:

- Dominance of great powers – distribution of power
- Hierarchy of prestige – Reputation for power, or the credibility and perceived resolve of a state, in the eyes of other states. Prestige lags behind actual distribution of power, and the system breaks as perceptions catch up with real power.
 - The prestige of the hegemon rests on its victory in the last hegemonic war, its provision of public goods, and (v. weakly) the acceptance of some ideology justifying dominance
- Division of territory
- Rules of the system –Hedley Bull’s set of rules, like treaties, rules governing war and economics
- International economy
- **International Change** – Can be slow (bargaining) or revolutionary. 3 types:
 - Systems change – Change in the nature of actors (from empires to nation states). Major change in the character of the system itself.
 - Ex. Rise and fall of Greek city-state system, decline of medieval European state system, emergence of modern European nation-state system
 - Systemic change – governance of system – change in the distribution of power. Main focus of the book.
 - Interaction change – interstate processes – most frequent, like alliance formation, regime change, transnational relations.

Ch 2.

States will pursue foreign policy to serve their interests. When the cost of changing the system is less than the benefits a state expects to get from the change, the state will seek to alter the status quo.

Cost and benefit is subjectively calculated, however. What determines these perceptions?

- Historical experience of a society (lessons from past wars)
- Time range of calculations- short term gains, long term, etc.
- Material factors which constrain fantasy perceptions – these include the usual structural and power variables (economic, military and technology factors). He goes into detail about environmental factors that can change, like transportation and communication, military innovation, economic factors (economics of scale, etc.). Structure constrains state behavior as an oligopolistic market influences the behavior of the firm.
- Economic changes empowers new social groups who become instruments for changing foreign policy – the distribution of costs and benefits WITHIN a society will go into the final calculation about whether to change the international system, along with structural factors.

Interesting points:

- Gilpin discusses different distributions of power. Against Waltz, he argues bipolarity is not the most stable – one side may fail to balance against the other, the delicate balance between the two sides can be easily disturbed by a minor change,

- with grave consequences, and inability to accommodate entry of new power into the system.
- When Gilpin talks about domestic interests, it becomes clear he's not a materialist, and can't be a total rationalist – Private and public interest are not always different, for example in Rome, where the soldiers had a personal stake in the glory of Rome. This is a normative basis for a different conception of interest than an economist (a basic one) would allow. Non-materialistic interest.

Ch. 3

Chapter on growth and expansion – there's a limit to expansion.

“The expansion of a state and of its control over the system may be said to be determined in large measure of by U-shaped cost curve. The initial phase of expansion is characterized by declining costs due principally to economies of scale. However, as the size of state and the extent of its control grows, it begins to encounter decreasing returns to scale.”(P. 107) As the marginal costs of further expansion begin to equal or exceed the marginal benefits, expansion ceases, reaching equilibrium.

The mechanisms of expansion differ historically:

Territorial conquest in the imperial era, replaced by economic expansion in the modern era.

Ch. 4

Once an equilibrium is reached, the costs of maintaining the status quo increases for the dominant powers, and they start declining. Dominant powers will experience a fiscal crisis if they try to maintain dominance.

Internal and External factors both affect the decline of a state.

Internal:

- Structural changes in the economy: Every economy is subject to the law of diminishing returns.
- Law of the increasing cost of war: Due to the increased costs of military capabilities and diffusion of military technology, the costs to the dominant state of maintaining the system rise with time. But the increased effectiveness of modern technologies can moderate the impact.
- There is the tendency for both private and public consumption to grow faster than the GNP as a society becomes more affluent.
- Structural change in the character of the economy: service industries tend to have a lower rate of productivity growth than manufacturers.
- Corrupting influence of affluence: This causes divergence in private and public interests as well as makes people of the dominant state unwilling to concede to demands of challengers or make sacrifices to defend the status quo

External

- Increasing costs of dominance: Increasing costs of protecting sphere of influence and decreasing profitability of the status quo

- Loss of economic and technological leadership: The diffusion of economic and military technology to less advanced societies is a key element in the international redistribution of power.

Ch. 5

Faced with challengers, the dominant power can: generate more resources and direct them towards maintaining its position, or reduce commitments and costs in a way that doesn't jeopardize its position.

Historically, states have tried to generate more resources by taxation or getting more tribute from other states. This has a cost however and can generate rebellion (French Rev.)

Reducing commitments involves unilateral abandonment of the state's commitments, seeking rapprochement with less threatening powers, or conceding to the demands of the rising powers.

If the state of disequilibrium is not resolved peacefully, then a hegemonic war is likely to occur.

Hegemonic war draws many states in ("world war"), affects the nature and governance of the system, and may use unlimited means.

Three preconditions for the outbreak of a hegemonic war:

1. Decline of options and opportunities for the dominant powers
2. Psychological factors, the perception that "a fundamental historical change is taking place and the gnawing fear of one or more of the great powers that time is somehow beginning to work against it and that one should settle matters through preemptive war." (201)
3. Events get out of hand: beyond human control.

Exactly what determines when states be unable to resolve things without war is unclear – depends on historical contingencies and decisions of individual state-makers.

A hegemonic war is not the end, but marks the beginning of another cycle of growth, expansion, and eventual decline, so on.