



# ANALYSIS

*Editors' Note: The article below is by the late Professor Colin S. Gray and was brought to the editors' attention by Professor Gray's dear wife Valerie; she encouraged its publication. It was an unpublished manuscript that Professor Gray authored in January 2019. In it, Professor Gray offers a timeless essay on the broad sweep of history and the use of history for strategic analysis. His comments include keen observations that are wholly pertinent to today's international threat context. The editors are very pleased to be able to present this article in honor of Professor Gray and would like to thank Valerie Gray for bringing it to our attention.*

## **GREAT POWERS AND WORLD ORDER: PLUS ÇA CHANGE...?**

By Colin S. Gray

### **INTRODUCTION**

An alternative title for this essay could be 'the perils of tripolarity'. I argue here that, notwithstanding the presence of large competitive nuclear arsenals, there will be little in the world politics of the twenty-first century that is systemically novel. This does not mean that our political leaders necessarily are well educated in the international hazards of their contemporary tasks. However, we and they may find some comfort in the thought that the human race has done it nearly all many times before, albeit not in identical detail, of course. There is but a single zone of grim, indeed potentially lethal, menace to the unity of the whole human experience: nuclear weapons. We are quite unable to solve the challenges that these pose because their vibrancy of hazard is driven by factors far outside the engines of destruction themselves. The nuclear danger to all humankind resides undoubtedly in our politics and the factors that drive them.

This essay welcomes some political and technical innovation, but is most concerned to provide understanding of the major threads to our history that have not altered in or from the past and appear unlikely to do so in the future. I endeavor to contextualize the security condition of the United States in the twenty-first century. In order to do that I will strive to explain historical dynamism, political impulse, and a persisting need for strategy.

### **HISTORY'S RHYTHM**

So deeply encultured are we to place extraordinary value on novelty that it can be difficult to persuade an audience that difference is not in itself a quality much worthy of respect. The problem is substantially cultural. Our economy and its values are near wholly geared to revere change. This often is equated unreflectively with the morally commanding idea of progress, an idea that tends naturally and indeed inevitably to foreclose upon debate.

It can be difficult to oppose change. Because the idea often is deployed with positive connotations, it is assumed to be desirable. All change is not necessarily beneficial. The direction here is towards the claim that we appear incapable of learning from our history



what we should do in our own most vital interest. Because our historical narrative is not, and can never be pre-scripted, even substantial familiarity with a largely true version of the past should not be trusted to produce a reliable guide. We often find ourselves obliged to behave in unexpected ways due in large part to accident and circumstance. Great men and women are enabled to be such because opportunity so permits. This is not intended to demean, let alone dismiss, extraordinary achievement, but it is to help provide context for unusual achievement. There is what can be termed usefully a rhythm to history that is as unmistakable as, nonetheless, it is apt to mislead the unwary.

A common error is the severe misuse of history as a repository of analogous wisdom. Indeed, “analogous wisdom” is a contradiction in terms because one should never assume wisdom in analogy. Human circumstance is always too varied and dynamic for analogy to be reliable. So many and various, not to say possibly unexpected, are the influences generating behavior that analogy must always be deemed unsafe. This does not mean, however, that history cannot and should not be deployed as an educational aid to contemporary statecraft.

Whereas we are now confident of human innovation resting upon ever-expanding scientific discovery, it can be a surprise to many when they discover that a historical narrative is not one that demonstrates plausibly the achievements of much progress over the course of several millennia, say from the time of Herodotus to the present.<sup>1</sup> Human tools and toys have altered very notably, but it is more impressive to take note of the continuities in human behavior over the course of millennia. What we can hardly avoid noticing is the triumph of a continuity in patterns of behavior. Of course fashions change, sometimes suddenly and with widespread effect, but we should not coarsen our understanding of history by settling too easily into comfortable pseudo-historical falsehoods. Also we should not forget that all countries create national historical narratives that fall some way short of being a true record of what happened, why, and to whom! History is important, indeed it is essential to understanding of the present and to prudent anticipation of the future. Nonetheless much of what passes muster as history, while it will employ widely agreed facts, may have only a modest dependence upon reliable records from the past. Much historical fact is really not so, because history comprises the stories about the past we were taught, and in our turn teach, in school. The past is gone and cannot be recreated. In using history we have no choice other than to select the stories we choose to believe and to teach. Even with honest interest we can get it wholly wrong – and since ‘history’, meaning the past, is only played once, no magical social science method is capable of revealing what really happened. We must attempt to make use of history-based understanding.

If we take as a bold hypothesis the proposition that there has been a common logic of prudent necessity for all human existence, we can find a rich vein of reasoning on the vital subject of security. The argument will be that really it matters not for our understanding today just what were the local details, then, of time, geography, and culture. The whole historical narrative of our species is relevant today. The rhythm of history finds expression in the rise, decline, and fall of every great power without exception. It would be unreasonably

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<sup>1</sup> Herodotus wrote his great work, *The Histories*, between the 450s and 420s BC.

brave to suggest that the multi-millennial rise and fall of once great powers will not apply to the United States also. No one can know what the future holds in detail. There are too many relevant variables to enable predictions. However, although we should not engage in a foolish hunt for analogies, there is, in some contrast, merit in a search for approximate parallels in situation. The historical record is filled abundantly with people and circumstances that bear notable resemblance to the challenges of today. The rhythm of history may not be highly melodic, but it will be discovered to be oft-repeated because of eternal concerns.

## **POLITICAL ORDER**

Politics is the force that keeps relations between states constantly in motion. As explained by Harold D. Lasswell in *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*, politics always is about efforts to achieve influence over others.<sup>2</sup> His terse, even austere, definition has never been bettered.

And though this concept of political order is understandably popular, its meaning is apt to be left obscure because empirical referents are anything but frozen in time and place. The theoretically-defined political order, is thus always fraying around its edges. For example, Imperial Rome and Persia contested for centuries the space that was very largely beyond the Euphrates. Much more recently, the Eastern Europe comprising the Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and even the much larger states of Poland and now Ukraine, have changed hands politically because of the political consequences of shifting strategic fortunes between Russia and another great European power.

Global politics in this century are shaping up to be significantly tripolar in structure and dynasties. There is in progress a bipolar competition between the United States and China, with Russia rather hopelessly hanging on to a superpower status that the world probably knows today is gone and cannot return. This is not to deny the reality of an awesomely impressive Russian nuclear arsenal. In some ways ironically, however, the reality of a near superfluity of nuclear armament provides a staggeringly sharp contrast when considered in the full context of contemporary Russia. Bluntly stated, the new global bipolarity still emerging today does not include Russia, despite the reality of its nuclear arsenal. This is not to ignore or otherwise dismiss Russian nuclear weapons, but rather to argue that those military instruments have sharply limited utility in contemporary statecraft. Political order today, as was true in all periods in the past, cannot be founded and sustained on the basis of military power alone. There is no doubt that, for now, the United States remains alone in a class of true superpower, a status unshared with any competitor. Americans need to grasp the geopolitical fact that some 'others' are convinced that they too should advance to realize their 'Manifest Destiny'. America is by no means alone in this conceit. Both Russia and China are being urged to march onward and ever upward of course on the path to ever greater national greatness – sounds familiar? These continental competitors to sea-power America are both convinced that political authority flows reliably only from the barrels of more guns.

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<sup>2</sup> Harold D. Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How?* (New York: Whitlesey House, 1936).

We dare not simply assume comfortably either that Russia will in effect, if not at all formally, retire from top-table political and strategic competition. Declining powers can be extremely dangerous. For a historical parallel with Russia's situation today and tomorrow, we need only cast our minds back a little over a hundred years to find an Austro-Hungarian empire not overly concerned about the contemporary balance of power in Europe. Vienna started the ball rolling that did not complete its travel until it had destroyed three great empires and wrought immense damage far beyond even that. The international reality of today is one that continues to depend critically upon American support. Although Russian troublemaking continues to be irritating to American governance at home and influence abroad, that menace is occasionally annoying background context when compared with the competitive threat now maturing, if not already mature, from Beijing.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding the reality of the very large Russian nuclear arsenal, there is little doubt that China will pose a far more serious threat than Russia to the largely American world order. This new, indeed still emerging, reality comes to reshape fundamentally the actualities of global power politics.

U.S. competition with China can be further distinguished from the superpower's historical competition with Russia in the two challengers' cultural distinctiveness. Whereas Russia has long been known as proud, even boastful about, its brutality of strategy and policy, the contrast with China could hardly be greater. Whereas Russians are ever inclined to resort to force in matters of statecraft, by contrast it is characteristically Chinese to believe and act as if their international context is composed of rivals to themselves markedly less wise than are they. Americans have long grown comfortable in the certain knowledge that they are superior to others. It is a shock for them to learn that they are regarded as being inferior in culture and many other respects by their Chinese foes. It is quite difficult for American statecraft both to understand, let alone know how best to counter, a Chinese antagonist so culturally distinctive from the Russian competitor US policymakers have come to believe they understand reasonably well. Americans do not understand the limits, if any, of Chinese ambition, but they do understand these ambitions are likely to be very extensive.

## **THE STRATEGIC ENABLER**

Military power becomes strategic power when it meets and is given meaning by politics. The current complex tripolar military balance is barely on the scales for appropriate weighing. Tripolarity inevitably is potentially unstable – two against one, but which 'one'? The Russians and Americans are both more than a little anxious about the political goals of Chinese military modernization; the military facts are not disputable, but whither is Beijing heading and why?

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<sup>3</sup> The Chinese challenge is analysed helpfully in Edward N. Luttwak, *The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012); and Eliot A. Cohen, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Power*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016), ch.4.

There is no serious room for doubt about the most probable goal for Chinese competitive effort. Notwithstanding the nuclear complication, China anticipates that they will be the defining power of the twenty-first century, much as the sixteenth century saw Spain on top of the bevy of squabbling states, to be succeeded by France in the eighteenth century, Britain and Russia in the nineteenth, and the United States in the twentieth. Extraordinary economic strength always enables and motivates political ambition. Rise, decline, and eventual fall has been a rhythmic reality throughout the whole of our past.<sup>4</sup> This is not a narrative that has to be interrupted by major wars, though often that has been the case. When the balance of a familiar pattern in the relations of states alters, or when deep anxiety is felt widely over the probability of an adverse shift in power relations, the world becomes very dangerous. Unduly great 'greatness' breeds feelings of danger abroad, and inevitably the forging of attempts at countervailing alliance.

Because of the now familiar nuclear peril, we can assume that political leaders in the three superpowers would be tempted seriously to play a game of nuclear 'chicken' in order to frighten an adversary into agreeing to a disadvantageous crisis settlement. However, there is some reason to be anxious lest Russian or Chinese leaders should have to meet domestic crises for which they, or more particularly their political systems, are ill prepared. Both Putin and Xi are probably aware that they do not have a robust domestic environment capable of withstanding much bad news. Often the U.S. forgets that the rather messy and seemingly inefficient American political system yields immense political and consequently strategic advantage over both Moscow and Beijing. The domestic ability, indeed duty, to 'throw the rascals out' after four years, is a priceless competitive asset when contrasted with the rigidities and vulnerabilities of the political systems that blight our superpower competitors.

## CONCLUSION

Four main points have been advanced in this essay:

- First, all strategic activity has political meaning essential to its nature.
- Second, our historical narrative should be regarded as motion in rhythm. We humans repeat ourselves, though not in a regular way or hardly at all in detail.
- Third, global political order is organized and policed more or less closely by the superpowers of the day. At present there are three such powers – the United States, Russia and China. This number will reduce to two, as Russian domestic weaknesses affect and effect systemic changes in policy. It is increasingly possible that China alone may enjoy the benefits of superpower, but her domestic fragilities are likely to compel

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, (New York: Random House, 1987), remains indispensable; as does F.R. Bridge and Roger Bullen, *The Great Powers and the European States System, 1814-1914*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 2005), esp. ch.1. The latter offers unequalled explanation of vital historical context.

limitations on official ambition. Similarly, it is possible the long period of American leadership for international security on a global scale is reaching the end of its domestic tolerability.

- Fourth, great economic strength always finds expression in great military power.

In some respects these conclusions are notable for their familiarity. They were as true for all periods in the past as they will be for the future also. There is a unity to our entire human narrative, both the desirable and the other.

*Colin S. Gray was a co-founder of National Institute for Public Policy and served as its first president. Dr. Gray had an unparalleled career as a leading scholar and advisor to U.S. and British governments. He authored more than 30 books and 300 articles, many of which continue to be read by professionals in the field and are required readings in university courses.*

