

## **A. F. K. Organski**

### **The Power Transition**

. . . It is claimed that a balance of power brings peace. We have seen that there were periods when an equal distribution of power between contenders actually existed or was thought to have existed by the parties involved, but examination revealed that these periods were the exception rather than the rule. Still closer examination reveals that they were periods of war, not periods of peace.

In the 18th century, the last century of the period called the golden age of the balance of power, there were constant wars. In the 19th century, after the Napoleonic Wars, there was almost continuous peace. The balance of power is usually given a good share of the credit for this peaceful century, but as we have seen, there was no balance at all, but rather a vast preponderance of power in the hands of England and France. A local balance of power between France and Germany erupted into the Franco-Prussian War, and German miscalculations that her power balanced that of her probable enemies resulted in World War 1, bringing an end to the century of peace.

In the years between the two World Wars, we again had peace and a preponderance of power on the side of the Allies. Once Germany rose again to the point where the power of the Axis nations in fact approximated that of the European allies, war broke out again, the attack predicated on the erroneous assumption that the power of the United States was not involved. Now we are again in the period of peace, where the United States holds the preponderance of power.

The relationship between peace and the balance of power appears to be exactly the opposite of what has been claimed. The periods of balance, real or imagined, are periods of warfare, while the periods of known preponderance are periods of peace. If this is true, the time to worry about the dangers of a third world war is not now, when the predominance of the West is so obvious, but in the future, when industrialization may bring the Communist world abreast of us in power.

The claim that a balance of power is conducive to peace does not stand up. Indeed, it is not even logical. It stands to reason that nations will not fight unless they believe they have a good chance of winning, but this is true for both sides only when the two are fairly evenly matched, or at least when they believe they are. Thus a balance of power increases the chances of war. A preponderance of power on one side, on the other hand, increases the chances for peace, for the greatly stronger side need not fight at all to get what it wants .... [One of] the conditions that make for international peace . . . is not an equal distribution of power.

There is one last point that must be raised about the balance of power. According to the theory, the danger of aggression is to be expected from the stronger nation. A powerful nation intent on maximizing its power is expected to press its advantage and make war upon its neighbors if it ever succeeds in achieving a clear preponderance of power. Here again, the facts do not back up the theory. Nations with preponderant power have indeed dominated their neighbors, but they have not been the ones to start the major wars that have marked recent history. This role has fallen almost without exception to the weaker side. The theory of the balance of power provides no possible explanation for

Germany's action in the two World Wars or for Japan's attack upon the United States. It does not explain the two great wars of recent history . . . .

We are now in position to understand more clearly why the usual distribution of power in the world has not been a balance but rather a preponderance of power in the hands of one nation and its allies. And we can understand why world peace has coincided with periods of unchallenged supremacy of power while the periods of approximate balance have been the periods of war. As we have noted, wars occur when a great power in a secondary position challenges the top nation and its allies for control. Thus the usual major conflict is between the top nation (and its allies) and the challenger that is about to catch up with it in power.

In some respects the international order has striking similarities with that of a national society; it is legitimized by an ideology and rooted in the power differential of the groups that compose it. Peace is possible only when those possessing preponderant power are in firm control and are satisfied with the status quo or with the way in which it promises to develop in a peaceful context. Peace is threatened whenever a powerful nation is dissatisfied with the status quo and is powerful enough to attempt to change things in the face of opposition from those who control the existing international order.

Degree of power and degree of satisfaction, then, become important national characteristics to be considered when trying to locate the nations that are most likely to disturb world peace. We can classify all the nations of the world in terms of these two characteristics, achieving four categories which turn out to be of major importance in international politics.

## **CLASSIFICATION OF NATIONS:**

### **1. THE POWERFUL AND SATISFIED**

The international order is best visualized if one thinks of a pyramid with one nation at the top and many nations at the bottom. Those at the top of the pyramid are most powerful and those at the bottom least powerful. As we move downward in terms of power, the number of nations in each layer is greater than the number in the layer above it . . . .

Together, the dominant nation and the great powers allied with it make up our first group of nations: the powerful and the satisfied. At present, this group includes the United States, Britain, France (though France is falling fast into the position of a middle power), and, since their defeat in World War II, Western Germany, Italy, and Japan. Satisfaction is, of course, a relative term. Perhaps no nation is ever completely satisfied, but in a general way it can be said that these nations are satisfied with the present international order and its working rules, for they feel that the present order offers them the best chance of obtaining the goals they have in mind. The dominant nation is necessarily more satisfied with the existing international order than with any other since it is to a large extent her international order. Other nations (such as England and France today) may be satisfied because they realized their full power potential before the present order was established, and thus their power assured them a full measure of what they regarded as their rightful share of benefits. Still other great powers (such as the defeated Axis powers) may be considered satisfied because they can no longer hope to achieve the domination they once sought and are thus content to accept a place in the international order that seems likely to allow them substantial rewards.

## **2. THE POWERFUL AND DISSATISFIED**

Some of the great powers, however, are not satisfied with the way things are run on the international scene, and they make up our second category, that of the powerful and dissatisfied. From this group come the challengers who seek to upset the existing international order and establish a new order in its place. When nations are dissatisfied and at the same time powerful enough to possess the means of doing something about their dissatisfaction, trouble can be expected.

As we have seen in our brief historical sketch, the nations that are powerful and dissatisfied are usually nations that have grown to full power after the existing international order was fully established and the benefits already allocated. These parvenus had no share in the creation of the international order, and the dominant nation and its supporters are not usually willing to grant the newcomers more than a small part of the advantages they receive. Certainly they are unwilling to share the source of all their privileges: the rule of international society. To do so would be to abandon to a newcomer the preferred position they hold. As far as the dominant nation is concerned and, even more pointedly, as far as great nations that support the dominant nation are concerned, the challengers are to be kept in their place.

The challengers, for their part, are seeking to establish a new place for themselves in international society, a place to which they feel their growing power entitles them. Often these nations have grown rapidly in power and expect to continue to grow. They have reason to believe that they can rival or surpass in power the dominant nation, and they are unwilling to accept a subordinate position in international affairs when dominance would give them much greater benefits and privileges.

A rapid rise in power thus produces dissatisfaction in itself. At the same time, a rapid rise in power is likely to be accompanied by dissatisfaction of a different sort. In the present period such rapid rises have been brought about largely through industrialization. Rapid industrialization, however, produces many internal strains and grievances, and the temptation is great for the national government of a nation undergoing such changes to channel some of the dissatisfaction into aggressive attitudes and actions toward the outside in order to divert criticism from the government or other powerful groups within the nation. Industrialization is the source of much of the international "trouble" of the present period, for it expands the aspirations of men and helps to make them dissatisfied with their lot and at the same time it increases their power to do something about their dissatisfaction, i.e., to wrest a greater share of the good things of life from those who currently control them.

The role of challenger, of course, is not a permanent role, nor is it one that all great powers go through. Some of the great powers never fill it. These are the nations that accept a supporting role in the dominant international order, nations we have classified as "powerful and satisfied." Dissatisfied, powerful nations, however, are likely to become challengers, at least for a time. Those who succeed become dominant (and so satisfied) nations eventually. Those who fail conclusively may fall back and accept a secondary supporting role in the international order they have tried to overturn, as Germany appears to have done after two defeats, thus joining the ranks of the satisfied and the powerful by a different path. However, as long as they remain outside the dominant international order and have hopes of overturning it or taking over its leadership through combat, such

nations are serious threats to world peace. It is the powerful and dissatisfied nations that start world wars ....

Peace, then, is most likely to be maintained when the powerful and satisfied nations together with their allies enjoy a huge preponderance in power over the challenger and its allies, i.e., when the power of those who support the status quo is so great that no military challenge to them could hope to achieve success. War is most likely when the power of the dissatisfied challenger and its allies begins to approximate the power of those who support the status quo.

It must be stressed that such a peace is not necessarily a peace with justice. Protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, dominant nations are interested primarily in their own welfare, not in that of the rest of the world, and the two are not always compatible. Nor is the challenger necessarily on the side of right. Challengers often claim to speak for all of oppressed humanity, for all the underdogs who stiffer tinder the existing international order, but they, too, are primarily interested in their own welfare, and once a new international order is successfully established, the underdogs are likely to find that they are still underdogs who have merely exchanged one set of world leaders for another.

Nor is peace exactly synonymous with the maintenance of the status quo . . . . Change is constant. The international distribution of power is constantly shifting and with it many of the other arrangements that depend upon power. The possibilities of peaceful change should not be underestimated, but neither should the frequency with which major changes are brought about through war. As the challenger grows more powerful, it begins to demand new arrangements and changes in the international order which will give it a larger share of the benefits it desires. In theory, those who dominate the existing international order could make way for the newcomer and welcome it into the top ranks, giving up some of their privileges in the process. In practice, however, such action is rare. The challenger demands a place at the top and is rebuffed. Desiring change and unable to bring it about peacefully, the challenger all too often turns to war.

It might be expected that a wise challenger, growing in power through internal development, would hold back from threatening the existing international order until it had reached a point where it was as powerful as the dominant nation and its allies, for surely it would seem foolish to attack while weaker than the enemy. If this expectation were correct, the risk of war would be greatest when the two opposing camps were almost exactly equal in power, and if war broke out before this point, it would take the form of a preventive war launched by the dominant nation to knock off a competitor before it became strong enough to upset the existing international order.

In fact, however, this not what has happened in recent history, Germany, Italy, and Japan attacked the dominant nation and its allies long before they equaled them in power, and the attack was launched by the challengers, not by the dominant camp. If history repeats itself, the next world war will be started by the Soviet Union and it will be launched before the Soviet bloc is as powerful as the United States and its allies, thus diminishing the chances of a Communist victory. However, history may not repeat itself, for the Soviet Union is not Germany, and there are other factors involved besides the relative power of the two camps ....

Thus wars are most likely when there is an approaching balance of power between the dominant nation and a major challenger. However, there are other factors

which also operate to make war more or less likely. Specifically, war is most apt to occur: if the challenger is of such a size that at its peak it will roughly equal the dominant nation in power; if the rise of the challenger is rapid; if the dominant nation is inflexible in its policies; if there is no tradition of friendship between the dominant nation and the challenger; and if the challenger sets out to replace the existing international order with a competitive order of its own.