The U.S. confronts the difficult task of managing change peacefully as the BRICs’ economic rise redistributes power in the international system. I consider the insights from four approaches within international relations—Realism, Institutionalism, Constructivism and Liberalism—to draw out possible policy advice. While the first two offer useful thinking, their policies are in fact quite risky and difficult to implement. Constructivism, too, offers insights, but theories from this approach do not articulate practical policy guidance. Liberals direct our attention to the domestic sources of state preferences, suggesting not only how to influence future systemic change, but also identifying ways to make Realist or Institutionalist policies towards the BRICs more applicable and effective.

Key words: U.S. foreign policy, international relations, BRICs
alliances have surely been sown. Moreover, everyone recognizes that power will eventually be redistributed in the international system, presenting the status quo powers with one of the greatest challenges in international politics: managing change peacefully.\footnote{E. H. Carr, \textit{The Twenty Years’ Crisis} (New York: Harper, 1964), chap. 13.}

By all accounts, four countries merit special attention, for they are already regional powers, and have the potential to become players with global political and economic reach: Brazil, Russia, India and China, collectively referred to as the BRICs. How can the United States manage this change? Can the United States integrate these powers into a shared order, using the BRICs to build a better future? Or will they band together to overthrow the status quo, confronting the United States with a “BRIC wall”?

The BRICs’ Relations with the United States

Several pieces of evidence indicate the United States needs to pay special attention to the BRICs over the next several decades. Most importantly, economic trends suggest these countries will eventually rise in power capabilities. Remarkably, the BRICs’ combined GDP has been projected to pass that of the G6 within forty years, with China’s GDP being larger than that of the United States.\footnote{The Goldman Sachs report that generated so much interest in the BRICs suggests the most important change may not be the relative decline of the United States, but the relative decline of so many American allies. The BRICs will eclipse the larger West European economies, since the latter have significantly slower economic growth, low birth rates, and face a looming crunch as expected government expenditures rise while government revenues fall. These countries will surely confront greater challenges adapting to the new distribution of power than will the United States.} While striking, several qualifications should be raised as we interpret such projections. Even with this growth, the GDP per capita of any one of the BRICs would remain low compared to that of the United States, for instance. Such differences matter, for it suggests these countries’ economies would complement the American economy rather than directly rival it. Also, these projections are based on the BRICs’ recent economic performance, plus assumptions about each one’s internal demo-
graphic, political, and economic stability. These countries will undoubtedly face serious obstacles sustaining high growth rates over four decades. Even if each of the BRICs could maintain their economic trajectory in coming years, that success could undermine stability by creating demands for political change. For argument’s sake, the analysis below assumes the BRICs will handle these challenges, continuing their economic growth—what then can the United States do to shape international outcomes as the distribution of power undergoes this radical shift?

Today, all four BRICs have deep economic ties with the United States. These ties give the U.S. some economic leverage over all four (even over China, despite the mass media’s reading of the two’s trade relations). Trade statistics reporting America’s worst bilateral trade imbalances for 2006 place China at the top of the list; Russia ranked 13th, India 18th, and Brazil 26th. First, note that the content of trade fits with each countries’ comparative advantage. In the case of China, a major source of goods flowing into the American economy, the United States imports labor-intensive light manufactures. The same could be said of India’s exports to the United States, though India and Brazil also export iron and steel to the United States. Russia and Brazil export raw materials to the U.S. as well. While one could fixate on the bilateral balances, I raise these statistics to question who has leverage in the relationship. These economies matter to the United States (all four being among the top 20 sources of imports into the U.S.), yet it would be a stretch to say the U.S. would find it too costly or too difficult to replace their goods with imports from other sources. Neither China nor India has a monopoly on cheap labor; no one of the BRICs exports large amounts of goods requiring advanced technology—none exports goods that cannot be matched in sophistication by other producers. (Only Brazil exports more advanced manufactures to the U.S., and these products fall within a narrow range of sectors, such as aircraft.)

The United States needs the BRIC markets much less than the BRICs need the American market. As destinations for American exports, China ranked fourth, Brazil 13th, India 21st and Russia a distant 33rd. When the tables are turned, we see the sort of

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leverage the U.S. can exert. The United States is both the second largest export market and second largest source of imports for Brazil. The U.S. is the second largest export market, and third largest source of imports for India. China needs the U.S. market for its exports (it is that country’s second largest), though the U.S. is not among the top 5 sources of Chinese imports. (The media portrays this as leverage over the U.S., as if the U.S. would not be able to find others interested in exporting to the U.S. market.) Russia would be the least vulnerable to American economic leverage, since the United States is neither a major market for Russian exports, nor is the U.S. a major exporter to Russia. Economically, the other three depend more on the U.S. than the U.S. depends on them.

More disturbing, the BRICs’ economic rise implies the potential for disruption of the international balance of power. Economic capabilities do not translate directly into military power, of course. Militarily, these three countries clearly do not rival the United States. India and China are both embarking on expansion of their naval and air forces, with the desire to project power further from their shores. For instance, India recently announced the launching of new warships, as well as its first military satellite. Nonetheless, the forces of three of the BRICs are aimed at each other as much as (if not more than) at American targets. China and India have been rivals for some time, as have Russia and China. Even though the three Asian powers have developed long-run plans to increase the size and technological sophistication of their armed forces, all remain several stages behind the level of American forces.

Russia’s military forces have declined in numbers and operational abilities, with little chance of improving in the near future. Russia continues to develop advanced weaponry, though it cannot afford to produce these in volume. Brazil’s military remains primarily focused on internal and regional capabilities, posing little current or future threat to the United States. Of course, China, Russia and India already have nuclear capabilities (and Brazil could join them in short order if it so desired); all four could surely produce other weapons of mass destruction, along with capable delivery systems. In conventional forces, the United States has an enormous lead in strategic lift, combined forces operations, organization, tactical skill, and weaponry—to
develop rival conventional capabilities, the BRICs would need to invest several decades of concentrated effort merely to catch up. It is more likely that a BRIC would construct armed forces rivaling the United States militarily in numbers, or develop the ability to project power within their own region, backed by weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) that could threaten the American homeland. This would make them potent challengers, if not quite as dangerous as the former Soviet Union. Two or three BRICs allied together would present a much more serious threat.

The evidence therefore suggests the BRICs will have expanding capabilities, and that their potential could enable them to threaten the order or stability of the international system. Yet, along with those possibilities come several qualifications—we need not exaggerate the depth of the change these economic projections predict. Moreover, the United States has points of economic leverage it could use, while it continues to exercise paramount military power, remains the center of the international financial system, and commands leading roles in international institutions. How can the United States use these advantages to manage change as power is redistributed?

**Theories for Guiding Policy in a Turbulent Period**

Below I consider the policy guidance flowing from four popular schools of thought in international relations. Each has numerous adherents in academia and government. Each paradigm makes assumptions about where state policies come from, what the goals of policy are, as well as the chief means for state interaction. Because they look to different sources for power and interests, each paradigm predicts different consequences from the rise of the BRICs. More importantly, each suggests different ways for the United States to shape the future as the BRICs’ positions change. Whichever American policy emerges, it will be based in one of these four—or perhaps rest on some mixture of them.
Realism

From a Realist perspective, changes in the distribution of power always have important consequences. For Realists, everything revolves around power itself. Power is both states’ ultimate desire, and states’ most important tool in international relations. As countries’ positions in the international system change, their fears and desires also change. Realists see the future relative decline of the U.S. as problematic, since it means other states will demand political changes, as these rival states gain the capabilities to exert leverage over the United States. As noted at the outset, E. H. Carr, one of the pioneers of Realism, considered periods when the distribution of power changed to be extremely dangerous, since rising powers could employ force to alter the status quo.

Since power determines interests in the Realist view, the key to continued favorable political outcomes for the United States would be to control or limit changes in the distribution of power—perhaps taking preemptive action against rivals, or at least deterring them from exercising their power. On one level, the United States has been pursuing such a policy in hopes of maintaining unipolarity. By enforcing the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) after the Cold War, combined with efforts to block the development of other WMD, the U.S. has tried to limit any future military competition to rivalry in conventional weapons. This puts competition on grounds very favorable to the United States. The U.S. has three tremendous advantages over any rivals when it comes to conventional warfare: it is several steps ahead in terms of weapons technology, it has the wealth and capacity to produce more of these weapons than any rival, and it has the experience and tactical skill to employ them effectively. In terms of power projection (where intelligence gathering, transport capabilities, and bases matter), no other country (or group of countries) will be able to match America’s global military reach for decades. The best others can hope to do is counter this conventional power with WMD.

Realists may still fret about the eventual changes in the distribution of power, however, since power can be wielded in a variety of forms. While Realists focus on the consequences of power, their notions about the origins of power have never been
particularly sophisticated. Power comes from two basic sources: alliances with other states, or harnessing internal capabilities. External alliances involve a certain amount of risk, since one never knows whether other states will honor their commitments when that action implies costs. Moreover, alliances typically involve reciprocal commitments. As the single powerful pole, when the United States enters an alliance it probably takes on more obligations than potential assistance. The second fount of power, internal sources, clearly depends on economic growth and the ability of states to tap their domestic sources. Economists cannot agree on why national economies grow at different rates, giving Realists little guidance here. We do have studies illustrating that different types of governments can tap into their economies at differing rates, but this may only make a difference over the long haul.4

Since Realists worry about changes in the distribution of power, and power comes from these two sources, their advice is for the United States to implement policies extending its own dominance for as long as possible.5 Recognizing that the U.S. economy will lose its advantage in relative size over others, some Realists therefore look to the international system for help. The BRICs may be future rivals once they grow economically, and especially as they convert their economic assets into greater military power. Even as one rises in power, it may drive others into the arms of the United States. Consider the current rivalries between Russia, India, and China. Russia has lost its dominance over central Asia, where China desires greater influence. If Russia regains some of its muscle, it will undoubtedly seek to reassert influence in these regions. China also shares long, disputed borders with both India and Russia. As one of these countries rises in power, it will be perceived as a threat by its neighbors, giving the United States potential allies.

Moreover, the United States may find additional assistance from the economically advanced countries who are its long-standing allies. The EU, Japan, and Canada all maintain close military

ties with the United States, despite bickering and disputes over recent foreign policy decisions. These states may keep pace with the BRICs (though there are several reasons to think the EU and Japan will have considerably slower economic growth, and thus not provide much to the U.S.), but they will surely be interested in defending the status quo. Moreover, they too are likely to feel threatened by the dramatic rise of some of the BRICs. A resurgent Russia could compel the Europeans back toward the U.S.; an increasingly powerful China is just as likely to drive Japan into a tighter embrace with the United States. The exception to this pattern would be India or Brazil. India’s rising power would more likely threaten its regional neighbors (Pakistan in particular) first, then China. Brazil’s rising power would surely threaten the United States before Europe, Canada or Japan—though it would worry regional neighbors such as Argentina even earlier. While the U.S. could play China, India, and or Russia off against each other, a powerful, challenging Brazil would clearly be a problem for the United States by itself.

The traditional Realist approach would stress isolating any state threatening the status quo. Thus the Bush administration’s policies—the idea of preemptive war in particular—horrifies many Realists. They fear current American hubris will only spark rivals to try even harder to balance against the U.S., thus reducing America’s preeminent position sooner. Rash or reckless acts today undercut future American power by making others less willing to follow or support the United States, and encouraging those who fear American power to seek each others support. Instead, American restraint would make it easier to isolate threats.

Other Realists suggest the U.S. should take active steps to decelerate or impede the economic growth of the BRICs, as a way to deter or retard their potential to be threats in the future. By limiting foreign investments or trade ties with these countries, the United States can attempt to slow their economic expansion, thereby delaying their rise in power. This policy contains certain risks however, since it explicitly identifies these states as threats today, and punishes them—regardless of their current behavior.

Executing this policy therefore creates antagonisms where none exist, suffering in that sense the same disadvantages as preemptive wars would. Since there is no way to determine which of these states is the greatest long-term threat, the United States would need to implement such policies against all four—making it impossible to play one off against the others, as suggested above. Other states would surely chalk such policies up to American hubris, and refuse to follow, undercutting the effectiveness of American efforts.

In practice, the United States would face serious difficulties intervening in the BRICs’ economic rise, despite American leverage over any single one. The United States may be able to afford to cut links with any one or all the BRICs, hurting them more than itself. Yet that alone will not slow down their growth much. Even an embargo on American foreign direct investments in these countries would have a very limited effect. The BRICs’ economic growth will be driven by internal dynamics more than by external forces. American attempts to slow these countries’ economic growth are simply unrealistic.

The difficulties inherent in formulating and executing a Realist policy towards the BRICs underscore problems within Realism itself. The abrupt end of the cold war—unanticipated by Realists—suggested to most experts in the field that Realism overemphasized power. The Soviet Union (or Russia) could dramatically change its foreign policy without first experiencing a rapid shift in its position in the international system. Scholars therefore began exploring other sources of change, including rethinking states’ interests, as well as the importance of domestic politics or ideas in shaping those goals. In North America, the post-cold war years have seen the development of three alternative approaches to Realism: Institutionalism, Liberalism, and Constructivism.

7. For instance, some turned to the importance of ideas or other factors mediating the importance of power. See William Wohlforth, The Elusive Balance (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993).
8. See also Leslie Elliott Armiyo’s contribution to this issue. In her schema, Institutionalism, Constructivism, and Liberalism are collapsed into a single mental framework: Liberal Institutionalism, which she contrasts to the alternatives of Economic Liberalism and Realism.
Institutionalism shares many assumptions with Realism. Both paradigms assume states to be the primary actors, and that the international system is anarchic. They make different assumptions about what states want, however. Realists believe that the consequence of anarchy is that states will demand security above all else; since security can only be achieved through power (and one's power is relative to the power of others), anarchy produces the security dilemma. Power therefore not only determines a state's ability to pursue whatever other goals it might have, it also becomes the chief goal itself. Institutionalists view security as necessary, but only up to a point. Having attained adequate security, states can turn to the pursuit of other goals, pertaining to the wealth and well-being of their country. Rather than competing for a relative good such as power, states may seek absolute goods, such as wealth. States could then engage in cooperative ventures.9

Realists worry about trade and international investment, as noted above, because they conceive of these as sources of power. American Realists therefore argue that trade and investment flows need to be directed in ways that add to American power. Institutionalists' assumptions allow them to think about economic growth as an end in itself. To determine the welfare of the United States, Institutionalists are more likely to examine the country's economic fortunes, the health and wealth of its population, alongside national security. They would also consider these same concerns as the guiding considerations for other states, including the BRICs.

Whereas Realists see changes in the future distribution of power as disturbances with fateful consequences, Institutionalists are concerned with whether the rising states will be satisfied with their positions in the international system. The trick for American policy, in this perspective, is to design relations between the United States and the BRICs that allow both to benefit. If the BRICs value their relations with the United States, or value the status quo, their increased economic capabilities need not pose a problem. Institutionalists therefore suggest American policies that foster cooperation and economic growth.

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can policy construct binding beneficial relations between the U.S. and the BRICs.\textsuperscript{10}

For some, this seems straightforward. The United States has helped to create, promote and then maintain international rules and organizations generally considered advantageous for their members. On the economic side, the U.S. was a key proponent of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and then the World Trade Organization (WTO). The WTO continues to liberalize trade, which on the whole makes its participants richer. The IMF and World Bank are supposed to stabilize international monetary relations, while also harnessing international financial resources to promote economic development. Politically, the U.S. was (and remains, even under the Bush administration) a major backer of the United Nations. The U.S. has also been a chief participant and supporter of regional associations spanning economic and political affairs, such as the association for Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

The challenges for American foreign policy originating in an Institutionalist perspective are perhaps more daunting than many realize, however. Institutionals want to use international institutions to convert the BRICs to status quo powers. This may prove difficult for two reasons. The current trend—not particularly supported by the Bush administration, but promoted by American allies such as Canada—has been to develop new institutions to give the BRICs a greater stake in the current international system. For these reasons, Russia has been allowed to join the G8, while India and Brazil have become prominent members of a new grouping, the G-20.

This accretion of institutions may not be as effective as promised, however. One problem comes from having so many institutions with overlapping domains. Rather than reduce response times to international situations, the larger number of international institutions sharing responsibility appears to slow action, and weaken its effect.\textsuperscript{11} With different institutions to


choose from, different states turn to different institutions; states select the forum that matches their voice and interests. For example, under the current rules, France would prefer giving the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) greater responsibilities, since it has a disproportionately powerful voice in that setting. Its European allies, such as Germany or Italy, might seek to have a problem handled by other institutions—such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) or North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Institutional proliferation may bring the appearance of greater political voice for the BRICs, but if this undercuts the effectiveness of international institutions, the effort will not satisfy the BRICs.

The second avenue for action would be to reform existing international institutions to give the BRICs greater political and economic rewards. This would prevent the problems just described, but involves other dangers. Institutional reform is difficult—which is why so many of our current institutions continue to be structured just as they were a half-century ago. World War II swept away older institutions and practices, producing a clean slate to design new institutions and organizations. However, those institutions have often proven inflexible in the face of incremental change—sometimes suffering repeated crises as they fell short of their aspirations, sometimes failing outright, sometimes merely losing their relevance. Reform would signal a willingness on the part of the United States to recognize the needs of the BRICs, while actively seeking ways to develop mutually supportive relations.

Yet in the most important settings, such as the UN, the countries about to be eclipsed by the BRICs would surely resist reform. Opening up calls for change within the UN could well trigger its collapse, since such suggestions would raise many more expectations than could possibly be satisfied. While we could draw up various ways to redesign the UNSC, for instance, none would be easily implemented. The current members with veto powers (including two of the BRICs) jealously guard their privileges. Adding Brazil and India as permanent members with veto powers would not only make the UNSC more unwieldy than it already is, it would leave other states (Japan, South Africa, or even Pakistan) displeased. Adding Brazil, India, or China to the G8 might make for excellent symbolism, but would
only be acceptable because the G8 has lost much of its importance as a coordinating body anyway. Extending membership would merely accelerate the G8’s decline in importance.

Continued economic ties, with the consequent linking of domestic political economies, promises the best route for Institutionalists to create the future environment where the BRICs would be satisfied. By doing the opposite of the Realists—using American policies to promote the economic growth of the BRICs—Institutionalists believe the United States could ensure that even the changing distribution of power would have little political effect. A powerful but satisfied Russia or China would simply add to the number of status quo players in the system; having more states such as Japan or the members of the EU would be little problem.

One point to remember with Institutionalism, however, is that it does not assume that all state goals are mutually beneficial—it respects the original Realist notion that sometimes states pursue power or other goals that cannot be easily shared. Institutionalism’s great contribution has been to identify mechanisms for states to attain aims when all participants can share. If forced to analyze outcomes when powerful states clash over incompatible goals, however, its assumptions drive it back towards Realists’ conclusions. Thus the underlying doubt some have with Institutionalism concerns its assessment of state goals—while Institutionalism highlights the desires all states probably have for increased wealth and greater voice politically within international bodies, states may seek a host of other goals that would be much harder to handle—be they ideological in nature, or based on security concerns. Moreover, not all states have seen free and open trade as the best route to increased wealth; while the BRICs do today, they all have pursued closed economic development in the past, and could well revert to such policies.

Two other perspectives that challenged Realism in the wake of the cold war present alternative takes on the future. These two approaches, Liberalism and Constructivism, argue that states’ goals vary, both over time and across cases, in ways the Institutionalists don’t recognize. Liberals believe states’ desires reflect the preferences of constituents. When a state pursues wealth, it is not doing so in an aggregate sense, Liberals would argue, but rather the state is implementing policies that benefit particular
constituents. Trade, international investment, and other policies benefit states, but also redistribute wealth within states. Domestic politics matter—giving American decision makers other policy tools to consider. For the Constructivists, identity determines interests. Identity can be shaped by many factors.

**Liberals**

Liberals offer advice that is both perilous and hopeful. Liberal analyses focus on domestic interests—their basis, organization, and expression as filtered through domestic institutions—as the source for foreign policy goals. In this way, Liberals try to explain why different states may pursue various goals, or why the same state may pursue different goals at different points in time. Instead of trying to derive both capabilities and interests from the very same force—position in the structure, as a Realist would—Liberals consider a state’s goals, and its capabilities for pursuing those goals, as separate. One must therefore consider the structure of preferences in the system before considering the distribution of power—power only matters when other states need to be persuaded or deterred because their interests clash.

This perspective forces us to focus on the domestic politics of the BRICs—it accepts that long-run economic patterns suggest these countries will eventually be more powerful. The real question, according to Liberals, is whether these states will seek to overturn the status quo or defend it. Realists would assume that any state with rivaling capabilities would also generate rival interests—thus their very presence poses a latent threat; Institutionals focus on creating common ground at the system-level to defuse any potential disputes; Liberals, however, would look to the compatibility of states’ preferences, with each state’s preferences internally generated. If states desire the same ends, changes in the distribution of power mean little. Indeed,

having other powerful states that seek similar ends as the U.S. could be good for America’s future. This is how Liberals can spin a much more hopeful story.

Consider one of the Liberals’ best known arguments, democratic peace theory. Though it comes in more than one version, the basics are the same: the domestic political characteristics of democracy—mass participation, executives responsible to voters, traditions of tolerance in politics—produce polities that, when confronting one another, seek to resolve their disputes short of force. Force is deemed illegitimate means by state leaders and their constituents alike. Liberals would explain the end of the Cold War through the domestic political changes that swept away the Soviet Union—although Russia inherited much of the military hardware from the Soviet era, its goals were no longer driven by the ideological or power-hungry aims of the Communist Party elite. It therefore gave up its alliances, repositioned (and scaled back) its armed forces, and redirected resources towards alternative ends. The differences were not driven by changes in the international structure, but by domestic shifts.

If democracies do not fight each other, then one of the best ways to promote peace in the future, according to Liberals, would be to ensure that all major powers are democracies. Even if the BRICs rose in power, if they were democracies we would at least expect them to maintain peaceful relations with the United States. India has a long tradition of democratic rule; democratic government seems firmly ensconced in Brazil too. The United States would need to do little to keep these two countries democratic (save help them maintain economic growth). The other two powers are more troubling—Russia had instituted democratic reforms, but continues to backslide under Vladimir Putin. China has introduced tremendous economic reforms in the past decade, but executed few meaningful steps towards democracy. Instead, the specter of Tiananmen Square hangs over discussions of political reform.

Economic reforms do matter, because Liberals theorize about the full range of domestic interests. Typically, Liberals include domestic political institutions in their arguments merely to model

how these channel interests. Different domestic political institutions reflect domestic interests onto the international scene differently. In international political economy, Liberals have shown that differences in electoral systems matter for how economic interests shape tariffs, for instance. Yet even before introducing these filters, Liberals need some model of the domestic distribution of interests—usually drawing on concepts or theories generated from other disciplines or other subfields in political science. Thus Liberals would note how diverse the domestic population of each BRIC is, with tremendous potential for identity politics to create deep schisms; or they would look at the tremendous inequality of wealth in Brazil, or the rising inequality of wealth in China or Russia, to identify possible cleavages within these societies over the desirability of particular policies. Similarly, Liberals might pick up on internal changes within these countries that others miss—the rising imbalance of males to females in India and China for instance, and the sort of emigration issues this is likely to trigger.

Liberal analyses have a perilous dimension, however, because Liberals remain divided over ways one country might reconfigure domestic interests inside another—and that is what they would recommend the United States do to shape its evolving relations with the BRICs. Given the political economic characteristics of Brazil and India, Liberals would conclude they would maintain stable relations with the United States. Russia and China, being less democratic, would be more likely to oppose the status quo, or America’s international role. But the Liberal recommendation—external pressures supporting domestic political reforms—could easily backfire, triggering nationalist responses that would merely aggravate future relations. The policy recommendation is clear: if the United States does anything contributing to their power—including anything adding to their economic potential—the U.S. should also attach conditions reshaping these states’ domestic political institutions.

Liberals therefore can offer policy responses that overlap with those from other paradigms, but with selectivity. Realists argue the U.S. needs to balance against any powerful state—whereas Liberals would argue the U.S. only needs to balance against those whose preferences clash with American interests. Institutionalists argue that the U.S. needs to create international
organizations that ensure benefits accrue to all participants; Liberals would claim that the definition of benefits varies from one state to another, therefore taking the Institutionalist point, but being more sensitive to what individual states desire. Liberals would even argue that states’ desires can be reshaped, making their desires compatible with those of the United States.

**Constructivists**

Constructivists, too, are concerned with what states desire. Constructivists approach this question quite differently, however. They argue that all definitions of interest—whether the actors we are talking about are states, domestic interest groups, or individuals within states—originate from the actors’ identities. Identities define not only appropriate goals for the actor, but also appropriate or inappropriate means for attaining those goals. To ensure positive relations between the United States and the BRICs as the latter rise in power, Constructivists would look to the continuing evolution of international norms. At the system level, the United States would need to promote norms that would help manage peaceful change. The U.S. could also guide the evolution of social norms within the BRICs, to shape the identities of individuals, in hopes of creating better relations between these countries and the United States. There are several shortfalls in Constructivism, however. Which norms are worth promoting? Which should be promoted at the cost of others? What is the most effective means for promoting them? Constructivists have few answers to these questions, unfortunately, making it difficult to draw policy relevant conclusions from their analyses.

These are not idle problems. Most Americans (as well as citizens in other Western countries) would expect their leaders to support and strengthen norms regarding human rights. Policy efforts directed at expanding or enhancing human rights often run right up against other norms. Since human rights standards deal with how states interact with their citizens, changes in these

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norms have clashed with existing norms concerning sovereignty. Pushing human rights further forced U.S. policy makers to confront difficult choices—both the Clinton and Bush administrations disregarded the UNSC because they chose to uphold norms that collided with the principle of state sovereignty. Constructivists can describe these clashes, but they have yet to develop models that might help us predict how conflict between norms gets resolved.

The United States chose to impose the West’s desires regarding human rights on Milosevic’s Serbia, and used similar claims to engage Saddam’s Iraq; but the inconsistencies in doing so—especially in contrast to inaction in Africa—have not enhanced the image of the United States. Cynics argue the U.S. merely pursues its own narrow interests under the guise of promoting some higher moral values. Russians were angered by the use of force against Serbia. China has continually countered American arguments by stressing the norm of state sovereignty—and is using this stance to develop new partnerships with African and Asian states that have come under American criticism. Sudan is the most obvious example. China does not criticize the Sudanese government, and in return has been able to deepen its economic links with that country.

Meanwhile the United States defends state sovereignty. The refusal to sign on to the International Criminal Court, for example, rests on state sovereignty. This makes it doubly hard to promote some of these other norms that collide with the norm of sovereignty. At the same time, sovereignty has never been complete—it is always been compromised in practice. Still, there appears to be no consensus among Constructivists over how conflicting norms get resolved in practice, let alone how one overwhelms another.

Constructivists also lack consensus on the ways new norms arise, or get promoted. Constructivism offers enormous potential for change, because it suggests that identities are malleable. States may be changed from placing their sovereignty above all other goals; such changes may be occurring in the identities of the European Union, some would argue. Individual European states have conceded their decision-making powers on an array of issues, because they see themselves increasingly as part of the European community, rather than as competitors in an anarchic
environment (as Realists might portray). Individual citizens of European states may feel they are Europeans as much as they are Italians or Spaniards. We can describe this outcome, but then who should we credit with promoting this change? Was it individual citizens, statesmen, politicians, academics, non-governmental organizations, or European-level bureaucrats themselves? Constructivists are reluctant to exclude any potential actors; since they argue identities change, it is difficult to start an analysis with any actors anyway.

The third problem we should raise addresses the notion that norms regulate international political processes. If our goal is to figure out policies the U.S. can implement to help accommodate the rise of these powers peacefully, we could simply promote the norm that any breach of the peace is unacceptable. The flaw in this thinking, as E. H. Carr so accurately explained long ago, is that other states or peoples may not find the status quo acceptable. To expect them to prefer peace is folly. The value of peace is relative to other interests. Interests depend on identities, according to Constructivists. Since identities can change, peace itself may be threatened whenever identities change. Given that we don’t know how to promote (or counter) the expansion of particular ideas, it is difficult to know how to turn this thinking into useful policies, especially if some new, less desirable identities emerge within one or more of the BRICs.

Constructivism is a relatively young paradigm, and thus it has not developed the full range of arguments or analyses we might desire. Unfortunately, its attack on standard approaches in international relations, plus the extent to which it draws on particular roots in political theory and other disciplines—the very things that have led Constructivists in interesting directions—have also placed drastic limits on its utility. Constructivists often aim to describe outcomes, rather than analyze causal connections. This leaves them bereft of useful policy recommendations. Until Constructivists develop meaningful models of causal pathways, which they can then test empirically, they will be unable to offer persuasive policy proposals.
Evaluating the Theories: Policy Options for the United States

The coming changes to the international system create daunting challenges for the United States. By stressing security above all else, Realists see this change as threatening—yet the policies they propose appear doomed to failure. On their own, Realist theories provide poor guidance. Since any other major power is considered a potential enemy, Realists recommend the U.S. deter the rise of any potential competitor. Their implicit recommendation to attempt to slow the economic growth of the BRICs is unlikely to delay their rise significantly, or even take pre-emptive military steps. Such actions are unlikely to work for two obvious reasons. First, hostility towards the BRICs would be self-defeating since it would encourage them to challenge the United States. Second, antagonizing the BRICs would (by the Realists’ own logic) push them to form a counterbalancing alliance. The best the U.S. can do within this frame of thinking is seek to isolate any one of the BRICs that first emerges as a threat—merely playing the short-term game of balancing.

Institutionalists suggest important ways the United States can prevent the BRICs from evolving into threats, though there are obstacles here as well. Institutionalists can suggest mechanisms that bind the U.S. and the BRICs in ways that benefit both, using those ties as a vehicle for convincing the BRICs to accept the status quo. This can be (and is currently being) done via deepening economic links. By having well-developed and stable economic ties, these countries’ material wealth continues to rise. However, other non-economic mechanisms for drawing these countries to prefer the status quo remain problematic. While reform of existing international institutions could give the BRICs more political voice, such action risks alienating others and perhaps the viability of those institutions. New multilateral institutions could be created, but this may merely politicize the choice of forum for international political processes, and undercut the utility of old and new alike. While it makes sense to pursue these angles, efforts may need to be especially limited.

Constructivists suggest the world can be transformed even as these states rise in power and importance, but their policy advice remains difficult to convert into policy. However, by thinking
about combining the advice coming from these approaches within a broader Liberal framework, several policy strands could prove effective.

The Liberal vision is the most promising. Liberals offer advice that can encompass or selectively apply the insights from the Realist or Institutionalist approaches—making use of their insights far better than they could on their own. Yes, the United States needs to be prepared to counter the potential threat a BRIC might pose, especially if one rivals the United States in power. But in the meantime, the U.S. can take positive steps to bring those countries around to positions that would lessen the chances of conflict, creating greater chances of mutually beneficial—mutually satisfying—interactions. This can be done by reforming existing international institutions or mechanisms, or by creating some new ones, as Institutionalisits might suggest. We must recognize these changes will be difficult, however. On top of these adjustments, however, the Liberals would also urge us to take steps to alter the domestic political and economic dynamics of these countries. As they grow, we need to ensure that they also move towards democratic rule, and develop the external ties that allow them to garner benefits from their ties with the United States. As noted above, Russia and China present the greatest challenges here.

Like the Institutionalisits, Liberals also recommend making the BRICs satisfied with their place in the international system, and their relationship with the United States, but through a different route. Far better to consider the domestic politics of the BRICs, Liberals would argue. If those countries remain economically complementary to the U.S. (i.e., specializing in the production of goods the U.S. cannot make competitively such as labor-intensive manufacturing or natural resources), and they develop or maintain domestic political institutions that help channel domestic interests into effective partnerships with the United States and its allies, the U.S. has little to fear in the future. If the BRICs’ preferences on international affairs match those of the United States, their economic rise would herald opportunities rather than obstacles.

Of course, Liberals would also say domestic politics within the United States matters for how the U.S. will deal with the rest of the world—thus we might pause to consider how America’s domestic politics will hinder or help it deal with coming changes.
Liberal-based policy recommendations have, arguably, shaped America’s policies in recent years—and not always with success. While the Bush administration invaded Iraq for a variety of reasons, it eventually trumpeted the promotion of democracy there as the main long-term goal—both as the only way to extract American troops from the country but also convert the region into one more stable and friendly. While few dispute the desirability of democracy in the Middle East, the increasingly dismal prospects in Iraq (coupled with the mixed success in Afghanistan) will undoubtedly have repercussions on future American policies. The Republican Party will probably move more towards consensus on traditional, Realist “security first” perspectives. For example, the original George W. Bush team seemed confident that Iraqis would seize the opportunity for democratic rule. Therefore they had incomplete and inadequate plans for ruling the country after defeating Saddam’s regime. Having been burned, and seeing how fragile democracy appears to be in Afghanistan, many conservatives are likely to conclude that preserving American interests—including the lives of American personnel—needs to come before goals that appear to be based on moral principles, such as the promotion of democracy. The Liberals’ subtly but crucially different point however, was not that it was morally better to have democracies out there, but that it would be better for America to have more democracies in the system.

Among Democrats, many have distinguished their approach from the Bush team by stressing multilateralism. This draws them to Institutionalism. The Institutionalists argue that the Bush administration has damaged American relations with others by undercutting the role of important institutions such as the UN and NATO. By undercutting the legitimacy of those bodies, or reducing the legitimacy of international law, the United States has won independence in the short-run. There are few costs to that today, when the United States is so strong it may accept risks that might come with a step towards more lawlessness. Once other states increase their power—the BRICs—lawlessness will surely lose any appeal and existing global governance institutions will appear correspondingly more attractive. Yet we should recognize the shortcomings of current international bodies such as the UN, and be pragmatic about how much we can rely on those institutions to help manage change in the future. Institu-
tions matter, and can be incredibly useful tools for the United States in the future. The United States needs to worry about promoting change within the BRICs, and not simply plan to rely on using international institutions as mechanisms for generating common ground.

Both parties will be under pressure from domestic interests, including those that have links to each of the BRICs. There are vocal critics of each BRIC within the United States. China’s domestic policies draw fire, its exports are said to cost Americans’ jobs; Russia’s blustering toward Eastern Europe makes it difficult to forget cold-war animosities; Brazil’s inequality remains astonishingly high; India’s arms race with Pakistan worries others. At the same time, more and more American firms deepen their ties with the BRICs. Emigrants from the BRICs form increasingly powerful lobbies within the United States. These changes too will shape American foreign policy as the distribution of power changes.

Conclusions

Liberals would argue that the United States can promote the positive evolution of the BRICs countries’ attributes—most importantly ensuring they become democratic as their power potential increases. Two of the BRICs, Brazil and India, are democracies embracing capitalism, with the masses increasingly drawing benefits from their participation in the international economy. Although they might develop political frictions with the United States, why would such countries seek to overturn the status quo? Russia and China present quite different puzzles. Both have little tradition of democracy to build upon, and both have recent histories of exercising international power against their neighbors. These two may also be the least sensitive to external influence.

Liberal insights can help guide policy decisions based from the other approaches. If the Realists suggest attempting to slow the growth of rivals, Liberals at least tell us which rivals are likely to prove most threatening. If Institutionalists tell us to cede decision-making powers in multilateral institutions, the Liberals can help identify when and where such concessions might be
needed. Effective Liberal policies might trump the need for these other policies. By shaping domestic interests in the BRICs, the United States can turn them into building blocks of a new international order, rather than drive them to confront the United States as a BRIC wall.

E. H. Carr’s work has been mentioned here, because I consider the current period more akin to the post-World War I period than many realize. The advice given above is close to what one might have argued in the 1920s: the best means for ensuring peace would not have been to deter Germany, Italy, and Japan (and perhaps also the Soviet Union), but to prevent them from wanting to overturn the status quo in the first place. Britain, France, and the United States would have had a much easier task in managing international affairs in the interwar period if communists had not seized power in Russia, fascists in Germany and Italy, or militarists in Japan. Once domestic disorders allowed such groups to control the foreign policies of major powers, international order was threatened. The democracies then fell back on a host of Constructivist, Institutionalist, and Realist policies: pacifism, international organizations such as the League of Nations, arms limitations treaties, appeasement, and eventually deterrence through counter-balancing alliances. As Carr noted then, none of these could implement peaceful change in the international system. American policy makers need to heed his warnings, if the coming changes are to be handled more peacefully.

Principal References


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