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ARTICLE

Framing intervention in a multipolar world

Philip Cunliffe

School of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

Contact

Email: p.cunliffe@kent.ac.uk

Note on contributor

Philip Cunliffe is Senior Lecturer in International Conflict in the University of Kent. His most recent book is *Lenin Lives! Reimagining the Russian Revolution 1917–2017* (Zero Books, 2017).

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Abstract

In this contribution to the forum, I draw attention to the persistent inadequacy of existing categories in the field of international studies to capture and frame patterns of intervention today. It is to be expected that this inadequacy will become more and more apparent as the unipolar system of the post-Cold War era evolves into a multipolar system in which patterns of intervention will become more complex. I will show this by focusing on two aspects of contemporary intervention. First, I will argue that patterns of intervention today invert the classical predictions and expectations of International Relations theory with regard to the

behaviour of emerging powers (resulting in what I call ‘reverse revisionism’ – i.e. revisionism by leading states). Second, I will argue that the categories applied to understand Western interventions, already problematic in themselves, cannot be stretched to cover the behaviour of non-Western and emerging states.

Keywords (5–7).

Successful analysis in any field requires at least a degree of complementarity rather than perfect symmetry between its conceptual categories and empirical observations. Juxtaposing categories alongside empirical trends helps us to understand developments in world politics and improve and restructure our theoretical understanding en route. In this short article, I am not looking to provide a systematic overview of empirical trends in intervention, but only to say that empirical trends and conceptual categories have diverged so much as to require a reboot. Our concepts need restructuring in order to make sure that we better capture recent trends.

The usual story about international order ...

The usual story told about recent changes in international order goes something like this. Global economic growth and technological change has led to the resurgence of powers such as China, India and Russia who will subvert the current international order and challenge Western leadership. As revisionist states excluded from the top table, they have responded by constructing their own collective international institutions to pursue their political and economic goals, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO). Their growing power makes them more politically assertive, willing to exercise imperial influence abroad such as Russia’s interventions in Syria

and Ukraine, and China's growing influence across Africa. These emerging powers' refusal to embrace international norms of human rights and the responsibility to protect is a mark of their authoritarianism and resistance to Western leadership. In the classical terms of International Relations (IR) theory, such behaviour is 'revisionist' – that is, emerging powers seek to revise the legal and institutional infrastructure of the international order to better accommodate their growing power and interests.¹ The classical exemplar of this model is the behaviour of the Axis states in the inter-war period, which saw them flaunt international law, subvert the League of Nations and aggressively use force to expand their empires and spheres of influence. In the contemporary version of this story, China and India's restoration to the status of world powers returns history to its 'normal' state, bringing to an end a brief 500-year interlude of European and Western ascendancy.²

A new type of revisionism?

There is plenty to challenge in this stylised story, both on specific points of fact and with respect to its overall thrust. In many ways, the conventional story rendered above is a Eurocentric fable that makes out as if nothing significant had happened in international history between the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 (that brought Europe's wars of religion to an end) and the early 1990s. In this latter period, Western countries supposedly inaugurated a 'post-Westphalian' international order focused on transcending the nation state through the protection of individual rights and the construction of new transnational political and legal structures moulded around a globalising world economy. This story effectively orientalisises China and India, ignoring the fact that they are modern states integrated into a capitalist world economy, thereby making the pre-modern history of those countries' ancient tributary empires of little relevance to an international order founded on sovereign states and modern nationalism. The picture is further complicated by the fact that India has been no less

suspicious of international humanitarian claims than China and Russia, and India is the world's largest democracy – suggesting that opposition to human rights imperialism is not purely a result of authoritarian political systems.

More fundamentally, in some respects the story rendered above inverts the actual dynamics of international order over the last few decades. Instead of emerging powers rising to reshape the international order as predicted by conventional theorising, it has been Western powers – those perched at the top of the existing international order – that have, against expectations, shown the most persistent and enduring commitment to revising the rules of that very same international order. This was most notable in Western states' relentless promotion of human rights and the responsibility to protect as justifications for military intervention and international administration. Often with very little strategic rationale, Western states have intervened throughout Africa, the Balkans and, of course, most dramatically, the Middle East. They thus subverted the very rules concerning non-interference that they themselves established when they promoted the UN Charter as the foundation of post-war international order in 1945. Therefore, the states that scrapped the post-Cold War international order through the aggressive and repeated use of force were not upstart powers but entrenched and powerful states, thereby squandering the moral authority they had gained through victory in the Cold War and irrationally provoking geopolitical tensions in an otherwise largely pacified international system. By contrast, it is the emerging powers that have, at least until recently, been thrust into the position of being conservative defenders of the status quo, frequently castigated as 'Westphalian' powers for their attachment to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. As this behaviour finds no correspondence in the classical paradigms and categories of IR theory, it requires a conceptual innovation – what I call 'reverse revisionism' – to capture this strikingly unexpected pattern of behaviour.

The contrast with the behaviour of the emerging powers is instructive. To be sure, Russia, which had hitherto excoriated Western intervention in the Balkans and Middle East, has since adopted a revanchist posture, carving protectorates out of Georgia after it sponsored the secession of South Ossetia and Abkhazia following the 2008 war.³ More dramatically, Russia has since annexed Crimea in 2014 and continued to intervene in the Ukrainian and Syrian civil wars. Yet both Russia's overall international posture and interventions remain strategically reactive, defending its interests in eastern Ukraine from the perceived threat of NATO and EU expansionism to its borders, as well as defending an ally in the Middle East from Western-supported regime change by proxy. It is this essentially reactive posture that also explains why Russia has been able to reap strategic gains through these interventions – gains that have thus far repeatedly eluded Western powers in their interventions.

Russia can reap strategic benefits from establishing a 'frozen conflict' in Ukraine, as it manages to preserve its sphere of influence in that country in this way. In the Middle East, strategically speaking, Russia succeeds simply from ensuring the survival of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria against his opponents. The goals of Western revisionism are so much more far-reaching and ambitious that they always overrun any particular intervention itself. Nothing less than regime change in Syria would approximate Western regional ambitions, and this in turn would have to conform to some kind of at least cosmetic multi-party democracy not to count as a defeat and disappointment. NATO and EU expansion eastwards to the borders of Russia is part of a grand civilisational project of liberal transformation;⁴ thus merely ejecting Russian influence from Ukraine would never be sufficient to fulfil Western revisionism: it requires absorbing all the remaining former Soviet states into the EU and NATO. More strikingly still, Russia has explicitly defended its interventions by reference to Western precedents, citing in particular the 1999 NATO air campaign over Kosovo and its subsequent unilateral declaration of independence in 2008.

Russia's revisionism is thus limited; the reverse revisionism of Western states is so ambitious that any particular intervention always seems to fall short of its visionary sweep as liberal democracy fails to spread and the West finds itself settling for 'stabilisation' operations. Russia's revanchism is not only reactive but parochial; Western revisionism by contrast is systemic and vast.

Ethics and oil

The second major problem with our understanding of interventionism is that the categories used to capture intervention tend to bifurcate into two schools of thought. On the one hand, there are those who accept normative transformation as the most important element in explaining Western states' revisionist behaviour. In this reading, the normative diffusion of human rights, democratisation and broadly liberal ideals is the driving force behind Western states' interventionist policies, from military campaigns through democracy promotion efforts to supporting civil society organisations and developmental aid. This group of theories, whether liberal, institutionalist or constructivist, are all premised on the notion of a normative upgrade in Western states, with normative diffusion reflecting the improved and leading normative status of Western states.⁵ The second set of explanations is diametrically opposed to the former, arguing that such claims have been instrumentalised to serve ulterior motives and hard geopolitical interests, such as resource grabs.⁶ Neither of these are adequate to truly explain the scope of post-Cold War interventionism.

On the one hand, theories that assume normative transformation as their conceptual backstop tend to underestimate the significance of normative transformation as itself a factor in political competition and hierarchy, accepting as unproblematic the notion of normative improvement in Western states. On the other hand, the norm-sceptics tend not only to overstate the geopolitical cunning and strategic coherence of Western states' behaviour in

supposedly manipulating humanitarian ethics but they also tend to reify the very normative ideals that they purport to criticise. The notion that human rights or democracy is being instrumentalised or contaminated by ulterior motives – for instance, the aim of imposing a neo-liberal economic vision on Iraq following the 2003 invasion – paradoxically works to reaffirm these ideals as having been poorly implemented. By deflecting attention to underlying geopolitical motives and the role of special interest groups such as the Israeli lobby or the oil lobby, paradoxically these ideals themselves are not subject to critical scrutiny as to whether or not they are appealing paradigms for world order.

Neither of these sets of ideas are easily extended to the behaviour of non-Western states, and paradoxes abound. On the grandest scale, it is claimed that an authoritarian regime in Beijing is willing to substitute for US leadership of a liberal international system on which the Chinese economy is still heavily dependent for its export-oriented model of development.⁷ On the other, some analysts have claimed that Russia is promoting a liberal world order – simply a different variant of liberalism, incorporating state sovereignty, national interest and cultural pluralism.⁸

How far can constructivist theories of norm diffusion capture say, Turkish military intervention in Iraq (2007) and Syria (2017) as well as Turkish developmental aid policies in Somalia? How far do such theories capture Brazilian intervention in Haiti through the UN peacekeeping mission under the left-wing government of the Workers' Party, and the expansion of Brazilian leadership in UN peacekeeping missions since then under the subsequent centre-right coalition? Nor are these paradoxes necessarily recent: in the 1990s, for instance, the dictatorship of Abacha in Nigeria was battling to establish a multi-party democracy in Liberia. Such complexity ill fits models of normative diffusion, good international citizenship, democracy promotion or 'wars for oil'.

As power continues to diffuse from the unipolar US we can expect a multipolar world to be more complex and multi-layered. We can expect geopolitical self-assertion in a multipolar system to mean that interventions will continue if not indeed grow in importance, but that they will not be defined by a single regime type and its associated set of ideas (i.e. liberal internationalism, human rights). Such a world will require more careful reference to systemic forces and political competition as well as regime type in trying to understand new types of interventionism. This will require IR theory to regroup and return to its core concerns – inter-state competition, power politics, international order and so on – and turn away from the most exotic outer reaches of the over-expanded field of ‘international studies’ concerned with the arcana of the ‘post-human’ and ‘anthropocenic politics’. In a multipolar world, these theoretical flourishes will increasingly come to be seen as the ideological hubris of a past unipolar system and liberal world order.

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Endnotes

¹ See Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis*; Huiyan, 'Is China a Revisionist Power?'; Rynning and Ringsmose, 'Why are Revisionist States Revisionist?'

² See e.g. Allison, 'What Xi Jinping Wants'; Dalmia, 'History Must be Earned.'

³ Chesterman, *Just War or Just Peace?*

⁴ Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest*.

⁵ See e.g. Linklater and Suganami, *The English School of International Relations*; and Finnemore and Sikkink, 'International Norm Dynamics'.

⁶ See Bricmont, *Humanitarian Imperialism*; and Klare, *Blood and Oil*.

⁷ See e.g. Drezner, 'Why China Will be Able to Sell'.

⁸ Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest*.