INTERNATIONAL SYSTEMIC TRANSITION:
A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

2.1: Rationale for a framework

What does it mean to have a working knowledge of world politics, an ability to comprehend new and unexpected events and place them in larger perspectives that encompass past trends, present developments and future possibilities? The most obvious answer is that comprehension requires familiarity with the facts. But, such an answer has little utility because it is equally obvious that the facts do not speak for themselves that the observer must structure them and interpret them in terms of certain framework, thereby infusing meaning into some facts and dismissing other as irrelevant.

A framework refers to such an organization of data and inter-influencing variables that try to explain and help to attempt prediction. A prime purpose of a theoretical framework is to help create understanding by ordering facts and concepts into some meaningful pattern. Gathering of facts and description of events create understanding of these facts and events; but, otherwise has little broader application. Only when these facts and events are fitted against some theoretical framework of concepts, can they be seen essentially as illustrations of general and recurring process in international politics. There are in short, no self-evident facts: no facts that are so
absolute that they will be interpreted by all observers in the same way. Instead, facts acquire meaning because the observer gives them meaning through some theoretical framework.

The need for a better understanding of political transition, especially international political transition, was well set forth by Wilbert Moore in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*: "Paradoxically, as the rate of social change has accelerated in the real world of experience, the scientific disciplines dealing with man's actions and products have tended to emphasize orderly interdependence and static continuity." (Moore 1968).

It is worth noting, as Joseph Schumpeter pointed out, that the natural development of any science is from static analysis to dynamic analysis (Schumpeter 1954). Static theory is simpler, and its proposition are easier to prove. Unfortunately, until the static of a field of inquiry are sufficiently well developed and one has a good grasp of repetitive processes and recurrent phenomena, it is difficult to proceed to the study of dynamics. From this perspective, systematic study of international relations is a young field. The question whether or not our current understanding of these static aspects is sufficiently well advanced to aid in the development of a dynamic theory poses a serious challenge to the present enterprise.

In the present study we take a very different stance, a stance based on the assumption that the fundamental nature of international relations has not changed over a millenia. International relations continue to be a recurring struggle for power and wealth among independent actors in an anarchical society. The classic history of Thucydides is as meaningful a guide to the behaviour of states today as when it was written in the fifth century B.C. Yet important
changes have taken place.

The purpose of this study is to explore these changes, especially in the post-cold War era. In this endeavour we shall seek to develop an understanding of causal dynamics of international systemic transition. We do not pretend to develop a general theory of international relations that will provide an overarching explanatory statement. Instead, we attempt to provide a framework for thinking about international systemic transition and its causal determinants. This theoretical-intellectual framework is intended to be an analytical device that will help to order and explain the present developments as also be a guiding construct of analysis and foresight of the past and future respectively. However, it does not constitute a rigorous scientific explanation of systemic transition at the international level. The ideas on this transition presented in this study are based on observations of historical experience rather than a set of hypotheses that have been tested scientifically by historical evidence; they are proposed as a plausible account of how international systemic transition occurs.¹

2.1 : The Nature of the International System

The term "international system" has a number of ambiguities. It can cover a range of phenomena from sporadic contacts among states to the tightly interlocked relationships of late-nineteenth-century Europe. Until the modern era, there was no single international system, but rather several international systems, with little or no contact one with another. Thus, except for the modern world, one cannot really speak of the international system.

In this study the term "international system" is used to refer to the
compartmentalized systems of the past, as well as the worldwide system of the present era. The definition of international system as used here is adapted from the definition used by Robert Mundell and Alexander Swoboda: “A system is an aggregation of diverse entities united by regular interaction according to a form of control!” (Mundell and Swoboda 1969). According to this formulation, an international system has three primary aspects. In the first place, there are the “diverse entities”, which may be processes, structures, actors, or even attributes of actors. Second, the system is characterized by “regular interaction”, which can vary on a continuum from infrequent contacts to intense interdependence of states, with a number of vicissitudes in-between. Third, there is some “form of control” that regulates behaviour and may range from informal rules of the system to formal institutions. Furthermore, by implication, the system must have boundaries that set it apart from other systems and its larger environment. Let us consider each of these aspects in little more detail.

2.2.1: Diverse entities

As noted earlier, the principal entities or actors are states, although other actors of transnational nature may also play important roles under certain sets of circumstances. But these roles, in the ultimate analysis, can be explained only in the terms of subtle state control mechanisms. The nature of state itself also changes over time, and the character of the international system is largely determined by the type of state-actor: city-states, empires, nation-states, etc.

2.2.2: Regular interactions

Every international system is characterized by various types of in-
teractions among its constituent elements. The nature, regularity, and intensity of these interactions vary greatly for different international system with different influential determinants. The interactions among the actors in the system may range from intermittent armed conflict to the high levels of economic, political, strategic, and cultural interdependence of the modern world. All these and many other aspects of interactions and relationship constitute the functioning of the international system.

In the modern world, these interactions among states have become increasingly intense and organized, principally because of revolutionary advances in the transportation and communications which tend to transform the world into a global-town. International transactions and relationships are governed by and large through formally agreed norms and rules, or conventions and customs. In particular, economic interdependence, or what may be called the pattern of international distribution of global resources has evolved as one of the most important feature of the international system in the contemporary world. The evolution and functioning of the pattern of international distribution of global resources have become critical aspects of the process of the international systemic transition.

2.2.3 : Form of control

Undoubtedly, the most controversial aspect of the definition of the term "international system" as used in this study is the notion of control over the system. A view prevalent among many scholars of international relations is that the essence of international relations is precisely the absence of control. International politics, in contrast to domestic politics, is said to take place in a condition of anarchy. There is no authority or control over the behaviour of the actors, and
many writers believe that it is a contradiction in terms to speak of control over the international system. Because of the importance of this issue as one of the central themes of the argument of this study it requires a little more extended treatment than the other aspects of the international system.

Although the international system is one of anarchy (i.e., absence of formal governmental authority), the relationships among states have a high degree of order and the system does exercise an element of control over behaviour of states (Bull 1977, Young 1978). However, the nature and extent of this control differ from the nature and extent of the control that domestic societies exercise over the behaviour of individuals. Yet it is possible to identify similarities in the control mechanisms of domestic systems and international system as shown in the following table.

**Table 1: Mechanisms of control**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domestic</th>
<th>International</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Dominance of great powers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>Hierarchy of prestige</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property rights</td>
<td>Division of territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Rules of the system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic economy</td>
<td>International economy</td>
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</table>

When we speak of “control” over the international system, the term “control” must be understood as “relative control” and “seeking to control” or at the least “seeking to influence”. No state or empire has ever completely controlled an international system; for that matter,
no domestic government, not even the most totalitarian, has completely controlled the domestic society. The degree of control obviously differs also in various aspects of international relations and over time (Keohane and Nye, p.31). If a state or a group of states were \textit{completely} in control of a domestic or international society, change could not take place. Indeed, it is precisely because a number of varied forces escape the control of dominant groups and states that transition - be it domestic or international - does take place.

Control or influence over the international system is a function of three factors. In the first place, governance of the system rests on the distribution of power among political coalitions. In domestic societies these coalitions are primarily classes, strata, or interest groups, and the distribution of power among these entities is a principal aspect of the governance of domestic societies. In international society the configuration of power among states determines who governs the international system, how and for what.

The second component in the control of an international system is the hierarchy of prestige among states. In international relations, prestige is the functional equivalent of the role of authority in domestic politics. Like the concept of authority, prestige is closely linked to but is distinct from the concept of power. As defined by Max Weber, power is the capability of an actor within a social relationship to carry out his own will despite resistance and regardless of the basis on which his capability rests. Authority (or prestige) is the "probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons" (Dahrendorf 1959,p.166). Thus, both power and prestige function to ensure that the lesser states in the system will obey the commands of or be influenced by the dominant state or states.
Prestige, rather than power, is the everyday currency of international relations, much as authority is the central ordering feature of domestic society. As E.H. Carr put it, "prestige is enormously important," because "if your strength is recognized, you can generally achieve your aims without having to use it" (quoted in Wight 1979, p.98). It is for this reason that in the conduct of diplomacy and the resolution of conflicts among states there is actually relatively little use of overt force. Rather, the bargaining among states and the outcomes of negotiations are determined principally by the relative prestige of the parties involved. But behind such negotiations there is the implicit mutual recognition that deadlock at the bargaining table could lead to a decision on the battlefield, not necessarily physical but even psychological (Kissinger 1961, p.170).

In addition to the configuration of power and the hierarchy of prestige, the third component of the governance of an international system is a set of right and rules that govern or at least influence the interactions among states (Hoffman 1965).

As far back as our knowledge extends, states have recognized certain rules of the system. These rules have ranged from simple understandings regarding spheres of influence, conduct of diplomacy and commerce to the elaborate codification of international law in our own era.

Every system of human interaction requires a minimum set of rules and the mutual recognition of rights. The need for rules and rights arises from the basic human condition of scarcity of material resources and the need for order in human affairs. In order to minimize conflict over the distribution of scarce goods and to facilitate fruitful interactions among individuals, every social system creates
It is obvious that international transitions can be and are of varying degrees of magnitude and that individuals may place quite different weights on their significance. For example, throughout the history of European diplomacy there was a continuous succession of differing configuration of power, a variety of actors, and changing memberships of political alliances. Because these transitions were of differing magnitudes, theorists have the task of classifying them before formulating a theory to explain them. Thus, whereas Arthur Burns regarded many of these transitions, such as the emergence of revolutionary France and the Bismark's unifications of Germany in 1871, as merely modifications within the European State System (Burns 1968), Richard Rosecrance classified them as transition of the international system itself (Rosecrance 1963).

Although a typology of transitions is largely an arbitrary matter, the classification used must be a function of one's theory of transition and of one's own definition of the entity that changes. Thus, in this study we draw on our earlier definition of an international system to distinguish three broad types of transition characteristic of international system as presented in the following Table 2.

Table 2: Types of International Transitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Factors that change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Interaction Transition</td>
<td>Interstate Processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. System Transition</td>
<td>Nature of Actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Systemic Transition</td>
<td>Governance of System</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first type of transition that may take place is in the form of a change in the form of regular interactions or processes among the entities in an international system; this type of transition may be called *Interaction Transition*. The second type of transition is a transition in the nature of the actors and/or diverse entities that compose an international system, this type of transition may be called *System Transition*. The third type of transition is a transition in the form of control or governance of an international system, this type of transition may be called *Systemic Transition*. The following elaboration should make the distinction between these transition more clear.

### 3.2.1 : Interaction transition

By interaction transition, we mean modifications in the political, economic, and other interactions or processes among actors in international system. Whereas this type of transition does not involve a change in the overall hierarchy of power and prestige in the system, it usually does entail changes in the rights and rules embodied in an international system. However, it should be noted that interaction transition do frequently result from the efforts of states or other actors to accelerate or forestall more fundamental changes in an international system (Keohane and Nye 1977).

### 3.2.2 : System transition

System transition involves a major change in the character of the international system itself. By the character of the system, we refer primarily to the nature of the principal actors or diverse entities composing the system. The character of international system is identified by its most prominent entities: empires, nation states, or multinational corporations. The rise and decline of various types of entities and state systems must of necessity be a fundamental concern.
of a comprehensive theory of international transition. To study such transitions properly and systematically would necessitate a truly comparative study of international relations and systems.

3.2.3 : Systemic transition

It is with this type of transition that we are fundamentally concerned in the present study.

Systemic transition involves a change in the governance of an international system. That is to say, it is a change within the system rather than a change of the system itself. It entails three fundamental changes in the international system: change in the international configuration of power, change in the capability of major international actors, and change in the pattern of international resource and wealth distribution. Thus, whereas the focus of system transition is the rise and decline of state systems, the focus of systemic transition is the rise and decline of determining construct that govern the particular international system.

The theoretical framework to understand international systemic transition as developed here, rests on the assumption that the history of international system is the history of systemic conflict among the dominant actors, waged under determining influence of the three constructs, as spelt herebefore, that govern the particular international system and provide order and stability as an equilibrium attained out of systemic conflict. We shall argue that the evolution of any system has been characterized by these three determining constructs that govern the system and shape the patterns of international interactions by establishing the rules of the system. Thus, the essence of international systemic transition involves a change in the determining constructs that govern the system and its conflict to
reach a new state of equilibrium for attaining order in the international system. The following diagram shows the structure and interrelationship of determining constructs of systemic environment vis-a-vis systemic order.

Diagram 1: Determinants of Systemic Transition

Although scholars of international relations, and diplomatic historians have devoted considerable attention to this type of transition, seldom have they addressed the problem of systemic transition in a systematic, comparative, or theoretical vein; rather, most of these studies have tended to be historical or descriptive. There is a need for a comparative study of international systems that concentrates on systemic transition in different types of international system.
Such a comparative examination is obviously beyond the scope of this study. At best, this study may succeed in presenting a better understanding of the nature and process of the post-Cold War international systemic transition as a historical process and point the way to empirical studies of transition on a comparative scale. If so, the purpose of our humble endeavours will have been fulfilled.

Note
1. However, in principle these ideas are translatable into specific testable hypotheses. At least we would argue that this is possible for a substantial fraction of them. The carrying out of this task, or part of it, is intended to be taken up later as post-doctoral research theme.
References


