CHAPTER 7

Power Shift and Change in the International System

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Abstract

China's rise has resulted in a power shift from Europe to East Asia, and a changing international configuration is in the making. However, this does not mean that an evolving international configuration or shift in power will lead to a change in the international system as a whole. The international system is composed of three elements—international actors, an international configuration, and international norms. A typological change in any of these elements cannot be equated to a type change in the international system; otherwise there can be no distinctions between an international system and elements of the system. Neither can the relationship among these elements be defined. Therefore, we state that a type change in the international system must be preconditioned by a type change in at least two system elements. Since China's rise is a main cause for a shift in international configuration, the systematic pressure it faces during its rise will trend up. Therefore, China needs to map out foreign strategies in line with its status as the world's second largest economy. It must pursue the principle of making strategic friends and establish new international norms.

Keywords

Power shift – international system – type of system – world centre – rise of China

The shift in world power centre has long been a major topic of international relations study. Since the start of the new century, this topic has again aroused attention from academic circles following China's rise. This article aims to answer the following questions: In what direction will the world centre shift.

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in the 21st century? Will the shift bring about a change in the international political system? How should China dance in tune with the historical trend of world centre shift?

I In What Direction Will the World Centre Shift in the 21st Century?

With the coinage of the concept of BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) countries and the establishment of the G20 summit, discussions concerning world centre shifts have gradually increased in the media and academic circles. The author holds that the difference regarding in what direction the world centre will shift comes, in essence, from a lack of explicit and objective criteria for defining the term “world centre.”

1 Criteria for Defining World Centre

The international geopolitical centre is determined not by its natural geographical position, but by the strength of the countries in that region. To be more exact, there are two preconditions for a region to become a world centre. First, that region must have the most influential countries in the world, i.e., one or more countries in that region should have world-class material power (especially military power) and cultural power (especially that of thought) and become a model for other countries. Second, a world centre should also be the most conflictive region, which means the central countries fight for their interests in that region or other regions. History shows that there are two types of world centres. One is that the central countries fight for their strategic interests in the region where they are located. The other is that the central countries scramble for their strategic interests in peripheral regions. When one of the central countries fights for its interest in the region where it is located, the region's position as a world centre would become more prominent. In the above-mentioned two scenarios, whether there is a central country that has a global influence is the precondition for determining whether a region can become a world centre.

In the post-World War II period until the end of the Cold War, the U.S. and the Soviet Union were the most powerful nations of the world; at the same time, they were also major strategic rivals in the international system. As one of two “polars” of the world, the Soviet Union was located in Europe, which, in turn, was also the centre of rivalry between the two countries. Therefore, Europe was thought to be the centre of the world during the Cold War period. In 1946, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said in his Fulton speech in the U.S.: “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain