

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

**American Global Pre-Eminence: The Development and Erosion of Systemic Leadership.** By William R. Thompson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 286p. \$110.00 cloth, \$32.99 paper.

**Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders.** By Ayşe Zarakol. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 313p. \$34.99 paper.  
doi:10.1017/S1537592724000306

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The rise and fall of great powers, and their association with world order, has been studied by political scientists since the 1950s, and this topic has been undergoing a renaissance with the current challenges faced by the United States and the threats to liberal international order. Two remarkable books, one by William R. Thompson and the other by Ayşe Zarakol, look back in time to show us the future by contributing to and advocating for a more inclusive approach, although in different ways.

William Thompson asks how and why the United States achieved and maintained a predominant position in world affairs after 1945 and what factors are now contributing to its relative decline. Mixing historical analysis and international relations (IR) theory, he chronicles the rise and gradual decline of the United States as a “system leader.” He argues that the United States’ position of dominance, particularly after World War II, was a product of its material wealth and reflected systemic conditions. This dominance is now facing challenges due to a combination of domestic factors, political dysfunction, economic decline, and external factors, including the rise of other global powers.

This impressive book reflects Thompson’s extensive work on the subject and addresses new challenges like COVID-19 and political polarization while engaging siloed theoretical outlooks. He bridges the gap between otherwise compartmentalized theories such as power transition, long cycle, hegemony, and unipolarity. A system leadership long-cycle perspective is still clearly present in his analysis: great powers follow a cyclical pattern characterized by the ascent, supremacy, and decline of leading powers driven by technological breakthroughs, economic command, and naval superiority. These cycles include periods of intense global conflict marked by power transitions and the emergence of new leaders. He offers a detailed examination of the last 500 years, focusing on successive system leaders like Portugal, the Netherlands, Britain, and the United States.

The United States’ ascent to global dominance was the result of strategic vision, economic strength, and technological vigor culminating in an ability to steward a new

international order. Industrial and innovative surges during the world wars fueled the transition from British to American leadership, highlighting the capacity of transformative periods to reshape the global hierarchy and chart the course of history. The analysis reveals striking statistics, such as the US production of nearly 80% of World War II’s petroleum and military trucks, its lead in Nobel prizes, and the dominance of US tech giants by 2018, showcasing its comprehensive rise to global economic power.

Thompson takes on the way unipolarity is studied and views post-Cold War unipolarity as a transient, overstated condition, disregarding the complexity of global power dynamics, the relative decline of US influence, and the rise of other significant global powers. Decline instead stems from the weakening of the core attributes that define a system leader—technological innovation, resource use, economic dominance, and naval power—which reduces its ability to set trends, lead in global commerce, project power, and influence global norms and practices. This erosion paves the way for a power shift in the global hierarchy, as new states rise to prominence.

Adaptation exists within this historical pattern along with the ability to hasten or postpone the inevitable reckoning. A state’s grand strategy varies over time and is a function of the capabilities available to solve internal and external challenges; it is contingent on advocacy by policy entrepreneurs who bridge the gap between the development of ideas (microlevel) and their broad-scale implementation (macrolevel). However, the line between policy entrepreneurship and leadership blurs when examining President Roosevelt’s tactics in domestic and international affairs to promote a global agenda. His ability to use opportunities, rally support, and alter policy directions seems inseparable from his authoritative position.

Diverging from systemic leadership long-cycle theory, Thompson predicts a Sino-American stalemate, emphasizing the geographical context of the rivalry and a prolonged balance of power, rather than a clear transition to another system leader. The historical world orders informing predictions of a potentially multipolar future world order are Western-centric, a perspective directly countered by Zarakol’s book.

Ayşe Zarakol’s outstanding book challenges Eurocentric views of international relations by reimagining world orders and sovereignty through an Asian and Eurasian lens. Advocating for a more inclusive and global historical approach, she emphasizes the need to recognize diverse forms of political authority and relations that have existed historically outside Europe. Her argument is supported by a detailed examination of the influence of the Mongol Empire, Chinggisid, Timurid, and Ming world orders and their aftermath.

A major contribution of the book lies in illustrating the context-dependent nature of Westphalian sovereignty. The Genghis Khan, or Chinggisid, model of sovereignty, derives from the ruler's personal authority and is validated by conquests and claims of universal rule in a geographical and culturally fluid world order. This authority, often legitimized through conquest, encompassed not just territorial control but also a broader claim to universal sovereignty. Contrary to the European reliance on religious and customary law, Chinggisid rulers held extensive, independent lawmaking powers. Zarakol offers a detailed examination of the Mongol Empire's administrative and governance strategies, such as the Yasa code and the Yam system, that provided the foundation for the innovative and influential aspects of Mongol rule. The Yasa code offered a unified legal framework, whereas the Yam system ensured that messages and goods were properly dispatched across large distances. Chinggisid rule was characterized by significant cultural and religious tolerance, allowing diverse practices under centralized governance. This concept of sovereignty challenges the Eurocentric narrative in IR, highlighting the importance of recognizing diverse historical experiences in understanding global political dynamics. The possibility of influence and control beyond physical borders points to the significance of soft power, the economic and cultural connections in determining a state's global standing. By acknowledging the historical validity of the Chinggisid model, a more inclusive and expansive view of global politics is encouraged that moves beyond the conventional Eurocentric framework to encompass a broader spectrum of political structures and concepts.

Another significant contribution lies in demonstrating the interconnectedness of Eurasian history, emphasizing how the Mongol Empire facilitated extensive cultural, economic, and political exchange across vast distances, thereby transforming the societies it ruled. The Mongol Empire had a significant influence on subsequent Asian empires including the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals, and affected Europe's political evolution as well. Zarakol shows how the sixteenth-century world order was shaped by the post-Timurid empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals. These empires shared a cultural and political heritage rooted in the Timurid and Chinggisid models of universal sovereignty and competed for the title of *sahibkiran* (world conqueror). Their competition, informed by shared norms and practices, reinforced a world order based on premises ranging from political theology to artistic preferences. This period marked a unique intersection of military might, cultural richness, and spiritual authority, underpinning a shared *ecumene* from the Middle East to South Asia.

The influence of Chinggisid sovereignty in the sixteenth century was pivotal in shaping the course of

world politics. The Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals, all seeking to emulate the universal empire ideals of Chinggisid and Timurid legacies, dominated vast regions spanning from Western Europe and North Africa to East Asia. Collectively, these empires governed a significant portion of the world's population and controlled major economic resources and trade routes. Their dominance represented an Asia-centric world order, where the Chinggisid principles of leadership and governance continued to resonate and guide political ambitions. This was a historical moment where the global balance of power and the direction of globalization could have significantly diverged from the Eurocentric path it eventually took, showcasing the profound impact of Chinggisid norms on global history. Contrary to traditional readings of their historical trajectories, the decline of this world order in the seventeenth century resulted not from linear decay but from complex processes of internal restructuring and external challenges.

The book's major advantage is simultaneously its disadvantage. Arabs are effectively erased from this historiography, missing an opportunity for historically relevant inclusiveness. The influence of Muslims is recognized, but the specific contributions of the Arab world are not, distorting the historical narrative. The Arab world was not just a part of the Islamic cultural sphere but was also a principal architect of many facets of Islamic civilization. During the medieval period, Arab scholars gathered at Baghdad's House of Wisdom before it was destroyed during the Mongol invasion in 1258. These Arab thinkers pioneered advancements in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, and medicine, laying down the foundational knowledge that would profoundly affect Islamic culture, including the Chinggisid dynasty. The sophisticated political and administrative systems of the Abbasid Caliphate, for example, were models for governance that influenced the administrative structures of the Chinggisid Empire, and Arabs contributed to Islamic jurisprudence, contract law, and banking. They also had an enormous impact on architecture, exemplified by intricate geometric designs and calligraphy within the Chinggisid realm. Arab traders were pivotal in the Silk Road, connecting the East and West, facilitating not just the trade of goods but also the exchange of ideas and culture. This trade and cultural exchange underpinned the economic and social policies within Chinggisid territories. Excluding the Arab dimension overlooks the nuanced interplay among different Islamic cultures and practices, which were essential in shaping the religious and intellectual milieu of Chinggisid rule. A comprehensive understanding of Chinggisid Eurasia requires recognizing the integral role of Arab contributions to its historical, political, and cultural landscape.

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This terrific book vividly illuminates how history can inform our understanding of our world, our future, and our theories, and it suggests the exciting possibility of even greater depth through further engagement with the “global

IR” literature. The larger project of historically informed, global, and inclusive international relations will reach its full maturity when one does not have to “be” something to recognize its significance.