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THE HYBRID ERA OF THE "RETURN OF HISTORY": SYSTEMIC CHAOS, GRAY ZONES, AND CONNECTIVITY

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What History Returns?

In a speech delivered to the Senate following the invasion of Ukraine by Russian armed forces, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi acknowledged that a long political era had definitively ended. The Kremlin's decision not only brought war back to Europe but also dispelled the illusion that economic integration could ensure a peaceful future. "The jungle of history is back," Draghi said. "Its vines seek to envelop the garden of peace in which we believed we lived." The image used by the Italian Prime Minister polemically evoked the thesis enunciated by Francis Fukuyama in 1989 that the "end of history" consisted of the victory achieved by liberal democracies over every alternative political ideology. More precisely, Draghi's words echoed a thesis that Robert Kagan had articulated almost fifteen years earlier. According to Kagan, the beginning of the new millennium dashed hopes for a freer and more peaceful world, bringing nationalist claims and the motives of old power politics back to the fore. Although the United States remained the world's sole superpower, the ambitions of old and new players were becoming increasingly relevant. "The order of today," Kagan wrote, "reflects the rising influence of the great powers, including the great power autocracies": "a multipolar world in which the poles are Russia, China, the United States, India, and Europe would produce its own kind of order, with different rules and norms reflecting the interests of the powerful states that shaped it" (Kagan, 2008, p. 96).

While the events of the past fifteen years confirm that it is necessary, rather than simply legitimate, to recognize that "history is back," it is also essential to define how we understand the "return of history." That is, should we conceive history as a return to the nineteenth-century logic of power politics? Alternatively, should we view it as a return to the bipolar logic of the Cold War? Or, finally, should we view the return of history as leading us toward a premodern-like world? Although each of these hypotheses captures some element of global transformation, it is likely that each overlooks important aspects of the hybrid era we are experiencing. In this article, I suggest that to reconstruct the physiognomy of the new "regime of war" (Hardt & Mezzadra, 2024), it is necessary to recognize that old and new elements combine, drawing a hybrid picture that increasingly challenges the classical distinction between war and peace.

Hegemony and Chaos

Interpretations that see the return of history to today's changing international system can be traced, with many simplifications, to two main patterns. The first key interpretation focuses on the idea that a *hegemonic transition* is taking place today, similar to the transitions that have marked the history of the modern international system in the past. In this case, the returning history resembles the historical clashes clash between Athens and Sparta for hegemony over the Greek world, or the transition of power from Britain to the United States. A second line of interpretation believes that after a brief interlude of a 'unipolar moment,' the international system tends to become multipolar again. In other words, according to these interpretations, new 'great powers' are emerging today, each of which has substantial material resources and ambitions for prestige, making the system once again, as it was before 1914, a m*ultipolar system*. The way the new arrangement is viewed, however, varies considerably, with significant consequences for what we should expect from the behaviour of states.

Regarding the first group of explanations (*hegemonic transitio*n), an important difference lies in the way hegemony is understood. For Robert Gilpin, for example, hegemony is primarily about material factors and, thus, a position of dominance in political, economic, and military power (Gilpin, 1987). For Joseph Nye, it includes not only hard power but also soft power, that is, cultural power that relates to values and world views (Nye, 2004). According to world-system theory, hegemony has economic roots and political–ideological expressions, making a hegemonic state the pivot of the system at a given historical moment (Palano, 2021). According to Giovanni Arrighi, for example, a state may become world hegemonic "because it can credibly claim to be the motor force of a general expansion of the collective power of rulers vis-à-vis subjects." Alternatively,

"a state may become world hegemonic if it can credibly claim that the expansion of its power, relative to some or even all other states, serves the general interest of the subjects of all states" (Arrighi, 2010, p. 30–31). In other words, the would-be hegemon must demonstrate an ability to collectively lead and offer solutions to the system's problems.

Despite differences in how hegemony is understood, interpretations adopting this focus agree that contemporary instability is a consequence of the decline of the U.S.'s hegemony. Specifically, according to the theory of hegemonic cycles, each major hegemonic season is marked primarily by a long phase of rise, victory, maturity, and finally, an equally long phase of decline. In the maturity phase, the hegemon has no challengers. In the rise phase, it must face the previous hegemon. In the decline phase, the hegemonic state must take a defensive stance against potential challengers. According to Arrighi, for example, modern history has been marked by three great hegemonic seasons, dominated by the Netherlands, Great Britain, and the United States, respectively. These historical examples show that hegemonic crises are characterized by the intertwining of three processes: the intensification of competition between states and businesses, the rise of social conflicts, and the emergence of new power configurations. Financial expansion is an integral aspect of the hegemonic crisis and is connected to the explosion of *systemic chaos*: a situation in which conflicts develop beyond the system's ability to regulate them (Arrighi & Silvers 1999).

Over the past two decades, many signs suggest that the hypothesis of the decline of American hegemony should be taken seriously and remains an important factor in interpreting change. In the new century, the United States, itself, began to undermine the foundations of the liberal international order it had built after World War II. First, the "global war on terror" declared by Washington, D.C., after September 11, 2001, distanced the United States from Europe, weakening multilateralism. Second, after the 2008 crisis, during the Obama administration, the U.S. began to adopt protectionist measures designed to preserve certain sectors of the manufacturing industry from foreign competition. These measures ran counter to the free trade principles upon which the architecture of the liberal international order was built. The tariff war declared by Trump further signalled a break with the past, which was only partially remedied by Biden (Lucarelli, 2020; Palano, 2019). Finally, Uncle Sam's 'muscles' seem to have atrophied. The hard power on which Washington could rely—and still relies on today—has not lived up to the ambitions of the global superpower, especially regarding military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Starting with the Obama presidency, Washington began to scale back its commitments abroad, reducing its presence in the Middle East and preferring to focus on 'covert operations' and high-tech wars rather than ground wars. During the

Trump presidency, this trend continued, coupled with a more explicit abandonment of multilateralism (Parsi, 2021).

According to some scholars, the decline of the American hegemony tends to replay the classic 'Thucydides trap' (Allison, 2018). In other words, these hypotheses suggest that we are heading toward a hegemonic transition, in which the declining power of the United States will have to confront the rising power of Beijing. In schematic terms, according to these interpretations, in the descending phase of hegemony, power is less concentrated in the hands of the strongest power. Consequently, the hegemon is less able to play the role of the guarantor of order, as it is no longer willing to bear the costs involved. Although such a transition may still be far off, the perception of this scenario as realistic changes the behaviour of the system's actors, increasing instability and multiplying the risks of war. The two major powers begin to distrust each other's intentions, creating a climate of uncertainty about their medium- and long-term goals and fuelling competitive drives. Challengers can demonstrate their disobedience to the hegemon without facing significant sanctions. This scenario finds numerous confirmations in the political events of recent years. On the Middle East front, successive crises since 2011 have witnessed increased activism by both U.S. allies, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and competitors, such as Iran and Moscow. Israel's reaction after the October 7, 2023, attacks also illustrated the Israeli government's autonomy from Washington's directives.

Scholars understand hegemony in various ways, and their predictions do not point in the same direction. Nonetheless, the signs of the attrition of America's hegemony are quite evident. The dynamics of global politics following the 2008 crisis exhibit all the elements that Arrighi perceives as characteristic of a phase of systemic chaos: the intensification of competition between states and corporations, the rise of social conflicts, and the emergence of new power configurations. Therefore, from the 'return of history,' we should expect what accompanies every hegemonic transition: a growth of conflict and, ultimately, a general war, similar to those from which the Dutch, British, and American hegemonies emerged in the past.

A Crowded World

A second major interpretative line argues that the 'return of history' is leading us toward a multipolar order similar to that experienced by Europe before World War I. In other words, it is believed that the unipolar moment is definitively closed and that new powers are emerging with growing power bases and claims for international recognition. The way this new order is envisioned, however, is quite varied. According to Amita Acharya, a 'multiplex world order' is taking shape, caused by the decline of America's hegemony.

Nevertheless, due to high economic integration, there will not be a return to power politics and violence (Acharya, 2018). Conversely, Charles Kupchan predicts that the international system of the 21st century will be 'multipolar' (or even 'a-polar'), with each of the major regional powers of the future—likely including China, the United States, Russia, Japan, India, South Africa, Brazil, and Turkey—bringing its own concept of what constitutes a 'legitimate' international order (Kupchan, 2012). From a realist perspective, other scholars believe that the system is becoming multipolar, leading to increased instability in alliances and greater insecurity. As early as 1990, John J. Mearsheimer predicted that the end of the bipolar confrontation between the USA and the USSR would return the Old Continent to its pre-1914 condition, characterized by balance-of-power logic and rivalry among European powers (Mearsheimer, 1990). Similar to all multipolar systems, the new European order would be extremely unstable and far from immune to the risk of wars, with nuclear proliferation representing an especially insidious risk.

As Mearsheimer later highlighted, in addition to becoming multipolar, the international system is also breaking down into regional systems, with the United States acting as an external balancer. According to Mearsheimer, the most dangerous front would be in the Asia–Pacific region. He believes that China will seek to become a hegemon in Asia and impose a Monroe Doctrine-like control over the region. This will inevitably lead to friction with the United States, particularly over the control of the South China Sea and Taiwan's sovereignty. Faced with this scenario, Mearsheimer argues that the United States should abandon the unattainable dream of global hegemony and focus on containing China's rise (Mearsheimer, 2014, 2018). According to a similar perspective, Andrew J. Bacevich has argued that the US should follow the advice George Kennan formulated in 1948: "avoid needless war, fulfil the promises in the country's founding documents and provide ordinary citizens with the prospect of a decent life" (Bacevich, 2023, p. 21).

Beyond the outcomes of the US–China confrontation, the shift toward a multipolar order triggers a series of behaviours that are not difficult to recognize in recent trends. First, the perception that power balances are changing drives actors (especially emerging ones) to distrust others' intentions and seek recognition as regional powers. Second, alliances become less stable, contributing to increased imbalance and insecurity. Finally, the very rules of international law and principles of legitimacy become subjects of contestation, particularly the rules on the legitimacy of using force to resolve international disputes. The most glaring manifestation of this uncertainty regarding rules and fundamental principles is evident in the constant controversy over 'double standards,' highlighting

the contradiction between condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the lack of Western condemnation for the Western military intervention in Kosovo, the US attack on Iraq during the Second Gulf War, or the massacre of the Gaza population (Baccelli, 2023; Colombo, 2022).

According to the hypotheses of a transition toward multipolarity, the 'return of history' appears as a return to the logics that preceded World War I. In short, in a world crowded with great powers, it becomes more difficult to "calculate" and predict rivals' behaviour. This contributes to increased overall insecurity and triggers the classic 'security dilemma,' pushing states to distrust others and strengthen their defences (Herz, 1959). Alliances also become more unstable, and there is an increasing tendency for states to 'offload' the costs of interventions to sanction rights violations onto others. Finally, uncertainty also affects the rules and principles of legitimacy that underpin the system, as they are subject to constant interpretative conflicts, primarily concerning the very legitimacy of resorting to armed violence.

Although very different, the war in Ukraine and Israel's massive retaliation after the Hamas terrorist attack can be interpreted as striking manifestations of the instability of the contemporary international system and its 'breakdown' into regional systems. Indeed, Russia's aggression can be explained as the consequence of a misinterpretation regarding the reaction of the United States and NATO. In other words, the Kremlin might have expected the Western states to 'pass the buck' and not rush to Ukraine's rescue, as had happened in Georgia in 2008 and with the annexation of Crimea and Donbass in 2014. However, in this case, the West's reaction changed the picture and thwarted Russian plans (Baev, 2022).

The Israeli retaliation against Gaza has deep roots, as it is the latest episode in the long conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. However, the Hamas attack and Israel's retaliation fit into a scenario where the effects of the transition to multipolarity and the 'decomposition' of the global system into regional systems have been evident for years (Colombo, 2010). Indeed, since 2008, the relative disengagement of the United States from the Middle East has favoured the rise of new powers and the loosening of existing alliances. Powers such as Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, as well as Russia and medium-sized powers like Qatar, have since 2011 engaged in conflicts to assert their roles in the region, mainly by supporting non-regular armed forces. Israel is at the centre of a shifting web of alliances and balances between states in the Middle East, as evidenced by the Abraham Accords which, prior to the October 7 Hamas attack, were expected to eventually lead to normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia (Hokayem, 2023; Sternfeld, 2024). In this case, the 'strategic calculation' about its

security proved incorrect. Moreover, the reaction of the Israeli government once again highlights the backwardness of the United States, which seemed unable to moderate its Israeli ally. "The sprawling competition between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War generated serial proxy wars, each one devastating in its own way," as Michael Kimmage and Hanna Notte have written. However, "great-power distraction is starting to look more like a collective curse," because the power vacuum is proliferating in Asia, the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus, where "middle powers and local actors are exerting themselves more and more boldly" (Kimmage & Notte, 2023). The shift toward a multipolar international system and the fragmentation of the global order into competing regional systems tend thus to increase insecurity, instability, 'buck-passing,' and volatile alliances.

A Hybrid Era

The interpretations we have briefly examined in the previous pages undoubtedly capture some relevant aspects of the ongoing transition and are very useful for explaining some aspects of the crisis. The signs of the decline of America's hegemony are too evident to be denied, not only because the rise of Chinese power has taken on a military profile in the past decade, but also because the United States truly appears to be a 'dysfunctional' superpower (Gates, 2023), grappling with a strong internal sociopolitical crisis. This makes the idea of reviving its ambitions as a global policeman less credible and makes the scenario of a gradual retreat toward domestic issues likelier. At the same time, the interpretations that observe signs of a transition toward a multipolar system grasp the novelty of a world that is already "post-Western." However, both readings tend to underestimate two aspects, which should lead us to recognize in the 'return of history' a hybrid phase, combining innovative elements and older trends.

The first problematic element particularly concerns interpretations that attribute contemporary instability to the decline of US hegemony and view it as the announcement of a hegemonic transition. Various theories of hegemony, as partially discussed, interpret the history of the modern international system as marked by major hegemonic phases whose conclusion coincides with a general war involving all actors of the system and defining the foundations of the international order. Although apocalyptic drifts cannot be ruled out, we know well that, after 1945, the prospect of a general war became highly unlikely due to the potential destructiveness of a large-scale nuclear conflict. The fact that actors consider resorting to nuclear arsenals as an extreme eventuality makes it largely improbable that the hegemonic transition could be decided by the outcome of a general war, similar to those from which the Dutch, British, and American hegemonies emerged. The highly

improbable nature of a general war could prolong and deepen systemic chaos, increasing instability, overall insecurity, and fuelling internal conflicts within states.

Naturally, the fact that a general war is considered by actors as an extreme eventuality does not mean that states will renounce the use of armed violence. Even during the bipolar era, the impossibility of a general war did not make the world more peaceful, but rather pushed the two superpowers to engage in a series of peripheral conflicts, to fuel proxy wars, and to use political warfare tools aimed at weakening the rival. Indeed, the Cold War's equilibrium pushed the USA and the USSR to develop instruments that did not imply direct confrontation with the rival, but rather the use of intimidation and deterrence, pervasive propaganda, psychological operations, and covert operations. Even today, the use of nuclear arsenals represents the last resort, although after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the threat of resorting to nuclear weapons has been explicitly stated on various occasions by Putin and Russian leaders. Moreover, the conflicts fought in the twenty-first century reveal that the use of weapons, even in the presence of a significant resource imbalance, cannot guarantee an easy victory. Despite the apparent discontinuity represented by 1989, the transformations of the last thirty years seem to go in a direction similar to that of the Cold War. In the unipolar context, the asymmetry of military resources pushed the challengers of the United States to use offensive tools other than traditional warfare, consisting of cyberwar actions, disinformation, destabilization, and terrorism. Simultaneously, after the Desert Storm operation in Iraq, the United States radically rethought its modalities of military interventions, orienting toward the use of highly technological tools that avoided the deployment of substantial ground troops. Both on the American side and on the part of Washington's challengers, attention then turned to 'hybrid warfare' or, more precisely, to that 'grey zone' between peace and war, which comprises the use of offensive tools aimed at striking an adversary, without these interventions being interpretable as actual offensive actions or clearly attributable to a sovereign state (Friedman, 2018; Galeotti, 2022). Political warfare is not a novel phenomenon in the hybrid age, as it is an inheritance from the Cold War and the ideological conflict between the Eastern and Western blocs. However, what sets apart today's political warfare is that systemic disorder cannot be rectified through a full-scale war, and the world is no longer bifurcated into opposing camps but is interconnected by robust economic and technological networks.

The second component of the hybrid era in which we are living concerns indeed the connectivity of the system. While the hypotheses of a transition toward multipolarism capture the reality of the power redistribution process, it currently seems unlikely that decoupling and the formation of large blocs could substantially undermine the connect-

ed world that the unipolar moment and globalization have left us. The realization of the world market that in the 1990s had suggested the image of an ancient empire did not produce a long imperial peace (Hardt & Negri, 2000). Nonetheless, it has built a structurally interdependent space where new conflicts, the ambitions of emerging powers, and the fears of the declining hegemon find their place. As Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman argue, in today's interdependent world, it is possible to recognize a network topology that "generates enduring power imbalances among states" (2019, p. 45). Moreover, these asymmetries "create the potential for 'weaponized interdependence,' in which some states are able to leverage interdependent relations to coerce others" (Farrell & Newman, 2019, p. 45). In other words, since it is not possible to radically renounce interdependence, states try to move in the direction of derisking, limiting their vulnerability (Farrell & Newman, 2023). Meanwhile, they exploit interdependence to their advantage, using it as a weapon to weaken their rivals. In an era where open warfare is a card that cannot be played as easily as in the past, conflicts take place in the realm of 'connectivity.' As Mark Leonard argues, new conflicts do not occur on the battlefield or in the skies but on the internet, at border controls, in technology, in supply chains, and in the financial system (Leonard, 2021). In an interdependent world where aspiring hegemons cannot confront each other in the field, conflicts multiply and extend the 'grey zone' between peace and war, an area where there is no real war but no real peace: a zone where, as Lucas Kello has defined it referring to internet disorder, 'unpeace' reigns (Kello, 2017; Leonard, 2019).

The war in Ukraine shows us a traditional conflict, seemingly distant from 'hybrid wars.' However, even in this conflict—in its development and in its outbreak—hybrid elements have been present. Beyond this, Ukrainian resistance has depicted how adequate technological equipment can allow even a relatively marginal country to long withstand what was considered one of the most efficient and best-prepared armies. Similar conclusions are suggested by the outcome of the occupation of Afghanistan, which ended after two decades and enormous financial and human costs with substantial failure.

Quite different from the war in Ukraine, the Israeli retaliation against Gaza is a classic example of asymmetric warfare, in which the armed forces of a sovereign state fight against irregular forces, also striking civilian targets. In this case, military violence is exercised in a striking manner, seemingly distinct from those of connectivity conflicts. However, this contemporary crisis is the latest episode in a long phase of instability, where the major powers in the area have used and continue to use grey areas and the weaponization of connectivity to weaken adversaries. Attacks by Iranian state-sponsored hackers, piracy by the Houthi rebels in the Red Sea, the destabilizing

role of Hezbollah in the region, and the weaponization of refugee flows as a means of pressure are just a few examples of how connectivity conflicts and information warfare can intertwine with and exacerbate actual armed violence in the Middle East (Krieg 2024). The expression 'hybrid warfare' is very general, but contemporary wars are in many ways hybrid wars, because they combine military and non-military tools. While actors tend to avoid direct armed confrontation and aim to manipulate the behaviour of rivals primarily through the weaponization of connectivity, in a context of general uncertainty, 'miscalculations' are always possible. It is by no means excluded that the grey zone may turn out to be a zone of real war.

By other means

In these pages, I have attempted to identify key elements of the hybrid era we are living in. As discussed, this era is termed 'hybrid' because it blends old and new elements. The 'return of history' can be partially understood as the resurgence of systemic chaos that accompanies power transitions between hegemonic states. However, the destructive potential of nuclear weapons makes the prospect of large-scale warfare unlikely and extremely risky, causing systemic chaos to become a more structural phenomenon. Simultaneously, signs of a transition to a new multipolar system are evident today, leading to increased insecurity, instability, and the risk of armed conflict. The experiences of 21st-century wars, beginning with Afghanistan, will likely encourage China and the U.S. to avoid direct military confrontation, instead opting for other means to assert their influence. In response to this climate of uncertainty, great powers are striving (and will continue to strive) to reduce their vulnerabilities. However, the decoupling hypothesis remains highly unlikely at present, as does the formation of 'closed blocs' similar to those of the Cold War. The world remains interconnected through mercantile, financial, and communicative flows. Rather than severing interdependence, states are already seeking to use it as a tool for exerting non-military pressure. To avoid the costs and uncertainties of direct military interventions, states will aim to strengthen political warfare tools to weaken and destabilize rival states. At the same time, it is possible that Western states, in an effort to mitigate the risks of the 'grey zone,' may adopt approaches similar to those of China and Russia. After the 'colour revolutions' and the 'Arab Spring,' China and Russia began perceiving foreign influence behind every domestic protest, treating internal dissent as external threats (Leonard, 2021). The risk of the hybrid age is that the 'grey zone' will expand, legitimizing the use of hybrid warfare instruments against a broad range of 'hybrid enemies,' thereby blurring the line between peace and war and obscuring the distinction between armed conflicts and societal strife.

Half a century ago, in a series of lectures at the Collège de France that were recently published, Raymond Aron commented on Clausewitz's famous phrase that war is "the continuation of politics by other means." Aron urged the lecture's attendees to distinguish well between internal political conflicts and the armed violence specific to war (Aron, 2023). In those same years and in the same classrooms of the Collège de France, Michel Foucault invited the audience of his lectures to overturn Clausewitz's maxim, recognizing that, to decipher power strategies, it was necessary to see politics as "the continuation of war by other means" (2023). Both Aron's admonition and Foucault's provocation remain fundamental pieces of the twentieth-century discussion on the transformations of enmity and continue to provide important insights (Antoniol, 2023). In the hybrid era of the new regime of war—a time when systemic chaos seems to become structural, where the 'grey zone' between war and peace grows, and where interdependence and connectivity are used as weapons to weaken adversaries—politics does indeed seem to become the continuation of war by other means. The space of this social conflict risks being crushed within the logic of war.

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