

China and the United States: a succession of hegemonies?

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This article is written in the general spirit of contributing to the development of the English School (ES) approach to International Relations (IR), and from the specific perspective of the work of Martin Wight. The literature on international society has greatly enriched our understanding of international order. However, it falls short in what it offers to one important contemporary debate. This deficiency results from its evasion of a central dilemma: how is the role of the Great Powers in managing international order best sustained when their number approximates to one single Great Power? Given the English School's attachment to the role of the Great Powers, it cannot afford to ignore this question. This article adapts ES theory to reflect a world characterized by a concentration of power. The concept of hegemony is central, and will be applied to the arguments about a putative succession between the United States and China. The case is made that their respective power trajectories need to be plotted, not just against relative material capabilities, but taking into account also the appeal of the international orders they come to represent.

I have developed this general analysis at greater length elsewhere.¹ At core, it considers hegemony as an institution of international society. Since this develops from previous work on international legitimacy,² it locates hegemony within that social context. In short, it is intended as an exploration of the role of international legitimacy in a situation not of equilibrium but of considerable concentration and preponderance of material power. Its major claim is that this is best done conceptually through hegemony, and theoretically by regarding that hegemony as one possible institution of international society.

This article does not rehearse that general position. Instead, it applies it to one contemporary debate: what light can such a revised concept shed on the much-mooted 'power transitions', or 'hegemonic successions',³ anticipated in the

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¹ Ian Clark, *Hegemony in international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2011); 'Towards an English School theory of hegemony', *European Journal of International Relations* 15: 2, 2009, pp. 203–28; 'Bringing hegemony back in', *International Affairs* 85: 1, 2009, pp. 23–36.

² Ian Clark, *Legitimacy in international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³ Both terms are found in Robert C. North and Julie Strickland, 'Power transition and hegemonic succession',

context of the United States and China? The general analysis demands a concept of hegemony that is much richer than a concept of primacy: when carried across to this specific issue, it must bring with it a quite different understanding of hegemonic successions. For the most part, this topic has been presented as an extension of the preoccupation with primacy: power transition becomes simply the animated version of the 'still' of primacy. However, contrary to this conventional wisdom, hegemonic successions result from much more than shifts in the material balance of power. In short, just as we must distinguish between primacy and hegemony, so we need to distinguish also between power transitions and hegemonic successions: if the former treats the accretion of material power by a challenger as a precondition for revising the international order, the latter reminds us that broad acceptance of a dominant state's preferred international order is itself a constituent of a hegemon's effective power. Accordingly, while power-transition theory is principally concerned to explain the onset of international conflict, hegemonic succession theory should be regarded instead as primarily about the conditions for preserving order.

Martin Wight and hegemony

Martin Wight wrote relatively little about hegemony, and certainly less than his one-time collaborator on the British Committee, Adam Watson. However, in his own Martin Wight Memorial Lecture, delivered in 1989, Watson recalled once remarking to Hedley Bull of the notion of a 'succession of hegemonies' that 'the idea was originally Martin's'.⁴ Of course, Wight's brief allusions to this subject were confined to historical examples, and could not envisage the kind of US primacy that was to emerge after 1990. Moreover, as was normal at the time, what he wrote about hegemony referred to little other than primacy, or the role of the dominant state, and certainly did not convey any important sense of legitimacy, as is central to the argument presented here. To make this case, it is then necessary to transcend what Wight actually wrote on the topic. Specifically, it depends on introducing a fundamental distinction between his two phrases, a 'succession of dominant powers' and a 'succession of hegemonies'.

Hegemony was certainly paramount in Wight's account of international history. It was Watson again who informed us that Wight 'suspected that hegemony by the power or powers at the top of the hierarchy was usual and perhaps ubiquitous'.⁵ Not only had it been salient in the European states system, but there was compelling evidence of its presence in other historical settings, for example ancient

paper delivered at ISA conference, March–April 1986; see also S. Chan, *China, the US and the power-transition theory* (London: Routledge, 2008); R. N. Lebow and B. Valentino, 'Lost in transition: a critical analysis of power transition theory', *International Relations* 23: 3, 2009, pp. 389–410; D. Lemke, 'The continuation of history: power transition theory and the end of the cold war', *Journal of Peace Research* 34: 1, 1997, pp. 23–36; A. K. Organski, *World politics* (New York: Knopf, 1958); A. K. Organski and J. Kugler, *The war ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁴ A. Watson, *Hegemony and history* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 25–6.

⁵ Watson, *Hegemony and history*, p. 17.

Greece.⁶ ‘The Greeks’, he suggested, ‘seem to have had a fundamentally *hegemonial* theory of the states-system.’⁷ This idea provided, quite literally, the bookends for his account of states systems. For example, in a discussion of these systems in the British Committee in January 1965, he had identified five characteristics. His final two were that ‘anterior to the existence of the state-system, there must have been political hegemony’, and that ‘the state-system itself leads in the long run to another political hegemony’.⁸ This was very close to Herbert Butterfield’s notion that a states system could be created only ‘after a political hegemony has broken down’,⁹ and this was why important questions needed to be asked about a states system’s relationship to a common culture.¹⁰ In turn, this system would eventually face a renewed challenge, since ‘sooner or later its tensions and conflicts will be resolved into a monopoly of power’.¹¹ His reasoning here was that ‘there may be another law of international politics, slower in operation than the balance of power, and ultimately overriding it: a law of the monopoly of concentration of power’.¹² Thus understood, all international history is a constant dialectical encounter between the balance of power, on the one hand, and hegemony, on the other.

If this was so, however, it presented a serious problem. Among the corollary beliefs of his idea of an international society, Wight noted that ‘the tranquillity of international society and the freedom of its members require an even distribution of power’.¹³ This was why he approvingly quoted Oppenheim that an ‘equilibrium between the members of the Family of Nations is an indispensable condition of the very existence of international law’.¹⁴ This concern affirmed his view of the integral relationship between the balance of power and international society, and implicitly pushed hegemony beyond the pale. Accordingly, in his Martin Wight lecture, Watson was to speak for both when he recollected that ‘we thought of the hegemonial practice as a series of violations of the legitimate society, which the anti-hegemonial coalitions were each time fortunately able to defeat’.¹⁵ It has since been pointed out that this ‘monopoly of concentration’ creates serious problems for the ES view of international law, exemplified by the ‘hegemonic law’ that eventuated during the post-1990 unipolarity.¹⁶ In short, we can have either international society or hegemony, but not both. Why, then, should modern

⁶ B. Vigezzi, *The British Committee on the Theory of International Politics (1954–1985): the rediscovery of history* (Milan: Edizioni Unicopli, 2005), p. 184.

⁷ M. Wight, *Systems of states*, ed. H. Bull (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), p. 65.

⁸ Vigezzi, *British Committee*, p. 405. See also the 2001 Martin Wight Lecture by Andrew Linklater, ‘The problem of harm in world politics: implications for the sociology of states-systems’, *International Affairs* 78: 2, 2002, p. 322.

⁹ Vigezzi, *British Committee*, p. 187.

¹⁰ As discussed in Barry Buzan’s 2009 Martin Wight Memorial Lecture. See B. Buzan, ‘Culture and international society’, *International Affairs* 86: 1, 2010, pp. 1–26.

¹¹ Wight, *Systems*, p. 44.

¹² M. Wight, *Power politics*, ed. H. Bull and C. Holbraad (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 180.

¹³ M. Wight, ‘Western values in international relations’, in H. Butterfield and M. Wight, eds, *Diplomatic investigations: essays in the theory of international politics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 103.

¹⁴ M. Wight, *International theory: the three traditions*, ed. G. Wight and B. Porter (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991), p. 167.

¹⁵ Watson, *Hegemony and history*, p. 18.

¹⁶ P. Wilson, ‘The English School’s approach to international law’, in C. Navari, ed., *Theorising international society: English School methods* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009), p. 181.

Europeans not be comfortable with a hegemonial theory of the states system, as the ancient Greeks were?

Logically, Wight had every reason to be suspicious of any sole Great Power, given his repeated concerns about the role of the Great Powers collectively. As he had written for Chatham House in his first edition of *Power politics* in 1946, the 'Great Powers will impose the law, but are themselves above it'.¹⁷ This conviction formed the basis of his abiding distaste for the UN Charter's special dispensation to the permanent members of the Security Council: while charged with producing collective security for others, the P5 would not themselves be subject to it. This Wight saw as a regression from that one constitutional advance that had, by 1919, represented some modest progress in international life.

But what did Wight mean by hegemony, and what gives rise to that condition? It soon emerges that he intended little more by it than material primacy. This can be established both directly—by what he said about hegemony—and indirectly, by what he said about related subjects, especially the Great Powers. This takes us to the very heart also of Wight's notion of power. In many respects, Wight seemed to adopt a straightforwardly materialist interpretation, although there was some suggestive ambivalence. At times, he was forthright. In international politics, he insisted, we must distinguish between influence and power, as it is 'concrete power in the end that settles great international issues'.¹⁸ Elsewhere, he was just as blunt. 'Great-power status is lost,' he averred, 'as it is won, by violence.'¹⁹ Accordingly, Germany by 1939 had switched the tests for its own power standing 'from the conference room to the battlefield'.²⁰

The ambivalence arises when this conception of power is contrasted with a status that is recognized by others, and so rests on an essentially social basis.²¹ On this, Wight once hedged his bets, affirming that a 'scientific definition' of power must 'satisfy the exact appreciation of power rather than (*or as well as*) its conventional recognition'.²² Indeed, it would be most surprising if this had not been part of Wight's thinking, given how absolutely central reciprocal recognition was to his conception of any international society at all.²³ Yet, in one remarkable passage, Wight confronted the source of the status of Great Powers. Suggesting that it 'is only part of the truth to say that a great power is a power that is recognized as great by its contemporaries', he cited Gortchakov's directly contrary opinion that 'a great power does not wait for recognition, it reveals itself'. Wight then added his own summary verdict that 'the existence of what is recognized determines the act of recognition, and not the other way round'.²⁴ For exactly

¹⁷ Quoted in I. Hall, *The international thought of Martin Wight* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 128–9.

¹⁸ Wight, *Power politics*, pp. 26–7.

¹⁹ Wight, *Power politics*, p. 48.

²⁰ Wight, *Power politics*, p. 44.

²¹ B. Buzan, *From international to world society: English School theory and the social structure of globalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 59–60; A. Hurrell, 'Hegemony, liberalism and global order: what space for would-be Great Powers?', *International Affairs* 82: 1, 2006, p. 4; Navari, *Theorising international society*, pp. 40–1.

²² Wight, *Power politics*, p. 50, emphasis added.

²³ Wight, *Systems*, p. 135.

²⁴ Wight, *Power politics*, pp. 45–6.

that reason, he pointed out that ‘the great powers are not great powers because they have a veto in the Security Council’ but ‘were able to give themselves the veto because they were great powers’.²⁵ This certainly cast doubt on any view of the Great Powers as a ‘social’ institution, as it seemed to rest on a fully materialist account. It further implied that, for Wight, a hegemon is just the same as a dominant power, elsewhere defined as ‘a power that can measure strength against all its rivals combined’.²⁶ Certainly, he was to use those two terms virtually interchangeably, as he did also with a ‘succession of dominant powers’ and a ‘succession of hegemonies’.

This materialist view is further accentuated by the way he went on to distinguish hegemony from suzerainty. In his discussion of suzerainty within the Chinese system, he had noted that the suzerain ‘asserts unique claims which the others formally or tacitly accept’. In doing so, it represents ‘the sole source of legitimate authority’.²⁷ Nowhere did he consider hegemony in any similar sense. While states may recognize the ‘reality’ of dominant power in practice, this condition had never become an accepted part of international society.²⁸ In Wight’s own formulation, other states ‘recognize a dominant power in fact . . . but hegemony has never been accepted in theory’.²⁹ Hegemony, in other words, should be treated as a brute fact, not as any kind of social institution.

However, such a stark interpretation cannot be left unqualified. Many would rightly be puzzled, not to say astonished, to have Wight portrayed in such outright ‘materialist’ terms, albeit in this specific context. Therefore, whatever he said—about power, Great Powers, dominant states and hegemony—must in the end be placed in the totality of his account of international politics. How, otherwise, is the above characterization to be reconciled with Hall’s unequivocal assessment that Wight’s world was ‘irredeemably normative, not to be measured or modelled’?³⁰ Similarly, in his own Martin Wight Memorial Lecture, given in 1976, Bull was to insist of Wight’s view of IR that it was ‘focused upon the moral and normative presuppositions that underlie it’.³¹ It is one thing, of course, to say that Wight’s own priorities lay in the moral and normative; quite another that he held a view that this is what shapes the understanding and behaviour of the participants in the great game of international politics.³² So how far should we go in pressing also this second claim? In fact, there are numerous occasions when Wight departs from any purely materialist or mechanistic account, and his own singular devotion to the study of ‘thought’ in the field surely stands as persuasive corroboration of the latter view.

²⁵ Wight, *Power politics*, p. 45.

²⁶ Wight, *Power politics*, p. 34.

²⁷ Wight, *Systems*, p. 23; Watson, *Hegemony and history*, p. 18.

²⁸ Watson, *Hegemony and history*, p. 18.

²⁹ Wight, *Power politics*, p. 41.

³⁰ Hall, *International thought*, p. 159.

³¹ H. Bull, ‘Martin Wight and the theory of international relations’, in Wight, *International theory*, p. xxiii.

³² On the general relationship between constructivism and the English School, see C. Reus-Smit, ‘Imagining society: constructivism and the English School’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 4: 3, 2002, pp. 487–509, and ‘The constructivist challenge after September 11’, in A. J. Bellamy, ed., *International society and its critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 81–94.

This corrective can be briefly illustrated. On power—its grading, and the results of its application—Wight’s position overall was considerably more nuanced. Any ‘scientific definition’ of power, he had warned, ‘will be an abstraction’, and ‘removed from our complicated and unmanageable political experience’.³³ What you ‘see’ is not then necessarily what you get. This is because not everything can be grasped through the ‘mechanics’: ‘powers have qualitative differences as well as quantitative, and their attraction and influence is *not exactly correlated to mass and weight*’.³⁴ For this reason, he further warned that while the ‘mechanistic metaphor’ can be useful in international relations, we should not ‘suppose that it exhausts everything of importance that can be said about them’.³⁵ Above all, what any limited appreciation of this kind leaves out is that ‘a dominant power must be described by purpose as well as by power’, as it generally ‘appeals to some design of international unity and solidarity’.³⁶ A successful dominant power does not, to that extent, pursue only its own vision, but succeeds in socializing it. Summary assessments of Wight are, for those reasons, absolutely correct to stress that his understanding of states systems was ‘shaped as much by ideas as by power’,³⁷ and by ‘norms and values’, not simply ‘mechanical factors’.³⁸

If there are residual uncertainties about where exactly Wight stood on these matters, there is no doubt at all about the central motif in his writings on hegemony: for him, the salient feature was not its isolated episodes, but rather the ‘succession of hegemonies’, a phrase that constantly recurs. Just as evident in European history was the ‘succession of dominant powers’.³⁹ This emphasis reflected his view of the constant tendency towards concentration of power, and prompted Watson to suggest that, for Wight, ‘a succession of hegemonies’ was not an ‘aberration’ but instead was an ‘*integral feature of the system*’.⁴⁰

It is to this cognate theme that we must now turn. This can be done first by considering a succession of dominant powers, engaged in a power transition. Second, however, by introducing the notion of hegemony as an institution of international society, we arrive at a quite different type of ‘shift’: a transition between dominant powers is not at all the same as a succession between hegemons.

The United States and China: primacy and power transitions

How does this analysis apply specifically to the debate about the future of the United States and China, and the likelihood of a power transition between them? This latter framework is the ‘most widely used’ by scholars writing on ‘the rise of China’.⁴¹ Accordingly, the question so many are eager to pose is exactly whether

³³ Wight, *Power politics*, p. 48.

³⁴ Wight, *Power politics*, p. 81, emphasis added.

³⁵ Wight, *Power politics*, p. 168.

³⁶ Wight, *Power politics*, p. 36.

³⁷ Hall, *International thought*, p. 105.

³⁸ H. Bull, ‘Introduction’, in Wight, *Systems*, p. 17.

³⁹ Wight, *Power politics*, p. 30.

⁴⁰ Watson, *Hegemony and history*, p. 22.

⁴¹ J. S. Levy, ‘Power transition theory and the rise of China’, in R. Ross and F. Zhu, eds, *China’s ascent: power*,

China will 'challenge the current reigning hegemon, the United States'.⁴² Ideas of 'transition' and 'succession' dominate this discussion:

China's rise affects the United States because of what IR scholars call the 'power transition' effect. Throughout the history of the modern international states system, ascending powers have always challenged the position of the dominant (hegemonic) power in the international system—and these challenges have usually culminated in war.⁴³

The rise of China, we are warned, is likely to prove no exception.⁴⁴ Whether peaceful or not, 'hegemonic transition' is certainly the recurrent image.⁴⁵ While many question the extent to which this is already under way, even the rebuttals mostly conform to the same frame of reference.⁴⁶ However, when examined closely, those transitions apparently refer to nothing beyond 'a contest for world primacy'.⁴⁷

It is, of course, perfectly possible to have a sensible—if limited—discussion about the future prospects for primacy, and the associated idea of power transition, provided heed is taken of Wight's warning that this does not exhaust everything of importance about future international relations. In those terms, the salient feature of the recent period has indeed been the primacy enjoyed by a single state. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been 'truly alone in the world',⁴⁸ with respect to a number of indicators of material power. Between 1998 and 2007 world military expenditure increased by 33 per cent, whereas US military expenditure increased by 66 per cent:⁴⁹ it currently accounts for close on 50 per cent of all global expenditure on defence.⁵⁰ At the same time, the US is the source of almost a quarter of global economic activity. Its share of global GDP has ranged between 23 and 36 per cent since the 1960s, is larger than the combined EU total, and stands at three times that of China.⁵¹ Some 65 per cent of the world's currency reserves continue to be held in US dollars.⁵² By most measures, this is

security, and the future of international politics (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 18; E. Goh, 'US strategic relations with a rising China', in K. Cooney and Y. Sato, eds, *The rise of China and international security: America and Asia respond* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 79–82.

⁴² K. Cooney, 'Introduction', in Cooney and Sato, *The rise of China*, p. 1.

⁴³ C. Layne, 'China's challenge to US hegemony', *Current History* 107: 705, 2008, p. 16.

⁴⁴ J. Mearsheimer, 'China's unpeaceful rise', *Current History* 105: 690, 2006, pp. 160–2; E. R. May and Z. Hong, 'A power transition and its effects', in R. Rosecrance and G. Guoliang, eds, *Power and restraint: a shared vision for the US–China relationship* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), pp. 18–19.

⁴⁵ M. Beeson, 'Hegemonic transition in East Asia? The dynamics of Chinese and American power', *Review of International Studies* 35: 1, 2009, pp. 95–112.

⁴⁶ Cooney, 'Introduction', p. 38; Beeson, 'Hegemonic transition', pp. 110–11; G. John Ikenberry, 'The rise of China and the future of the West: can the liberal system survive?', *Foreign Affairs* 87: 1, 2008, pp. 23–37; H. White, 'The end of American supremacy', *East Asia Forum*, 12 September 2010, at www.eastasiaforum.org, accessed 15 Sept. 2010.

⁴⁷ Chan, *China, the US and the power-transition theory*, p. 11.

⁴⁸ K. Waltz, 'The United States: alone in the world', in I. W. Zartman, ed., *Imbalance of power: US hegemony and international order* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2009), p. 35.

⁴⁹ C. A. Preble, *The power problem: how American military dominance makes us less safe, less prosperous and less free* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 135; C. Norrlof, *America's global advantage: US hegemony and international cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 19.

⁵⁰ C. Conetta, *Cul de sac: 9/11 and the paradox of American power*, Research Monograph 13, Project on Defense Alternatives (Cambridge, MA: Commonwealth Institute, 2008), p. 2.

⁵¹ Norrlof, *America's global advantage*, p. 21.

⁵² Norrlof, *America's global advantage*, p. 19.

historically unprecedented.⁵³ ‘No system of sovereign states’, it is averred, ‘has ever contained one state with comparable material preponderance.’⁵⁴ Those confident about US staying power therefore predict that it will remain the ‘defining’ state for several more decades, and that the ‘international order is therefore probably stuck with American hegemony’. Now, they recommend, ‘would be a great time to buy futures in American power’.⁵⁵ On this reckoning, US hegemony will persist for ‘another forty or fifty years’, or at least for ‘the foreseeable future’.⁵⁶ However, such claims rest on nothing more than a view of US primacy, and its unprecedented preponderance of material resources.

Approaching the subject from a different direction, others now believe that the conditions for any primacy of this kind have already receded, in consequence of a relative shift in material power.⁵⁷ This assessment has received some oblique endorsement in President Obama’s 2010 National Security Strategy, which described ‘a dynamic international environment, in which different nations are exerting greater influence’ and ‘emerging powers in every region of the world are increasingly asserting themselves’.⁵⁸ Official US projections up to 2025 paint a broadly similar picture. These highlight the trend towards multipolarity, associated with a greater diffusion of power internationally.⁵⁹

One major reason for the prevalence of this assessment is the aftermath of the global financial turmoil of 2007–2009: its negative impact on the US economy, its squeeze on the role of the dollar, its damage to the American model of capitalism, and its seeming acceleration of a shift in the centre of the global economy towards East Asia. Domestically, US opinion is increasingly inward-looking, while its stalemated political system has rendered it less disposed to bear the responsibilities of international leadership. Accordingly, much discussion has been framed by an image of declining US power, set against the seemingly remorseless rise of China (and Asia more generally), indicating the likelihood of a significant power transition.⁶⁰

This image is considered particularly applicable in the economic sphere, given China’s rapid emergence from the effects of the global recession, relative to the ongoing travails of the United States. There are many claims that East Asia now

⁵³ R. Jervis, ‘The remaking of a unipolar world’, *Washington Quarterly* 29: 3, 2006, p. 7.

⁵⁴ S. Brooks and W. Wohlforth, *World out of balance: international relations and the challenge of American primacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 1.

⁵⁵ K. N. Schake, *Managing American hegemony: essays on power in a time of dominance* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2009), pp. 1–4.

⁵⁶ Schake, *Managing American hegemony*, p. 135; Norrlof, *America’s global advantage*, p. x.

⁵⁷ M. Cox, ‘Is the United States in decline—again? An essay’, *International Affairs* 83: 4, 2007, pp. 643–53; D. Hiro, *After empire: the birth of a multipolar world* (New York: Nation Books, 2010); C. Layne, ‘The waning of U.S. hegemony—myth or reality? A review essay’, *International Security* 31: 1, 2009, pp. 147–72; K. Mahhubani, *The new Asian hemisphere: the irresistible shift of global power to the East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008); T. E. Paupp, *The future of global relations: crumbling walls, rising regions* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009); F. Zakaria, *The post-American world* (London: Allen Lane, 2008).

⁵⁸ United States National Security Council, *US National Security Strategy 2010*, p. 43, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2010>, accessed 6 June 2010.

⁵⁹ United States National Intelligence Council, *Global trends 2025: a transformed world*, NIC 2008–003 (Washington DC, 2008), www.dni.gov/nic/Nic_2025_project.html, accessed 10 Oct. 2010.

⁶⁰ R. J. Art, ‘The United States and the rise of China: implications for the long haul’; Levy, ‘Power transition theory’.

forms the powerhouse of the global economy, and that China is acquiring a much louder voice through the G20, while possibly applying pressure against the role of the US dollar as the principal global reserve currency.⁶¹ At the same time, much of China's trade balance has been recycled into US government securities, so that at the onset of the global financial turmoil in summer 2008 China had the largest holding of such securities, amounting to some US\$967 billion.⁶² In total, China owned US\$1.5 trillion in dollar-denominated debt by March 2009.⁶³ While this is often presented as an important form of China's leverage, it can be understood also as evidence of continuing US structural power.⁶⁴ At the same time, the United States has become one of China's largest trading partners.⁶⁵ This has been a double-edged sword politically, creating high levels of interdependence, while also aggravating economic imbalances.⁶⁶ In 2007 the US experienced a trade deficit with China of US\$256 billion, its largest with any partner (and representing two-thirds of the US deficit overall), and this has spilled over into ongoing controversies about the low value of the Chinese currency.⁶⁷

More troubling still, important elements of traditional US soft power, such as its cultural and ideological appeal at the centre of free-market philosophy, and as the world's technological leader, may no longer evoke quite the positive response that they did during the second half of the twentieth century.⁶⁸ For yet others, the problem is more deep-seated still, in that we have moved into an age when it would be unrealistic to expect any state to be able to function as a global leader. On this reasoning, 'American hegemony has set in motion a world that can no longer be dominated by any single state or its cultural fruits'.⁶⁹ To this extent, any future US role is already a victim of its own past successes: it has helped shape a world that is no longer amenable to hegemonic direction.⁷⁰ Already, Mandelbaum's earlier depiction of the United States as a Goliath functioning as 'the world's government' must seem quite fanciful.⁷¹

⁶¹ Z. Deng and Y. Zheng, 'China reshapes the world economy', in G. Wang and Y. Zheng, eds, *China and the new international order* (London: Routledge, 2008); R. Wolverson, *Confronting the China-US economic imbalance* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 16 Nov. 2009).

⁶² United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC), *2008 report to Congress* (Washington DC: USGPO, 2008), http://www.uscc.gov/annual_report/2008/, p. 45, accessed 20 Jan. 2010.

⁶³ D. W. Drezner, 'Bad debts: assessing China's financial influence in great power politics', *International Security* 34: 2, 2009, p. 8.

⁶⁴ R. Germain, 'Financial order and world politics', *International Affairs* 85: 4, 2009, pp. 684-5.

⁶⁵ Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), *US-China relations: an affirmative agenda, a responsible course*, Task Force Report 59 (New York: CFR, 2007), p. 63; Drezner, 'Bad debts', p. 33.

⁶⁶ E. Prasad with G. Gu, *An awkward dance: China and the United States* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 11 Nov. 2009).

⁶⁷ USCC, 'Hearing on US debt to China: implications and repercussions', evidence of Professor E. S. Prasad, 25 Feb. 2010, p. 3; USCC, *2008 report*, pp. 25-6, 42.

⁶⁸ M. H. Hunt, *The American ascendancy: how the United States gained and wielded global dominance* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 322; I. Parmar and M. Cox, eds, *Soft power and US foreign policy: theoretical, historical and contemporary perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

⁶⁹ J. Agnew, *Hegemony: the new shape of global power* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005), p. viii.

⁷⁰ C. Chari, ed., *War, peace and hegemony in a globalized world: the changing balance of power in the twenty-first century* (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁷¹ M. Mandelbaum, *The case for Goliath: how America acts as the world's government in the twenty-first century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), p. xv.

In terms of power transition, the key question is whether China is inevitably destined to challenge America's position.⁷² During the latter 1990s, and certainly by the turn of the century, there was compelling evidence of a shift in Chinese attitudes.⁷³ This signalled a move away from the insistence that unipolarity would be of short duration—soon to be replaced by multipolarity—to one in which unipolarity was taken to be a long-term reality that required an adjustment both in theoretical understanding and also in actual policies.⁷⁴ The preference for multipolarity, it was then conceded, was 'out of touch with reality'.⁷⁵ Instead, there was acceptance of an alternative reality, of 'one superpower . . . many great powers', in which 'the superpower is more super, and the many great powers are less great'.⁷⁶ Explicit in this new thinking was recognition that 'US dominance is likely to prevail for many decades to come'.⁷⁷ Some Chinese scholars understood this to require, for a period of several decades, a kind of 'bandwagoning' with the United States, along with participation in its preferred international regimes.⁷⁸ At the very least, it implied that China had to 'learn to live with the hegemon'.⁷⁹

This line of argument would be of theoretical interest alone had it not been matched by the substance of Chinese policy. There has, to date, been little evidence of any overt strategy of balancing or soft balancing on China's part.⁸⁰ Even in the case of Iraq in 2003, China—while clearly opposed to American military action—challenged the United States less openly than did Russia, Germany and France. In that sense, the opportunity for a practical realization of multipolarity was not seized by China, as it did not wish unduly to antagonize the US. Reportedly, Russian officials were very much disappointed by China's performance over Iraq, and criticized it for being 'half a step behind' the other three countries in their efforts to constrain American-led action.⁸¹ China's policy by the end of this decade may have become more self-confident, and more assertive, but the fundamentals of this assessment do not yet appear to have changed.⁸²

Within the limited confines of power transition, then, the evidence is no better than ambiguous. While there certainly are important indicators of future shifts in material power, there is as yet no compelling reason to view Chinese actions as amounting to an aspirant challenge. On such a reading, any evidence of an actual

⁷² M. Mastanduno, 'Incomplete hegemony and security order in the Asia-Pacific', in G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America unrivalled: the future of the balance of power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 184.

⁷³ Y. Deng, 'Hegemon on the offensive: Chinese perspectives on U.S. global strategy', *Political Science Quarterly* 116: 3, 2001, p. 345.

⁷⁴ Y. Zhang, 'Understanding Chinese views of the emerging global order', in Wang and Zheng, *China*, p. 151.

⁷⁵ Deng, 'Hegemon on the offensive', p. 347.

⁷⁶ Deng, 'Hegemon on the offensive', p. 346.

⁷⁷ R. Foot, 'Chinese strategies in a US-hegemonic global order: accommodating and hedging', *International Affairs* 82: 1, 2006, p. 83.

⁷⁸ Foot, 'Chinese strategies', p. 91.

⁷⁹ Q. Jia, 'Learning to live with the hegemon: evolution of China's policy toward the U.S. since the end of the Cold War', *Journal of Contemporary China* 14: 44, 2005, pp. 395–408; Suisheng Zhao, 'The transformation of US–China relations', in Zhao, *China and the United States: cooperation and competition in Northeast Asia* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2008), p. 24.

⁸⁰ Deng, 'Hegemon on the offensive', p. 362.

⁸¹ P. Ferdinand, 'Sunset, sunrise: China and Russia construct a new relationship', *International Affairs* 83: 5, 2007, p. 849.

⁸² National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), *East Asian strategic review* (Tokyo: Japan Times, 2010), pp. 118–21.

decline in US influence is more likely a consequence of specific US policies than a result of any proactive Chinese policy to achieve such an outcome.⁸³ In the same way, the future of the US–Chinese relationship remains as much a function of the content of US policies as of any deterministic structural requirement for China to balance against American power.⁸⁴ The critical element, as Foot pointedly reminded us, is not the ‘inequalities in the distribution of power’, but rather, and more importantly, ‘how that hegemonic position is used’.⁸⁵ This invites us to open up the quite separate issue of the likelihood of a hegemonic succession between the two states, and how others might feel about China as the ‘next hegemon’.⁸⁶

China and the United States: hegemony and hegemonic succession

The claim that international relations routinely display a succession of hegemonies has, of course, long been prominent in realist thought. Its *locus classicus* is the work of Robert Gilpin, who contended that ‘a hegemonic war is the ultimate test of change in the relative standings of the powers in the existing system’, and accordingly the ‘great turning points in world history have been provided by these hegemonic struggles among political rivals’.⁸⁷ While Gilpin did acknowledge the distinction between power and prestige, in the end he considered the latter reducible to the former, since prestige ‘is the reputation for power, and military power in particular’.⁸⁸ The only great puzzle, in terms of this grand historical scheme, had been why the ‘succession’ from Britain to the United States took place peacefully, when otherwise such successions had historically always been accomplished by war. But does this image of hegemonic succession add any real analytical value to that already described as a power transition?

My own theoretical position can now be restated in relation to the US and China. It rejects the applicability of that idiom of hegemonic succession, as found in so much of the current debate, asserting instead the importance of two different themes. The first is that of legitimacy, and the particular form of power to which this gives rise; the second is the requirement for a discernible hegemonic *order*, rather than just the ability to exercise dominant power within any bilateral context.

As to the first, it might seem that Wight is a hostile witness. He was evidently unconvinced that ideas of legitimacy exerted any effective influence on international behaviour. In part, this scepticism derived from his distinctly ‘realist’ view of power, as already described. In addition, however, there were his dismissive comments about international legitimacy, found in his famous essay under that

⁸³ D. Shambaugh, ‘China engages Asia: reshaping the regional order’, *International Security* 29: 3, 2004/5, pp. 90–1.

⁸⁴ S. Tsang, ‘China’s place in East Asia’, in C. M. Dent, ed., *China, Japan and regional leadership in East Asia* (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2008), pp. 88–9.

⁸⁵ Foot, ‘Chinese strategies’, p. 94.

⁸⁶ Cooney, ‘Introduction’, p. 1.

⁸⁷ R. Gilpin, *War and change in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 198, 203. A parallel sociological account of ‘hegemonic struggle’, ‘hegemonic elimination contests’ and the seemingly universal *furor hegemonialis* is to be found in N. Elias, *The loneliness of dying and humana conditio*, ed. A and B. Scott, trans. E. Jephcott (Dublin: UCD Press, 2010), pp. 86–7, 93.

⁸⁸ Gilpin, *War and change*, pp. 30–1.

title.⁸⁹ In this, he chided that the ‘influence of principles of legitimacy upon international politics has been generally overstated’, and that ‘conceptions of international legitimacy have had a minor part in shaping international history’.⁹⁰ However, it is clear in context that Wight refers here only to what I have elsewhere called the ‘rightful membership’ strand of international legitimacy:⁹¹ these are the claims invoked to validate the constitutional principle of the state, and international society’s recognition of it. He makes no comment on the impact of any other generic principles of ‘rightful conduct’.

Nonetheless, the concept of hegemony most readily achieves its distinctive identity when it is associated with legitimacy, however difficult it is to establish, or measure, that link.⁹² On this understanding, legitimacy functions as a constraint on the strong, not simply on the weak. Its notable outcome is ‘to increase the autonomy of all parties, not to compromise the autonomy of the less powerful in order to increase the autonomy of the more powerful’.⁹³ What this does is place the emphasis on the institutional dimension—the empowerment of the *institution* of hegemony—rather than on any simple enhancement of the power of the *hegemon*. Thus whereas some think of two competing theories of hegemony—one resting on material power, and the other on norms⁹⁴—the alternative suggestion here is that only a normative account provides a convincing concept of hegemony *in international society*. This, in turn, demands a sharp distinction between primacy and hegemony. On these grounds, the first reason to dismiss any notion of hegemonic succession between the US and China is that, whatever primacy the US has enjoyed since 1990, there has assuredly been no American hegemony during that period to which China might now aspire to succeed.⁹⁵

Just as relevant is Wight’s stress on the ‘purpose’ of dominant powers. As we have already seen, he believed that powers presented qualitatively different appeals to ‘international unity and solidarity’. In elaboration, he outlined a view of the ‘kind of common interest represented by successive dominant powers’, and reached his surprisingly positive judgement that they have ‘generally safeguarded real values, and offered real benefit, for other nations’. From this, he went on to speculate about the prospect of a future escape from anarchy ‘by acquiescence in a common government provided by the strongest power’.⁹⁶ This makes the second key point: that hegemony should be associated not simply with the exercise of dominant power but with the creation of a distinctive, and acceptable, pattern of order. Accordingly, to make the further move from a power transition to a

⁸⁹ Wight, *Systems*, pp. 153–73, and the expanded version in ‘International legitimacy’, *International Relations* 4: 1, 1972, pp. 1–28.

⁹⁰ Wight, ‘International legitimacy’ (*IR* version), p. 28.

⁹¹ Clark, *Legitimacy*, pp. 26–8.

⁹² D. P. Rapkin and D. Braaten, ‘Conceptualising hegemonic legitimacy’, *Review of International Studies* 35: 1, 2009, pp. 113–49; L. Lee, *US hegemony and international legitimacy: norms, power and followership in the wars in Iraq* (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁹³ M. Haugaard, ‘Conceptual confrontation’, in M. Haugaard and H. H. Lentner, eds, *Hegemony and power: consensus and coercion in contemporary politics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), p. 4.

⁹⁴ Lee, *US hegemony*, p. 154.

⁹⁵ Clark, ‘Bringing hegemony back in’, p. 27.

⁹⁶ Wight, *Power politics*, p. 289; Hall, *International thought*, p. 108.

hegemonic succession, the argument has to be supplemented by reference to some kind of 'purpose transition' as well.⁹⁷

What, then, is at stake in this real debate about hegemony? The immediate point is that any accretion of China's economic power, let alone a more general tendency towards multipolarity, does not even begin to translate into a hegemonic succession. For that reason, many of the above claims to relative shifts in material power between the US and China (as well as others) can be readily admitted, as far as they go. However, these do not yet amount to any *succession* in Wight's terms, let alone to one that is *hegemonic* in mine. Accordingly, we must be sceptical about any conflation with the power-transition thesis, if this concept of legitimate hegemony is to be taken seriously. What this argument offers is an alternative way to think about the substance of 'successions', by taking heed of Wight's earlier admonitions: we must bring back purpose, not just power; we need to be mindful of the qualitative, not just the quantitative: and we should remember that international attraction and influence are not exactly correlated to mass and weight. Applying Wight's own strictures, then, there are compelling reasons to insist that hegemonies are much more than dominant powers. It follows that this deeply entrenched debate about China and the United States deserves critical scrutiny. On closer examination, we find that it rests on a further analogue with the notion of primacy, not on any notion of hegemony. So what happens if we do insert this alternative conception of hegemony? How differently should we think about the evolving distribution of power, if this power is in part social, and not straightforwardly material?

This real debate—beyond the one about primacy—must additionally address the prospects for China to convert increasing material power into a distinctive, and acceptable, form of order. In turn, this breaks down into a number of subsidiary elements. How content is China to operate within the existing order, and how far does it have an alternative in mind? If the latter, how likely is it that China can serve as an effective model, and become attractive elsewhere? There can be no easy or definitive pronouncements on any of these matters, certainly for the longer term.

There is nonetheless a convincing consensus that China, for the moment at least, is largely supportive of the existing order. Where China has made its greatest advances, it has done so 'through working within existing frameworks and norms',⁹⁸ and has been successful because of the order, not despite it.⁹⁹ Chinese commentators for the most part concur,¹⁰⁰ and it is in this sense that China's depiction of its 'peaceful rise' is best understood. Any continuation of this situation, of course, is not for China alone to ensure, but depends equally upon the accommodation of others.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ J. W. Legro, 'Purpose transitions: China's rise and the American response', in Ross and Zhu, *China's ascent*, p. 163.

⁹⁸ S. Breslin, 'Understanding China's regional rise: interpretations, identities and implications', *International Affairs* 85: 4, 2009, p. 818.

⁹⁹ G. Allison, 'Introduction: keeping China and the United States together', in Rosecrance and Guoliang, *Power and restraint*, p. xv.

¹⁰⁰ J. Yang, 'The rise of China: Chinese perspectives', in Cooney and Sato, *Rise of China*, p. 28.

¹⁰¹ Legro, 'Purpose transitions', p. 187; G. John Ikenberry, 'The rise of China: power, institutions, and the western order', in Ross and Zhu, *China's ascent*, p. 114.

This is not to deny that China has its own preferences for how this order should develop, and which features should be resisted. Above all, it is a matter of record that China has been wary of the liberal agenda of ‘protection’, with its varying degrees of interventionism. China has privileged instead ‘hyper-sovereignty values’,¹⁰² and—far from instigating a new order—has favoured instead the restoration of one that is old and familiar.¹⁰³ The extent of its revisionism has therefore been to seek some reconfiguration of roles and responsibilities within that existing framework: this would simultaneously place greater restraints on the United States, while further liberating China.¹⁰⁴

In any event, what kind of model does China embody for an alternative international order, and how broadly acceptable might this become? There is certainly sympathy for China’s sovereignty agenda throughout many parts of the South, and selectively in the North, for example in Russia. There is equally good reason to view also the region’s accommodation of China as a noteworthy acknowledgement of China’s positive regional contributions.¹⁰⁵ Even if there was widespread resentment at China’s role during the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit, this was scarcely any more strident than that voiced against the United States on the same occasion. Nonetheless, China’s predominant image remains that of an effective model of economic development, via one form of state-led capitalism. Its emphasis upon ‘non-interference’ (especially from international financial institutions) has certainly resonated widely.¹⁰⁶ However, the irony is that its model’s USP is above all suited to China’s exceptional conditions: the corollary is that it is ‘by definition . . . not transferable’.¹⁰⁷ On the international economic front more generally, China’s highly visible resource diplomacy evokes widespread misgivings, whether justifiable or not, while its enormous current account surpluses have not yet translated into a commensurate role in international capital and currency markets, given the limitations of its domestic institutions in those areas.

In this more complex light, the future respective standings of the US and China evidently depend upon much more than any forward extrapolation of their material capabilities. In the short term, and notwithstanding any power transition currently under way, there is simply no prospect of China acting as a hegemon in its own right. For that reason, the real issue that faces us is not whether China will succeed the United States, but whether it is possible to design an order, broadly acceptable to all, that also satisfies the particular preferences of both China and the

¹⁰² E. A. Feigenbaum, ‘China’s challenge to *Pax Americana*’, in A. T. J. Lennon and A. Kozłowski, eds, *Global powers in the 21st century: strategies and relations*, a *Washington Quarterly* reader (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 20–1.

¹⁰³ Breslin, ‘Understanding China’s regional rise’, p. 825.

¹⁰⁴ R. Kagan, ‘Ambition and anxiety: America’s competition with China’, in G. J. Schmitt, ed., *The rise of China: essays on the future competition* (New York: Encounter Books, 2009), pp. 10–11, 20–1; Y. Deng and T. G. Moore, ‘China views globalization: toward a new great-power politics’, in Lennon and Kozłowski, *Global powers*, pp. 124–5.

¹⁰⁵ D. C. Kang, *China rising: peace, power, and order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 4, 8–9.

¹⁰⁶ M.-H. Huang and Y.-H. Chu, ‘Exploring theoretical implications of the rise of China: a critique on mainstream international relations perspectives’, in Q. Zhao and G. Liu, eds, *Managing the China challenge: global perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 54–5.

¹⁰⁷ Breslin, ‘Understanding China’s regional rise’, p. 827.

United States simultaneously. This is far from straightforward. In one important report, we are told that 'China's leaders increasingly chafe at what they perceive to be American hegemony, and they want to counterbalance U.S. influence in Asia'. At the same time, the supposed remedy is for the United States to 'welcome a growing role for China in regional and global security affairs even as it seeks Beijing's understanding and appreciation for a continued U.S. leadership role'.¹⁰⁸ But how easy will it be to reconcile China's requirements for autonomy with the constraints of such a US-centred order?

The most likely obstacles have already become apparent in the very terms of constructive engagement, as pursued by the United States in recent years. This policy has been framed since 2005 in the language, coined by then US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick, of the 'responsible stakeholder'.¹⁰⁹ According to Zoellick, as a stakeholder, 'China would be more than just a member—it would work with us to sustain the international system that has enabled its success'.¹¹⁰ This language was subsequently incorporated into the 2006 version of the US National Security Strategy, where the emphasis was upon the need for China to uphold the order *as it is*, by 'enforcing the international rules' and by 'embracing the economic and political standards that go along with that system of rules'.¹¹¹

To recognize these obstacles, however, is not to close down the possibility. On one optimistic prognosis, this case may prove less confrontational than previous historical examples of such transitions. Ikenberry draws attention to the flexibility inherent in the present liberal order, such that, by any comparison, it is 'hard to overturn and easy to join'.¹¹² In support, the US has indeed sought to encourage China, not to contain it,¹¹³ a theme that Obama explicitly reiterated during his November 2009 tour of Asia. Additionally, China has for the most part pursued policies that have promoted both regional integration and stability. For these reasons, there are modestly hopeful prospects of compatibility between both sets of goals. What this glosses over, of course, is the currently unanswerable question of whether this will suffice for China in the longer term.

This analysis makes no attempt to project the future positions of China and the United States. It is not, in any case, for the US and China alone to set this agenda: it is equally important that diverse international constituencies indicate how, if at all, any special rights and responsibilities should be allocated to those states.¹¹⁴ This is so especially in the context of East Asia and, in that respect, 'regional leaders will

¹⁰⁸ CFR, *US-China relations*, pp. 35, 83.

¹⁰⁹ Zhang, 'Understanding Chinese views', p. 155; NIDS, *East Asian strategic review*, p. 132.

¹¹⁰ R. B. Zoellick, 'Whither China? From membership to responsibility', remarks to National Committee on US-China Relations, New York, 21 Sept. 2005, at www.cfr.org/publication/8916/whither_china.html, accessed 25 Nov. 2010.

¹¹¹ United States National Security Council (2006), *US National Security Strategy 2006*, <http://www.georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2006>, p. 41, accessed 25. Nov. 2010.

¹¹² Ikenberry, 'The rise of China', p. 23.

¹¹³ T. C. Christensen, 'Fostering stability or creating a monster: the rise of China and U.S. policy toward East Asia', *International Security* 31: 1, 2006, p. 108.

¹¹⁴ This is the subject of a collaborative book: M. Bukovansky, I. Clark, R. Eckersley, R. Price, C. Reus-Smit and N. J. Wheeler, *Special responsibilities: global problems and American power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2012).

want to pay more attention to the legitimation of U.S. primacy and China's great power status in the region'.¹¹⁵ If this could be successfully achieved, we might indeed see the rudiments of a complex collective hegemonic order; but it would be one that does not yet display any form of succession.

Conclusion

A detailed review of US primacy, and its potential erosion, has not been the immediate concern of this article: there have been writings aplenty on primacy, and the supposed power transitions that relate to it. Rather, the aim has been to establish a viable account of hegemony, and what is entailed by a hegemonic succession. Future projections of material power, in any event, have been notoriously unreliable, as previous predictions of the decline of the United States in the 1970s and 1980s amply demonstrated. Similarly, projections of China's future role, based on simple extrapolations from its current rate of economic growth, are bound to deceive. Above all, China faces a complex array of severe domestic problems that will dominate its policy priorities for many decades to come, and it is wholly speculative to assess the nature of its likely international contributions beyond those concerns. For that reason, the occurrence of a power transition—but in the absence of a hegemonic succession—could yield the worst of both worlds. This is Mandelbaum's worry: that the alternative to a leading US role may not be 'better', but 'less', global governance.¹¹⁶

These reflections warn against any temptation to plot future legitimacy dynamics, as if they straightforwardly track material shifts in power. In the literature on China's rise, accounts of so-called hegemonic succession have actually been about no more than an embryonic power transition, and rest upon narrowly materialist accounts. Martin Wight was right to warn against an exclusive focus on the 'mechanics', and to insist that attraction and influence are not 'exactly correlated to mass and weight'. Serious questions are properly being asked about the US capacity to sustain its role in the future. At the same time, there are equally pertinent questions about whether China is yet able to convey an appealing international purpose that, in Wight's words, would support a 'common interest', promote 'real values', and promise 'real benefit' for all. The future positions of these two states will be shaped, not simply by transitions in material power, but just as importantly by the potential to develop an institution of hegemony, resting upon widespread international consent. If this is to be achieved at all, then, in the foreseeable future, it is much more likely to be collective in form than to represent a succession of hegemonies.

¹¹⁵ E. Goh, 'Great powers and hierarchical order in Southeast Asia: analyzing regional security strategies', *International Security* 32: 3, 2007/8, p. 156.

¹¹⁶ Mandelbaum, *Case for Goliath*, p. 225.