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# World War I and IR Theory

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## ABSTRACT

*Although its origins can be traced back to the ancient world, it was World War I that provided the impetus and context for the emergence of modern international relations (IR) theory. The result was a community of IR theorists, scholars, and specialists dedicated to the study and formulation of responses to, the forces unleashed by the Great War that have shaped the world into the twenty-first century. This evolving context, which included events such as the emergence of the United States as a world power, World War II, the Cold War, the rise and fall of fascism and communism, new technologies, terrorism, ethno-religious wars, and the contending forces of globalization and nationalism, provided an abundant basis for IR theorizing. IR theories and approaches—realist, liberal, and constructivist—contain a rich vein of often-competing hypotheses, assumptions, research questions, and policy prescriptions about these and other phenomena for which World War I was the incubator and catalyst, and in whose shadow we live a century later.*

## INTRODUCTION

World War I and international relations (IR) theory are inextricably linked. One cannot understand the evolution of twentieth- and

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twenty-first-century IR theory in the absence of the Great War. Therefore, the one hundredth anniversary of the end of World War I provides an excellent vantage point from which to survey its impact on IR theory and

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the emergence of international relations as an academic discipline with its own literature and community of specialists, drawing upon such disciplines as political science, history, law, geography, economics, sociology, psychology, and philosophy, among

others. Virtually every issue area that is addressed and therefore forms the basis for IR theory can be traced back to World War I.

None was more important than the study of the origins and causes of war, together with remedies designed to prevent its recurrence, including international institutions, procedures, and practices to be embodied in the League of Nations and its Covenant. As E.H. Carr reminds us, the Great War provided the catalyst and the motivation for the creation of a “science of international politics” whose “teleological aspect,” or purpose, was to prevent a recurrence of this “great and disastrous war.”<sup>1</sup> This end to be achieved, deemed to be of overwhelming importance, framed and determined the initial focus in which aspirations for world order took precedence over critical and analytical thought about international problems. In other words, a quest for the desirable preceded an understanding of the possible, given the urgent need to find a peaceful alternative to avoid a repetition of the catastrophic events of 1914 to 1918.

Issues of war and peace could not be left to rulers and elites but should instead be opened to greater public scrutiny and popular participation. The basis for such oversight lay in international education, which included research and the development of theories and expertise on conflict and cooperation, war and peace. The idea contained in Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points calling for “open covenants, openly arrived at,” in place of the secret treaties that preceded World War I, led logically to the conclusion that an enlightened, informed, educated public was necessary for a more peaceful world. In the decades that followed, schools of international relations, world affairs councils, and international relations curricula were established.

## THE ORIGINS OF IR THEORY

IR theory has encompassed normative, explanatory, and interpretive approaches focused on a series of recurring debates about the actors to be

studied, the most appropriate level of analysis, the most important variables, and the most pressing issues. As Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal have suggested, IR theory is a “practical discourse” concerned with the question, “How should we act?”

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Liberals and realists, Marxists and feminists, as well as the various schools of critical theory all address this question with varying degrees of appreciation for the need to understand more fully the world in which we live—the empirical—in order to develop a sense of how to build the world that we would like—the normative.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the very decision to theorize about or to study one phenomenon or another is in itself a normative choice. According to such logic, it is not possible to separate analytically the explanatory and the normative.

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Such debates, or “practical discourses,” have encompassed normative issues that can be traced back to the ancient world—for example, to Plato, Aristotle, and Thucydides. At their core are the relationships between power and justice, power and legitimacy, and power and authority. Thucydides analyzed problems of diplomacy, imperialism, alliances, war and peace, the motives that drive political action—fear, honor, interest—and the dialectic clash between power and moral values. Machiavelli’s celebrated treatise, *The Prince*, offers seminal insights relevant not only to the Renaissance Italian city-states of his age, but also to later realist analyses of power in the state system. Theoretical insights about relationships between political units in a decentralized setting can be derived from ancient China in the writings of Mencius and Confucius, and from India in the code of Manu, dealing with favorable conduct in warfare and the inviolability of diplomats. The writings of Kautilya, who had a complex balance-of-power theory among princely states, also offer a multidimensional conception of power and its utilization in support of a leader’s strategic goals. The philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, meanwhile, could be characterized roughly as idealist or utopian and realist or empirical, and were comprehensive enough to include war and the necessity for military defense of the city-state, on which they focused their attention. Thus, the proponents of the new “science of international politics” described by E.H. Carr had available to them a rich philosophical tradition that extended beyond Europe to civilizations as distant as China and India.<sup>3</sup>

## IR THEORY AFTER WORLD WAR I

Informed by this tradition, the post-World War I era produced a community of IR theorists, scholars, and specialists dedicated to the study of, and the formulation of responses to, the forces unleashed by the Great War that have shaped the world into the twenty-first century. The shortlist includes the collapse of the Ottoman, Hapsburg, German, and Russian empires; the rise of communism and fascism; the spread of nationalism beyond Europe to Africa, Asia, and the Middle East; and the accelerating and cascading development of technologies that shrank distances and engendered new means of warfare. The conflicts of the modern Middle East, the origins of World War II, the Cold War, the collapse of European empires, the formation and dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the growth of nationalism form the basis for enduring theory and policy debates. To be sure, the causal chain from one event to another is complex. Furthermore, subsequent generations necessarily view such events through the lenses of time and changed circumstances, leading to new perspectives and causal assessments. Nevertheless, the forces unleashed by World War I provided the context for the development of theories whose purpose is either to describe such phenomena or to prescribe policies to eliminate or ameliorate them. This is the context of IR theory's development. The issue areas that we choose to study arise from the dominant problems of our time, such as nuclear proliferation, terrorism, or information warfare. Just as these topics occupy our attention today, World War I produced a series of problems that, as Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez have pointed out, led IR scholars in the decades between the two world wars to develop theories about such phenomena as international conflict, balance of power, alliances, power transitions, perceptions and misperceptions, and economic interdependence.<sup>4</sup>

A rich database emerged from the war for case studies about diplomacy, military mobilization, crisis management, decision making, leadership, perception, and escalation, as well as historiographical debates about war guilt and responsibility. As a crisis between Austria-Hungary and Serbia that rapidly escalated to a European and then a world war, the events of 1914 offer insights into how such conflicts can spiral out of control. Theoretical debates about structure and agency; the latitude and constraints faced by decision makers in an anarchical setting; the role of domestic factors in foreign policy; the security dilemma in a world of competitive armaments, in which one state's quest for security leads to another's perception of insecurity; and shortening mobilization timetables

brought about by modern technology leading to a situation of “use it or lose it” arose out of the events, data, and insights provided by World War I.

Among the most important outcomes of World War I with lasting implications for IR theory was the emergence of the United States as a world power. Scholars derived contrasting conclusions about America’s response to this new status, which transformed into early liberal and realist frameworks. The ambivalence with which many Americans greeted this new position was reflected in the role played by the United States in the development of the League of Nations Covenant and its subsequent rejection, alongside a series of U.S.-inspired efforts to outlaw war as an instrument of national policy—principally in the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, which was promoted by a group of American internationalists that included James T. Shotwell, a leading academic at that time.<sup>5</sup> Shotwell’s keynote address at the opening of The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in 1933 is worth reading as illustrative of the purpose, or teleology, of IR described by E. H. Carr. Shotwell’s analysis contained the assumption of an international harmony of interest, in which peoples could reach peaceful solutions based on mutual understanding and the national interest could be transcended by the international interest. As Shotwell put it, “Ever since the Great War disclosed in a cataclysmic revelation the anarchy of the national state system of the nineteenth century, the chief problem of statesmanship has been the creation of a new world order and the erection of institutions capable of embodying it in permanent form.”<sup>6</sup> This approach to IR contended increasingly with theories of realism brought by immigrant scholars such as Hans J. Morgenthau, Nicholas J. Spykman, Arnold Wolfers, Robert Strausz-Hupé, and eventually Henry Kissinger. In the generation after World War I, the foundation was established for contrasting theories containing both descriptive and prescriptive elements.

In the interwar decades, this foundation provided the basis for the refinement of liberal and realist theories as two of the three dominant approaches to IR theory. The third approach, constructivism, is discussed below. The liberalism of this era was built on the premise that there is a natural harmony of interest in peace that can best be realized through representative governments, in which such individual interests can become the collective national and ultimately international interest. In this sense, Woodrow Wilson’s call to “make the world safe for democracy” was based on the liberal assumption that democracies do not go to war against other democracies, but instead work to resolve their disputes by peaceful means. Drawing on the eighteenth-century writings of Immanuel Kant, these

liberal ideas evolved into democratic peace theory in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

Contrasted to this theoretical focus is realism, which furnished an alternative explanation for the breakdown of the post-World War I order set forth in the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations Covenant, and which gained particular traction with Japan's invasion of Manchuria in September

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1931. Realism represented an effort to distinguish the analysis of the world as it is from aspirations about what it should become. Realism placed emphasis not on a global commonwealth, but instead on a system of nation-states in competition with each other, divided by egoism and faced with the need to assure survival in an anarchical world. Realists

described a prevailing state system characterized by anarchy and the absence of central government, in which the national interest superseded the international interest. Both approaches—liberal and realist—sought to draw an isolationist United States into the wider world—the liberal because of the indispensable American contribution to global order and collective security, and the realist because of threats to the most vital national interest of survival.

## FOUNDATIONS OF THE POST-WAR ORDER

Endowed with vast economic and military power that was maximized during World War II, the United States led the creation of a post-war liberal order resting on economic, political, and military institutions. Elements of liberalism and realism were combined to form a new strategic approach to international relations, defined by a need to achieve peace through strength, to promote representative governance and human rights, and to lead in the formation of international regimes and other arrangements for this purpose. At the same time, U.S. educational institutions and a vibrant American academic community played a leading role in the expanding the literature that defined the theoretical and methodological debates that were also influenced by seminal contributions from outside the United States through both contemporary and historical contexts.

To assert that theory is contextual is to affirm the impact of the issues of the day on what scholars choose to study—as World War I clearly demonstrated. Academics who become policymakers or otherwise shape public policy inevitably bring with them a variety of assumptions, analyses, and

policy prescriptions drawn from already accumulated intellectual capital. The policymaker who returns to academia may have reaffirmed, refined, revised, or rejected earlier assumptions and theories that have been tested in the crucible of practice. Analysts and decision makers are likely to examine policy issues based on their existing theories about the consequences of alternative courses of action. Such theories may have been shaped by the assumptions set forth in liberalism and realism, and they are likely to have been “constructed” by the world around them. An understanding of IR theory provides the basis for more explicit and sharply focused assumptions to help guide our thinking. IR theory may also provide insights into the assumptions and motivations of decision makers. For example, such assumptions and motivations may include realist or liberal explanations. They may also be constructed, or constituted, by the social and physical enviroing circumstances shaping decision makers’ choices.

This leads logically to the third approach to international relations that finds confirmation in World War I, namely, constructivism. The Great War and its aftermath amply illustrated the contextual nature of behavior. Individuals shape, and are shaped, in interactive fashion by the world in which we live. We construct society and society constructs us; cause and effect are interrelated. Nevertheless, individuals have it within themselves to bring about change. As constructivists might explain, epistemic communities that included IR scholars arose to develop the new field of international relations that emerged after World War I. To the constructivist, “anarchy is what states make of it, and new normative standards can be, and are, constructed.” Patterns of behavior that were the norm in one era may be replaced by new norms. Such standards, for better or worse, are constantly evolving. Today’s enemy may become tomorrow’s ally. An enemy in possession of one nuclear warhead poses a greater perceived threat than an ally with many such systems. Thus constructivism, which made its formal appearance on the IR landscape only in the late twentieth century, provides a theoretical means of linking liberal and realist theories in helping us to understand the contextual nature and implications of World War I for IR theory.

*We construct society and  
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#### PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Just as World War I spawned a modern study of IR, the techniques and tools of subsequent generations of scholarship have been utilized to

revisit the events leading to and surrounding the conduct of the Great War. Extensive archival research after World War I revealed detailed information about the history of pre-war alliances, secret diplomacy, and political-military decision making. Such data made possible detailed analyses of the origins and causes of the war. In addition to diplomatic history, much of the scholarship during the generation after World War I focused on the study of the League of Nations and other international activities as the basis for a new world order, based on peace and cooperation in place of war and conflict. This scholarship enjoyed widespread academic support.

Because the *raison d'être* for IR, from the vantage point of the post-World War I era, lies in its utility in addressing the major issues of the international setting, what is the relationship between theory and practice? What can IR theory contribute to the conduct of foreign policy in the twenty-first century? What have we learned about the issues that led to and resulted from World War I that would help us to build a better world?

Each of the major IR theories forms a distinctive lens through which to view the issues of the day. For example, two of the basic theoretical approaches—liberalism and realism—have shaped U.S. foreign policy through successive administrations from World War I to the present. Today's debate revolves around the extent to which the liberal world order that was constructed after World War II is adequate to twenty-first-century

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..... needs. Some question whether the United States should continue to give primacy to an institutional order that many believe was more suitable to U.S. post-war dominance than to a setting in which economic power is far more widely shared. This viewpoint contends with an approach that places significant value on national interests and great power politics between the world's most important states. Thus, we find ourselves in the midst of a policy debate in which traditional IR theories and their applicability to contemporary issues are being questioned and challenged. Several questions characterize, this debate, such as: What should be the nature of the twenty-first-century "rules-based" system? What is the "fair share" to be contributed by allies? And how should such burdens be distributed in a twenty-first-century world that is dramatically different from that of the mid-twentieth century?

Liberal and realist theories contain a rich vein of hypotheses, assumptions, research questions, analyses, and policy prescriptions about such

issues and questions. An understanding of IR theory can provide the basis for a more focused and rigorous analysis of many policy issues. Ultimately, we may choose one approach or another, but in order to do so, it is useful to speculate about the potential implications of various courses of action through alternative lenses provided by IR theory. We may also begin to understand more clearly when, where, and why one theoretical explanation makes more sense than another. In some cases, a combination of theories may form a more comprehensive approach to understanding contemporary issues. For example, how does the liberal hypothesis that institutions provide the setting for consensus-building reconcile realist national interests held by the various members of an alliance? How and why did NATO as an institution adapt to post-Cold War structural changes brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar era? What are the limits as well as the potential for NATO in light of contending liberal and realist theories and assumptions?

The post-World War II international system can be studied utilizing liberal and realist theories as well as constructivism. International institutions such as the EU and NATO represented efforts not only to harmonize national interests, but also to build and promote a more peaceful world. Such institutions emerged from the bipolar order created by World War II, based on the widely perceived need to establish a balance of power between the Soviet Union and Western democracies. The Soviet Union occupied vast expanses of the Eurasian continents that could best be countered by power projected from North America to Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The Western democracies joined Euro-Atlantic institutions that both reflected and reinforced a consensus about common security needs. The resulting security umbrella provided the setting for the rebuilding and strengthening of democratic political institutions, market-based private- and public-sector economies, and the flow of international commerce and investment, as well as unprecedented human mobility. And as the Sino-Soviet conflict deepened, the United States eventually aligned with China against the Soviet Union. This understanding of the post-World War II order not only draws heavily on liberal and realist theories, but also brings into focus theories of balance of power and geopolitics.

#### **THE REFINEMENT OF IR THEORY**

Successive generations of liberal and realist IR theory have evolved to include increasingly refined versions in the form of neoliberalism and neorealism. The result is reflected not only in a greater understanding of

the role of institutions—in accordance with liberalism—and of structures—in accordance with realism—but also in the development of various middle-level theories about such phenomena as interdependence, bipolarity, multipolarity, political integration, and deterrence. In the case of liberalism, post-World War II Europe provided the setting for theories about political integration arising from various unification movements, notably the European Union. The process by which political communities became more or less integrated, especially in the case of democracies in Western Europe, attracted both academic and policy interest. Issues addressed included the process by which cooperation in one sector, such as trade policy, expands into and impacts other economic sectors—and

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ultimately foreign policy and defense. Today, Brexit offers an example of the process of the national interest being subsumed into a broader conception of interest in reverse.

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 In the case of realism, the coming of the nuclear age gave new urgency and meaning to the development of theories about deterrence against the use of such weapons. By the same token, theories of deterrence developed outside the official policy community as a logical extension of the principal realist tenet of national survival in an anarchical society. One major question was how to deter the outbreak or escalation of war, particularly between two parties armed with nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. Resulting theories of integration and deterrence were not only logical extensions, respectively, of liberal and realist theories, but also illustrative of how international society “constructs” or constitutes IR theory in light of the needs of the times. For example, it was, of course, the Peloponnesian War that provided the context for the theory developed by Thucydides. Westphalian Europe, the post-World War twentieth century, and now the post-Cold War twenty-first century furnish a rich context for IR theory construction in response to the pressing issues of the day.

## TECHNOLOGY AND THE EVOLUTION OF THEORY

Just as World War I shaped IR theory in subsequent decades by incorporating analytic frameworks from diverse fields, World War II and the Cold War not only produced new problems that came to preoccupy both IR theorists and policymakers, but also generated new technologies for theory-

building, data collection, and research analysis. With the development of the computer during World War II, it became possible to make increasing use of methodologies based on quantification, leading to epistemological debates between the proponents of behavioral science and their critics. New theories emerged in the post-World War II setting in areas including decision making, systems, communications, development, environmental, and game theory. The concept of “behavioral revolution” aimed to draw upon a range of disciplines and methodologies from the other social sciences and natural sciences in the hope of developing a comprehensive theory of international behavior. These efforts produced a recognition that both quantitative and qualitative analysis had critical roles to play in the quest to understand recurring patterns of behavior. Quantification provided the basis for measurement and comparison, while qualitative analysis made possible a focused, in-depth comparison of similarities and differences among international phenomena. Both came to be seen as crucially important in explaining and understanding the multiplicity of causes and effects and the relationships between dependent, independent, and intervening variables. Recognition of the growing complexity of twentieth- and twenty-first-century international behavior underscored the need for comprehensive theories that could incorporate quantitative, behavioral, and positivist focuses on observation and sensory experience, as well as qualitative metaphysical approaches emphasizing human reasoning, introspection, and intuition.

In the post-World War II setting, this meant quantitative studies to explain, for example, the use of transactions as measures of political integration, the development of more precise political and military indicators of impending crises, the statistical relationships between armaments and war, the relationship between domestic violence and international conflict, and the correlation between alliances and armed conflict in bipolar and multipolar international systems. Other research focuses included examinations of the unique characteristics of particular leaders, political movements, nations, groups, and events, which can provide in-depth dimensions alongside comparisons of discrete phenomena that contribute to a kind of symbiosis between the quantitative and the qualitative. This becomes a mutually enforcing basis for testing and developing propositions and hypotheses.

The contextual evolution of IR theory continues into the present century. China has embarked on an ambitious plan to develop infrastructure and other investment projects between East Asia and Europe. Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative recalls an earlier geopolitical analysis developed by Halford Mackinder. According to Mackinder, who wrote and lectured in

the early years of the twentieth century, modern technology, namely the railway, linked the Eurasian continents and therefore placed Eurasia at the center of world affairs. His “Heartland Theory” held that in the control of Eurasia lay the key to global dominance. As Mackinder saw it from the vantage point of 1904, the key twentieth-century problem would be the relationship between the major powers contending for Eurasian domination and, in the years immediately ahead, between Germany and Russia.<sup>7</sup>

Building on Mackinder’s analysis, we may ask, as Robert Kaplan does, whether Eurasia is gaining new strategic meaning as a result of the unprecedented interconnectivity created by communications technologies, fiber optic cables, pipelines, ports, and rail lines.<sup>8</sup> At the forefront of this geopolitical transformation, China is pursuing a grand strategy that encompasses soft power as a basis for extending Beijing’s influence. Because Eurasia contains other major actors—India, Iran, and Russia—that are contending with forces of globalization and nationalism, the emergence of megacities, the alienation of large uprooted populations, and the ever-wider availability of military capabilities—including weapons of mass destruction—the ingredients for conflict are clearly present. Yet, there also exists a need to develop institutions and other mechanisms for peaceful resolution. In this case, liberal theories can provide insights into the impact of technology on interdependence. Realist theories offer perspectives on the impact of technology on capabilities. Constructivists help to illuminate the implications of social structures for material factors. Thus, these IR theories offer numerous analytical and conceptual lenses through which to view developments in Eurasia and other complex twenty-first-century international settings.

## CONCLUSION

Because of its global dimension, World War I brought into play forces that have had widespread and reverberating ramifications. In the immediate aftermath of the Great War, and into the twenty-first century, IR theory drew heavily on the European experience grounded in the Westphalian state system and extending back to ancient Greece. Nevertheless, as Henry Kissinger reminds us, there exist contending and contrasting visions of world order.<sup>9</sup> Western norms about world order provided a pattern repeated in the other regions that fell under European domination. World War I produced a study of IR based on a uniquely European conception of territorial sovereignty among states possessing varying levels and types of political power in a decentralized setting. The goal of statecraft was to assure the

independence and security of as many of these states as possible. Although it was not immediately evident at the time, World War I unleashed forces that replaced European global dominance with large numbers of new states that often cut across traditional cultures and ethno-religious groups. Given the diversity of cultures, interests, geography, resources, and historical experiences, the task of statecraft involves the fashioning of imperfect accommodations in such a world. However, the Westphalian principles that shaped IR theory after World War I have been challenged even in Europe, including in the conduct of foreign policy and in the institutions of the EU providing for the “pooling of sovereignty.” Islamic and Chinese conceptions of world order, based respectively on religious governance and a hierarchical theoretically universal order, contend with the idea of the sovereign equality of states. Such globalization of international politics, traceable back to World War I, offers countless theoretical puzzles, challenges, and opportunities to twenty-first-century IR theory as we look back and move forward from the vantage point of the centenary of the end of World War I. Implicit in the term “World” War is a recognition that the development of IR theory in the next century will be more global in nature, producing contending theories based on contrasting traditions, cultures, geographies, and histories. How such theories will address the enduring debates of IR theory and what new debates will emerge remains to be seen.<sup>f</sup>

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**ENDNOTES**

- 1 E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 8.
- 2 Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal, “Between Utopia and Reality: Practical Discourses of International Relations,” in Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7.
- 3 For a recent examination of such global perspectives, see Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), especially chapters 3-6.
- 4 Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez, “Introduction: historians, political scientists, and the causes of the First World War,” in Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez, eds., *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3-29.

- 5 For a detailed examination of such efforts, see Oona A. Hathaway and Scott Shapiro, *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 102-130.
- 6 James T. Shotwell, *The Task of Diplomacy Today*, program distributed at the formal opening of The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy containing the text of this address, October 27, 1933.
- 7 Halford Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *Geographical Journal* XXI (April 1904), 434.
- 8 Robert D. Kaplan, *The Return of Marco Polo's World: War, Strategy, and America's Interests in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Random House, 2018), 3-45.
- 9 Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), especially chapters 2-7.