Forecasting the Next World War: Between Theory and Practice

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Winston Churchill famously said, “those who do not learn history are condemned to repeat it.” The truth is, even when we do learn history, we often remain trapped in its repetition. Worse still, attempts to act on historical lessons—such as after World War I—often end up creating new conditions for history to repeat itself. And when we choose passivity or forget history altogether, as seems to be the case today, history turns *us* into its next lesson. This captivity to historical cycles appears methodologically inescapable. Worse, it suggests a kind of universal curse: one that plays out at both the level of individual human nature, as Morgenthau explored, and at the level of interstate dynamics, as seen in Mearsheimer’s analysis. Power—and its corrupting influence—remains the defining feature of both human and international relations.

Power returns, war resurfaces, and crisis deepens—all of which we are collectively experiencing today. Analogously, whether we look at: 50–60 year Kondratieff cycles of economic growth and contraction; 80–100 year Power Transition Theory (Organski and Kugler); 80–120 year Modelski Long Cycle Theory of global power; 100–150 year Gilpinian hegemonic cycles; the World-Systems Theory of Wallerstein (center-periphery expansion); the 200–300 year secular Malthusian cycles of population and resource pressure; or even Toynbee’s 500–800-year civilizational cycles of east-west transitions – they all appear to converge in our current historical moment.

A better framework for studying these recurring cycles in international relations may be found in the evolution of the discipline of International Relations (IR) itself: at the intersection of theory (knowledge, agents, discourses) and practice (interstate relations, wars, trade, power distribution, international system configuration). The frictions between theory and practice are not separate—they are co-constitutive. Reality shapes theory, and theory shapes reality. IR moves through recurring cycles aligned with the rise and decline of structural power. These cycles manifest in theory—through oscillations between realism/rationalism and liberalism/reflectivism—and in practice—through the alternation between periods of peace and moments of war. Their co-constitutive relation make that the state of intellectual realm is directly associated (or inversely related) to the state of the system’s power distribution (i.e., war/peace). The closer to war the more realist and the further from conflict the more idealist. The undulating patterns of theory and practice converge at critical inflection points, resulting in paroxysms: major wars or profound ideological transformations.

These moments of intersections mark thresholds—tipping points where both the global order and theoretical paradigms undergo systemic shifts in equilibrium. By modeling this co-evolution of theory and practice as an oscillating dynamic—between politics and policy, context and content—we may better anticipate the intellectual/physical conditions leading to the next rupture. Understanding these turbulent intersections as part of a continuous progression of theory and practice may give us the best chance to prevent conflicts and avoid flawed intellectual approaches.

Intersection 1: Post-First World War

The modern discipline of International Relations took shape in the 1920s, forged in direct response to the devastation of the First World War. The unprecedented destruction was seen not as an accident of history but as a failure of the

existing order—rooted in militarism, nationalism, imperial rivalry, and the precarious balance of power. This context created the demand for a new kind of intellectual "content": theories aimed at explaining, anticipating, and ultimately preventing violent interstate practice.

Liberal Institutionalism emerged as the first major response, propelled by idealist convictions that peace could be secured through law, norms, and cooperative governance. Its architects—figures such as Woodrow Wilson—sought to replace competitive power politics with collective security frameworks. The League of Nations became the flagship embodiment of this vision, designed to institutionalize diplomacy, restrain nationalism and imperial ambition, and provide mechanisms for conflict resolution. In this way, the chaos of the pre-1914 anarchic system acted as the context, and Liberal Institutionalism—theory and institutions alike—became the content. The cause was the catastrophic failure of the old order; the effect was an idealist turn toward building a new one. However, just as peace can set the stage for war, this Liberal Institutionalist IR content inadvertently enabled the return of power politics and paved the way for the outbreak of a second world war.

Intersection 2: World War II

The Liberal Institutionalist content of the interwar period—though not directly causing WWII—failed to prevent it. Intended to avoid the confrontational politics of 1914, its peace-at-all-costs approach clashed with geopolitical realities and, in practice, hastened the path to war. Under this vision, the League of Nations, the Munich Agreement, and appeasement policies all underestimated the power dynamics and revisionist ambitions of Nazi Germany at the time.

As Charles Doran observes, the very effort to avoid repeating WWI's mistakes by and adopt peace-at-all-cost, ironically enabled their repetition. Britain and France, determined not to confront Germany as in 1914, abandoned balancing strategies in favor of accommodation—just as German expansionism became undeniable. Neville Chamberlain's appeasement epitomized the liberal dilemma: seeking to avert war, yet enabling aggression by delaying the use of power. This *decalage* between theory and practice, between how the world was versus how they wanted it to be, left liberal content unable to restrain a context defined by rising power.

The collapse of interwar idealism left "a dangerous illusion" of harmony of interests. In its wake, the philosophical battleground shifted to utopia versus realism, morality versus relativism. Realism emerges as dominant, shaped by both the recurrent intellectual failures of interwar liberalism and the catastrophic realities of WWII and the Cold War. This reflects a recurring IR pattern: liberal optimism flourishing in times of peace, only to give way to realist dominance in the aftermath of war, with an emphasis on the world as it is rather than as it ought to be.

Intersection 3: Post-WWII Bipolarity and the Cold War's First Crises

The end of WWII confirmed realism's wartime credibility, but the peace it ushered in also created the conditions for a renewed liberal turn. Anchored by U.S. leadership, the Bretton Woods system, the United Nations, and rapid globalization and technological advances, the post-war order inspired a new Liberal Institutionalism—more methodologically rigorous than its interwar predecessor. Infused with behavioralist methods and a pluralist worldview, it sought to lock in cooperation through a Western-led network of rules and institutions, effectively a "League of Nations 2.0" designed to manage power before it turned destructive.

This post-WWII liberal resurgence, however, was short-lived. Geopolitical reality intruded almost immediately. The onset of the Cold War—crystallized in the Korean War and later Vietnam—sharply exposed the limits of post-war idealism. U.S. foreign policy, liberal in rhetoric but increasingly realist in execution, revealed the widening gap between *content* (institutional cooperation, interdependence) and *context* (bipolar rivalry, ideological confrontation). The liberal project's reach exceeded what the system's power distribution could bear.

The expected post-war "peace phase" in the oscillation was cut short; instead of a gradual return to stability, the system lurched rapidly into confrontation. This premature collision of liberal content with a hostile context drove the discipline toward harsher, more systemic formulations of realism—most notably neorealism—and its institutional

counterpart, neoliberalism. Once again, rising tension pushed IR theory toward harder-edged realism, reaffirming the pattern: liberal expansion in moments of stability, realist retrenchment as conflict intensifies.

Intersection 4: Cold War Climax

By the late 1960s and 1970s, Cold War rivalry had sharpened. The Cuban Missile Crisis had demonstrated the catastrophic stakes of miscalculation, while the "Second Cold War" brought renewed arms races, proxy wars, and heightened ideological confrontation. Liberal pluralism, vibrant in the 1960s, could not withstand this intensified context. Yet, at the same time, realism itself was evolving. The complexity of nuclear deterrence, bipolar stability, and systemic interaction demanded more than classical realist arguments about human nature and statecraft. Kenneth Waltz's Theory of International Politics (1979) distilled realism into neorealism—a more scientifically precise, policy-oriented structural theory of systemic crises, focused on the Cold War's anarchic order, the distribution of capabilities, and parsimonious modeling.

Intersection 5: Cold War Collapse and the Post-Positivist Turn

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union in 1989–1991 struck at the core of structural theories. Designed to explain the stability of a bipolar world, neorealism failed to anticipate its collapse—one of the greatest shortcomings of IR theory and policy. The dramatic shift in context, from the intensity of Cold War confrontation to a relatively peaceful, Western-led unipolar order, demanded new theoretical orientations. In this quieter system, the explanatory power of power-centric models diminished, opening space for reflectivist approaches.

At the same time, changes in practice reinforced this transition. The rise of identity politics, norms, transnational activism, and intrastate violence—alongside uprisings in Eastern Europe, the Tiananmen protests, and a surge of civil wars and ethnic conflicts—challenged the state-centric, materialist assumptions of mainstream IR developed in wartime contexts. In their place, post-positivist and reflectivist approaches—constructivism, critical theory, and postcolonialism—gained prominence, emphasizing the social construction of reality, the power of ideas, and the limits of material explanations.

What emerges at this juncture is a clear oscillation in IR theory: as practical power peaked in bipolar confrontation, realism dominated; but with its collapse into a relatively stable unipolar moment, intellectual space opened for approaches less centered on power politics. Rather than a return to realism, this transition marked a decisive turn toward reflectivism, expanding the field beyond traditional power struggles.

Modeling the Chronology

To summarize; after WWI, the devastation of conflict (context) spurred liberal idealism (content) to prevent its recurrence through institutions and collective security. Yet appeasement policies (content), meant to avoid another 1914, misread rising power politics and helped enable WWII (context)—where practice undermined theory. The war's catastrophe returned realism to dominance, aligning theory with a context of raw power struggle. Post-1945 peace, U.S. hegemony, Bretton Woods, the UN, and globalization revived liberal institutionalism, embedding interdependence into a new order. But the Cold War's bipolar rivalry and crises in Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba quickly exposed liberal overreach and misappreciation, prompting neorealism to refine theory to match systemic realities, with neoliberalism adapting to salvage cooperation. The Cold War's tense equilibrium drove a power-centered spiral of theoretical debates and an escalating missile arms race. Its eventual collapse, coinciding with the fall of the Berlin Wall, opened a "unipolar moment," in which the limitations of power-centric models became evident. This shift created space for post-positivist approaches, where changing contexts reshaped theoretical content—and that content, in turn, reframed practice.

Observations suggest that the evolution of practice and theory is interrelated, largely dictated by oscillations of power, and polarized between moments of war and peace. In the interwar period, theory carried a liberal or idealist label; with the return of conflict, it shifted back to realist or rationalist frameworks—each variation reflecting the prevailing distribution of power. Another observation is that peace often sets the stage for war, and that each

oscillation back to equilibrium tends to be as great, if not greater, than the preceding stage. Thus far, as this chronology illustrates, the oscillation between theory and practice has been mostly *reactive* or *retroactive*: reacting to war or reapplying past frameworks to new contexts. If we extend these theoretical and material conditions to today's system, we necessarily arrive at another intersection—one that may prove more brutal, as each past transition has been. Anticipating the next middle ground is neither rhetorical nor prophetic; it is an outcome shaped by structural forces and the cyclical return of power.

Intersection 6: Contemporary Multipolarity and the Return of Power Politics

On the side of context and practice, we stand today at a critical juncture marked by the return of power politics, deteriorating peace, and mounting geopolitical tensions. Much like the precarious era preceding World War II, current global conditions show striking parallels: global peace indicators are worsening for the first time in decades; regional flashpoints in Ukraine and the Middle East are intensifying; and the Western order is struggling to manage shifting power dynamics, faltering in alliance cohesion, deterrence, and diplomacy amid rising multipolarity.

Mechanisms of interstate stability are also eroding. Deterrence is weakening with Iran's nuclear advances and the asymmetrical proliferation of weapons. Meanwhile, democratic states suffer from declining cohesion and strategic complacency—marked by insufficient rearmament, fractured alliances, and political unpreparedness—leaving them vulnerable to escalation. In contrast, authoritarian coalitions of China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and their partners are consolidating around nationalist and authoritarian ideologies, steadily eroding the liberal order.

These developments expose the limits of containment. The Cold War assumption that liberal values and market economies would gradually stabilize adversaries has failed; instead, nationalism and authoritarian resilience persist, directly challenging those expectations. Diplomatic engagement, while essential to managing power imbalances and preventing escalation—much like arms control helped stabilize Cold War rivalry—has in recent years been unable to improve the international climate.

Today, it seems we are once again caught in frictions reminiscent of the interwar period, as described by E.H. Carr at the first great intersection. The Munich analogy—appeasement of Nazi Germany—serves as a cautionary tale for contemporary democracies, which must choose deterrence over deference. To counter illegitimate claims akin to Hitler's, democracies must pursue strategic rearmament, significantly strengthen defense capabilities, and prioritize alliances and preparedness in order to deter aggression effectively.

On the theory side, IR faces familiar tensions. The field remains caught the recurring oscillation and the polarization between realism and idealism that drives theory and practice to extremes. Escaping this theoretical self-fulfilling prophecy is essential, as history shows it to be both conducive to war and merely reactive to crisis. Neither framework alone suffices to navigate today's rapid systemic shifts, where vertical and horizontal power, geopolitical change, and ideological currents interact in complex ways.

At the same time, just as neorealism faltered at the height of the Cold War when the international system shifted away from concentrated power, today's turn toward reflectivism and idealism has reached a dangerous climax. We are witnessing a revival of post–World War I–style idealism: one marked by excessive moralism and reflectivism. Politics are increasingly driven by distorted ideological commitments and harmful double standards, where pacifist, legalist, and moralist ideals take precedence over sober assessments of international relations and security—a subtle choice of the lesser evil between the disagreeable and the disastrous. Contemporary society, in its thought experiments about human identity pushed to "wokest" extremes, risks a similar misreading of reality: as if judging a man-eating tiger through the lens of abstract idealism rather than recognizing its predatory nature.

As in previous intersections, the oscillation between context and content—between practical power and intellectual framing—is ongoing. Understanding this dynamic is crucial: escaping the cycle of reactive theory and crisis-driven policy offers the best chance to prevent a repeat of historical extremes. The current juncture is not merely theoretical; structural forces, rising multipolarity, and ideological fault lines suggest it may be one of the most consequential intersections yet.

Policy Prescription

The solution to the theory/practice and content/context cycle of power lies in a proactive, eclectic, and pragmatic middle-ground theory. Theory-making for multipolarity should avoid anchoring itself in the symptomatic frictions of transitional moments, and should not treat power-based analysis as a fatalistic, self-fulfilling realist prophecy of inevitable warfare. Instead, it should expand the scope of variables studied to allow for a more dynamic understanding of the distribution of power—along both vertical and horizontal axes—such as those proposed by power cycle theory.

The other side of IR's theoretical bipolar paradigm must awaken from the illusion of perpetual peace, stop rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic, and begin acting proactively. Failure to do so will have disastrous consequences for international stability and security. Power must be confronted directly and understood—whether its claims are legitimate or illegitimate—as power cycle theory compels us to do.

We should adopt a proactive, pragmatic, problem-solving–centered epistemology—one suited to addressing the complex, multidimensional challenges of international security in a rapidly shifting multipolar world. The next systemic transition demands a multipolarized theory of multipolarity: departing from strict realism while, like neoclassical realism, incorporating broader variables—ideology, regime type, and discursive power—that shape both systemic and agent-level behavior. Methodologically eclectic, this theory must navigate uncertain patterns of power reconcentration with flexibility and pragmatism. Rather than clinging to rigid ontologies, it should prioritize problem-solving explanations and adopt a causal, epistemologically aware approach that directly engages with the realities of power.

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