Gilpin, *War & Change in World Politics* (Introduction, Chaps. 1, 4-6, Epilogue)

Week 8, IR field seminar

Introduction

Gilpin proposes to set forth a framework for analyzing war and change in international politics. Political change is a long-ignored topic, owing to the bias of science towards explaining regularities, the emphasis in recent years on middle-range (rather than grand) theory, the Western bias in the study of international relations, and bias among social scientists in favor of stability rather than change.

Gilpin's framework assumes that while important changes do occur over time, and particularly in modern times, international relations has been an enduring struggle for power and wealth across the millennia.

Chapter one

Social structures, including international systems, are created by actors in order to advance their interests, and social arrangements tend to reflect the relative power of the actors involved. As interests and the distribution of power change over time, those actors which will benefit from political change will seek to bring about such change.

Specifically, an international system will be stable if, and only if, no powerful state believes that the expected benefits of trying to change the system will exceed the expected costs. A revisionist state will attempt territorial, political or economic change until the marginal benefits of further change just equal the marginal costs. The economic costs of maintaining the equilibrium thus achieved will tend to rise faster than the economic capacity to maintain it, and the resulting disequilibrium must be resolved or a further round of change will be initiated.

States have both internal and external functions, namely pursuing economic and welfare goals and national security. The objectives of states may be represented by indifference curves, which illustrate the various bundles of objectives which states may seek as the relative costs of those objectives change over time. While the external objectives of states will therefore change over time, the goals of states have generally included territorial acquisition, influence over other states, and control over the world economy.

An international system is defined in terms of three elements: *diverse entities*, primarily nation-states in the present era but also including transnational actors and, in other periods, city-states, empires, etc.; *regular interactions*, composed of the nature, regularity and intensity of diplomatic, military, economic and cultural relationships; and *forms of control*. By the latter, Gilpin means that far from being anarchical, the international system is highly ordered. Three factors determine the mechanisms of control: the distribution of power among great powers or their coalitions; the hierarchy of prestige, or the reputation for power, enjoyed by states; and the rights and rules that apply to state behavior.

Gilpin classifies international political change into three categories, according to the element of the international system that is changing. *Systems change* results from change in the character of the units; this is long-term historical change in the dominant form of domestic political organization, such as the transition from the medieval European state system to the modern nation-state system. *Systemic change* is change in the governance of the international system, which amounts to changes in the dominant power or powers of the system and corresponding, if lagging, changes in prestige and rules. Finally, *interaction change* is the most frequent type of change in the international system, and includes alliance behavior,

regime change and transnational relations. Gilpin focuses in this book on systemic change, which in turn centers on the rise and fall of great powers, and to a lesser extent on systems change.

Chapter four

This chapter describes the process by which an international system in equilibrium tends to fall into disequilibrium.

Societies that have reached the peak of their expansion will tend to find their relative position eroding. Internal factors combine to produce relative decline in growth and competitiveness. External factors that contribute to decline include the increasing costs of political dominance, as the costs of protecting the status quo rise more quickly than the benefits of the status quo, and the tendency of the comparative advantage enjoyed by the dominant power to dwindle over time.

Meanwhile, rising states tend to enjoy certain advantages, relative to the dominant state. Rising states benefit from the diffusion of economic, technological or organizational skills representing the dominant state's comparative advantage. Rising states are able to "free ride" on the provision of public goods by the dominant state, and to enjoy lower costs in other areas, rising rates of return and the many advantages of backwardness.

As a result of these factors, dominant states tend to decline and weaker states to rise to challenge them. Differential rates of growth eventually produce a decisive redistribution of power and hence a disequilibrium in the system.

Chapter five

The basic mechanism of systemic change has historically been hegemonic war, as increasing disequilibrium leads rising states to challenge overburdened, once-dominant declining powers.

Systemic change thus results from changes in the distribution of power, but must also involve changes in prestige, rights and rules, as well as patterns of interaction. Hegemonic war resolves disequilibrium by leading to the redistribution of territory, new patterns of economic relations, and alterations in the hierarchy of prestige. As before when systemic equilibrium was first established, the newly dominant states will expand to the limits of their military, economic and other capabilities. Eventually, these dominant powers will mature and other states will rise to challenge them in turn; decline, disequilibrium and hegemonic conflict will again be the result.

Chapter six

This chapter evaluates the claims of interdependence theorists and others that fundamental changes in international relations have occurred in modern times.

The advent of nuclear weapons has made the exercise of military power more costly and dangerous, but the exercise of power remains the dominant feature of international life. Nuclear weapons ensure that avoiding another hegemonic struggle remains a priority for all nations. But there is no guarantee that resort to hegemonic conflict will not result in time. Likewise, the apparent growth in the relative importance of economic and welfare goals fits well within Gilpin's basic model of international political change, and may not have prevented the resort to conflict should the benefits of change become great enough for rising states.

The ultimate response of the international system to contemporary developments such as nuclear weapons, increasing interdependence and the growing globalization of international life may well take place at the level of systems change. It is possible that in the end these developments may generate a shift away from the nation-state as the predominant form of political organization, towards economic and political entities that would prove more profitable for human society. However, as with the shift from feudalism to the nation-state, such long-term systems change would exact enormous costs as it took place.

Epilogue

The epilogue examines the world situation in the early 1980s and attempts to determine whether the international system is on the brink of another hegemonic conflict.

Gilpin concludes that the United States has suffered relative decline and is no longer able to assert its prior dominance. Hence disequilibrium has arisen in the international system. The United States has responded by retrenching and seeking additional resources, which may yet generate a new equilibrium and avoid the necessity of hegemonic war.

Factors adding to Gilpin's optimism include the bipolar structure of the present hegemonic order, which is relatively stable. Five potentially destabilizing factors are not present in the world system today. Furthermore, the coalescence of political, economic and ideological issues tends to support the outbreak of hegemonic war, and today those cleavages do not run in parallel.

Other factors, including the Soviet Union's rising military power, threaten the existing order. Nevertheless, Gilpin remains "cautiously optimistic" about the prospects for avoiding catastrophic war in the near future.