

## Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics

### **Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism**

Jonathan M. DiCicco

Subject: World Politics Online Publication Date: Sep 2017

DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.311

### **Summary and Keywords**

Power transition theory and Graham Allison's Thucydides Trap Project are discussed in tandem with two complementary aims: to highlight theoretical and empirical contributions of the power transition research program, and to provide critical perspective on the Thucydides Trap Project. Conventional-wisdom approaches of this sort are distinguished from power transition theory, the empirical international relations theory proposed by A. F. K. Organski and further articulated and tested by generations of scholars. The theory's central elements—national power, stages of power transition, shifts in the distribution of power, international order and the status quo—are identified and discussed, with a focus on key variables used to explain war and peace among contending states. A comparative, critical examination of the Thucydides Trap Project is used as a lens for spotlighting key empirical contributions of the power transition theory research tradition and the value of adhering to norms of scientific rigor. Opportunities for further growth and development are noted, with special attention afforded to essential features of the power transition theory research program, including the study of (1) the timing and initiation of war; (2) rising powers' dissatisfaction with the status quo, and a possible distinction between dissatisfaction and revisionism; and (3) reducing the risk of violent, revisionist challenges.

Keywords: War, power, international order, peaceful transition, status quo, revisionism, Thucydides, rising power, Thucydides Trap Project, Trap, empirical international relations theory

---

### Introduction and Overview

The rise and decline of leading states in the international system and wars among those states are central subjects in the study of international relations. Although theories and empirical investigations of these phenomena abound, few have coalesced into a research tradition as fruitful as the one associated with power transition theory (Organski, 1958, 1968). Proponents, adapters, and critics of that theory have used scientific hypothesis-testing and cutting-edge techniques of data analysis, modeling, and trend projection to build on A. F. K. Organski's original insights into states' uneven growth, the pitfalls of power shifts, and benefits of power preponderance. For 60 years, scholars have developed and extended the theory and subjected its implications to rigorous empirical tests.

The power transition research program continues to expand and produce novel findings, its proponents generating countless insights and innovations in the study of power shifts and war and in related areas like deterrence and comparative economic development. The research tradition has inspired many who acknowledge an intellectual debt to the pioneers of this radical revision of conventional understandings of world politics. Indeed, the power transition theory (PTT) tradition has much to offer analysts who see an impending power shift as the central tension driving 21st-century international relations—and yet, such analysts often look elsewhere for inspiration and insight. For example, citing the historical precedent of the Peloponnesian War and Thucydides' reflections on its causes, Graham Allison (2012, 2014, 2015A, 2015B) has made a project of warning U.S. public officials about the correspondence between the Athens-Sparta confrontation and a potential China-United States confrontation. Allison, much like Organski (1958; see also Tammen et al., 2000), has expressed concerns about a heightened risk of armed conflict associated with China's rise, exhorting policy-makers to exercise caution and students to examine historical analogs. The presumed goal is to raise awareness of the dangers of power shifts, and to generate the will and skill needed to minimize the risk of war between the system's current and future heavyweight contenders.

Thucydides did not (and, in the 5th century BCE, could not) anticipate China's rise, but Organski (1958) did—and he theorized about the causes and consequences of that and similar power shifts in modern international systems. Thucydides offered insight into Spartan fears of Athens's rise, but scarcely could be expected to track and project contenders' power trajectories using reliable quantitative data and computer models—but of course, this is precisely what researchers in the power transition research tradition have done. Thucydides, in standard translations, asserted that war between Athens and Sparta was "inevitable." Organski, by contrast, warned of the dangers of shifting power but also speculated about conditions that facilitate peaceful change—and, along with his students and their students, set about the tasks of collecting and analyzing data to facilitate the growth of knowledge on the subject. The result of this collective scholarly

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

enterprise is a substantial, empirically validated body of knowledge on shifting power, preponderance, and war.

Because it echoes key elements of PTT, Allison's (2014, 2015A) stance perhaps more closely resembles Organski's than it does Thucydides. The focus on contenders' converging power trajectories and the imperative to exercise caution during that dangerous period suggests a strong theoretical resemblance, though this alone is hardly exceptional. Allison and his collaborators, like Organski and his students, have initiated an empirical project intended to use the mirror of the past to create illuminating lessons for the future in hopes that the knowledge gained will help ameliorate conditions that otherwise would portend war. Though the projects are far from identical, the Allison project appears to duplicate some of the efforts of power transition researchers without explicitly building on PTT's useful contributions. Based on publicly available information about Allison's research, this article undertakes a critical discussion of that project and identifies areas of overlap with the PTT research tradition.

That critical examination also fosters an appreciation of the depth and breadth of scholarship in the PTT tradition and its theoretical innovations and empirical findings. While space limitations prohibit an authoritative survey of power transition research, key aspects of the PTT tradition are discussed. The article also takes on two additional tasks. It first asks the question: What features of the power transition research program might intimidate or repel reputable scholars and analysts? That a longstanding research program afforded praise and accolades even by its critics (e.g., Chan, 2004, pp. 103–104) and by those outside of the program (DiCicco & Levy, 1999, 2003) should escape the attention of notable analysts has raised some intrigue. One need not wonder why Thucydides remains popular with international relations enthusiasts, but asking why well-established, empirically supported scientific work is overlooked by comparison is warranted.

Second, inasmuch as this article suggests future directions for substantive research in the PTT tradition, it trains its focus on two particular directions. Several open questions commend themselves, including how to measure states' power in a world of rapidly changing technologies, how to articulate the linkages between system-level and regional-level hierarchies and conflict processes, and others. But this article argues that intensified inquiry in two overlapping areas in particular will help fuel the continued growth of knowledge in this research tradition: better understanding of dissatisfaction with the status quo, and peaceable prevention of revisionist challenges to the status quo.

The latter involves the adaptive use of human agency to mitigate the effects of structural pressures, something about which Organski remained cautious and skeptical (1958, p. 323, and Chapter 13, *passim*). Allison's appeal to policy-makers may be of some help here. By highlighting scholars' potential to influence how public officials and policy-makers *think* about power shifts—and by opening minds to data-based inferences about power shifts and war—Allison's contribution might be more in the realm of process than the production of knowledge. In addition, this article argues that a conceptual distinction,

## **Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism**

---

however subtle, between dissatisfaction with the status quo and revisionism provides room for the incorporation of human agency into the broader power transition framework.

The article begins with a brief summary of PTT, and then discusses connections and points of difference between that theory and Thucydides' treatment of the Peloponnesian War. Next it moves into a critical discussion of Allison's project, which includes some points of comparison with research in the PTT tradition, and which gives way to a short discussion of key features and future directions in PTT research, with a particular focus on dissatisfaction with the status quo and revisionism.

# Power Transition Theory

Three decades after its introduction, power transition theory (PTT) was characterized by its progenitor and his protégé as “a radical break” from the received wisdom of balance of power theory (Kugler & Organski, 1989, p. 175). Indeed, Organski (1958) prefaced PTT with a sharp critique of balance of power theory, which he lambasted as being incompatible with the facts of modern international politics, as distorting the meaning of world events, and as logically inconsistent. In Organski’s estimation, these deficiencies made balance of power theory a poor guide for modern statesmen (Organski, 1958, p. 272). Over a half-century later, Organski’s three critical points of emphasis map to laudable features of the PTT research program, including commitments to (1) verifiable empirical scholarship, (2) rigorous methodologies that facilitate reliable interpretation of events, and (3) formal modeling techniques that ensure logical consistency. Taken together, these three features arguably create a sound basis for generating policy advice as well as building knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

PTT itself was an expression of intellectual revisionism. Against balance of power theorists, Organski argued that a *preponderance of power* preserves stability and peace in international systems (1958, p. 272, 332), an association that Vasquez called Organski’s “main contribution” (1996, p. 35). Power preponderance encourages stability by deterring potential challengers who understand that they have little hope of achieving military success against the dominant power and its allies (Organski, 1958, p. 332). Thus, *relative power* of states is a central concern, and a lopsided distribution of power is associated with a stable, rules-based international order arranged to yield disproportionate benefits to powerful states, and especially to the dominant state. States occupying lesser positions in the order may derive benefits from the extant order—but in lesser quantities, proportional to their positions in what amounts to a *de facto hierarchy* of states.

A snapshot of the *de facto* hierarchy provides a metaphorical understanding of the order as a pyramid cross-cut by different ranks, with a single dominant power perched at the top, a handful of great powers beneath it, a generous helping of middle powers beneath them, and the vast majority of the world’s entities (weaker countries and dependencies) occupying the bottom ranks. This “power pyramid” is a heuristic device meant to represent a moment in time, but the distribution of power is not static—far from it (Organski, 1958, pp. 322–333). Endogenous growth of countries’ economies constantly alters the relative distribution of power among them, which in time can diminish the dominant power’s preponderance—and possibly the peace. As the gap between a fast-growing prospective challenger (from the rank of the great powers) and a slow-growing or stagnating dominant power narrows, deterrence becomes less assured. When a prospective challenger draws near to rough equality (or *parity*, as it would later be termed) of power with the dominant state, an emboldened challenger might make a play

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

for preeminence in the order, or create a new one in its place (Organski, 1958, Ch. 12; see also Organski & Kugler, 1980; Lemke & Kugler, 1996; Tammen et al., 2000).

The dynamic nature of the system derives from the passage of each state through a sequence of three developmental stages—the *stages of the power transition*—by which it progresses from a preindustrial economy to a mature, industrialized economy (Organski, 1958, pp. 300–306). A middle stage—the “transitional growth” stage—provides an extended period of meteoric growth. States undergo such growth spurts at different moments in history, meaning that some states will grow more rapidly than others—and, notably, at faster rates than states that have completed their own transitions and have leveled off into the slow-growth third phase of power maturity. For minor powers with limited resource endowments, the growth spurt associated with power transition might propel them from a lower rank to a middle rank, but generally these small powers are not destined to become contenders, at least not within a global hierarchy (Lemke, 1996, 2002).

On the other hand, when a great power with vast potential makes the transformation, its growth spurt can launch it onto a collision course with the dominant power. Such potential resides, first and foremost, in *population size*; its role as central element of national power is discussed at length in Organski’s *World Politics* (1958, pp. 137–145) and expanded upon in later work (e.g., Organski & Organski, 1961; Organski & Kugler, 1980; Tammen et al., 2000, pp. 18–19; T. Kugler & Swaminathan, 2006). Together with population size and *degree of industrialization* (discussed above), *political efficiency* rounds out a troika of key determinants of national power. Political efficiency (or *political capacity*, as it came to be known in later work) refers to the ability of government to mobilize resources and convert them into influence over other countries, and to government’s ability to exercise agency in international politics (Organski, 1958, Ch. 6–8, esp. pp. 185–200; see also Arbetman & Kugler, 1997). When a country enjoys a large population, efficient political organization, and industrial economic development, these three elements of power can work hand-in-hand to propel the state to the commanding heights of world politics. A rapidly rising power of this sort, with its vast potential, is a prospective challenger of the *de facto* hierarchy’s dominant power.

A confrontation may result but is not inevitable, because the rising power might be *satisfied* with the existing order or status quo. If, however, it has been *dissatisfied*, or becomes dissatisfied by virtue of its ascent, then the rising power might demand from the dominant power alterations to the existing order, or the replacement of the existing order with a new one (Organski, 1958, pp. 328–329). The dominant power, which PTT assumes has constructed the order to its own benefit, is both powerful and satisfied, and therefore is likely reluctant to revise the order. Thus, when a dissatisfied, rising state approaches parity with a satisfied, once-dominant power in relative decline, the stage is set for armed conflict. Indeed, following Organski’s (1958, p. 338) assertion that “the major wars of recent history have all been wars involving the dominant nation and its allies against a challenger who had recently risen thanks to industrialization,” Organski and Kugler’s

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

(1980) pioneering empirical investigation in *The War Ledger* found no industrial-era wars among contenders in the absence of a power transition.

The theory is elegant but deceptive in its apparent simplicity. PTT's many moving parts require conceptualization, operationalization, measurement, and incorporation into statistical and formal models in order to be tested. For six decades, PTT researchers have undertaken these tasks and have expanded the research program in a variety of ways, many of them productive or, in Lakatosian terms, progressive (DiCicco & Levy, 2003). Some of the work instrumental to this progress will be discussed or mentioned later. But when simplified to its essence, PTT appears to be focused on two explanatory variables—shifting power, and (dis)satisfaction with the status quo—and one dependent variable, namely war or peace atop international orders. It is perhaps this simplified version that is conflated with perspectives associated with Thucydides.

## Thucydides, Power Transitions, and Wars

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

If Helen's face launched a thousand ships, it may be said that Thucydides' thesis launched a thousand theories. An enduring source of fascination for international relations scholars, *History of the Peloponnesian War* provided what the world's first "scientific historian" framed as an objective assessment of the causes of war between Athens and Sparta. The one singled out for special attention—the "real" cause of war, in standard translations—is encapsulated in a famous sentence: "The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable."<sup>2</sup>

Few 21st-century social scientists would accept such grim determinism. Undeterred, analysts prognosticating about the next big war or China's rise are drawn to Thucydides' intuitive notion that a competitor's ascent poses a dangerous challenge to a leading state's position, status, or authority. Trading on the classic appeal of the venerated general-cum-historian's insight, some have assigned a metaphorical brand name (and for a time, even a logo) to the hazard associated with rapid power shifts, and have repeated the catchphrase in newspapers, in magazines, and in testimony before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee: "Thucydides Trap" (Allison, 2014, 2015A, 2015B).

To apply Thucydides' insights to subsequent power shifts is not new. Thirty years ago, political scientist Robert Gilpin asserted that Thucydides' theory of hegemonic war, while "limited and incomplete," has "withstood the test of time better than any other generalization in the field of international relations" (1988, pp. 29–30). Lebow (2003, p. 34) argued that modern realists celebrated Thucydides "as the first power transition theorist" thanks to the famous sentence in Book I.23.6 of *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Perhaps inspired by Thucydides, many scholars have advanced their own more elaborate theories concerning power shifts, war, and systemic change, especially between contenders vying for system leadership status (Gilpin, 1981; Modelski, 1978; Thompson, 1988; Rasler & Thompson, 1994).<sup>3</sup> The wars of greatest interest from this perspective are those with the potential to transform the system by disrupting the dominance of the system by a particular state—what Gilpin called "hegemonic wars."<sup>4</sup> Allison and his team of researchers at Harvard University's Belfer Center have arrived late to the party, but appear eager to contribute to the accumulated knowledge of war-prone power shifts among major powers—and the peaceful transitions among them.

Peaceful transitions are crucial because historical cases might suggest factors or strategies relevant to the management of China's rise. Allison explains that he frames the United States–China situation in Thucydidean terms not to suggest that war between the two powers is inevitable, but rather because an awareness of the heightened risk of war (as reflected in the historical record) should motivate conscientious efforts by leaders and officials in both countries to find creative solutions to disputes (including those involving third parties with ties to the United States or China) that might otherwise provoke escalation to armed conflict (2014, pp. 78–79). Allison's tone is sobering; he asserts that a peaceful transition will require a depth of mutual understanding achievable only through "radical changes in attitudes and actions, by leaders and publics alike" (2015a). To



## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

facilitate that radical change, Allison and his research team have undertaken an investigation of historical situations featuring “rising” and “ruling” powers.

From a social-scientific perspective, the value of empirical investigation goes beyond (but does not invalidate) the virtue of informing public officials of findings relevant to policy-making. Such investigations can promote the accumulation of basic knowledge, provided that analysts take the necessary steps of accessing extant knowledge and comparing it with new discoveries. Indeed, scholarship is scarcely imaginable without its practitioners’ commitment to acknowledging what has come before and either building on it or challenging it with new evidence. Some have questioned whether Allison and his research team have conformed to these basic norms of scientific inquiry in their promulgation of the Thucydides Trap Project (TTP).

The TTP shares with PTT a focus on powerful states contending for dominance and a heightened risk of war associated with the rapid rise of a contender seeking to challenge the ruling (or dominant) power. But there are significant differences worth mentioning. The first already has been mentioned: Whereas Thucydides framed war between Athens and Sparta as inevitable, Organski theorized that the risk of war between rising challenger and dominant power is influenced by a distinct causal factor: (dis)satisfaction with the international order or status quo (discussed in greater detail in a later section). Other features that set PTT apart are its inclusion of a generalized, theoretically linked explanation of the rise and relative decline of states, an emphasis on rational decision-making and the intentionality of war, and its limited temporal domain.

### Explaining Contenders’ Rise and Relative Decline

Thucydides offers much to the student of international relations. Indeed, his account of the contest between Athens and Sparta prefigures many of the discipline’s central concepts and subjects like entangling alliances and extended deterrence. But *History of the Peloponnesian War* and many of its derivatives tend to occupy themselves with behavioral manifestations of system-level pressures—coercion, crisis diplomacy, armed conflict—without necessarily theorizing about the underlying processes that generate the system change that reshapes the context in which the behavior occurs. By contrast, the multigenerational PTT research program has illuminated not only the prospects for war and peace among contending major powers, but also the uneven development processes that precipitate the rise and relative decline of those contending powers (e.g., Organski et al., 1984). The resulting theory is difficult to test in a holistic manner—fragmentation is common in this research tradition—but it does attribute both patterns of rise and relative decline and major-power wars to the same set of processes: uneven industrial development.

That the rapid rise of a challenger is fueled by industrialization’s boost has implications for operationalization and measurement, and for future theory development. Because the central variable, relative power, is linked to economic development, PTT researchers

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

embrace operational definitions of power that capture economic productivity; measures of power that rely exclusively on military spending, technology, or personnel will miss at least one integral element of national power (see Kugler & Domke, 1986; Kugler & Arbetman, 1989). In the 1968 revised edition of *World Politics*, Organski advocated the use of gross national product (GNP) as an indicator. He argued that although the goods and services captured by GNP do not comprise a direct contribution to a nation's power per se, the statistic is determined by the same sorts of factors that determine nations' power, and thus captures a reflection of the concept (Organski, 1968, p. 209). Later, Organski and Kugler (1980, pp. 30–38) justified their use of GNP, both for its positive attributes (reliability, parsimony, theoretical attractiveness) and its advantages over other popular indicators; others followed their lead, shifting to gross domestic product (GDP) when it became sensible to do so (de Soysa, Oneal, & Park, 1997, p. 510). More recently, Casetti (2003, p. 663) identified several advantages of aggregate product (i.e., GDP) for modeling major powers' long-term power trajectories, thus affirming PTT researchers' focus on GDP as an indicator of power.

Critiques of PTT researchers' use of GDP to measure power are not uncommon (e.g., Levy, 2008, pp. 18–20; Rapkin & Thompson, 2013, pp. 52–53), but further controversy is on the horizon. GDP might be losing relevance in the 21st century, for a variety of reasons. For example, production processes have globalized in scope (but are fragmented among multiple countries), and transnational corporations' practices make it difficult to attribute productivity and profits to any one state (Starrs, 2013). And GDP arguably underestimates the impact of innovative and knowledge-based sectors like information technology and “big data” (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016, pp. 31–46). In light of these developments, reliance on GDP as an indicator ultimately might confound rather than clarify the picture of comparative power of states, especially at the top of the “power pyramid.” As Diane Coyle wrote in her 2014 book on GDP, “It is a measure of the economy best suited to an earlier era” (quoted in Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016, p. 38). That operational indicators of power would be historically contingent is not surprising, and in one sense PTT already reflects this perspective, given Organski's emphasis on industrialization. If the meteoric growth of “knowledge-based” economic activity indicates a postindustrial shift in how economic development is achieved or accelerated, then adjusted indicators will become necessary; but if it represents a transformation in what economic development and wealth generation mean and how these processes are understood, then PTT—with its focus on industrial-era development—might be poorly equipped to explain future power shifts and major wars, and new theories may become necessary.

The relevance of one other element of power might be changing in the information age: population. With the increasing ubiquity of robotics, artificial intelligence, remote-controlled unmanned vehicles, “cyberwarfare,” and related technologies and practices, will population continue to hold its position as a key element of national power? Surely in terms of economic productivity, resource extraction, occupation of territory, and fielding armies, a large population remains a source of considerable power for a state. But will the benefits of economic maturity—including high life expectancy, reduced infant

## **Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism**

---

mortality, and the like—create a burden on technologically advanced states just as they find that the work of many humans can be reliably and efficiently accomplished through the use of automated technologies? The human element of power may lose some of its salience as economic and military aspects of national power become less reliant on human operators.

### Emotional Versus Rational Decision-Making, and the Intentionality of War

According to standard translations, Thucydides used the word “fear” or “alarm” to characterize Sparta’s response to Athens’s rise, which opens the door for emotion. Lebow (2003) chastened scholars for superficial readings of Thucydides—and especially that famous sentence—so readers might reasonably expect that the present emphasis on fear or alarm is misguided. But Lebow himself highlighted the role of emotion in Thucydides’ work (Lebow, 2003, p. 114), and Allison’s interpretation underscores “the rising power’s growing entitlement, sense of its own importance, and demand for greater say and sway,” along with the established power’s “fear, insecurity, and determination to defend the status quo” (Allison, 2015A). Subsequent discussion notes how Athens’s rise “shocked Sparta” while empowering Athens with growth in “its self-confidence, its consciousness of past injustices, [and] its sensitivity to instances of disrespect,” which Sparta interpreted as “ungrateful” considering that Athens had flourished under Sparta’s system leadership (Allison, 2015A). Allison’s representation of Thucydides suggests that the power shift induced or heightened emotions, thus raising suspicions and hardening positions.

By contrast, Organski (1958) frames the dominant power’s motives not in terms of fear (nor any other emotion) but rather in terms of benefits that would be forgone if a challenger upset the status quo. Though the benefits themselves are perhaps underspecified (more on this later), the important observation here is that PTT suggests a rationalist model—and indeed, the PTT research program is characterized in part by formalized mathematical and game-theoretic models built on assumptions of rational choice, cost-benefit analysis, and strategic interaction (Abdollahian & Kang, 2008; Alsharabati, 1997; Alsharabati & Kugler, 2008; cf. Powell, 1996).<sup>5</sup>

Organski (1958) did note deviations from idealized rational decision-making, and the author’s willingness to acknowledge the discrepancy underscores the value of honesty and transparency in scholarly work. A prime example is Organski’s observation that, historically, rising challengers appeared to initiate war prior to overtaking the dominant power, despite the latter’s presumed military advantage and the foolhardiness of choosing to attack while in a weaker position (Organski, 1958, p. 333). For a rationalist model, the discrepancy between theory and evidence was problematic. But rather than conceal the problem, the author openly acknowledged it—and, as discussed later, the timing and initiation of war during power transitions continue to be subjects of fruitful debates that connect PTT with other research traditions. For his part, Organski speculated about reasons for the discrepancy—and, for the most part, remained focused on factors (e.g., benefits of the status quo, the costs of war, and the probabilities of victory or defeat) that could be accounted for both in a theoretical sense, within a rationalist framework, and in an empirical sense, in that they might be operationalized and measured.

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

Emotions like fear and alarm do not lend themselves to reliable measurement; neither, for their part, do emotions associated with the rising power, like pride (Allison, 2014, p. 77). Moreover, the attribution of emotions to an entire country or its government suggests an anthropomorphizing of the state that both implies and obscures aggregation problems. To the extent that derivatives of Thucydides' thesis emphasize emotion as a mechanism, they are dissimilar from PTT. PTT researchers' overarching focus on rational and strategic choice has given shape and coherence to the research program, and that has allowed some theorists to demonstrate the logical consistency of portions of PTT and its extensions (e.g., Kim & Morrow, 1992; Morrow, 1996; Abdollahian & Kang, 2008; Alsharabati & Kugler, 2008).

The focus on rational and strategic choice is broadly consistent with one other key element of PTT that distinguishes it from Thucydidean perspectives: the *intentionality of war between contenders*. Following Thucydides, Allison expresses concern that minor crises involving allies or client states can drag contenders into major wars (Allison, 2014, 2015A; Coker, 2015, pp. 109–116). PTT by contrast generally emphasizes the rising power's decision to challenge the dominant power (Organski & Kugler, 1980; Kugler & Zagare, 1987). The implicit or explicit focus on the decision for war against that adversary, and not being entrapped or dragged in by alliance ties, has implications both theoretical and empirical. On the theoretical side, the implication is that war is intentional, if not deliberate, which is consistent with the rationalist character of PTT. A second theoretical implication is that the key focus is the contender dyad: the relationship between the dominant power and the rising challenger, and the strategic interaction within that dyad. Application of formal modeling techniques in a PTT framework typically have shared this dyadic focus (Abdollahian & Kang, 2008; Alsharabati & Kugler, 2008). On the empirical side, many tests of PTT-derived hypotheses follow this tendency to take on a dyadic focus, though not all limit themselves to contender dyads (e.g., Houweling & Siccama, 1988; Geller, 1993).

The intentionality of war between contenders is a crucial aspect of debates linked to PTT. If power transition wars stem from intentional, calculated "challenges" by rising states choosing to initiate war against the dominant power, then two observable implications follow. First, a pattern of war initiation by challengers should be discernable in history. Second, evidence of the challenger's intention to use force to disrupt the status quo should obtain. As empirical propositions, both are more complex than they initially appear, and typically require fine-grained attention to historical evidence. In addition, consideration of factors at lower levels of analysis may be warranted, including domestic politics or even particular leaders or small groups of decision-makers (e.g., Greve & Levy, N.D.). Though the structural pressures of a power shift can push states toward war, the persons involved retain some measure of influence over the steps to war. And, as Vasquez (1993, p. 104) noted in a critique of structural theories, human error can play an important role in war onset.

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

Perhaps Lemke (2002, p. 28) is right when he argues that PTT is a structural theory that provides a simplified, stylized account of more complex realities, and that as a broad framework it is valid from a big-picture perspective. As a defense of structural theories, the argument for parsimony has familiar appeal. But to account for the intentionality of power transition wars, to explain their timing and initiation, and to better understand how such wars may be averted likely will require work that provides ample room for human agency. Power transitions might well be the underlying causes of certain types of wars—but the wars' proximate causes, and the empirical substantiation of features like the intentionality of war, demand that researchers build bridges to scholarship that emphasizes the interaction of structure and agency (e.g., Braumoeller, 2013). This article returns to the issue of human agency in a later section.

### Temporal Domain

Thucydides purported to create a work of history that would provide insight universal to the human condition, spanning time and space. Inspired by Hippocratic doctors' emergent methodology, Thucydides reportedly sought to unearth general laws of human nature and behavior (Nitz, 2013, p. 70) unbound by time. Despite the hubris of such an approach, more than 24 centuries later Thucydides' account of the contest between Athens and Sparta highlights and illustrates many of the concepts and tensions of international relations. This article will not attempt to resolve whether Thucydides' continued resonance is a manifestation of a self-fulfilling prophecy; rather, Thucydides' claim is notable here for its contrast with PTT. In plain and emphatic terms, Organski established temporal boundaries for the theory: It would not explain patterns of international politics and great power war in the preindustrial era, and it would not help explain a world in which all states had fully industrialized. That PTT is so circumscribed derives from its basic engine: endogenous economic growth and development and, in particular, asynchronous industrialization of states.

Differential industrialization is the key to understanding the shifts in power in the 19th and 20th centuries, but it was not the key in the years before 1750 or so, and it will not always be the key in the future . . . The theories of this book, and the theory of the power transition in particular, apply to the second period when the major determinants of national power are population size, political organization, and industrial strength, and when shifts in power through internal development are consequently of great importance.

(Organski, 1958, pp. 306–307)

The period following the industrializing era, according to Organski (1958), will “require new theories” (p. 307).

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

Rather than hubris, Organski's approach conveys modesty. By urging readers to understand that collective understandings of the determinants of power in international relations change over time, he encouraged researchers to focus their energies on a particular period of modern history. This has not deterred some researchers associated with the research program from testing variations of PTT across a wider time span, including a portion of the preindustrial era. Perhaps most notable in this regard is the "alliance transitions model" advanced and tested by Woosang Kim. Kim (1991, 1992, 1996) builds on Organski's suggestion that states' power may be aggregated in blocs—to include the allies of a dissatisfied challenger in a bloc with that challenger, and the allies of the dominant state in a bloc associated with the status quo. Following Thompson (1983), Kim (1992) criticizes Organski's assumption that industrialization is necessary to generate rapid power shifts on the grounds that alliance formation could be used to augment the power of a state (Kim, 1992, pp. 155–156). Although Organski (1958) and Organski and Kugler (1980) emphasize the difficulty in changing alliances in 20th-century international politics, the 1648–1815 period studied by Kim featured more fluid alliance arrangements—and thus if one is willing to accept a capability-aggregation interpretation of alliance blocs, one can extend PTT's basic principles to this (largely) preindustrial period. But this is the exception, not the rule. As DiCicco and Levy (1999, 2003) note, Kim's work represents a break from PTT's core assumptions.

Kim's scholarship nonetheless provides an opportunity to compare Allison's adaptation of the Thucydidean thesis to the PTT research program on one crucial empirical dimension: wars to be explained. The next section features a brief comparison of the wars identified by Allison's TTP and the wars used to test hypotheses drawn from PTT. Rather than attempt to reconcile the diverse approaches to identifying wars by various PTT researchers and their critics, this article relies on a minimalist interpretation based on the criteria articulated by Organski and Kugler (1980). Siverson and Miller explain it well: "Power transition theory does not have as its domain all wars between states. Rather, it generally has been limited to explaining the big, system-transforming wars that are asserted to establish the central political status of the state that possesses sufficient power not just to defeat others, but to take on the task[s] of organizing the system . . . and allocating values and benefits" (Siverson & Miller, 1996, p. 60). By providing a conscientious and transparent adaptation of Organski and Kugler's (1980) criteria to the 1648–1815 period, Kim's (1992) empirical study makes possible a comparison over a 300-year time frame—thus partially bridging the gap between the PTT research program's industrial-era focus and TTP's focus on five centuries of history.

## Accounting for Major Wars Between Rising and Ruling Powers

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

In *The Atlantic*, Allison (2015A) warned, “Based on the current trajectory, war between the United States and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than recognized at the moment. Indeed, judging by the historical record, war is more likely than not.” On what historical, empirical foundation does Allison base these inferences? A brief review of the TTP’s “case file” provides some perspective, as well as a helpful basis for comparison with PTT research.

The case file—a fledgling data set perhaps, though not quantified—is built on the TTP team’s analysis of “the historical record” (Allison, 2015C). The empirical project’s preliminary first phase identified 16 cases of potential transitions between major ruling powers and rapidly rising powers between 1500 and the present.<sup>6</sup> Of the 16 cases identified, four did not end in war—a figure that has remained intact, despite some ambiguity about particular cases. In the original data, three cases of peaceful transition occurred during the nuclear era: the Soviet Union versus a rising Japan in northeast Asia during the 1970s and 1980s; the Cold War confrontation between the United States and a rising Soviet Union; and Europe (led by the United Kingdom and France) versus Germany, 1990s–present.<sup>7</sup> The fourth case is the always-exceptional Anglo-American transition, which is dated to the early 20th century (Allison, 2015C).

The remaining 12 cases are linked to wars. Though war is defined according to the standard criteria in the Correlates of War Project, six of the episodes occur prior to 1816: France versus the rising Hapsburgs in the Hapsburg–Valois wars (1519–1559); the Hapsburgs versus the rising Ottoman Empire in the Ottoman–Hapsburg Wars (1526–1566, 1593–1606, 1683–1699); the Hapsburgs in the Holy Roman Empire versus Sweden in the Thirty Years’ War (1630–1648, the period of Swedish involvement); the Dutch Republic versus a rising England in the Anglo-Dutch Wars (1652–1674); France versus a rising Britain in the combination of the Nine Years’ War (1688–1697), the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714), the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–1748), and the Seven Years’ War (1754–1763); and France versus a rising Britain in the French Revolutionary Wars (1792–1802) and the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815).

With the exception of France’s defeat in 1815 punctuating Britain’s overtaking of France (Organski, 1958, p. 317), these wars (or series of wars) fall prior to PTT’s temporal domain, which begins in the latter half of the 18th century with Britain’s industrialization (Organski, 1958, p. 307; DiCicco & Levy, 2003, p. 125). However, because Kim’s (1992) test of the alliance transition model applied Organski and Kugler’s (1980) criteria for identifying major wars to the period 1648–1815, a useful comparison with TTP’s wars (Allison, 2015C) may be made (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of Wars Before 1815

**Allison/Thucydides Trap**

**Kim, using Organski & Kugler criteria**



## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

Hapsburg-Valois wars (1519-1559)	<i>No pre-Westphalia wars included</i>
Ottoman-Hapsburg Wars (1526-1566, 1593-1606, 1683-1699)	<i>No pre-Westphalia wars included</i>
Thirty Years' War (1630-1648, period of Swedish involvement)	<i>No pre-Westphalia wars included</i>
The Anglo-Dutch Wars (1652-1674)	Dutch War of Louis XIV (1672-1678)
<b>Nine Years' War (1688-1697)</b>	<b>War of the League of Augsburg (1688-1697)</b>
<b>War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714)</b>	<b>War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714)</b>
War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748)	<i>Does not satisfy O&amp;K's criteria</i>
<b>Seven Years' War (1754-1763)</b>	<b>Seven Years' War (1754-1763)</b>
<b>French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802)</b>	<b>French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802)</b>
<b>Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815)</b>	<b>Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815)</b>

Other rigorous investigations have illuminated patterns of great power war and peace spanning preindustrial and industrial periods (e.g., Modelski, 1978; Thompson, 1988; Rasler & Thompson, 1994), but Allison makes no mention of this scholarship, choosing instead to rely primarily on “the leading historical accounts” (Allison, 2015c). Based on these histories and on information from Gilpin (1981) and Levy (1983), the team identified the following industrial-era wars associated with a rapidly rising challenger: the United Kingdom and France versus a rising Russia in the Crimean War (1853-1856); France versus a rising Germany in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), a rising Japan versus China and Russia, respectively, in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905); the United Kingdom, supported by France and Russia, versus a rising Germany in World War I (1914-1918); the Soviet Union, United Kingdom, and France versus a rising Germany in World War II in Europe (1939-1945); and the United States versus a rising Japan in World War II's Pacific theatre (1941-1945). See Table 2 for a comparison.

Table 2. Comparison of Wars, 1816-2016

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

Allison/Thucydides Trap	Organski & Kugler
Crimean War (1853–1856)	<i>does not satisfy O&amp;K's criteria</i>
<b>Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871)</b>	<b>Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871)</b>
First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895)	<i>does not satisfy O&amp;K's criteria</i>
<b>Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905)</b>	<b>Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905)</b>
<b>World War I (1914–1918)</b>	<b>World War I (1914–1918)</b>
<b>World War II in Europe (1939–1945)</b>	<b>World War II (1939–1945)</b>
World War II in Pacific (1941–1945)	

(\* *Note*: Kim (1992) argues that the Russo-Japanese War does not meet one of Organski and Kugler's (1980) criteria, but its inclusion in the latter warrants its inclusion here.

Taken together, the lists reveal similarities and differences between PTT and Allison's TTP with respect to the identification of wars. First, there is significant overlap in the wars identified by both. Since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, there is a fairly precise correspondence between wars identified using Organski and Kugler's criteria on the one hand, and the TTP on the other. Nine of 14 wars (or nine of 13 if the European and Pacific theatres of World War II are not decomposed) identified by Allison's research team also appear in Kim (1992).

Readers should, however, take note that wars are *not* the selection mechanism here; TTP researchers identify opportunities for such wars defined by the rapid rise of a potential challenger to a "ruling" state, and Organski and Kugler (1980, pp. 28–49) identified the field of contenders in the "central system" and then tracked their power trajectories over time to identify periods in which rough parity obtained. However, where PTT researchers treat distinct wars as distinct events, the TTP sometimes groups wars as a single conflict process (especially in the 17th and 18th centuries). More important, PTT researchers generally have been transparent in their estimation and reporting of relative power, their identification of major powers and contenders, and their identification of conditions under which a power shift has resulted in rough parity—thus facilitating replication—while the TTP maintains an atmosphere of mystery. Consider this explanation from the TTP website's description of the case file: "we . . . identified 'ruling' and 'rising' powers by following the judgments of leading historical accounts . . . These histories use 'rise and 'rule' according to their conventional definitions, generally emphasizing rapid shifts in relative GDP and military strength" (Allison, 2015A). Few specifics are provided. The

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

historical accounts are cited, but not much assistance is given with respect to operational definitions of rising power, ruling power, or even just “power.”

Researchers in the PTT tradition, by contrast, have considered, compared, and utilized different indicators of capabilities or potential power. Distinct data series have been painstakingly compared, and the differences noted; spirited debates have ensued. Common standards have been adopted and critiqued, and strengths and weaknesses discussed in print (e.g., Kugler & Domke, 1986; Kugler & Arbetman, 1989; Houweling & Siccama, 1988; deSoysa, Oneal, & Park, 1997). So it might be with reasonable puzzlement that a PTT researcher would regard the statement on the TTP website, “A larger methodological problem for this inquiry is the absence of established metrics for assessing ‘national power’” (Allison, 2015c).<sup>8</sup>

The statement of methodology that accompanies the Thucydides Trap case file, and its discussion of case selection, variables, and measurement (Allison, 2015c), gives the project a veneer of scientific rigor. But the statement does not reflect widely accepted scientific standards of uniform measurement and replicability, and raises at least as many questions as it answers. In addition to questions about how power is measured,<sup>9</sup> one might reasonably ask: What is a “ruling” or dominant power, and on what basis are ruling powers differentiated from other great powers? For example, among Allison’s original cases that did not end in war, the Soviet Union was coded as both a ruling power and a rising power, and “Europe” is considered to be a ruling power.

Such observations lead to follow-on questions: Over what, exactly, does a dominant state have “ruling” status? If it is a global or regional order, what is the empirical basis of such an order, and what sorts of benefits are derived by those states within it? What is a rapidly rising power and on what basis is one differentiated from states that are rising slowly, or not at all? Are distributions of power determined on a dyadic basis or by aggregating allies’ capabilities? What constitutes a dangerous shift in power, and under what *ex ante* conditions would we predict such a shift to result in war? By contrast, under what *ex ante* conditions would we predict a peaceful transition?

Power transition theorists and researchers have established answers to such questions, and over 60 years have constructed an expansive superstructure of scholarly knowledge on these foundations (Kugler & Organski, 1989; Lemke & Kugler, 1996; Tammen, 2008; Tammen, Kugler, & Lemke, 2012). Perhaps then what remains is a single, overarching question: If there already exists a body of theory-driven, empirical scholarship that has investigated precisely the issues at hand, why would an academic research team *not* begin with that extant scholarship? The actual answer may be far from obvious, and in the spirit of empirical international relations theory, this article will not engage in speculation without evidence.

That said, the form and style of communication bears consideration. As the PTT research program has grown in breadth, depth, and academic importance, the features that give it credibility as good social science—verifiable data and analyses, rigorous methodology,

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

and the use of formal models to confirm logical consistency—also have raised the barrier to entry for the nonspecialist. Power transition researchers reassure readers that the work has enjoyed policy relevance, but only a limited audience has the knowledge, skills, and wherewithal to digest the content of scholarly articles written for consumption by other scientists. This is not to say that power transition theorists have not published works written in ordinary language and that convey key elements of the theory without the use of mathematical proofs and elaborate spatial models (e.g., Tammen, 2008). But even outside of its occasional technical demands on readers, the work is complex and demands sustained attention. For a general audience, and for political officials whose time is short, these demands may be too great. Despite its substantive banality, perhaps what gives currency to Allison's "Thucydides Trap" is the easily communicated and conveniently marketable message. That it is ambiguous—some have interpreted the "trap" as resembling PTT, others have framed it as a restatement of the security dilemma (Coker, 2015, p. 107)—seems not to matter much to consumers. But the catchiness of the alliterative brand name, the classical appeal, and the simplicity of the message have facilitated the absorption of "Thucydides Trap" into the lexicon of not only scholars, but also world leaders and ordinary folks who take an interest in global affairs.

To the extent that consideration of the "trap" gives people and public officials pause, and encourages careful navigation of the dangerous waters that may lie ahead, Allison's work is useful and may lead in a direction that Organski himself might have appreciated. But from here, to where does Allison's project go? (Apart from a book, of course; see Allison, 2017.)<sup>10</sup> A catchphrase and a weakly specified collection of cases of confrontations between "rising" and "ruling" powers provide precious little by way of foundations for scientific inference. Without the transparency that would allow others to evaluate the methodological rigor of the data collection, coding, and analysis, there is only the thinnest of reasons for confidence in conclusions about the dangers of rapidly rising rivals, at least from a social-scientific perspective. But more important for practitioners of empirical international relations theory is the question: What does this partially documented collection of cases contribute to the accumulation of scientific knowledge? The aforementioned veneer of scientific rigor, in combination with the author's credentials and the pedigree of the sponsoring institutions, might be sufficient to impress casual observers, to publish in popular outlets, and to open doors to the chambers of public officials. But social scientists are less likely to be impressed—and more likely to be cynical about the prospects of using the TTP as a basis for expanding, deepening, or building our knowledge.

The issue of communication still remains: Are those who produce rigorous, empirically based scholarship in the PTT tradition succeeding in reaching desired audiences? If the point is to build a reputation within narrow communities of like-minded specialists, then the answer surely is "yes." If, however, the point is to reach a still-wider audience that includes nonspecialists, the answer is less clear. Perhaps the question of intended audiences and how best to reach them remains one of the unresolved issues for this multigenerational research program. But this is not a question only for power transition

researchers, and it is not the only question facing power transition researchers. Two such areas that would benefit from continued exploration and bridge-building with other islands of research are the timing and initiation of war within the power transition framework, and the nature and operationalization of the status quo and its evaluation by states in the system.

### Timing and Initiation of Power Transition Wars

Levy and Thompson (2010, p. 45 ff.) noted that PTT theorists have not achieved consensus on the timing and initiation of power transition wars. Concerning the timing of war, the overarching prediction (and, for the most part, the empirical pattern) is clear enough. As Tammen et al. (2000, p. 28) note, great power wars do not occur when there is a clearly superior dominant power. Imbalances of power tend to preserve the peace among major powers, and shifts in the direction of a more even balance (i.e., parity) are warning signals of potential war. So parity is thought to be crucial, and thus a power transition that brings a challenger into parity with the dominant state generates a higher likelihood of war, as noted earlier. But when *within* the process of a power shift is war outbreak most likely?

Some have argued that the condition of parity is unsatisfying due to its imprecision.<sup>11</sup> Peer-competitor states might find themselves at parity for prolonged periods of time, a condition acknowledged by Organski and Kugler (1980, p. 26) in their initial tests of PTT. For example, by one measure of power, Great Britain and Germany were at parity for the lion's share of the period stretching from 1904 to 1938, with brief interludes of British superiority (though perhaps not dominance; see Tammen et al., 2000, p. 52). How are scholars to successfully postdict the timing of either or both World Wars if the two main contenders are at or near parity for over three decades? The concept of *overtaking* provides a key benchmark or mechanism to help refine predictions (Tammen et al., 2000, pp. 21–24; Kim & Morrow, 1992).

Organski (1958, 1968) observed that rising challengers tend to initiate early—prematurely, even—and specifically, before they achieve equality of power with the dominant state. Organski and Kugler (1980) corrected this earlier, anecdotal inference by producing quantitative evidence of war initiation *after* the challenger's overtaking of the dominant state (and specifically after overtaking, not simply during the period of rough parity). Though early critiques raised questions about operationalization and other issues (e.g., Thompson, 1983), the question of timing remained unresolved for years; it was an open question for the contributors to the 1996 anthology *Parity and War*, for example. But by the end of that decade, Tammen et al. (2000) seem to have settled on war-after-overtake:

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

In general, overtakings provide the preconditions for conflict because the challenger anticipates a fair chance of winning. Yet mere parity, even accompanied by an overtaking, is not the direct cause of conflict. Parity and overtaking must be accompanied by a challenging state's determination to change the status quo and a willingness of its elite to incur significant risks in order to alter the rules of the existing hierarchy.

(Tammen et al., 2000, p. 22)

The precipitous shift of focus away from timing and toward dissatisfaction (and, effectively, revisionism—more on that later) perhaps marks a point of exhaustion among PTT researchers with the debate over the precise timing of war. Weariness notwithstanding, critics have continued to raise the question, particularly since variation among observations on the timing of war seems to depend in part on how key elements of the theory are measured, including power and war. Again, there may be room here for incorporating PTT into a broader, multicausal framework that includes factors at lower levels—domestic politics, small groups, and leaders—to help account for the immediate causes of wars that may have power shifts as their underlying causes.

Also relevant is the question of whether the dominant power might initiate war, either as a preventive war to arrest the challenger's rise before parity or overtake, or as a preemptive war if leaders come to believe that the rising challenger is on the brink of attacking the dominant state. Existing work on the preventive motivation for war during relative decline suggests that war is a theoretical possibility that may be unfairly overlooked by many power transition researchers (Levy, 1987, 2008), but it is also challenging to ascertain and measure with a quantitative research design (Lemke, 2003). Whether any of the individual cases from the TTP case file will shed light on the question of preventive motivation remains to be seen. From a PTT perspective, one issue that has arisen is whether the dominant power can ever be dissatisfied with the status quo. The original theory maintains that the dominant power is satisfied—after all, it constructed the international order to its own advantage. And in Organski's words, "it is the powerful and dissatisfied nations that start world wars" (1958, p. 329).

## (Dis)satisfaction With the Status Quo

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

Early empirical treatments of PTT focused on measuring the relative power of states—and especially “contenders” for top-dog status—to the relative exclusion of the second key explanatory variable, (dis)satisfaction with the status quo. This may be attributed in part to an emphasis on measuring power and political capacity, on tracing patterns of relative growth and decline, and on testing the relationship between power preponderance and peace—and in part to conceptual ambiguity of both the status quo and (dis)satisfaction. The latter is especially noticeable when compared to power, which Organski (1958) subjected to extensive discussion. In addition, unlike national power, which could be estimated using extant indicators of capability and wealth, there were no preexisting indicators easily adaptable to the measurement of (dis)satisfaction. The past 30 years, however, have seen the development of several approaches to understanding and measuring (dis)satisfaction; continued progress is vital both to testing and extending PTT.

Lemke and Kugler (1996, p. 21) framed the issue and highlighted dissatisfaction’s importance by adopting Most and Starr’s (1983) language: Power transitions and the achievement of parity between rising and dominant powers create only the *opportunity* for contenders to fight; it is dissatisfaction that generates *willingness* to fight.<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, Vasquez (1996, p. 49) argued that power transition increases the likelihood of war between contenders, but (dis)satisfaction “is probably the key” to understanding which situations end in war and which do not. PTT researchers now have a large ring of keys from which to choose, but critics would suggest that none provides a perfect fit.

### Conceptualizing the Status Quo

One source of disagreement is the prior consideration: namely, what is it that constitutes the status quo itself? This concept is, according to Chan (2008, p. 5), “fraught with ambiguity.” Organski (1958, Ch. 12) linked the notion of the status quo to an international order that arguably included alliance ties, economic interdependence, rules and institutions, and some division of benefits accruing from the rules-based order. Whether such an order is necessarily global remains an unresolved question. Organski (1958, p. 321) wrote of the worrisome rise of the Soviet Union “gaining on the United States and her allies” and thus posing a potential threat to “the Western order, now firmly led by the United States.” The overarching narrative noted that at times the world would have just one such order, “but other times, as at present, there may be two or more competing international orders existing simultaneously” (Organski, 1958, p. 316).<sup>13</sup>

Conventional treatments of PTT view the global system as a single overarching order, or posit a multiplicity of layered or nested orders rather than distinct, competing ones (Levy, 2008, pp. 20–25). In part this is a function of PTT’s temporal domain. The existence of a truly global order (or a central system of European states with colonial holdings spanning the globe) during the industrial era is more defensible than it would be, say, during Thucydides’ time, when the peoples of classical Greek civilization remained unaware of some other civilizations’ existence on Earth. But to the matter at hand: Best-known

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

among scholars who have adapted PTT to a series of nested orders is Lemke (1996, 2002, Ch. 3), whose “multiple hierarchies model” posits orders-within-orders down to the regional and subregional levels. Within each regional subsystem there may be a dominant regional power, and a regional status quo; and similarly for localized subdivisions of regions. The various local and regional hierarchies are identified in part by a calculation of states’ proximity that adjusts for a loss-of-strength gradient (Boulding, 1962; Bueno de Mesquita, 1981), designed to capture the degrading of military power over significant distances. States within a focal state’s “relevant neighborhood” are those within military reach (Lemke, 2002, p. 71; Tammen et al., pp. 66–68).

But what is at stake among these potential contenders, either at the system level, or the regional or subregional levels, or even (and here the concept might be stretched past its limits) at the dyadic level? One school of thought emphasizes territorial issues (e.g., Vasquez, 1996), while others emphasize some combination of economic or financial benefits (e.g., Bueno de Mesquita, 1990); still others seek to capture some reflection of shared political culture, values, and institutions, with a nod to the interdemocratic peace (Lemke & Reed, 1996). Bussmann and Oneal (2007) argue that PTT implies that dominant powers distribute private goods (to reward those who uphold the status quo) in contrast to hegemonic stability theory, which relies on the hegemon’s provision of public goods (e.g., Keohane, 1984). Certainly Organski offered great latitude by emphasizing the various economic and military ties that form the sinews of international order as well as the order’s allocation of benefits, distribution of wealth and power, and shared “rules of trade, diplomacy, and war” (1958, pp. 313–316). The inclusivity gives the concept face validity, but makes specification, operationalization, and measurement incredibly complex.

### Measuring (Dis)satisfaction With the Status Quo

Conceptual ambiguity and complexity have not prevented researchers from attempting to measure (dis)satisfaction with the status quo. From the similarity of alliance ties to money-market discount rates, from military buildups to membership in intergovernmental organizations, a host of indicators have been proposed and utilized to distinguish the satisfied from the dissatisfied. Chan (2004), Kang and Gibler (2013), and Greve and Levy (N.D.) provide helpful critical overviews. The various indicators have value in generating estimates of (dis)satisfaction, but there is no consensus on basic parameters of measurement. That is to say, should dissatisfaction/satisfaction be considered dichotomous, and thus represented as a binary variable—or should it instead be measured as a continuous variable, which would permit observers a sense of just how satisfied or dissatisfied a particular state is? One advantage of measuring (dis)satisfaction this way is that it enables researchers to see patterns or trajectories in one state’s status quo evaluations over time. Growing dissatisfaction, for example, could be used to help forecast an escalating risk of war.



## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

But complications with a fine-tuned indicator of status quo evaluations abound.

Organski's (1958) original theory revolves around a dichotomous conceptualization: "the powerful and satisfied" uphold the existing order, and threats to the order come from "the powerful and dissatisfied." For the purpose of theory-testing, what is the appropriate break-point along a (dis)satisfaction spectrum for a state's status quo evaluation to tip from "somewhat dissatisfied" to full-blown dissatisfaction—whereby the evaluation of the status quo reaches such an intolerable level as to motivate corrective action by the dissatisfied challenger? Incorporating such tipping points is potentially useful in modeling the strategic interaction between a dominant power seeking to protect the status quo while also accommodating a rising challenger.

This discussion raises another issue that has bedeviled the power transition research program: How much of the status quo depends on status? To be more specific: It remains unclear the degree to which a state's (dis)satisfaction with the existing order depends on its own status within that order—with "status" indicating perceived status ranking of the state among other states, and perhaps the respect or deference afforded to that state as a consequence. A spate of recent scholarship has repopularized status as a theoretical and empirical item of interest (Larson, Paul, & Wohlforth, 2014; Onea, 2014; Wolf, 2014; Renshon, 2016), thus reviving an older thread in the literature on "status inconsistency" and armed conflict (Galtung, 1964; Singer & Small, 1966; Wallace, 1973; Midlarsky, 1975; Volgy & Mayhall, 1995). Despite occasional references in passing to this idea, researchers in the power transition tradition have focused their efforts on a materialist approach to status quo evaluations (Greve & Levy, n.d.)—or to a behavioralist approach, in which documented behaviors represent shared valuation of tangible expressions of the existing order, such as defensive alliances or intergovernmental institutions (Kim, 1991, 1992; Chan, 2003). A focus on nonmaterialist factors that are more difficult to capture through behavioral indicators would help to expand PTT and connect it to the emergent literature on status, and there are benefits to doing so. But these benefits also come at the risk of conceptual stretching, of making uniform measurement difficult or impossible, of smuggling emotional content into a rationalist theory, or of anthropomorphizing the state.

Qualitative studies may be particularly useful in exploring status concerns. Though such studies might not be able to achieve uniform measurement of status concerns, they can still help to illuminate whether and when political leaders, small groups of decision-makers, and other influential figures appeared to be motivated by status rather than by materialist concerns. Allison's own TTP might play a role in facilitating qualitative research into status concerns of "rising" and "ruling" powers, providing one means of bridge-building between TTP and PTT researchers. But it is not enough to rely on historians' narratives—researchers should strive to comport with disciplinary standards of evidence to establish whether and how status concerns figured into decisions to take action to redress perceived inconsistencies or deficits. In so doing, qualitative empirical scholarship may help discern whether and how perceptions (self-perceptions from within a state, as well as others' perceptions of status rankings) play an intervening role—both

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

in determining where states reside in the “power pyramid,” and in understanding when and why states are so dissatisfied with their own present status as to be moved to consider taking drastic action to improve it.

Of course, one challenge to such research concerns context: the parameters of the order in which a state seeks to improve its status, and the reference point to which it compares its current status. One solution to this quandary is to step away from PTT and embrace the Challenger/Transition model (Rapkin & Thompson, 2013, p. 64 ff.) with its emphasis on distinguishing between global and regional activities—or, to find a way to link the global and regional within a PTT framework (Danilovic & Clare, 2007). Though Lemke (2002) has been criticized for not adequately characterizing linkages between global and regional orders, his multiple hierarchies model provides another possibility. Another is to work more inductively from case studies to establish whether there is sufficient reason to push the development of theory and empirical indicators (Greve & Levy, N.D.). Better specification of the parameters may provide context for states’ decision to act on their dissatisfaction.

### From Dissatisfaction to Revisionism

In response to persistent arguments that power is constitutive of satisfaction, Lemke and Reed (1998) published an article entitled “Power Is Not Satisfaction.” To this statement might be added a follow-on statement: “Dissatisfaction Is Not Revisionism.” Such a statement might seem obvious to the user of plain language—after all, mere discontent is not the equivalent of ideologically charged activism. But this distinction is uncommon; it is, in fact, far more common to find revisionism and dissatisfaction with the status quo treated as different expressions of the same concept. For example, Legro (2007, p. 516) asserted that the labels “dissatisfied” and “revisionist” share a meaning that “is the same: they involve efforts to fundamentally revise the international system.” But it may be a mistake to equate the two.

The mistake is an understandable one—after all, scholars in other cognate subfields (international security studies, for one) identify revisionist states, and those states are assuredly dissatisfied with the status quo. But does the relationship run in reverse? That is to say, is a dissatisfied state necessarily a revisionist state? Rereading Organski’s (1958) articulation of PTT suggests that the answer could well be “no.” The reason for this is simple: Among the states classified into the category “dissatisfied” are those that are discontented with the international order and its division of benefits, but do not choose or plan to take action to redress the situation. Some of these are incapable of effective action, at least on their own, because they are among the weak and dissatisfied. But some that harbor discontent have the capability to disrupt the otherwise smooth operation of the international order, at least on a temporary or symbolic basis. Flouting the rules, exposing hypocrisy and inconsistencies in the enforcement of rules, seeking to delegitimize the international order and the dominant power that maintains it—these might be construed as the activities of revisionist states. For those dissatisfied states in the highest ranks of the power pyramid (and for their weaker allies, and for small states inclined to bandwagon with a rising power), revisionism may be expressed as war against the dominant state. But other behaviors meant to undermine the status quo are also plausible (Schweller & Pu, 2011).

Whether a revisionist state will choose to band together with other like-minded states in an effort to gang up on the dominant power is an open question, but for this discussion, a relatively unimportant one. The important issue here is the difference between thought and action, between judgment and execution. Discontent of a passive sort is scarcely a concern for the dominant power. Discontent that motivates action against the dominant power, its allies, or the international order is of considerably greater concern. Understanding better the conditions under which dissatisfied states are moved to act on their discontent (and thus become *revisionist* states) is one area for scholarly development in PTT.<sup>14</sup>

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

To demarcate dissatisfaction and revisionism as conceptually distinct might also require a rethinking of the popular application of Most and Starr's (1983) framework, namely parity *qua* opportunity and dissatisfaction *qua* willingness. If, as posited earlier, dissatisfaction does not necessarily imply a willingness to use force or disruptive methods to upset the status quo, then this commonly used shorthand would mislead. But it is more than this — "willingness" to fight or to use drastic measures implies action, and who chooses to act? People, of course. Hence the specter of human agency arises as a potentially decisive influence: seek to revise the status quo, or just remain dissatisfied?

In light of this potentially useful distinction, one final implication is worth considering. A dissatisfied rising power might stumble into war because of client states, alliance ties, or a rapidly escalating crisis. But an active, revisionist power is liable to intentionally initiate war with the dominant state, either by direct attack or by deliberately manipulating the dominant state or its allies into war. (It is important to note here that allies could play a role, but not an accidental one; rather, as pawns moved about on the chessboard by a revisionist power in a strategy of conflict.) To make this distinction is to acknowledge the differences between PTT and TTP with regard to the mechanisms by which wars between "rising" and "ruling" states come about, and also to acknowledge the potential role of human agency, either in using structural conditions as a justification or pretext to foment war, or to mitigate the risks of power shifts and reduce the likelihood of war between contenders whose power trajectories have converged.

## Conclusion

Like other structural theories that emphasize states' relative power, PTT offers insights into wars with the potential to revise or destroy the existing order, as well as the conditions that make such wars more or less likely. Like some other structural theories of war and peace, its proponents have developed insights about deterrence, nuclear proliferation, preventive motivations for war, and related subjects. Unlike many other structural theories, it has helped generate insights into a wide variety of distinct phenomena, including political capacity, demography (Organski et al., 1984; Feng, Kugler, & Zak, 2000), regional integration (Efird, Kugler, & Genna, 2003), the internal consequences of wars (Organski & Kugler, 1977) and intrastate and nonstate conflict (Benson & Kugler, 1998; Lemke, 2008; Toft, 2007). Its emphasis on the stabilizing effect of power preponderance prefigures hegemonic stability theory (Kindleberger, 1973; Krasner, 1976; Keohane, 1984), and its association of parity and overtake with an increased probability of war between the world's heavyweights perhaps echoes Thucydides' thesis, but also differs markedly from that perspective, and goes well beyond it.

PTT is, as Lemke (2002, p. 46) has noted, imperfect. Consider: The research program's focus on relative power has made it a target for the slings and arrows always aimed at operationalizations of this contested and slippery concept. Yet power transition theorists

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

have used various indicators of power in a collective effort to evaluate and test the theory's implications and extensions, and with considerable success: Available scientific evidence broadly supports contentions about preponderance and peace, parity and war, and the dangers of overtake, even across different operational specifications of power. At least among scholars who self-identify with the scientific study of international processes, PTT is recognized as a fixture in the firmament of empirical international relations theory.

Part of PTT's appeal is that it offers insight into the conditions of peaceful power shifts. Despite countless pages of scholarship published on the subject, the conditions of peace arguably constitute an understudied aspect of international relations (Diehl, 2016). PTT provides a basic framework for understanding how peace may be preserved even under the perilous conditions of parity and overtaking, and thus provides researchers and policy-makers hope in a way that fatalistic and deterministic forecasts do not. In this way, PTT makes an essential contribution: (Dis)satisfaction with the status quo is a key variable affecting the outcomes of potentially dangerous power shifts.

That no consensus exists on how best to conceptualize and operationalize (dis)satisfaction with the status quo indicates neither a lack of effort nor of interest—in fact, the opposite is true. As in earlier debates over measuring power, the struggle among proponents of distinct conceptions of (dis)satisfaction likely will lead to refinements and innovations. Not only does this present an opportunity for today's researchers, it also (*contra* Organski's skepticism) underscores the hope that diplomacy, negotiated solutions, and other expressions of human agency and ingenuity can mitigate the stresses associated with structural change in international systems.

Human agency is often given short shrift in conventional readings of Thucydides that draw readers' attention to the rise of Athens, the alarm this caused in Sparta, and the role of alliance ties in triggering and expanding a cataclysmic war. Given the emphases of ordinary translations of *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the inference that structural change and contests for power drove the war is entirely reasonable. Few have read—indeed, few can read—Thucydides in the original. Most must read a modern-language translation, in a form more accessible and less alien, and that does not require years of training to understand the words and appreciate the context, the style of argument and presentation, and the other technical aspects, all of which may seem remote to the uninitiated modern reader.<sup>15</sup> A similar problem can arise with regard to the scientific study of international processes. As data analysis and statistical and formal modeling techniques grow increasingly sophisticated, they also become increasingly alien and inaccessible to ordinary folks, to students, and to policy-makers. Without an approachable (yet accurate) translation, the import of scientific theory and evidence will remain underappreciated by those most likely to benefit from its insights.

Thucydides is often celebrated as the first historian to treat history as “a fact-based empirical science that results in authoritative ‘true’ accounts” (Nitz, 2013, p. 71). The quest for authoritative accounts of leading states' rise, decline, and cataclysmic wars continues some 2,400 years later. To ensure that such accounts are verifiably “true,”

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

scholars are obligated to strive for transparency in their work. Transparency enhances verifiability and facilitates replicability; these truths are commonly acknowledged today, but were not necessarily self-evident in Thucydides' time. Still, Thucydides' protoscientific style is often compared favorably with Herodotus' decidedly less scientific style—and, on the surface, the contrast is clear and compelling in its implication that Thucydides' aims and methods are more scientific. But it seems Thucydides positioned himself as an authority without divulging key bits of information about the origins of his claims (Nitz, 2013, pp. 70–71; Greenwood, 2006, p. 82). “While Herodotus openly acknowledges including hearsay, unreliable accounts, and colorful tales,” recounts Nitz (2013, p. 71), “Thucydides doesn't comment on his sources or on different contesting versions of the same story.”

One of the great accomplishments of the modern, scientific study of world politics is the accumulation of knowledge, which requires its practitioners to acknowledge, build on, and contest relevant work that preceded their own. To do so in the interest of one of the most crucial values of scientific inquiry—transparency—is the scholar's duty and obligation. We have come a long way since Thucydides, both in terms of social science writ large, and in terms of our understanding of the rise and decline of states and the risk of war associated with those power shifts—and researchers in the PTT tradition deserve to be recognized for their significant contributions to this progress.

## Acknowledgments

The author thanks Steve Chan, Andrew Greve, Jack Levy, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Errors that remain are the sole responsibility of the author.

## Further Reading

Benson, M. (Ed.). (2007). Special Issue: Extending the bounds of power transition theory. *International Interactions*, 33(3).

Gibler, D. M. (2017). State development, parity, and international conflict. *American Political Science Review*, 111(1), 21–38.

Kadera, K. (2001). *The power-conflict story: A dynamic model of interstate rivalry*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Kugler, J. (Ed.). (2011). Special Issue: Power transitions. *International Interactions*, 38(5).

Kugler, J., & Lemke, D. (Eds.). (1996). *Parity and war: Evaluations and extensions of The War Ledger*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

Kupchan, C. A., Adler, E., Coicaud, J., & Khong, Y. F. (2001). *Power in transition: The peaceful change of international order*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press.

Lemke, D., & Werner, S. (1996). Power parity, commitment to change, and war. *International Studies Quarterly*, 40(2), 235–260.

Levy, J. S., & Thompson, W. R. (2010). Balancing on land and at sea: Do states ally against the leading global power? *International Security*, 35(1), 7–43.

Sample, S. (2017). **Power, wealth, and satisfaction: When do power transitions lead to conflict?** *Journal of Conflict Resolution*.

Signorino, C., & Ritter, J. (1999). TauB or not TauB: Measuring the similarity of foreign policy positions. *International Studies Quarterly*, 43(1), 115–144.

Werner, S., & Kugler, J. (1996). Power transitions and military buildups: Resolving the relationship between arms buildups and war. In J. Kugler & D. Lemke (Eds.), *Parity and war: Evaluations and extensions of The War Ledger* (pp. 187–207). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

## References

Abdollahian, M., & Kang, K. (2008). In search of structure: The nonlinear dynamics of power transitions. *International Interactions*, 34(4), 333–357.

Allison, G. (2012, August 22). Thucydides' trap has been sprung in the Pacific. *Financial Times*, 7.

Allison, G. (2014). The Thucydides trap. In R. Rosecrance & S. Miller (Eds.), *The next great war? The roots of World War I and the risk of U.S.-China conflict* (pp. 73–80). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Allison, G. (2015a). The Thucydides trap: Are the U.S. and China headed for war? *The Atlantic*, 24. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>.

Allison, G. (2015b). Opening statement by Dr. Graham T. Allison before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services at a hearing convened to discuss “China, the U.S., and the Asia-Pacific.” Remarks as prepared for delivery April 14, 2015. Available at [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Allison\\_04-14-15.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Allison_04-14-15.pdf).

Allison, G. (2015c). Thucydides' trap methodology. Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, September 23, 2015. Initially retrieved on 6 January 2016 from [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/25782/thucydides\\_trap\\_methodology.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/25782/thucydides_trap_methodology.html). Retrieved from website with modified format on

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

30 January 2017 from <http://www.belfercenter.org/thucydides-trap/thucydides-trap-methodology>.

Allison, G. (2017). *Destined for war: Can America and China escape Thucydides's Trap?* New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Alsharabati, C. (1997). Dynamics of war initiation (Doctoral dissertation). School of Politics and Economics, Claremont Graduate University.

Alsharabati, C., & Kugler, J. (2008). War initiation in a changing world. *International Interactions*, 34(4), 358-381.

Arbetman, M., & Kugler, J. (Eds.). (1997). *Political capacity and economic behavior*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Benson, M., & Kugler, J. (1998). Power parity, democracy, and the severity of internal violence. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 42(2), 196-209.

Boulding, K. (1962). *Conflict and defense: A general theory*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Braumoeller, B. F. (2013). *The great powers and the international system: Systemic theory in empirical perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Brooks, S., & Wohlforth, W. (2016). *America abroad: The United States' global role in the 21st century*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bueno de Mesquita, B. (1981). *The war trap*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Bueno de Mesquita, B. (1990). Pride of place: The origins of German hegemony. *World Politics*, 43(1), 28-52.

Bussmann, M., & Oneal, J. (2007). Do hegemons distribute private goods? A test of Power-Transition Theory. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 51(1), 88-111.

Casetti, E. (2003). Power shifts and economic development: When will China overtake the USA? *Journal of Peace Research*, 40(6), 661-675.

Chan, S. (2003). Power, satisfaction and popularity: A Poisson analysis of UN Security Council vetoes. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 38(4), 339-359.

Chan, S. (2004). Can't get no satisfaction? The recognition of revisionist states. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 4, 207-238.

Chan, S. (2008). *China, the U.S. and power-transition theory: A critique*. New York: Routledge.

Coker, C. (2015). *The improbable war: China, the United States, and the continuing logic of great power conflict*. New York: Oxford University Press.



## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

Danilovic, V., & Clare, J. (2007). Global power transitions and regional interests. *International Interactions*, 33(3), 289–304.

DiCicco, J. M., & Levy, J. S. (1999). Power shifts and problem shifts: The evolution of the power transition research program. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 43(6), 675–704.

DiCicco, J. M., & Levy, J. S. (2003). Power transition theory: A Lakatosian analysis. In C. Elman & M. F. Elman (Eds.), *Progress in international relations theory* (pp. 109–157). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Diehl, P. F. (2016). Exploring peace: Looking beyond war and negative peace. *International Studies Quarterly*, 60(1), 1–10.

Efird, B., Kugler, J., & Genna, G. (2003). **From war to integration: Generalizing power transition theory.** *International Interactions*, 29, 293–313.

Feng, Y., Kugler, J., & Zak, P. (2000). The politics of fertility and economic development. *International Studies Quarterly*, 44(4), 667–693.

Galtung, J. (1964). A structural theory of aggression. *Journal of Peace Research*, 1(2), 95–119.

Geller, D. S. (1993). Power differentials and war in rival dyads. *International Studies Quarterly*, 37, 173–193.

Gilpin, R. (1981). *War and change in world politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Gilpin, R. (1988). The theory of hegemonic war. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 18(4), 591–613.

Greenwood, E. (2006). *Thucydides and the shaping of history*. London: Duckworth Press.

Greve, A. Q., & Levy, J. S. (n.d.). Power transitions, status dissatisfaction, and war: The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895. Forthcoming in *Security Studies*.

Houweling, H., & Siccama, J. (1988). Power transitions as a cause of war. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 32, 87–102.

Kang, C., & Gibler, D. (2013). An assessment of the validity of empirical measures of state satisfaction with the systemic status quo. *European Journal of International Relations*, 19(4), 695–719.

Keohane, R. (1984). *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kim, W. (1991). Alliance transitions and great power war. *American Journal of Political Science*, 35(4), 833–850.

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

Kim, W. (1992). Power transitions and great power war from Westphalia to Waterloo. *World Politics*, 45, 153–172.

Kim, W. (1996). Power parity, alliance, and war from 1648 to 1975. In J. Kugler & D. Lemke (Eds.), *Parity and war: Evaluations and extensions of The War Ledger* (pp. 93–105). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Kim, W. (2002). Power parity, alliance, dissatisfaction, and wars in East Asia, 1860–1993. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 46(5), 654–671.

Kim, W., & Morrow, J. (1992). When do power shifts lead to war? *American Journal of Political Science*, 36(4), 896–922.

Kindleberger, C. (1973). *The world in depression, 1929–1939*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Krasner, S. D. (1976). State power and the structure of international trade. *World Politics*, 28(3), 317–347.

Kugler, J., & Arbetman, M. (1989). Choosing among measures of power. In R. Stoll & M. Ward (Eds.), *Power in world politics* (pp. 49–78). Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

Kugler, J., & Domke, W. (1986). Comparing the strength of nations. *Comparative Political Studies*, 19(1), 39–69.

Kugler, J., & Organski, A. F. K. (1989). The power transition: A retrospective and prospective evaluation. In M. Midlarsky (Ed.), *Handbook of war studies* (pp. 171–194). Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Kugler, J., & Zagare, F. (Eds.). (1987). *Exploring the stability of deterrence*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

Kugler, T., & Swaminathan, S. (2006). The politics of population. *International Studies Review*, 8(4), 581–596.

Larson, D. W., Paul, T. V., & Wohlforth, W. (2014). *Status in world politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lebow, R. N. (2003). *The tragic vision of politics: Ethics, interests, and orders*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Legro, J. (2007). What China will want: The future intentions of a rising power. *Perspectives on Politics*, 5, 515–530.

Lemke, D. (1996). Small states and war: An expansion of power transition theory. In J. Kugler & D. Lemke (Eds.), *Parity and war: Evaluations and extensions of The War Ledger* (pp. 77–91). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

Lemke, D. (2002). *Regions of war and peace*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lemke, D. (2003). Investigating the preventive motive for war. *International Interactions*, 29(4), 273–292.

Lemke, D. (2008). Power politics and wars without states. *American Journal of Political Science*, 52(4), 774–786.

Lemke, D., & Kugler, J. (1996). The evolution of the power transition perspective. In J. Kugler & D. Lemke (Eds.), *Parity and war: Evaluations and extensions of The War Ledger* (pp. 3–33). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Lemke, D., & Reed, W. (1996). Regime type and status quo evaluations: Power transitions and the democratic peace proposition. *International Interactions*, 22(2), 143–164.

Lemke, D., & Reed, W. (1998). Power is not satisfaction: A comment on de Soysa, Oneal, and Park. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 42(4), 511–516.

Levy, J. S. (1983). *War in the modern great power system, 1495–1975*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

Levy, J. S. (1987). Declining power and the preventive motivation for war. *World Politics*, 40(1), 82–107.

Levy, J. S. (2008). Power transition theory and the rise of China. In R. Ross & Z. Feng (Eds.), *China's ascent: Power, security, and the future of international politics* (pp. 11–33). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Levy, J. S., & Thompson, W. R. (2010). *Causes of war*. Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell.

Midlarsky, M. (1975). *On war: Political violence in the international system*. New York: Free Press.

Modelski, G. (1978). The long cycle of global politics and the nation-state. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 20(2), 214–235.

Morrow, J. D. (1996). The logic of overtaking. In J. Kugler & D. Lemke (Eds.), *Parity and war: Evaluations and extensions of The War Ledger* (pp. 313–330). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Most, B., & Starr, H. (1983). Conceptualizing “war”: Consequences for theory and research. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 27(1), 137–159.

Nitz, J. (2013). History, a literary artifact? The traveling concept of narrative in/on historiographic discourse. *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 15(1), 69–85.

Onea, T. A. (2014). Between dominance and decline: Status anxiety and great power rivalry. *Review of International Studies*, 40(1), 125–152.

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

- Organski, A. F. K. (1958). *World politics*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Organski, A. F. K. (1968). *World politics* (2d ed.). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Organski, A. F. K., & Kugler, J. (1977). The costs of major wars: The phoenix factor. *American Political Science Review*, 71(4), 1347–1366.
- Organski, A. F. K., & Kugler, J. (1980). *The war ledger*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Organski, A. F. K., Kugler, J., Johnson, T., & Cohen, Y. (1984). *Births, deaths, and taxes: The demographic and political transitions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Organski, K., & Organski, A. F. K. (1961). *Population and world power*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Powell, R. (1996). Stability and the distribution of power. *World Politics*, 48(2), 239–267.
- Rapkin, D. P., & Thompson, W. R. (2013). *Transition scenarios: China and the United States in the twenty-first century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rasler, K., & Thompson, W. (1994). *The great powers and global struggle, 1490–1990*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Rauch, C. (2017). **A tale of two power transitions: Capabilities, satisfaction, and the will to power in the relations between the United Kingdom, the United States, and Imperial Germany.** *International Area Studies Review*.
- Renshon, J. (2016). Status deficits and war. *International Organization*, 70(3), 513–550.
- Schweller, R. L., & Pu, X. (2011). After unipolarity: China's visions of international order in an era of US decline. *International Security*, 36(1), 41–72.
- Singer, J. D., & Small, M. (1966). The composition and status ordering of the international system, 1815–1940. *World Politics*, 18(2), 236–282.
- Siverson, R. M., & Miller, R. A. (1996). The power transition: Problems and prospects. In J. Kugler & D. Lemke (Eds.), *Parity and war: Evaluations and extensions of The War Ledger* (pp. 57–73). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- de Soysa, I., Oneal, J., & Park, Y. (1997). Testing Power Transition Theory using alternative measures of national capabilities. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 41(4), 509–528.
- Starrs, S. (2013). American economic power hasn't declined—It globalized! Summoning the data and taking globalization seriously. *International Studies Quarterly*, 57(4), 817–830.

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

Tammen, R., Kugler, J., & Lemke, D. (2012). **Power transition theory**. *Oxford Bibliographies*. Available at <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199743292/obo-9780199743292-0038.xml>.

Tammen, R., Kugler, J., Lemke, D., Stam, A., Abdollahian, M., Alsharabati, C., Efirid, B., & Organski, A. F. K. (2000). *Power transitions: Strategies for the 21st century*. New York: Chatham House Publishers.

Tammen, R. (2008). The Organski legacy: A fiftyyear research program. *International Interactions*, 34(4), 314–332.

Thompson, W. R. (1983). Succession crises in the global political system: A test of the transition model. In A. Bergesen (Ed.), *Crises in the world-system* (pp. 93–116). Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE.

Thompson, W. R. (1988). On global war: Historical-structural approaches to world politics. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Thompson, W. R. (1995). Comparing world systems: Systemic leadership succession and the Peloponnesian War case. In C. Chase-Dunn (Ed.), *The historical evolution of the international political economy* (Vol. 1). London: Edward Elgar.

Toft, M. D. (2007). Population shifts and civil war: A test of power transition theory. *International Interactions*, 33(3), 243–269.

Vasquez, J. A. (1993). *The war puzzle*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Vasquez, J. A. (1996). When are power shifts dangerous? An appraisal and reformulation of power transition theory. In J. Kugler & D. Lemke (Eds.), *Parity and war: Evaluations and extensions of The War Ledger* (pp. 35–56). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Volgy, T., & Mayhall, S. (1995). Status inconsistency and international war: Exploring the effects of systemic change. *International Studies Quarterly*, 39(1), 67–84.

Wallace, M. D. (1973). *War and rank among nations*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Wolf, R. (2014). Rising powers, status ambitions, and the need to reassure: What China could learn from Imperial Germany's failures. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 7(2), 185–219.

### Notes:

(1.) While he did not bring all of these tools to bear in the 1958 book, Organski drew from the modern historical record to impeach balance of power theory and to illustrate power transition theory's salience and superiority as an alternative (Organski, 1958, Ch. 11–12),

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

and his commitment to methodological rigor is evident in later work, notably with Jacek Kugler in 1980's *The War Ledger*.

(2.) Slight variations obtain from translation to translation. This is the version cited repeatedly in Lebow (2003, p. 34, *inter alia*); it is fundamentally similar to Allison's (2014, 2015a, 2015b) citations as well.

(3.) Lebow (2003, pp. 34–35, 40) argues that conventional interpretations of Thucydides' famous claim misconstrue its meaning. Lebow "contend[s] that the Peloponnesian War was not inevitable, and that shifts in relative military capabilities were at best an indirect cause of war and by no means the most important one . . . The most important underlying cause of war was Spartan fear for their way of life, under growing threat from the political-economic-cultural transformation of Greece spearheaded by Athens. Spartan identity, not power, was the issue . . ." (Lebow, 2003, p. 40; also p. 67).

(4.) Gilpin (1988) analyzes the Athens-Sparta clash as a hegemonic war, but Thompson (1995) criticizes this interpretation of history; he argues that Athens and Sparta were participants in a wider Mediterranean system, of which the nominally hegemonic leader was Persia. How one conceptualizes the system has implications for how one identifies dominant powers, contenders, and challengers.

(5.) For a thoughtful discussion of the tension between the structural character of PTT and an emphasis on strategic interaction in situations of interest to PTT researchers, see Lemke (2002, pp. 38–46).

(6.) Allison (2015c) states of the TTP: "In this project we have attempted to include all instances since 1500 in which a major ruling power is challenged by a rising power. In technical terms, we sought not a representative sample but the entire universe of cases." Recall that how the system is conceptualized can influence the identification of "ruling" leaders and "rising" challengers (see note 4).

(7.) At the time of writing, the Soviet-Japanese case remains in the narrative portion of the online case file. It is, however, notably absent from the summary table, which instead features as a nonwar case the rise of Spain against "ruling" Portugal—a convenient replacement, as it provides a nonwar case uncomplicated by the existence of nuclear weapons. Note that the Portugal–Spain case occurs prior to 1500 (see previous note).

(8.) Allison does make two valid points: first, that there is no consensus on how to measure power, and second, that measuring power with material capabilities or economic product indicators does not necessarily capture subjective perceptions of power.

(9.) Organski, like Allison, voiced reservations about measuring power in objective terms because it is, in practice, subjective; for Organski, "A good part of a nation's power seems to depend, not only on its genuine ability to influence the behavior of other nations, but also upon its own estimation of its ability and upon the estimation made by other

## Power Transition Theory and the Essence of Revisionism

---

nations . . . [And] if a nation guesses wrong about its own power relative to other nations, it may actually alter its relative power.” (Organski, 1958, pp. 101, 101-104; Allison, 2015c).

(10.) The book stemming from the TTP (Allison, 2017) was published as this article was moving into production, and is not reviewed in detail here.

(11.) Following Organski and Kugler (1980), the condition of parity is obtained when a challenger’s relative power is between 80 percent and 120 percent of that of the leading state (Tammen et al., 2000, p. 21).

(12.) On opportunity and willingness, see Most and Starr (1983).

(13.) Taken together these statements might cause confusion, but perhaps they capture an element of truth about the global Cold War contest: rival superpowers each leading (or ruling) its own international order, yet striving to contain, intimidate, or dominate its superpower adversary.

(14.) In the sense used here, revisionism bears some resemblance to Rauch’s (2017) “will to power.”

(15.) According to Lebow (2003, pp. 73, 42), even the ancients found Thucydides difficult to read—too sophisticated for a mass audience, the work was aimed at elites, and likely was designed to reward multiple, cross-referential readings with insights not made plain in the text itself. See also Gilpin (1988).

**Jonathan M. DiCicco**

Department of Political Science, Canisius College

