

Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*

Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981

Gilpin's book seeks to provide a framework to explain in general terms the nature of international political change. His main claim is that *the international political system reflects the distribution of power among the major states and that international political change is caused by the differential rates of change for these major states.*

By the way, Gilpin does not think that the opportunity for peaceful economic intercourse and the constraints imposed by modern destructive warfare have served to decrease the probability of a major war. On the contrary, he assumes that the fundamental nature of IR has not changed over the millennia and that IR continue to be a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy.¹

Chapter 1: The Nature of International Political Change

According to Gilpin, an international system is established for the same reason that any social or political system is created: *actors enter social relations and create social structures in order to advance particular sets of political, economic, or other types of interests. The particular interests that are most favored by these social arrangements tend to reflect the relative powers² of the actors involved. Consequently, the actors who benefit most from a change in the social system and who gain the power to effect such change will seek to alter the system in ways that favor their interests. The resulting changed system will reflect the new distribution of power and the interests of its new dominant members.* Thus, a precondition for political change lies in a disjuncture between the existing social system and the redistribution of power toward the actors who would benefit most from a change in the system.

Therefore, the process of international change ultimately reflects the efforts of **states**³ to transform institutions and systems in order to advance their interests. And whether these interests are security, economic gain, or ideological goals, the achievement of state objectives is dependent on the nature of the international system (i.e. the governance of the system, the rules of the system, the recognition of rights, etc.) Ultimately, because these interests and the powers of groups (or states) change, *in time the political system will be changed in ways that will reflect these underlying shifts in interest and power.*

Gilpin's framework for explaining international political change rests on **5 assumptions**:

1. An international system is stable (*i.e.* in a state of equilibrium) if no state believes it profitable to attempt to change the system.
2. A state will attempt to change the international system if the expected benefits exceed the expected costs (*i.e.* if there is an expected net gain).

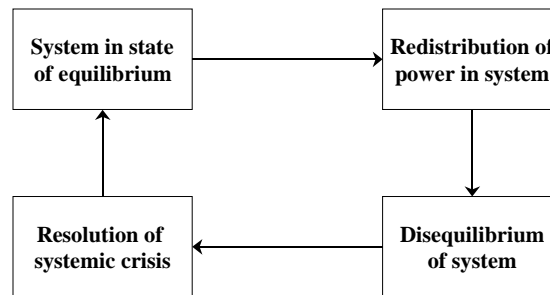
¹ Although important changes have taken place, "the classic history of Thucydides is as meaningful a guide to the behavior of states today as when it was written in the fifth century B.C." (p. 7)

² Gilpin defines power here as the military, economic and technological capabilities of states.

³ The state is the principal actor in that the nature of the state and the pattern of relations among states are the most important determinants of the character of IR at any given moment. [tautological definition?]. The state may be conceived as a coalition of coalitions whose objectives and interests result from the powers and bargaining among the several coalitions composing the larger society and political elite. Their goals are threefold: to increase their control over territory and conquer other peoples (prior to the modern age); to increase their influence over the behavior of other states; and to control or at least exercise influence over the world economy, or the international division of labor.

3. A state will seek to change the international system through territorial, political, and economic expansion until the marginal costs of further change are equal to or greater than the marginal benefits.
4. Once an equilibrium between the costs and benefits of further change and expansion is reached, the tendency is for the economic costs of maintaining the status quo to rise faster than the economic capacity to support the status quo.
5. If the disequilibrium in the international system is not resolved, then the system will be changed, and a new equilibrium reflecting the redistribution of power will be established.

DIAGRAM OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL CHANGE



In every system, a process of disequilibrium⁴ and adjustment is constantly taking place. The relative stability of the system is largely determined by its capacity to adjust to the demands of actors affected by changing political and environmental conditions. *The most destabilizing factor is the tendency in an international system for the powers of member states to change at different rates because of political, economic and technological developments.* In time, the differential growth in power of the various states in the system causes a fundamental redistribution of power in the system and, ultimately, international political change.

Gilpin believes that the disjuncture within the existing international system involving the potential benefits and losses to particular powerful actors from a change in the system leads to a crisis in the international system, resolved, more often than not, by *war*, and particularly hegemonic war. *Hegemonic wars* determine which state(s) will be dominant and will govern the system.⁵ They are followed by peace settlements reordering the political, territorial and other bases of the system. Such wars and peace settlements complete the cycle of change and create a new status quo and equilibrium reflecting the redistribution of power in the system and the other components of the system.

What is the international system?

⁴ Gilpin defines *disequilibrium* as a situation in which economic, political and technological developments have increased considerably the potential benefits or decreased the potential costs to one of more states of seeking to change the international system.

⁵ One of the principal functions of war, and particularly hegemonic wars, is to determine the international hierarchy of prestige and thereby determine which states will in effect govern the international system.

A system is an aggregation of diverse entities [here, states] united by regular interaction [here, international organizations + international division of labor] according to a form of control [see below]. Once in place, the international system provides a set of constraints and opportunities which affects the ways in which individuals, groups and states seek to achieve their goals.

Control over or governance of the international system is a function of three factors:

- First and foremost, the distribution of power among political coalitions. This distribution can be hegemonic, bipolar, or balanced.
- Second, the hierarchy of prestige among states. Prestige is the reputation for power and particularly military power. For Gilpin, prestige, rather than power, is the everyday currency of IR “much as authority is the central ordering feature of domestic society”. Prestige can lag behind realities; when it catches up with reality the system begins to break down.
- Third, a set of rights and rules that govern or influence the interactions among states.

In sum, the legitimacy or “right to rule” on the part of a great power rests on three factors: first, its victory in the last hegemonic war, second, its ability to provide public goods, such as a beneficial economic order or international security, and third, ideological, religious or other values common to a set of states. For Gilpin, the last two factors are usually weak or nonexistent: the primary foundations or rights and rules is in the power and interests of the dominant groups or states in a social system. *Political and other rules are the pattern of ruler practices.*⁶

The rules affecting the interactions among states cover three broad areas: the conduct of diplomacy and political intercourse between states; certain rules of war; and economic intercourse among states.

Types of international changes

| Type | Factors that change |
|--|--|
| <i>Systems change (change in the nature of the actors that compose an international system)</i> | Nature of actors (empires, nation-states, etc) |
| <i>Systemic change (change in the form of control or governance of an international system)</i> | Governance of system |
| <i>Interaction change (change in the processes among the entities in an ongoing international system)</i> | Interstate processes |

The *systems changes* are the most important ones, since the character of the international system is identified by its most prominent entities: empires, nation-states, or multinational corporations.

The *systemic changes* entail changes in the international distribution of power, the hierarchy of prestige, and the rules and rights embodied in the system (but not necessarily simultaneously). Whereas the focus of systems change is the rise and decline of state systems, the focus of systemic change is the rise and decline of the dominant states or empires that govern the particular international system.

⁶ Gilpin recognizes however that the most significant advance in rulemaking has been the innovation of the multilateral treaty and formalization of international law.

The *interaction changes* deal with modifications in the political, economic and other interactions or processes among the actors in an international system. They are much more frequent than the other types of changes but much less important, since states really aim at those more fundamental changes.

While interaction changes are incremental and occur through bargaining among states, systemic and system changes entail discontinuities in the international system and occur mainly through hegemonic wars.