The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: A Theoretico-Philosophical Inquiry into the Arational Nature of States in International Politics

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a theoretico-philosophical inquiry into states’ nature or essence to acutely understand the rise and fall of great powers in global politics. The present study primarily highlights how the perennial cycle of great powers in world affairs is premised on the nature (i.e. inherent qualities) of the states (i.e. countries). In this study, the term 'great power' signifies a 'superpower' or a 'hegemon.' This topic is significant as it has vital implications on India’s role in international affairs precisely because how it appraises these pressing issues will invariably define its influences in world affairs. It is also important to note that the fundamental contemporary theories in international relations—neo-realism, neo-liberal institutionalism, and constructivism—ignore the nature of states for they assume some rationale or purposive goals—be it conflict and self-interest, or harmony and cooperation—behind states’ actions. While constructivism, on the other hand, commences with the criticism of neo-realism and neo-liberal institutionalism with little understanding of the essence of states. This essay suggests that states’ actions have nothing whatever to do with rationality or purposiveness. That the nature of the state is ante-rational—has no interest, identity, or beliefs—and antipode to claims made by Wendt (2004) i.e. rationality, interest, identity, and beliefs.

KEYWORDS: Arational Nature of State, Hegemony, China, India, International Politics

INTRODUCTION

With India and China as emerging powers in world affairs at the backdrop of precarious American hegemony and pacifisms of Western Europe, how should India comprehend its place in this period of transitioning and changing dynamism? The longstanding hegemonic order, Pax Americana, established since the culmination of the Second World War, is showing signs of alteration, as new actors (such as India, China, and Russia, among many others) emerge from the chaos of the United States' disastrous invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the 2007 financial crisis that enveloped much of the world’s economy. Noted historian, Niall Ferguson, has written that the bloody twentieth
century witnessed "the descent of the West" and "a reorientation of the world" toward the East (2006, lxvii). If this is so, then a sound estimation of the mercurial nature of the international system in transition is essential for India, as it is one of the rising powers (besides China and Russia) vying to assert its influence in world affairs.

As scholars (Ikenberry, Feng, & Jisi 2015; Ikenberry 2008) have contended that the more urgent concern is to address the rise of China rivalling the unipolar hegemony of the United States, this puts the focus on and raises some fundamental issues concerning the role of India as a balancer to the rise of China in Asia. However, such circumstances and opportunities, which India and China is confronted with, are not new in international politics. The United States experienced congruent events when the then existing hegemony of Great Britain was declining, and so did the latter when the hegemony of Spain and the Dutch were likewise diminishing (Arrighi, 2010).

Thus, this paper is a theoretico-philosophical inquiry into states' nature or essence to acutely understand the rise and fall of great powers in global politics. The present study primarily highlights how the perennial cycle of great powers in world affairs is premised on the nature (i.e. inherent qualities) of the states (i.e. countries). In this study, the term 'great power' signifies a 'superpower' or a 'hegemon.' This topic is significant as it has vital implications on India's role in international affairs precisely because how it appraises these pressing issues will invariably define its influences in world affairs.

Inquiring into the essence of states becomes essential to appreciate the vicissitudes in international politics. The present research takes this avenue chiefly because, on assessing some of the principal literature in international politics, no satisfactory expositions are given to understand the unavoidable ebb and flow of great powers. The only reasonable explanations thus far offered are by multifaceted works (Ibn Khaldun 1967/ 2005; Spengler 1928/1980a; Toynbee 1946/1987; Durant 1939/2011; Gibbon 1910/ 2010; and Mommsen 1862/2009) that pay acute attention to the nature of man (as it will be shown later that the nature of man and state is the same).

It is also important to note that the fundamental contemporary theories in international relations—neo-realism, neo-liberal institutionalism, and constructivism—ignore the nature of states for they assume some rationale or purposive goals—be it conflict and self-interest, or harmony and cooperation—behind states' actions. While constructivism, on the other hand, commences with the criticism of neo-realism and neo-liberal institutionalism with little understanding of the essence of states.

This essay, however, suggests that states' actions have nothing whatever to do with rationality or purposiveness. That the nature of the state is ante-rational—has no interest, identity, or beliefs—and antipode to claims made by Wendt (2004) i.e. rationality, interest, identity, and beliefs. It would also be imprudent to reduce states to having command over their actions (or even their future). Yet, such theoretical assumptions are unavoidable given the fallacies at the fundamental level. Besides, this central literature—under the umbrella of rationality—rely on their exposition of power, security, survival (Morganthau 1960; Waltz 1954/2001; Mearsheimer 2001; Walt 1990; Gilpin 1981; Jervis 1976), interest, identity (Wendt 1992; Wendt 1999; Finnemore 1996; Katzenstein 1996; Onuf 1989/2012), and liberal peace, interdependence, institutions (Keohane 1984; Keohane & Nye 2011; Nye 2004; Axelrod 1984; Doyle 1986; Ikenberry 2000), as the sole arbiter of
transformation in international politics. Nevertheless, the global environment in actuality is neither static nor rational, instead, it is arational (or, ante-rational) and invariably dynamic. These theories, as a consequence, are germane to a system that is in equilibrium and where certainty is established. When uncertainty, i.e., dynamism in international politics, is interjected into the equation, their explanatory power diminishes.

**NATURE OF THE STATE**

By their very nature, states are ante-rationality and ante-morality. They also show no interest in survival, security, peace, or prosperity. Those who do not understand states' nature speak of "Just War" (Walzer 1977) or the "Great Illusion" (Angell 1910) of wars. Absence of these attributes such as reasoning, morality, etc., make the rise and fall of great powers plausible. If states possess any of these aspects, one hegemonic power will indissolubly dominate the system and in effect terminate this perennial cycle since states will be incapable of committing errors. For instance, states will not take on unnecessary wars or abortive policies that will jeopardize their power and security. It is the arational aspects of states (i.e., the capacity to commit errors and miscalculations) that afford different powers to elevate and occupy the dominant position. The temporary security and peace are unintended consequences produced by virtue of states' ante-rational, i.e. arational, actions.

Perhaps it is acceptable and logical for the essence of states to reflect the nature of man since states are an amalgamation of men. And if this proposition is plausible, we do gain certitude concerning the conflicts that permeate world politics and human relations. Thus, by nature, man and states are concomitantly social and anti-social entities, paralleling Kant's view, "Man wishes concord, but nature, knowing better what is good for his species, wishes discord" (1784/2000a, 45). Discord saturates international politics, as Durant and Durant remind us, "The causes of war are the same as the cause of competition among individuals: acquisitiveness, pugnacity, and pride; the desire for food, land, materials, fuels, mastery. The state has our instinct without our restraints. The individual submits to restraints laid upon him by morals and laws... The state itself acknowledges no substantial restraints, either because it is strong enough to defy any interference with its will or because there is no superstate to offer it basic protection, and no international law or moral code-wielding effective force" (1968/2010, 81). Such is the dreadful nature of states and man. As Kant vindicates, it is this nature that stands in the way of achieving perpetual peace (1795/2000c).

The 'desire for mastery' plunged the Roman Empire into social and political chaos, just as it was for the Greeks. The desire for 'fuel and territory' led Japan to go on offensive territorial conquest, occupying much of Asia. Also, it led to a fateful attack on Pearl Harbor that eventually led to its defeat. The desire for 'land and material' led the Europeans to expand their overseas empire resulting in a free grabbing of land in Africa, Asia, and the New World. The 'pride and pugnacity' led Napoleon III to a tragic war resulting not only to his defeat by the Prussian but also brought the Second Empire in France to a horrific collapse. The 'pride' of Bismarck led to the unification of Germany even if it meant deception and manipulation of affairs between nations.

As for 'hegemony,' states (especially powerful states) in the international system pursue it to gain power and mastery over others. The fruits to be achieved by acquiring the status of hegemony are exceedingly vast and to a certain extent, limitless. Indeed, this is the essence behind 'security dilemma' that eventually leads to an uncontrollable arms race between states (for example, India and Pakistan, India and China, or United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War). This
cannot be overcome because of unassuageable thirst for power ingrained and innate to the very nature of states. No doubt, the present explanation is dissimilar to the neo-realist/structuralist (Jervis 1976; Mearsheimer 2001) expositions, because they claim security dilemma to be a product of arms race brought to fore by misperceptions of other states' intentions (such as the inability to discern between offensive and defensive posture, etc.), as they try to ensure their security and survival. Yet, at the bottom, it is the unsatisfiable craving for power that drives states actions. As the words of Cecil Rhodes potently capture states' insatiable thirst for power, "Expansion is everything...these stars...these vast worlds which we can never reach. I would annex the planets if I could" (Arendt 1966/1976). As they acquire power, it leaves states in a condition of an unquenchable thirst for more power which cannot be satiated. It hence stems the dilemma of how much power is enough to ensure the state's stability and security relative to other rival states. It is understandable perhaps to sympathize when Kant reasoned that no state in the international system is safe and secure even for a brief moment, for the desire to subjugate and grow at the expense of another is invariably present (1792/2000b).

Today, the above-mentioned states' nature continues to persist, for instance, between India and China or between the United States and China. The desire for 'pride and fuel' makes the Chinese, the Japanese and the South Koreans to quarrel over a large lump of islands in the South China Sea and their pride dictates that they have the right to these islands—which may contain fuel, as well. According to Niebuhr (1941/1996), pride is present in every individual and transposed to the level of states. The element of power is closely related to pride since lust for power has pride as its ultimate end. The desire for power and mastery dominates the interest of the existing hegemon—the United States—and other rising powers—India, China, and Russia. Also, this never-changing nature further illustrates the invariant essence of man that goes on to constitute states. Bergson reminds us that even though societies have evolved into civilizations, the primitive nature of man continues to exist concealed under the many habits which we acquire with the growth of civilization (1932/1991). No matter what habits we may acquire, we practically remain unchanged, for nature cannot be driven out because it defines our essences, our inherent characteristics. Similarly, Kant was under no illusion when he reasoned that no matter how enlightened we may be, the discord which is present in our nature will bring destruction to the "civilized state and all the cultural progress hitherto achieved" (1784/2000a, 48). The destruction of the two Great Wars, the Cold war, the Korean War, the events of 9/11, the destruction of Syria due to the ongoing civil war are acknowledgements of Bergson and Kant's observations and substantiation of the arational nature of states.

Discords seem consistent with the nature of states when it is transposed from the nature of man. As Niebuhr prudently reasons, "The group is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centred and more ruthless in the pursuit of its end than the individuals" (1941/1996, 208). Indeed, the arrogance, selfishness, greed, and hypocrisy of individual persons are bourgeoned when they are amalgamated en masse corroborating the ante-rationality of man and thus of states. Le Bon likewise made congruent observations about the arationality of individuals. He observed the contagious effect of the crowd over individuals. He reasoned that when individuals are brought into a crowd, they completely lose their capacity to make a conscious decision. Here, we see the disappearance of conscious personality where individuals are no longer guided by their will, which, for Le Bon, is the principal attribute of individuals becoming part of a crowd. Thus, individuals in groups become barbarians, creatures guided by and acting on instincts ([1895] 2005).
We can, therefore, deduce that as states are an amalgamation of arational men, they too are an arational entity. Freud, for instance, was adamant about the arationality of man, especially individuals in groups, for they tend to create a dangerous artificial being capable of doing absolutely anything. Perhaps this is why Hobbes, for instance, conjectures an artificial being, the Leviathan; a supreme entity capable of taming the unruly, arational nature of man. And even the motive driving this artificial being is nothing but the raw natural instincts of man. Since states are entities composed of man, the nature of man—which is arational by nature—is vividly illustrated by the arational manner in which states carry themselves in international politics. This line of reasoning affords a better understanding of the essence of states in international politics.

**NATURE OF STATES AND THE RISE AND FALL OF GREAT POWERS**

With arationality of state firmly established, we must now demonstrate how this influences the rise and fall of great powers. Since states are arational, it dissuades them from learning lessons from the past and in the process induces the cyclical rise and fall of great powers. This inability to learn does not mean that states are wilfully blind to the events of the past. Instead, in the words of John Glubb, "'The only thing we learn from history,' it has been said, 'is that man never learn from history', a sweeping generalization perhaps, but one which the chaos in the world today goes far to confirm" (1976, 1). This perhaps vindicates the arational essence of states, because if states were rational, then by virtue of this quality states will learn from past events, ceasing the inevitable ebb and flow of great powers in international politics.

States inability to learn from the past is partly driven by one’s inherent attribute to wilfully ignore prevailing problems, which is a firmly established concept in behavioural sciences. There is always going to be some events paralleling those in the past, but in encountering such incidents, one usually seeks a way to justify that this time it is different—even when it is not. This is our way of denying reality, which is ingrained in our nature. Freud defines this denial as a primitive form of justifying one’s actions (1900/2010). Such, for instance, was the case in Rome during the decaying period of its empire. Faced with the problem of class conflict ultimately plunging the empire into 100 years of civil war and its eventual demise, they rejected to glean lessons from their historical predecessors. This class struggle was not the first of its kind in history, such struggles have occurred through-out the Hellas ultimately resulting in the demise of that (i.e. Greek) society. Nonetheless, the Romans justified the events as something different from that of the Greeks. The resulting civil war which ensued plunged the Roman Empire into utter disarray and brought an end to the Roman republic, only to be salvaged by Augustus who brought the empire under monarchical rule (Durant & Durant 1968/2010).

Failure to learn from history is generally a manifestation of states inability to solve their problems. Toynbee was explicit about the fact that decline usually follows when societies are unable to improve current issues arising from within and without. Instead of solving problems, they are managed, which only delays the inevitable eventually leading to their demises—such as the Hellenic, Roman, and Islamic society, among many others (Thucydides 1972; Ibn Khaldun 1967/2005; Spengler 1928/1980a; Toynbee 1946/1987; Durant 1939/2011; Gibbon 1910/2010; and Mommsen 1862/2009). When problems are managed rather than solved, they continue to persist and prove to be seeds of impending calamity. The failure to solve problems explains the war and chaos that usually accompanies the rise and fall of great powers in international politics. If, for instance, we examine the ebb and flow of great powers, they are rarely peaceful—the rise and fall of the Greek,
Roman, Spanish, French, Prussia, Austria-Hungary, and British empires, among many others. States cannot halt their demise since the fall is intrinsic to the very nature of states.

We can perchance attribute 'historical destiny' as a deciding factor determining which states will become great powers. The historical destiny—in this study—refers to the destiny brought about by circumstances that are beyond anyone's control and which follows the natural course of history, i.e. nature of the things. It is the ultimate source of vicissitudes actualizing in the form of political, socio-economic, and cultural problems from within and/or without. This destiny cannot be altered by any events; the given states are assured of their destiny in the grand stage of international politics. This is well illustrated by Marx who, having stated with heavy irony that history repeats itself, first as tragedy and then as farce, goes on to remark, "Men make their history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under the circumstances chosen by themselves, but under the circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (1852/1963, 15). For Marx, we do take part in the making of historical processes and destinies, but we do so under conditions that are not of our choosing, and our choices have consequences, which are not envisioned.

What's more, historical destiny rarely follows a rationally-linear path (hence the permanent mark of uncertainty and unintended consequences of states' actions). For if historical destiny was rational and linear, one could indeed alter the historical processes through manipulation of the environment through social experimentation. However, this seems unlikely even with the magnitude of advancement in scientific knowledge—the fulfilment of historical destiny ushers in new epoch and possibilities. Napoleon Bonaparte felt this destiny before he dominated continental Europe. He proclaims, "I feel myself driven towards an end that I do not know. As soon as I shall have reached it, as soon as I shall become unnecessary, an atom will suffice to shatter me. Till then, not all the forces of humanity can do anything against me" (Quoted in Spengler 1928/1980a, 144). This inner certitude held by Napoleon was the historical destiny that led to his post-revolutionary nation to conquer and put a stamp of French authority in continental Europe. It was this inner historical destiny that led the decaying Minoan civilization from Crete to establish the Greek (Hellenic) civilization (Toynbee 1946/1987a). It was also this inner certitude of historical destiny that led King Philip of Macedon to dominate the Hellenic world, which was brought to its apogee by Alexander the Great.

The paradox, however, is that the decline of great powers begins at the very height of their supremacy. As Kant rightly remarks, "Even if it were found that the human race as a whole had been moving forward and progressing for an indefinitely long time, no-one could guarantee that its era of decline was not beginning at the very moment" (1798/2000d, 180). Such a decline is not something one can bring to a halt, for the decay is assured, in the same manner, as a given power is bound to exalt to its apogee and with it, its demise. The ascend contains the seed of its demise, as the words of St. Augustine surmises this nature: "When they rise, therefore, they are set upon the course of their existence, and the faster they climb towards its zenith, the more they hasten towards the point where they exist no more. This is the law they obey" (Augustine, 1961, IV.x.80). Perhaps one can attribute historical processes as one of the factors behind societies remaining imperceptive to their looming demise. Since states tend to misunderstand the historical processes at work generally, this gives great powers a false sense of security believing their rise should not only continue forever, but also "believe that the immortality of these human institutions is assured...", yet, it is also at this very moment of thought that they are "in [their] last agonies" (Toynbee 1946/1987b, 4). Thus, it makes
them impervious to the decline, just as Pericles' Funeral Oration detailing the majesty of Athenian institutions would be the last splendid act of Athens.

The Moghul Empire could not have foreboded their demise during its zenith—let alone to foretell that their vast empire will be brought down by a Merchant Company, i.e., British East India Company. Nor anyone in the Abbasid Caliphates could have predicted their demise and were shocked when the Mongols destroyed their empire. Nor did the whole of Hellas foreboded that their splendid civilization will be coming to an end with Athenians and Spartans going to war against each other. Nor did the Romans think during 'the age of Antonines' that their vast empire will be split into East and West, and later on to be ravaged by the Goths (Visigoths and Ostrogoths), Vandals, and Franks, eventually plunging Europe into the 'dark ages.' Nor did Britain imagine in its zenith, its empire being blown into smithereens—for they were leading in every aspect of human necessity: techniques, science, wealth, military power, and so on. Later in the nineteenth century, they were stunned by the Germans and Americans who severely outperformed them in many aspects of material necessities essential to sustain Pax Britannia. At this present day, the existing dominant superpower, the United States, continues to lead in many fields of knowledge and techniques. One can rightly argue that its power is at its apogee. But history tells us, the decline beings at its apogee. Perhaps, it is inescapable that history will repeat itself—it is not a matter of right or wrong, good or bad, fair or unfair, for this is the essence of states, an essence that is, in the words of Nitzsche, *beyond good and evil*.

Because states are unperceptive to their decline, it seems as though (to use Spengler's words) they "unknowingly" come to their demise, when the fall predictably transpires. Past events present plentifully episodes on how great powers unknowingly plunged into their demise. The past illustrates how the eighteenth dynasty of the Egyptian kingdom, intended on driving out the Hyksos from its land, was all too tempted to embark upon enormous ambition—and thus begun it's faithful descend (Toynbee 1946/1987a). This unintentionally led to the 'overextension' (Kennedy 1989) of their empire and eventually to their humiliating defeat and eventual collapse.

The Ottomans in the Sixteenth century came to a late realization about their overextended empire—both strategically and economically—as their troops were stationed in Central Europe, North Africa, the Red Sea, the Aegean, Cyprus, and the Crimea as well as towards their East against the Safavids, thus eroding the very foundations of their empire.

Likewise, the Assyrians overextended when they bid to dominate South-Western Asia. Little did they know that this fateful bid for dominance at the very height of its power would bring not only to their defeat but also the extinction of the whole Assyrian society. Another point of interest is the uncanny resemblance of experience between the Assyrians and, the current superpower, the United States. Assyrian was unmatched by any rival societies in the Syriac Civilization—in terms of its armies, weapons, and other war machinery, which were continually being refined and improved. The militarism of Assyrian society, due to its unmatched military prowess, brought them in conflict with more powerful empires—Egypt, Babylon, and Elam—which proved to be their undoing (Toynbee 1946/1987a). The United States, similarly, runs the risk of falling into congruent problems as the militarism and trigger happy Assyrians. The general tendencies of the United States to intervene in every corner of the world in the name of democracy, capitalism, freedom, and so on will espouse more enemies (Mearsheimer 2018), which plausibly can contribute to its downfall, just as the Assyrians.
What's more, at present, the United States is faced with a congruent situation as its predecessors. Its power is stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific, with interests in all the continents backed by its unrivaled military capabilities. Although, as Kennedy forebodes, "A large military establishment may, as a great monument, look imposing to the impressionable observer; but if it is not resting upon a firm foundation (in this case, a productive national economy), it runs the risk of a future collapse" (1989, 444). Nevertheless, even with parallels from the past, it seems unlikely that the United States will heed lessons from the past events, exemplified by the numerous thwarted attempts since the early 2000s to reduce its military overextension, i.e. its military bases around the world. The British Empire's belated realization that they had overextended, as its power was stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific, they found it unattainable to maintain their overextension as their resources declined. What we see today is a déjà vu of dangerous policies which will severely affect the standing of the United States in international politics—as it had been for the British and the Ottoman, among many others.

Great powers, in general, are imperceptive to circumscribe their overstretching as they do not consciously discern how such overextension will ultimately spell catastrophic (in part, this perhaps accounts for the states' unknowingly coming to an end'). Such actions occurred even without their conscious awareness because of its very nature. If states realize they are overstretching their powers when they execute their political stratagem, they can simply circumscribe these fatal policies. In such a scenario, there will be no cyclical rise and fall of great powers. However, since it is in the historical destiny for these faithful states to rise and fall, it becomes difficult for these powers to cognize that their policies will, in due course, lead to their demise.

Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the perennial cycle of the rise and fall of great power in international affairs is predicated on the very nature of states. This cyclical ebb and flow are neither good nor bad, for how can we pass judgments on the natural tendencies of an entity. It would be like passing judgement on breathing. Humans, for instance, breathe because it is within our nature to breathe; otherwise, how can we survive? Correspondingly, as long as states exist, there is bound to be the perennial cycle of the rise and fall. Moreover, it is the nature or essence of states that makes them unable to learn from the past, and this way implicitly dance to the tune of historical process over which they have no control.

This is manifested through-out recorded human history. John Glubb (1976) shows how great powers, on average, last for about 250 years: Assyrian Empire (277 years), Persian Empire (208 years), Greece (231 years), Roman Republic (233 years), Roman Empire (207 years), Arab Empire (246 years), Ottoman Empire (250 years), Spanish Empire (250 years), Romanov Empire (234 years), and British Empire (250 years). No doubt, there is no way to locate the exact years of the rise and decline of any great power. Still, the general idea behind the previous historical records, nevertheless, does provide a specific ascertainable duration with which to conjecture the likely structural changes in world affairs. Perhaps it would be best to leave it up to the readers to deduce for themselves the fate and (remaining) duration of the current great power. If one goes by the averages of previous powers, the present great power does have a long spell, at the least till the next century, before its decline. Here, 'decline' means great power’s waning dominion in international politics.

The rise and fall of great powers are in one way following the laws of the universe, where everything contained within it is destined to degrade and fall apart. Just as the world moves from ordered to
the disordered state to decay; the same logic follows in international politics, where the system moves from an ordered state (i.e. where there is a hegemonic power) to a disordered state (i.e. absence of hegemonic power) where there are competing states bid for hegemony—similar to what we face today: with the waning of the United States’ power, we see multiple rising powers such as China, India, and Russia, vying to gain ascendancy and dominate world politics. The entropy in the international system brings the existing great power to its demise, and a new power and order are established in its stead, which will undergo the same cycle of growth and decline. As Durant and Durant verily assert: "Perhaps life should take fresh forms, that new civilizations and centres should have their turn" (1968/2010, 100).

CONCLUSION
This study is a humble effort to provide a novel way of understanding the uncertainties in international politics: how the sustained growth and decline of great powers in world affairs is premised on the essence of the states. It is one of the typical attributes of states that drive the structural vicissitudes elevating new powers to ascend and dominate world politics by replacing the old. These changes are, in the words of Kant, "... accordingly so many attempts to bring about new relations among states, and, by the destruction...of old entities, to create new ones" (1784/2000a: 48). This study affords scholars to conduct further in-depth explorative and empirical studies to either corroborate or falsify how this cycle of change in international politics is premised on states' essence.

REFERENCES


