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Great power management and ambiguous order in nineteenth-century international society

Benjamin Zala*

Research Fellow, Department of International Relations, Australian National University

Abstract

This article considers what the nineteenth century can tell us about the nature of great power management under conditions of ambiguity in relation to the holders of great power status. It charts the development of an institutionalised role for the great powers as managers of international society but with a specific focus on the mutual recognition, and conferral, of status. Such a focus highlights the changing, and sometimes competing, perceptions of not only which states should be thought of as great powers, but also therefore whether the power structure of international society remained multipolar or shifted towards bipolarity or even unipolarity. The article argues that a 'golden age' of great power management existed during a period in which perceptions of great power status were in fact more fluid than the standard literature accounts for. This means that predictions surrounding the imminent demise of the social institution of great power management under an increasingly ambiguous interstate order today may well be misplaced.

Keywords

Great Power Management; Nineteenth Century; Polarity

Introduction

Recent scholarship has recovered a focus on the central role that the international politics of the nineteenth century played in establishing many of the fundamental institutions and practices of modern international society.[1] In particular, the Vienna settlement of 1815 and the Concert system of great power diplomacy which it established, institutionalised the managerial role of the great powers that continues to exist in one form or another to this day. Nick Bisley has emphasised this legacy in that, '[n]ot only did it usher in, for a period, a successful phase of great power diplomacy, which explicitly managed international order through a cooperative and consultative process, it marked more clearly than ever before the flowering of a distinctly modern form of international politics.'[2] It is not only that the current international order is defined by what one account refers to as

* Correspondence to: Benjamin Zala, Department of International Relations, Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, Hedley Bull Building, 130 Garran Rd, The Australian National University, Acton, ACT, 2601, Australia. Author's email: benjamin.zala@anu.edu.au

[1] See Jennifer Mitzen, *Power in Concert: The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Global Governance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[2] Nick Bisley, *Great Powers in the Changing International Order* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2012), p. 25.

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'the downstream consequences of the nineteenth century'.[3] But also given the arguments of many about the rise of new powers spelling the end of the unipolar power distribution,[4] this period is said to be our best historical precedent for gauging the most likely shape of a coming interstate order characterised by the most diffuse distribution of power since the end of the Second World War.[5]

But increasingly, the argument is that as the era of US dominance comes to an end, the ability of the great powers to manage relations between themselves and with the rest of the world for the maintenance of global order is fast receding.[6] As German foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, recently put it, '[t]he world is recognizably in search of a new order, without having one. And from that, conflicts arise which are harder to solve today than 10 or 20 years ago.'[7] At the heart of this argument is the fact that a profound confusion exists as to whether a power transition is imminent,[8] already under way,[9] has already taken place,[10] or is actually less likely than many predict.[11] The logic here is that if certain states are to be conferred with the legitimacy that great power management requires, then their unambiguous identification must first be possible.

A recent report by the Center for a New American Security characterises the world as being in an 'era of compounding complexity' in which there is 'ambiguity in the international system about how rising powers work with existing multilateral frameworks … as well as a disconnect between the privileges these rising powers seek and their willingness to take on the burdens of global leadership.'[12] Randall Schweller has described a world in which the United States remains the most important state in the global order, but rising powers with varying degrees of success are challenging Washington's dominance in some (but not all) areas. The result is that US hegemony has given way

[3] Barry Buzan and George Lawson, 'The global transformation: the nineteenth century and the making of modern International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 57:3 (2013), p. 620.

[4] See Charles A. Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Robert H. Wade, 'Emerging world order? From multipolarity to multilateralism in the G20, the World Bank, and the IMF', *Politics & Society*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 347–78.

[5] See Barry Buzan and George Lawson, 'Capitalism and the emergent world order', *International Affairs*, 90:1 (2014), in particular, pp. 86–91; Knud Erik Jørgensen, 'Prospects for multipolarity and multilateralism in world politics', in Thomas Christiansen, Emil Kirchner, and Philomena B. Murray (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of EU-Asia Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 45–58; Adam Posen, 'What the Return of Nineteenth-Century Economics Means for Twenty-First-Century Geopolitics', speech, Chatham House, Royal Institute of International Affairs (17 January 2012), available at: {http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/181355} accessed 9 February 2016; Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008); Azar Gat, 'The return of authoritarian great powers', *Foreign Affairs*, 86:4 (2007), pp. 59–69.

[6] Wolfgang Ischinger, 'Munich Security Report 2015: Collapsing Order, Reluctant Guardians?' (Munich: Munich Security Conference Foundation, January 2015), available at: {http://perma.cc/GDE7-NRA6} accessed 9 February 2016.

[7] Quoted in Alison Smale, 'Germany's foreign minister, a man in the middle', *New York Times* (19 November 2014).

[8] Kupchan, *No One's World*.

[9] Wade, 'Emerging world order?'

[10] Daniel Deudney, 'Hegemony, nuclear weapons, and liberal hegemony', in G. John Ikenberry (ed.), *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 195–232.

[11] Joseph S. Nye, 'The twenty-first century will not be a "post-American" world', *International Studies Quarterly*, 56:1 (2012), pp. 215–17.

[12] Julianne Smith and Jacob Stokes, *Strategy and Statecraft: An Agenda for the United States in an Era of Compounding Complexity* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2014), p. 10.

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to an entropic global order. Entropy's 'indefinable quality – its inherently ambiguous nature'[13] in which 'power is being dispersed more evenly across the globe' makes 'working together to get things done more difficult'.[14]

The link between having a clear sense of the polarity of international society and the decline of great power management has been repeatedly made by the former foreign minister, Laurent Fabius. He argues that '[i]n today's world, which is no longer neither bipolar nor unipolar but rather chaotic, violent and unpredictable',[15] this lack of clarity creates 'a sort of vacuum in which, to put it briefly, there is no stabilizing power nor any sufficient regulation to address crises'.[16] Echoing the language associated with the practice of great power management, another account puts it this way: '[t]he international system is adrift because there is an unregulated diffusion of authority, agency and responsibility.'[17]

Charles Kupchan argues that this signals that we are entering 'no one's world' and that '[f]or the first time in history' the world will be 'without a center of gravity'.[18] Ian Bremmer bemoans a new 'G-zero world' in which no one power currently has the 'clout to impose a solution'.[19] He compares this to the Concert of Europe era in which the great power managers were clear arguing that '[a] nineteenth-century European system … doesn't translate into a twenty-first century global model made up of dozens of powerful countries with different sets of political and economic values and at different stages of development.'[20] This, in its most dramatic form, translates into the assertion that 'the idea of great power managerialism, and the conception of international society on which it relies … needs to be consigned to history'.[21]

However, an important but largely overlooked aspect of the substantial literature on the diplomacy of great power management during the nineteenth century[22] is the extent to which the exact roster of powers was rarely unambiguous. The recognition and conferral of great power status by both great power peers and non-great powers alike is a logical precursor to the management of issues of war, stability, and peace in international society by 'the great responsibles'.[23] Yet a specific focus on the mutual recognition, and conferral, of status points us towards the sometimes competing perceptions of which states should be thought of as great powers, and therefore even whether the power structure

[13] Randall L. Schweller, *Maxwell's Demon and the Golden Apple: Global Discord in the New Millennium* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 36.

[14] Ibid., p. 4.

[15] Laurent Fabius, 'Security: Laurent Fabius's Participation in the Munich Security Conference' (8 February 2015), available at: {http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/defence-security/events/article/security-laurent-fabius-s} accessed 9 February 2016.

[16] Laurent Fabius, 'France in an Age of Geopolitical Upheaval', speech delivered to the Brookings Institution, Washington, DC (13 May 2014), available at: {http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/events/2014/5/13-france-foreign-minister/20140513_france_fabius_transcript.pdf} accessed 9 February 2016.

[17] Chester A. Crocker, 'The strategic dilemma of a world adrift', *Survival*, 57:1 (2015), p. 13.

[18] Kupchan, *No One's World,* p. 3.

[19] Ian Bremmer, *Every Nation for Itself: Winners and Losers in a G-Zero World* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 6.

[20] Ibid., p. 170.

[21] Bisley, *Great Powers*, p. 94.

[22] For a good overview, see Ian Clark, *Hegemony in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 73–97.

[23] On the use of this term by Alfred Zimmern, Hedley Bull, and others, see Mlada Bukovansky, Ian Clark, Robyn Eckersley, Richard Price, Christian Reus-Smit, and Nichloas J. Wheeler, *Special Responsibilities: Global Problems and American Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 36.

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of international society remained multipolar or shifted towards bipolarity or unipolarity.[24] At a time of increased concern about the foundations and sustainability of the institution of great power management[25] as well as a greater focus on issues of status competition and contestation in world politics,[26] a clearer understanding of the relationship between these two dynamics during the nineteenth century should be of both scholarly and policy interest. The argument pursued here is that the practice of great power management is less fragile, and dependent on an unambiguous interstate order, than the current unease in literature on the contemporary order would suggest. While not its primary aim, the article also considers the ways in which great power management and the conferral of status can, under certain circumstances, become co-constitutive. The latter finding implies a greater role for the practice of great power management in the status seeking behaviour of both rising, and potentially declining, powers than is often recognised.

The article begins by establishing the nineteenth century as the golden age of great power management. This is followed by a historiography of the great power diplomacy of the period in order to demonstrate the extent to which disagreement and ambiguity over the conferral of great power status can be seen in the discourse of practitioners at the time as well as the *post hoc* analysis of scholars since then. In particular, the analysis focuses on what are identified as the 'problematic powers' of the multipolar European Concert system of the Austrian, Prussian, and Ottoman Empires, and the rising 'Pacific powers' of the United States and Japan towards the end of the century. The article then turns to the question of whether the standard depiction of a uniformly multipolar order for the entire century[27] actually matches up to the historical record when the emphasis is placed on the perceptions of decision-makers at the time. Statements such as 'it may be as difficult to achieve a stable, lasting peace in multipolar Asia, as it was in Europe in the eighteenth,

[24] A multipolar order having three or more great powers, a bipolar order having two, and a unipolar order having a single dominant power. The latter two categories would normally refer to the 'poles of power' as 'superpowers' rather than 'great powers'; see Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), pp. 69–71.

[25] Bisley, *Great Powers*, pp. 92–109; Kupchan, *No One's World*; Bremmer, *Every Nation for Itself*. This is also reflected to an extent in Barry Buzan, 'A world order without superpowers: Decentred globalism', *International Relations*, 25:1 (2011), pp. 3–25.

[26] See the various contributions to T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth (eds), *Status in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Thomas J. Volgy, Renato Corbetta, Keith A. Grant, and Ryan G. Baird (eds), *Major Powers and the Quest for Status in International Politics: Global and Regional Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[27] As one account notes, '[f]or neorealists, this period is one of unbroken multipolarity.' Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 15. For a small number of examples of this (and not just limited to neorealists), see G. John Ikenberry, 'The liberal sources of American unipolarity', in G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth (eds), *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 220; Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers*, pp. 48–9; Nicholas Khoo and Michael L. Smith, 'The future of American hegemony in the Asia-Pacific: a concert of Asia or a clear pecking order?', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 56:1 (2002), p. 69; George T. Duncan and Randolph M. Siverson, 'Flexibility of alliance partner choice in a multipolar system: Models and tests', *International Studies Quarterly*, 26:4 (1982), pp. 511–38. This is also reflected in International Relations textbooks as well (often a good way to gauge 'conventional wisdoms' in the discipline); see John J. Mearsheimer, 'Structural realism', in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (eds), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (3rd edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 84; Oliver Daddow, *International Relations Theory* (2nd edn, London: Sage: 2013), p. 131; Joseph Grieco, G. John Ikenberry, and Michael Mastanduno, *Introduction to International Relations: Enduring Questions and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 431.

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nineteenth and early twentieth centuries'[28] and 'the nineteenth-century system was multipolar in form'[29] are common and Nuno Moneteio is correct in pointing out that 'we usually describe the world as multipolar until 1945 and bipolar between then and 1989'.[30]

Using an historicist approach that analyses the statements of decision-makers and actions of states at the time, as well as the *post hoc* analysis of scholars in the years since, the discussion highlights the competing perceptions of the number of states holding the status of a great power. Such an approach stands in stark contrast to the overwhelming majority of the polarity analysis literature that treats the 'poles' of an international order as the states endowed with the greatest material capabilities (with polarity being an objective fact that can be gleaned afterwards from quantitative analysis). The standard literature is therefore concerned with parsimonious systemic theorising rather than a focus on perceptions of status found in the analysis below. The approach here resonates with the distinction made by Barry Buzan between regional, great, and superpowers but in a way that recognises that these distinctions are better suited to *post hoc* analysis than to understanding the way that decision-makers view the world in which they are operating at the time.[31] Polarity, as it is used by practitioners, is an ordering concept used to help think about issues of power and order that instead defines poles as holders of a particular social status.[32] As the historical discussion below highlights, the distribution of material capabilities does not always perfectly match the conferral of great power status, and therefore different actors can perceive different configurations of polarity at the same time. Thinking about polarity in a more complex way than is usually done in the standard realist literature on the topic (in which polarity is defined as the distribution of capabilities in the system at any one time), allows us to explore the link between the status of a 'pole' and the practice of great power management. This is implicit in much of the English School work on great power rights and responsibilities but it is also specifically important in the context of the nineteenth century.[33]

The evidence presented suggests that the period in which the modern practice of great power management was born was marked by considerably less widespread agreement as to the exact list of great powers at any one time than is often appreciated. The existence of such differing perceptions of power during what is widely regarded as the golden age of great power management, should give us

[28] Aaron L. Friedberg, 'Will Europe's past be Asia's future?', *Survival*, 42:3 (2000), p. 148.

[29] Michael Sheehan, *The Balance of Power: History & Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996), p. 121.

[30] Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 53. For further illustrations of this in the IR literature see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 348 and J. David Singer, Stuart Bremer, and John Stuckey, 'Capability distribution, uncertainty, and major power war, 1820–1965', in Bruce Russett (ed.), *Peace, War, and Numbers* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1972), p. 22.

[31] Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers*, pp. 69–72.

[32] For a full discussion of the implications of redefining polarity along more constructivist lines, see Benjamin Zala, 'Rethinking polarity for the twenty-first century: Perceptions of order in international society' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2013), available at: {http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/4099/} accessed 9 February 2016.

[33] As Buzan and Lawson have pointed out, it was in the early nineteenth century that a shift occurred from the 'ranking of powers' based on precedence and title to the 'grading of powers' based on power capabilities. This then found expression in the formal recognition of great power status that was expressed through the practice of great power management. Buzan and Lawson characterise this as an exclusive set of states that 'possessed special rights (for example, over intervention) and responsibilities (such as a duty to maintain international order).' Buzan and Lawson, *The Global Transformation*, pp. 178–9.

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at least some more confidence in the foundations for the future interstate order in what is being increasingly described as 'no one's world'[34] and an 'age of disorder'.[35]

The birth of great power management

While much of the literature on great power politics takes a highly reductionist view of its main category as simply the states that score highly on a set of material indicators,[36] another strand of the literature has long focused on the distinction between great and non-great powers in diplomatic practice (and therefore in fundamentally social terms).[37] Hamish Scott has argued that while the relative distribution of power amongst political units had long been regarded as crucial to political relations, it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that the term 'great power' and the idea of a state with special rights and duties in the international system emerged.[38] Yet many others go further in stressing the novelty of this 'two-tier setup' of managerial great powers and managed non-great powers that was set in place at the Congress of Vienna in 1815:[39]

> Frequently, the expression 'great power' is used regardless of the period being dealt with, but this leads to nineteenth-century assumptions about what a great power is and does being read into historical processes in which such assumptions were not present … There have always been big powers, of course. But both at Münster and Osnabrück and at Utrecht, the big powers had little sense of special rights and responsibilities.[40]

By the early nineteenth century, the concept was well established and it has become almost universally accepted that 1815 marks a high point (if not the starting point) in the development of social norms of great power management. It has also therefore become associated with the development of a degree of shared perception of power and status amongst the members of international society. This was implied in Hedley Bull's original research into the development of societal relations that extended beyond the systemic interactions of states. This was evident in that, as Richard Little puts it, '[a]ccurate assessments of the distribution of power … require the kind of stable environment that Bull associates with the existence of an international society.'[41]

[34] Kupchan, *No One's World*.

[35] Randall Schweller, 'Emerging powers in an age of disorder', *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, 17:3 (2011), pp. 285–97.

[36] See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Joseph M. Grieco, 'Structural realism and the problem of polarity and war', in Felix Berenskoetter and M. J. Williams (eds), *Power in World Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 64–82.

[37] See Edward Keene, 'The naming of powers', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 48:2 (2013), pp. 268–82; Gerry Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States: Unequal Sovereigns in the International Legal Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

[38] H. M. Scott, *The Birth of a Great Power System 1740–1815* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2006), pp. 117–21.

[39] Hans Morgenthau seemed to echo a similar sentiment when he wrote that the great powers as an 'institution of international politics and organization … sprang from the brains of Castlereagh'. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (5th edn, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), p. 459.

[40] Andreas Osiander, *The States System of Europe, 1640–1990: Peacemaking and the Conditions of International Stability* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 323.

[41] Richard Little, 'The balance of power and great power management', in Richard Little and John Williams (eds), *The Anarchical Society in a Globalized World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 111.

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Beyond the development of a hierarchical distinction between great and non-great powers, scholars associated with the English School of International Relations have identified the specific evolution of the practice of what is referred to as 'great power management'.[42] Bull most clearly summarised the role of the great powers as contributing to international order in two ways, 'by managing their relations with one another; and by exploiting their preponderance in such a way as to impart a degree of central direction to the affairs of international society as a whole'.[43] It is closely linked to the concept of hegemony given that while coercion is important, 'it is the consent, not necessarily enthusiastic, of the other members of international society for the position of privilege, and the benefits they perceive that it brings'[44] that is central to effective great power management. It involves, but is not reducible to, special rights (such as the waging of war and the maintenance of spheres of influence) and responsibilities (such as providing public goods and addressing fundamental challenges and crises of coexistence and cooperation).[45] Essentially, great power management requires a small minority of powerful states to play a disproportionately active role in the maintenance of international order through the avoidance of war between themselves; the early resolution of crises involving non-great powers that could threaten to escalate into such war; and playing a leadership role in collective action problems that threaten international society as a whole.

Given that this role requires the conferral of a specific status by others, it is perhaps unsurprising that, as international society moves into a period of uncertainty as to which states do and do not hold this status, that the practice of great power management should be called into question. However, the link between the social institution of great power management and collectively agreed upon perceptions of great power status (translating in numerical terms into agreement as to whether the order is multipolar – including agreement on the identity of the three or more poles – or whether it is actually unipolar or bipolar instead), may in fact be more tenuous. The following brief historiography of the nineteenth century demonstrates this by focusing specifically on perceptions of status rather than *post hoc* rankings of great power capabilities.

1815, multipolarity, and the management of international society

The institutionalisation of the practice of great power management at the Vienna Congress was not simply the product of the immediate aftermath of the Napoleonic wars from 1803 to 1815. It also followed a succession of conflicts across Europe including the Austro–Turkish and Russo–Turkish wars of 1787–92, the French Revolutionary wars of 1792–1802, and the Russo-Persian War and first Serbian uprising both lasting from 1804–13. Paul Schroeder has characterised the period from 1815 to 1854 as more stable and peaceful than any comparable period during the preceding century.[46] This point is important for our analysis as major war, and in particular the peacemaking that generally follows such systemic upheaval, has often been used to signify the granting of great power status.[47] One account goes so far as to state that '[t]he postwar years constitute a unique period in which states know where they stand in the scales of world power.'[48]

[42] See Bull, *Anarchical Society*; Bisley, *Great Powers*; Clark, *Hegemony in International Society*.
[43] Bull, *Anarchical Society*, p. 207.
[44] Bisley, *Great Powers*, p. 90.
[45] On the latter point, see Bukovansky et al., *Special Responsibilities*.
[46] Paul W. Schroeder, 'The 19th-century international system: Changes in the structure', *World Politics*, 39:1 (1986), p. 1.
[47] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 203; Ian Clark, *The Post-Cold War Order: The Spoils of Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 56–78.
[48] William C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions During the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 59.

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A fruitful way of capturing the fluctuations in terms of which states were and were not granted the status of great powers is to use the macro-structural concept of polarity (that is, the number of 'poles of power') as a lens. The conventional wisdom on the century following the establishment of the Concert of Europe in 1815 is that it was distinguished from the preceding three centuries by the relative stability in the polarity of the European system. According to this account, two major changes occurred – the rise of a unified but relatively weak Italy and the subsuming of Prussia into a unified Germany within the multipolar order, neither of which had the dramatic effect of the rise and fall of great powers (involving Spain, the Netherlands, France, Britain, Russia, and Prussia) during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.[49] In other words, great power management was carried out under multipolar conditions for the entirety of the period associated with the Concert system. Yet such a position obscures the contestations over status and differences in perceptions of power held by multiple actors at the same time throughout the nineteenth century.

At the heart of the Concert of Europe, or the 'Congress system' established at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, was the formalisation of the social differentiation between the great and non-great powers in Europe. F. H. Hinsley has captured the importance of the diplomatic practice at Vienna in signifying the collective agreement of the status of the great powers in the aftermath of the defeat of France. He notes that the ideas about order of those present 'found expression at Vienna in the spirit in which the assembled victor states agreed among themselves about the detailed resettlement of Europe.'[50] The Concert system was to underpin international order not only by providing an avenue for the management of relations between the great powers, but also as a means of highlighting their unequal power over the rest of international society.[51] This understanding of the Concert's purpose highlights that the great powers are those states that enjoy a very specific social status rather than simply controlling a certain share of the system's resources. Status, unlike the threat of brute force (such as, for example in the present age, the possession of nuclear weapons), requires regular public displays of power in order to be affirmed, and therefore the high-profile meetings of the Concert system provided an avenue for this. This social stratification and the practice of great power management was even made contractual by the Vienna settlement in that the parties became the 'guarantors' of the postwar arrangements.

It is clear that in 1815 there was a very widespread consensus on the existence of four undisputed great powers, Britain, Russia, Austria, and Prussia. France, reeling from its defeat at the hands of the Quadruple Alliance, was not treated as a peer with equal claim to great power rights and responsibilities in the settlement of the Napoleonic wars. This was despite the fact that even after the military losses endured in the final years of this conflict, France remained militarily stronger than Britain, Austria, and Prussia.[52] It was not until 1818, and after much diplomatic manoeuvring and negotiation, that France was included as a Concert power. The United States was 'well established' but its role 'marginal to power relationships elsewhere',[53] and Japan had yet to be considered by the European powers – those both claiming and developing the notion of great power status – as one of

[49] Scott, *Birth of a Great Power System*, p. 362.
[50] F. H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace: Theory and Practice in the History of Relations between States* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 194.
[51] Andrew Hurrell, 'Security and inequality', in Andrew Hurrell and Ngaire Woods (eds), *Inequality, Globalization, and World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 254.
[52] Roy Bridge, 'Allied diplomacy in peacetime: the failure of the Congress "system", 1815–23', in Alan Sked (ed.), *Europe's Balance of Power 1815–1848* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 34.
[53] Jeremy Black, *Great Powers and the Quest for Hegemony: The World Order Since 1500* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 101.

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their number. This reinforces the notion that 'status attribution is a perceptual phenomenon, but one that ought to have behavioural consequences',[54] such that states with considerable material capabilities or even 'rising powers' who experience economic and military growth should not always be expected to be automatically included into pre-existing great power clubs. The 'Concert powers' were a kind of social clique in which notions of an historical claim to great power status, ideas about civilisation, and geography were centrally important.

The issue of membership of the Concert related directly to which states were and which were not conferred great power status. This was captured in the statement of French prime minister, the Duc de Richelieu who, at the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle, insisted that France would:

> no longer consent to receive notes signed collectively by the ministers of the four Powers. This Areopagus sitting in Paris and discussing the affairs of Europe and of France herself can no longer exist unless France forms part of it. If this surveillance is to be tolerable, it must be reciprocal: France may be called on to suppress a revolution in Prussia just as much as Prussia to suppress trouble in France.[55]

Exclusivity was the order of the day given the privileged position of the initial four and eventual five great powers that were setting the peace and security agenda for the European continent. Therefore, the practice of great power management should be thought of not only as being affected by perceptions of great power status, but that equally, perceptions of status can be shaped by states claiming a right (and perhaps subsequently demonstrating an ability) to engage in great power management. In this sense, status and managerialism become co-constitutive.

Problematic powers in the Concert system

Examining two of the 'undisputed' powers of the nineteenth century raises interesting questions about great power status and therefore about the impact of ambiguity on great power management. The role of non-material factors in the determinants of great power status has been empirically downplayed and theoretically ignored in the largely realist literature on great power politics, polarity, and power transitions.[56] Yet Austria's status as a great power alerts us to the importance of non-material considerations. As Scott has noted:

> Austria retained the status of a great power until the First World War, more due to her geographical extent and European role than her own intrinsic strength … Austria thus remained, as she had been ever since her seventeenth-century political emergence, a state with the responsibilities of a great power but with an exposed and precarious strategic situation which she lacked the means to defend.[57]

For Herbert Butterfield, it was not only Austria's history of involvement in important military coalitions in the late eighteenth century and its domination of the Holy Roman Empire until 1806,

[54] Thomas J. Volgy, Renato Corbetta, Keith A. Grant, and Ryan G. Baird, 'Major power status in international politics', in Thomas J. Volgy, Renato Corbetta, Keith A. Grant, and Ryan G. Baird (eds), *Major Powers and the Quest for Status in International Politics: Global and Regional Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 13.

[55] Quoted in Bridge, 'Allied diplomacy', p. 37.

[56] See, for instance, Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Frank Wayman, 'Bipolarity and war: the role of capability concentration and alliance patterns among major powers, 1816–1965', *Journal of Peace Research*, 21:1 (1984), pp. 61–78; Gilpin, *War and Change*.

[57] Scott, *Birth of a Great Power System*, pp. 360–1.

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but also Klemens von Metternich's brilliant and effective use of diplomacy that secured for Austria a 'commanding influence in European politics totally out of proportion to that state's actual power'.[58] This is important for thinking about the ambiguous nature of great power status as, if Butterfield was right and structural power can come through agency, then there is no theoretical reason why this should be a quirk of history associated with a particular Austrian statesman.

The role of agency in perceptions of status can also endure for some time. Samuel Williamson has written of Austria, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as a so-called great power without the 'latent material and economic resources to allow for a competitive military build-up; it could not keep up with the Joneses, so to speak'.[59] Yet Austria's historical legacy, largely thanks to the hugely dominant role Metternich had played in European politics right up until his resignation as foreign minister in 1848, clearly carried Vienna's status well past what its material capabilities allowed. It is perhaps, though, no coincidence that Metternich was the most vocal and forceful proponent of the special rights and, importantly, the special responsibilities, associated with the five powers. When representatives of the 'lesser' states complained in the lead-up and aftermath of subsequent Congresses such as Aix-la-Chapelle, Laibach, and Verona, Metternich went out of his way to appeal to the legitimacy conferred on the five powers by the Final Act of the Congress of Vienna in 1815.[60] In this sense, not only did Austria's participation in the Concert endure despite its lack of material capabilities, it also provided a central pillar of Metternich's status projection.

Similarly, Prussia was without doubt treated as a great power throughout the Napoleonic era and immediately after, yet in reality, as was even noted by the French minister Talleyrand at the time, it was a great power in name only.[61] Prussia had suffered greatly during the Napoleonic wars – so much so that one account talks of it being 'nearly eclipsed as a great power' after its military defeat in 1806.[62] Yet at the Congress of Vienna, Prussia was treated as a full partner and acted accordingly, demanding recognition of its claim to Saxony. This claim was disputed by Austria but the British foreign secretary, Viscount Castlereagh, persuaded Vienna to accept a deal giving far greater concessions to Prussia than was expected.

Scott has written that these cases demonstrate the important but not sufficient role of material resources in the emerging great power system at the time: 'international leadership rested not merely on resources and administrative, military, and where appropriate, naval power, but on the willingness of the established elite to treat a newcomer as one of their number'.[63] The use of hard power (as well as its actual or potential possession in terms of capabilities) greatly affects the way states such as Prussia are viewed with hindsight by offensive realists such as John Mearsheimer. Mathew Rendall states that most scholars regard Prussia as being one of the great powers for the entire nineteenth century, yet Mearsheimer considered it to be so only from 1862 onwards with the coming

[58] Karl Schweizer and Jeremy Black, 'The value of diplomatic history: a case study in the historical thought of Herbert Butterfield', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 17:3 (2006), p. 264.

[59] Samuel R. Williamson, 'Austria-Hungary and the coming of the First World War', in Ernest R. May, Richard Rosecrance, and Zara Steiner (eds), *History and Neorealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 104.

[60] See Carsten Holbraad, *The Concert of Europe: A Study in German and British International Theory 1815–1914* (London: Longmans, 1970), pp. 24–8.

[61] Scott, *Birth of a Great Power System*, p. 4.

[62] Richard Rosecrance, 'Transformations in power', in Ernest May, Richard Rosecrance, and Zara Steiner (eds), *History and Neorealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 21.

[63] Scott, *Birth of a Great Power System*, p. 4.

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to power of Otto von Bismark.[64] From his defensive realist position, Rendall argues that this is partly because 'making potential and actual military power criteria for being a great power means excluding some states that exercise restraint.'[65]

The replacement of Prussia's role in the Concert system by the German Reich in 1871 is particularly illuminating. Despite the predictions of the Concert of Europe's demise by critics such as the German historian and commentator, Johann Gustav Droysen, as the rise of a new Germany would spell the end of the outdated oligarchic approach, the established form of great power management endured. The powers would meet in formal concert (even if only at the ministerial and ambassadorial level) at least six more times before the outbreak of the First World War including in full Congress in Berlin in 1878.

The Ottoman Empire is often discussed on the margins of the story of the great powers of the nineteenth century, and it only appears on some of the lists of great power contenders in the standard polarity literature.[66] If we consider the way in which it was treated at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, it is interesting to note that Castlereagh went to some effort to try and include a mention of the Ottoman Empire in the Vienna Final Act. Yet this was far from providing Constantinople a 'seat at the table' out of a recognition of the empire's prestige as a great power. Instead, Castlereagh's plan was to include a guarantee of the integrity of the Ottoman Empire that 'the Powers' would sign up to and even agree to enforce in a kind of collective security arrangement.[67] This demonstrates that the empire was treated as something which the great powers would need to protect from the designs of one another and not as a peer. This is particularly important given that those present at Vienna were not simply those involved in the victory over Napoleon but, more importantly, were those who would guarantee the future peace.

What historians now, in hindsight, refer to as the decline of the Ottoman Empire (known at the time as the 'Eastern Question') not only raised questions about the role of this former major player, but also encouraged rivalry and competition between certain members of the Concert order. The period of 1821–41 presented the Concert powers with a number of challenges concerning precisely how the holders of great power status were to manage the gradual decline of Ottoman influence in the Balkans and what is today referred to as the Middle East. In particular, the Greek war of independence of 1821–33 and the two Egyptian revolts of 1831–3 and 1839–41 became, according to Schroeder 'the most complicated, persistent, and dangerous question in European politics'[68] at the time.

However, following an increase in diplomatic efforts by Constantinople (such as the appointment of an ambassador to London in 1836 and the re-establishment of permanent embassies in Vienna, Paris, and London in 1835–6), a gradual move towards greater status recognition throughout the nineteenth century became possible. By 1853, British prime minister, Lord Palmerston was discussing the indispensable role of the Ottoman Empire for the European continent. Writing to the foreign secretary, the Earl of Clarendon, he observed that:

> the activity, spirit & the Energy, moral & Physical, military & political which the Turks have displayed in dealing with their present Crisis, must surely convince any impartial &

[64] Mathew Rendall, 'Defensive realism and the Concert of Europe', *Review of International Studies*, 32:3 (2006), p. 525.
[65] Ibid., p. 525.
[66] See, for example, Jack S. Levy, 'Alliance formation and war behavior: an analysis of the great powers, 1495–1975', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 25:4 (1981), pp. 581–613.
[67] Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace*, p. 200.
[68] Schroeder, 'The 19th-century international system', p. 6.

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> unprejudiced Person that Turkey is not a dead or dying Body, but that on the Contrary it possesses Powers of Life & national Resources which render it worth maintaining as a useful Element in the European Balance.[69] [*sic*]

Ian Clark notes that by 1856, the Ottoman Empire was being 'coopted by the European powers'.[70] This relates directly to the fact that it was treated as a great power at the Congress of Paris that year following the Crimean war and not simply as a victim of great power aggression. It was not until the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1856 that the Ottoman Empire was formally admitted into the Concert of Europe,[71] demonstrating that questions over certain states' claim to great power status may endure without threatening the institution of great power management itself.

Late nineteenth-century rising powers

Further to the east, the final two contenders for major power status towards the end of this century, were the rising Pacific powers of the United States and Japan. While it was Britain who had fought the revolutionaries in the previous century during the War of Independence, many of the European great powers had been directly involved on the North American continent (including Spain, France, and Russia). Yet the days of the United States being a newly emerging independent state still providing a setting for European 'offshore balancing' had passed by the middle of the nineteenth century.[72] Somewhat reminiscent of the rise of China today, the United States had gone from a developing to a strong, developed state in a relatively short period of time. By 1857, Palmerston was observing that '[w]e have given way Step by Step to the North Americans on almost every disputed matter, and I fear that we shall have more or less to do so upon every other Question except the maintenance of our own Provinces and of our West Indian Islands.'[73] By the 1870s the United States had already overtaken Britain as the world's largest and most advanced economy.[74]

However, the history of the rise of the United States into the league of great power status in a perceived multipolar order also provides evidence of the inability of traditional definitions of great powers as those rich in material capabilities to capture the reality of how power operates in world politics. By taking a purely materialist and rationalist approach to power, the United States should not only be well established as a pole of power by this time. In fact, by the turn of the century, according to Mearsheimer, the United States was far ahead of Britain in the two principal indicators of military might; population and industrial strength.[75] The Correlates of War project data shows that by 1920, the United States was producing more than 33.1 million tons of iron and steel than its

[69] Quoted in David Brown, *Palmerston and the Politics of Foreign Policy, 1846–55* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 161–2.

[70] Ian Clark, *The Hierarchy of States: Reform and Resistance in the International Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[71] It should also be noted that this recognition by the Concert powers did not necessarily ensure the Ottoman Empire's territorial integrity. Fikret Adanir, 'Turkey's entry into the Concert of Europe', *European Review*, 13:3 (2005), pp. 395–417.

[72] Richard Little, 'British neutrality versus offshore balancing in the American Civil War: the English School strikes back', *Security Studies*, 16:1 (2007), p. 72.

[73] Quoted in ibid., p. 75.

[74] Michael Cox, Tim Dunne, and Ken Booth, 'Introduction', in Michael Cox, Tim Dunne, and Ken Booth (eds), *Empires, Systems and States: Great Transformations in International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 11.

[75] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 246.

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nearest competitor (Britain), and consuming 482 million metric tons of coal equivalent more than Britain (again the second highest consumer at the time).[76] This would appear to place Washington in more of a unipolar position – in purely quantitative terms – yet the way great power status was granted by its peers does not bear this out. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a period in which the rising Pacific powers of the United States and Japan slowly learned to translate their growing material capabilities into 'rising power' status, something which (not unlike the contemporary period) is rarely conferred or perceived evenly across multiple actors.

In particular it was the 'Far Eastern crisis' of 1895–1905 that, according to Clark, demonstrated the arrival of Washington and Tokyo as centres of global power:

> It offered a stage for the United States to convert its growing economic and technological muscle into a degree of diplomatic leverage: its stake in the Philippines in 1898, the 'Hay Open Door' notes in relation to China and the hosting of the Portsmouth peace settlement between Russia and Japan in 1905 all bore witness to America's coming of international age. At the same time, Japan's war against China in 1894–5, her alignment with Britain and her symbolic victory over Russia in 1905 testified to an Asiatic presence in the world power structure.[77]

Writing of the Sino-Japanese war of 1894, Seung-Young Kim notes that following the Japanese victory, the British government asked the United States to join it alongside Russia, Germany, and France in an intervention with a view to achieving Korean independence. The invitation was declined as according to Kim, '[i]n the view of American leaders, a strong Japan would counterbalance the European intrusion in East Asia and could promote a favourable balance of power for the United States in the region.'[78] Two years later, Japan lost the Korean peninsula to a coalition intervention by Russia, France, and Germany.

By the turn of the century, Japan clearly saw itself as a great power (modelled on the great powers of Europe and North America) and was treated as such at the peace conference at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1905 following the Russo-Japanese war. The war had effectively reversed the outcome of the previous Triple Intervention and by 1907, Japan and Russia were negotiating with each other over Korea, Manchuria, and Outer Mongolia as states of roughly equal status within a multipolar system. The earlier Anglo-Japanese alliance formalised in the signing of the 1902 treaty (subsequently renewed and extended in scope in 1905 and then again in 1907) marked 'a major effort to incorporate Japan into equations of international strength and the algebra of great power calculations'[79] and explicitly recognised both parties' special interests in Northeast Asia. However the fact that Britain's allies, particularly France, did not feel equally compelled to do the same, suggests that the geographic, historical, and cultural barriers to accepting Japan as a great power may have been surmountable for Britain with its Eastern interests and recent rivalry with Russia, but were perhaps not yet for Paris.

[76] Quoted in Ernest R. May, 'The United States' underuse of military power', in Ernest R. May, Richard Rosecrance, and Zara Steiner (eds), *History and Neorealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 229.

[77] Clark, *The Hierarchy of States*, p. 95.

[78] Seung-Young Kim, *American Diplomacy and Strategy toward Korea and Northeast Asia, 1882–1950 and After: Perception of Polarity and US Commitment to a Periphery* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 18.

[79] Jeremy Black, *A History of Diplomacy* (London: Reaktion Books 2010), p. 164.

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Some, such as Schweller, have included Italy in the list of late nineteenth-century rising powers alongside the United States and Japan.[80] Yet the evidence is mixed on whether Italy was thought of in this way at the time, regardless of military and economic developments which have been analysed since. This not to say that Italian decision-makers did not think of Italy as a great power after unification in the 1860s.[81] Paying particular attention to the importance of self-perception in understandings of power alerts one to the difference between aspiration and peer recognition through actions (for example, the forming of alliances) for rising powers. The Triple Alliance of 1882 between Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Italy was for the two 'central powers' simply a 'makeshift measure to cope with an emergency' (the Russian response to Vienna's attempts to put down the October 1881 Bosnian rebellion and the possibility of a Franco-Russian alliance).[82] However, for Italy, the Triple Alliance 'represented the fulfilment of a long-cherished aspiration'[83] – status recognition as a peer by other European powers. Yet this was still a limited recognition as a useful ally by two of the six European powers and only in as much as it might provide an extra disincentive to Russia, and particularly its somewhat belligerent General Skobelev, to ally with France and make war with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Interestingly, the Triple Alliance, while officially replacing the previous Double Alliance between Germany and Austria, did not prevent only these two countries (and not Italy) in making joint military plans in the event of hostilities in the east.[84] Italy continued to attach itself to other powers for the rest of the century to guarantee its security (including first Britain and then France) further signifying its inability to convincingly act like a great power and therefore be treated as such in turn.[85] While it was, in theory, admitted as member of the Concert of Europe after attending the London Conference of 1867, its voice, as Evan Luard noted, 'even if heard, carried little weight'.[86] This aligns with Mearsheimer's claim that 'The United Kingdom, France and Russia were all much more powerful than Austria-Hungary and Italy'[87] throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and R. J. B. Bosworth's description of Italy in material terms at this time, as having 'more in common with that of a small Balkan State or a colony than a Great Power'.[88]

The Triple Alliance also signified the relative decline of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The fact that Italy was included at all tells us something of the diminished status of Vienna in terms of the balance of power in the late nineteenth century. Richard Little has pointed out that alongside the influence of Eurocentrism, a purely materialist methodology accounts for why, for example, Kenneth Waltz[89] regards Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire as poles of power during the late nineteenth and

[80] Randall L. Schweller, 'Managing the rise of great powers: History and theory', in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross (eds), *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), pp. 1–31.

[81] F. R. Bridge and Roger Bullen, *The Great Powers and the European States System 1814–1914* (2nd edn, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2005), p. 1.

[82] Ibid., p. 221.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid., p. 224.

[85] See A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe: 1848–1918* (2nd edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 382–3.

[86] Evan Luard, *War in International Society: A Study in International Sociology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 305.

[87] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 298.

[88] R. J. B. Bosworth, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy before the First World War* (London *et al.*: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 2.

[89] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; see also Renato Corbetta, Thomas J. Volgy, Ryan G. Baird, and Keith A. Grant, 'Status and the future of international politics', in Thomas J. Volgy, Renato Corbetta,

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early twentieth centuries well after others, such as Buzan,[90] have relegated them to the role of regional power (with Mearsheimer and Bosworth's work discussed earlier being rather ambiguous on the regional/great power distinction).[91] The Austro-Hungarian Empire struggled to keep up with the other powers in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and at least in military terms by 1914 was really viewed as a regional power in the limited sense (that is, a central European power) rather than a Europe-wide, let alone global, one.[92]

Yet despite the ambiguity over Italy and Austro-Hungary's status in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both states were looked to as being 'great responsibles' at certain times. At the Second Hague Conference in 1907 for example, when a proposal for a Permanent Court of Arbitral Justice with permanent representation of the great powers (with non-permanent representation for the other signatories divided over a complex four-tiered arrangement) was debated, both Italy and Austro-Hungary were included in this exclusive list.[93] So while at times both states were perceived of as being less than poles of power, they were nevertheless still granted the status of one of 'the powers' in both a diplomatic and even a juristic sense.[94]

Balance, hegemony, and perceptions of bipolarity

The idea that the clearly multipolar structure of the nineteenth century was vastly different from what Adam Roberts has described as the 'babel-like confusion'[95] over the current order, does not quite match the historical record when one focuses on the self-perceptions of two states in particular; Russia and Britain. Such a move raises the possibility of changes *within* polarity that are not captured in the standard approach, but also highlights potential changes *of* polarity (from multipolarity to something else) due to the central role of perception.[96]

In the latter half of the century, and particularly throughout the 1870s, perceptions of a Russo–British bipolar order can be detected amongst policymakers and analysts. One of the pitfalls of relying on historical analysis that focuses on material capabilities, and often a disproportionate focus on military capabilities, is that gradual change is overlooked. It leads to systemic change being conflated with points of major upheaval in diplomatic history – as discerned in *post hoc* analysis. Yet if the structure of the international system provides sets of incentives and disincentives for decision-makers and analysts *at the time*, then a more historically contingent approach is necessary to discern the degree of interaction between system structure and decision-making. As Ole Holsti has written, 'although some dramatic events are widely perceived as marking the beginning of new eras in

Keith A. Grant, and Ryan G. Baird (eds), *Major Powers and the Quest for Status in International Politics: Global and Regional Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 223.

[90] Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers*, pp. 49–50.

[91] Richard Little, *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths, and Models* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 187.

[92] Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (2nd edn, London: Pocket Books, 2006), p. 12.

[93] Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States*, p. 140.

[94] For an example of the way in which 'the powers' were described in the international legal analysis of the time see, James Brown Scott, 'The proposed court of arbitral justice', *The American Journal of International Law*, 2:4 (1908), pp. 772–810.

[95] Adam Roberts, 'International Relations after the Cold War', *International Affairs*, 84:2 (2008), p. 343.

[96] Here I am only taking issue with this *post hoc* characterisation of the nineteenth century. However it should be noted that as Little has pointed out, the leading proponent of polarity analysis, Kenneth Waltz, claimed that 'if we focus on the period from 1700 to 1935, there was never a time when there were fewer than five great powers interacting', making this a 235-year long multipolar period. Little, *The Balance of Power*, p. 196.

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international affairs – these are often the start or termination of major wars such as the years 1648, 1815, 1914, or 1945 – systemic changes may occur far less dramatically and over a more protracted period.'[97] Such a starting point opens up the theoretical space for perceptions to shift at a particular point in time (and on the part of some actors but not necessarily all), perhaps even over a period as long as a decade or more, without this becoming significant in a macro-historical sense when we look back generations later.

For example, while some in other European capitals were still certainly thinking in multipolar terms,[98] William Langer has noted Bismark's concern over the outbreak of hostilities between Russia and Britain in 1877 during the Russian–Turkish war which 'might well end in a cataclysm'.[99] Langer's assessment of the crisis is that Britain 'together with Russia, had come to play the leading role in the whole Near Eastern problem, so that the history of the crisis began to centre more and more on the relations between these two countries.'[100]

The bipolar image of the late nineteenth century is evident in military terms when one considers the limits to British naval dominance posed by Russia. While Russia presented a very serious threat on land, it had no equivalent to the Royal Navy whose might was unmatched. Yet Russia relied on a relatively small amount of seaborne trade (much of which could have been diverted overland) and therefore could not be effectively threatened by naval blockade.[101] Added to this, continental Russia presented Britain with few strategic targets that could be attacked from the sea, making Russia much less vulnerable to direct attack by Britain's most potent military capability than other powers in Europe, North America, or East Asia. The bipolar image is also strongly hinted at by William Thompson when reflecting on the parallels with the later US-Soviet bipolar struggle of the Cold War in the latter half of the twentieth century. In demonstrating the unambiguously multipolar order in which particular regional bilateral rivalries took place during the lead up to the Second World War, Thompson writes that '[i]ndeed, the US-USSR rivalry more closely resembled the older Anglo-Russian rivalry than it did the Anglo-French or Anglo-German rivalries' of the interwar years.[102]

While this bipolar rivalry was at its most potent in the late nineteenth century, it had its roots in a much earlier period. Schroeder has gone even further than to argue that the late nineteenth century was bipolar but in fact that the entire Concert system from 1815 onwards, rather than being based on a multipolar balance of power, was characterised by the 'factual condition of leadership or primacy' enjoyed by Britain and Russia.[103] This is evidenced, according to Schroeder, by the fact that 'nothing prevented Britain and Russia, whenever they chose, from combining to impose their will on

[97] Ole R. Holsti, 'International systems, system change, and foreign policy: Commentary on "changing international systems"', *Diplomatic History*, 15:1 (1991), p. 87.

[98] See, for example, the influential text, John Westlake, *Chapters on the Principles of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1894).

[99] William L. Langer, *European Alliances and Alignments 1871–1890* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931), p. 123.

[100] Ibid., p. 122.

[101] Nicholas Papastratigakis, 'British Naval strategy: the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the Turkish Straits, 1890–1904', *International History Review*, 32:4 (2010), p. 643.

[102] William R. Thompson, 'Anglo-German rivalry and the 1939 failure of deterrence', *Security Studies*, 7:2 (1997), p. 63.

[103] Paul W. Schroeder, 'Did the Vienna settlement rest on a balance of power?', *American Historical Review*, 97:3 (1992), pp. 705–6.

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the rest of Europe'.[104] Whether this is completely accurate or not, Schroeder's analysis, if nothing else, convincingly demonstrates that this perception was held by leaders in Moscow and Britain.[105]

The perception of a bipolar order based around the two poles of Britain and Russia is important for thinking about the success or otherwise of the Concert of Europe. The decline of the Concert marked a major change in the form of multilateral security cooperation in Europe. Castlereagh was clearly concerned about the endurance of a multipolar system given that the whole notion of the balance of power was entirely thought of solely in multipolar terms. Therefore his view of the conservative Holy Alliance (of Russia, Austria, and Prussia) was coloured by his notion that it would increase Russian influence in Europe, which equated to an end to a multipolar balance. If another state could so easily overturn the balance of power, and if it was Britain's duty to prevent this from happening in what should be a five-power multipolar order, it is difficult to maintain that the British did not consider themselves and Russia as being a step above the others.

Palmerston's enthusiasm for the 1834 British-French-Spanish-Portuguese alliance had as much to do with Russia as it did with the monarchical struggles in Spain and Portugal. Palmerston was convinced of the need for a strong counter to Russian ambitions and was at pains to convince the Cabinet of Viscount Melbourne of the need for a proactive approach to thwarting Russian influence.[106] Palmerston was unequivocal when he stated that there was 'the same principle of repulsion between Russia and us that there was between us and Bonaparte'.[107]

Of course such concerns about Russia could be thought of as simply anti-hegemonic, if the opposite of hegemony was a genuinely multipolar balance of power maintained by three or more great powers. Yet Schroeder is unequivocal that the balance of power for both Britain and Russia was a tool to be used for the pursuit of their own hegemony. This means that a Russian threat to 'the European balance' was, in the eyes of British decision-makers, a threat to its own hegemony (that is, thinking in bipolar terms). As Schroeder put it, '[t]he British concept of Britain as the necessary disinterested holder of the balance was a good way of rationalizing its hegemonic role and reconciling it with balance of power theory and propaganda.'[108]

Similarly, but with a greater attention to the *post hoc* nature of the description, William Wohlforth paints a picture of the nineteenth century as being mostly bipolar (with a multipolar interlude

[104] Ibid., p. 692.

[105] It is important to note that Schroeder claims that characterising the period as bipolar rather than multipolar, 'will not do' as it would only make sense to do so if 'as during the Cold War, there were two well-defined blocs with clear-cut power alliances checking and restraining one another'. Ibid., p. 693. Yet this is problematic for two reasons. First, it conflates systemic polarisation with polarity (the former being the number of major camps into which multiple powers of equal standing group themselves such as the Axis and Allied powers during the Second World War – a system can be bipolar without being polarised like it was during the Cold War). Second, it therefore imposes a Cold War idea of what bipolarity looks like on a period that predates the Cold War by a century. If, for example, British decision-makers at the time perceived that Britain and Russia were of equal standing but of greater importance than the other powers, then they were thinking in what today we would call bipolar terms. This would equate to Buzan's description, in polarity terms, as a 2+ world. See Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers*.

[106] John R. Davis, 'Britain and the European balance of power', in Chris Williams (ed.), *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 38.

[107] Quoted in Bridge and Bullen, *Great Powers and the European States System*, p. 96.

[108] Schroeder, 'Did the Vienna settlement rest', p. 690.

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in the middle).[109] Yet, for Wohlforth it is not only a matter of a simple Russo–British rivalry. Instead he claims that '[f]rom 1815 to 1853, it was a Pax Britannica et Russica; from 1853 to 1871, it was not a pax of any kind; and from 1871 to 1914, it was a Pax Britannica et Germanica.'[110]

This certainly gives the impression of an order in which two major states dominate the entire system (at least in terms of potential) for large parts of the period. Yet this perception existed alongside of competing ones that align more closely to the multipolar configuration discussed above, such as that of Friedrich von Gentz who talked of the Concert 'uniting all the states collectively with a federative bond, under the guidance of the five principal Powers'.[111]

Rule, Britannia! Perceptions of unipolarity

The standard view of an unchanged multipolar order throughout the nineteenth century is also challenged by the idea of a potentially unipolar image centred on what is often referred to as Britain's hegemonic role. A great deal of the attention given to Britain's potential unipolar role at this time relates specifically to its economic strength and the changes to its military power brought about by innovation in its world-class navy. In relation to the former, Robert Keohane goes so far as to say that 'Britain in the nineteenth century and the United States in the twentieth met the material prerequisites for hegemony better than any other states since the industrial revolution.'[112] Yet others have summarised this position as stemming not only from London's economic primacy and naval supremacy, but also as embodying the 'successful state that others might emulate'.[113] This is echoed by David Calleo who claims Britain became a world power 'out of scale with traditional European states' which 'inevitably promoted imitation'.[114] This idea that a polar power has a certain attractiveness in terms of imitation is a common theme in the polarity literature, particularly throughout the Cold War.

In terms of diplomatic practice, the unipolar perception is also underscored by the persistent recourse to isolationism, mainly under conservative governments in Britain. This tendency in British foreign policy towards Europe was rarely, if ever, based on a sense of being an equal partner in the great power manoeuvres of the day but wishing to play a minor role in this. Instead the idea was of Britain enjoying a sense of primacy that meant that it was less reliant on traditional strategies of balancing, alliances, and intervention. While it is the late nineteenth century era of British foreign policy, under the leadership of prime ministers Benjamin Disraeli and the Marquess of Salisbury, that is usually associated with Britain's so-called 'splendid isolationism' (and aligns with the unipolar image of the same period), such sentiments can be traced back as far as the 1820s when foreign secretary (and later conservative prime minister) George Canning decried getting 'deeply in all the politics of the Continent, whereas our true policy has always been not to interfere except in great emergencies, and

[109] This is echoed by Thomas Wright who argues that '[i]n fact, Russia and Britain were each hegemonic powers in their own right. Thus, the Concert of Europe rested on this bipolarity.' Thomas Wright, 'The rise and fall of the unipolar concert', *Washington Quarterly*, 37:4 (2014), p. 9.
[110] William C. Wohlforth, 'The stability of a unipolar world', *International Security*, 24:1 (1999), p. 39.
[111] Quoted in Clark, *Hegemony in International Society*, p. 79.
[112] Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 36.
[113] Clark, *Hegemony in International Society*, p. 117.
[114] David P. Calleo, *Beyond American Hegemony: The Future of the Western Alliance* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1987), p. 138.

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then with commanding force'.[115] The tendency amongst liberals to eschew this mix of isolationism and unilateralism (associated closely with unipolarity) seems to have added to a more multipolar perception. For example in 1853, in discussing the importance of the Eastern Question, Palmerston was concerned with maintaining a balancing coalition to counter Russian power, arguing that 'unless England & France are prepared to sink down into the Condition of second Rate Powers they must prevail.'[116] Russia is certainly being discussed in polar terms, as are Britain and France in this quote.

The unipolar perception is reflected in E. H. Carr's view of Britain's dominant role not only in Europe but in the Pacific as well. During a period (discussed above) in which the purely European dominance of the very top of the social hierarchy of international society was being challenged by the rising powers of the United States and Japan, Carr depicts a world in which Britain calls the shots, playing lesser powers off against each other. Carr sees an all-powerful Britain enjoying economic supremacy based on leadership of world markets as a manufacturing and exporting country and political supremacy based on matchless naval power in the Pacific. He notes that when 'towards the end of the nineteenth century Russia began seriously to encroach on China's land frontier and, supported by France, to challenge British predominance, Britain called in the rising, but still modest, power of Japan to redress the balance.'[117] In ways that are reminiscent of the current debate in US policy and scholarly circles about the ability of Washington to respond with renewed vigour to the rise of new powers,[118] British opinion-formers looked to consolidate what they saw as Britain's unipolar status in the face of a new set of emerging powers. Duncan Bell has noted that while not the only motivating factor, the rise of competitor powers (such as Germany, Russia, and even eventually the United States), was one of the reasons that a debate formed within Britain towards the end of the nineteenth century about the need to form 'Greater Britain'.[119] Greater Britain revolved around the idea of consolidating British global power in the face of relative decline through a closer union with the settler colonies of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of South Africa. Bell argues that this push for colonial unity under the banner of a Greater Britain 'was driven in part by the perceived need to theorize and construct a bulwark against the encroachment of a powerful set of global challengers'.[120]

But, as with the perceptions of multipolarity and bipolarity discussed above, the actions and statements of diplomats and statesmen in the late nineteenth and even into the early twentieth century appear to significantly challenge the idea of Britain holding an unambiguously unipolar status and even cast doubt (at least from the vantage point of a decade or so later) that this status had ever been held in the final decade of the nineteenth century. As tensions increased between Russia and Japan in Northeast Asia, the British tried to intervene by sending Sir Charles Hardinge to negotiate with his

[115] Quoted in Josef Joffe, '"Bismarck" or "Britain"? Toward an American grand strategy after bipolarity', *International Security*, 19:4 (1995), p. 103.

[116] Quoted in Brown, *Palmerston*, p. 162.

[117] E. H. Carr, *Britain: A Study of Foreign Policy from the Versailles Treaty to the Outbreak of War* (London: Longmans, Green & Co. 1939), p. 55.

[118] See, for example, Thomas L. Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum, *That Used to be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World it Invented and How We Can Come Back* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011); Bruce Jones, *Still Ours to Lead: America, Rising Powers, and the Tension Between Rivalry and Restraint* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014).

[119] Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 26.

[120] Ibid., p. 2.

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Russian counterpart, Count Benckendorff, in 1903. Instead of acting as a unipolar power able to organise 'major politico-military action anywhere in the system',[121] Hardinge complained of Russia encroaching on British interests and provoking hostility in the years prior by 'pursuing an aggressive policy in China, Persia, and Afghanistan'.[122] This sentiment was echoed by the British diplomat Cecil Spring Rice who remarked later that year that 'England is warned that the defence of India will become a far more serious matter if Russia is opposed in the development of her Far Eastern possessions',[123] and Hardinge later recollected of the negotiations over Tibet and Manchuria that London was 'losing ground all the time'.[124]

The apparent shock with which British policymakers appeared to view London's fortunes on the international stage at this time strongly suggests that a unipolar perception, at least in some quarters, had not disappeared overnight and was only gradually receding. The rapid push towards signing a series of international treaties in the first decade of the twentieth century (including the Hay–Pauncefote treaties with the United States in 1900 and 1902, the Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902, and the *ententes* with France in 1904 and Russia in 1907) were a sign of Britain 'becoming more like other European powers'.[125] Even if the perception of polarity had changed sooner in other capitals than it had in London, this alerts us to the fact that understandings of power structures were far less pervasive and robust than the standard literature claims. This means that far from a period of clear consensus and clarity as to the holders of great power status, the nineteenth century – despite being the heyday of great power management – can actually be thought of as being characterised by considerable disagreement on this issue.

Conclusion

Given the competing arguments today about whether a power transition is imminent, already under way, has already taken place, or is actually unlikely to take place at all, the idea of great power management as a social institution being on the decline seems straightforward. Yet the nineteenth century's golden age of great power management actually provides reason to be cautious in declaring the end of the 'great responsibles'. Whilst often being depicted in hindsight as an unending multipolar era, this was in fact a far more complex one in which the systemic picture is somewhat confusing and at times contradictory – not unlike today's world. The historical analysis above has identified a number of points of friction in the conventional understanding of the great powers as being uniformly 'known' and accepted by the members of international society throughout the period. Holsti points out that even *post hoc* analysis is not always aligned here and it is therefore to be expected that contemporary ideas about great power status which gave international society its hierarchical form at any one point in time were similarly inconsistent. He notes that while Richard Rosecrance identifies four distinct systems between 1815 and 1890, Stephen Pelz sees only one (a multipolar order based on a classical balance of power).[126] For Holsti, the point is 'not to take

[121] Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 13.

[122] Quoted in John Albert White, *Transition to Global Rivalry: Alliance Diplomacy and the Quadruple Entente, 1895–1907* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 37.

[123] Quoted in ibid., p. 40.

[124] Lord Hardinge of Penshurst, *Old Diplomacy: The Reminiscences of Lord Hardinge of Penshurst* (London: Murray, 1947), p. 84.

[125] Patrick Salmon, 'Reluctant engagement: Britain and Continental Europe, 1890–1939', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 8:3 (1997), p. 142.

[126] Holsti, 'International systems', p. 87.

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sides between Pelz and Rosecrance, but to illustrate that even long after the fact, rigorous scholars can disagree about whether systemic change took place'.[127]

Through an analysis of the words and actions of key players in history, it becomes evident that some states are granted the special social station of great power status based not only on material capabilities but also relating to their historical claims to this status and also their diplomatic skill. Changes both within and of polarity can be perceived differently[128] and therefore should not be expected to structure 'the horizon of states' probable actions and reactions'[129] uniformly and in totally predictable ways when it comes to great power management.

The historiography of great power politics of the nineteenth century presented here paints a messy and complex picture of how great power status is perceived in international society. In particular, it suggests that geography, culture, and history have mattered in the construction of the great powers in the past. This is important not only for the way in which we tell the story of the expansion of international society, but also for how we use history when discussing the effect of different forms of polarity, power transitions, and historical world orders.

The discussion has also suggested that, in line with more analytically eclectic approaches to International Relations theory, both material and non-material aspects are important in the granting of great power status which, in opening up the space for competing perceptions of status, should alert us to the possibility of greater ambiguity in history in terms of the polarity of the system. The analysis has highlighted that contradictory views can be held, even within one state, regarding the holders of great power status in international society at any one time. This strongly suggests that current approaches to understanding the way the great powers interact on key areas of war, stability, trade, cooperation, and governance must take into account the ambiguities inherent in the functioning of the social construction of world order. The point is not to be able to move beyond the multiplicity of understandings of the nineteenth century order and settle on a single story of great power status and polarity during this time. Rather, as scholars, we must become more comfortable with these contradictions, particularly if we are to understand the similarities and parallels with the current epoch. It also suggests that a single category of great powers is not a necessary requirement for, at least some degree of, great power management.[130] In this sense, it suggests that the seemingly more imprecise language of 'major powers' and 'non-major powers' can still capture the participants in various practices of global management. The more rigorous distinctions between regional, great, and superpowers are simply not uniformly applied by practitioners trying to make sense of the world around them.

It is clear from the period that the practice of great power management was not rendered impossible by such competing perceptions. Partly this is to do with institutionalisation. Clark describes 'the perception' that a new order based around multiple poles of power having special rights and responsibilities 'was also being conferred a quasi-legal basis'.[131] This is captured in what Gerry

[127] Ibid.

[128] This article has focused only on the perceptions of potential great powers themselves and their peers, but this phenomenon can be expected to extend to the perceptions of non-great powers (crucial in the conferral of the rights and responsibilities associated with this social status) as well.

[129] G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth, 'Introduction: Unipolarity, state behavior, and systemic consequences', *World Politics*, 61:1 (2009), p. 5.

[130] See Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States*; Clark, *Hegemony in International Society*.

[131] Clark, *Hegemony in International Society*, p. 79.

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Simpson highlights as the 'legalised hegemony' of the Concert system which involved 'a highly formalistic commitment to sovereign equality in relations between the hegemons'.[132] This commitment was institutionalised in the diplomatic practice of 'the powers' meeting at regular intervals which, despite the confusing and ambiguous picture of the interstate order that emerges from the analysis above, allowed the Concert system to facilitate the practice of great power management. This then would appear to challenge Justin Morris's claim that 'the conferment of recognition' amongst the great power managers themselves 'is dependent at the very least on: acceptance that each member of the club is of equal standing and esteem'.[133]

At least in the nineteenth century, it would appear that perfectly equal and uniform status recognition was not always a precursor to the practice of great power management and that institutionalised forms of management were relatively durable even under conditions of ambiguity. The degree to which particular elements of great power management – for example, whether Bull's first order task of managing relations between themselves as compared to his second order task of managing relations between the great and lesser powers – are affected differently by such ambiguity may well be a fruitful area of future research based on these findings. As is suggested by the discussion of the Eastern Crisis and the geopolitical manoeuvring in Northeast Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries discussed above, a greater degree of ambiguity (even at the margins of the great power order) would seem to shift attention from second order to first order great power management.

If Adam Watson was correct and for international society to 'function effectively, the dialogue between its major powers must be system-wide',[134] then the way we theorise great power management and international society as a whole must be able to theoretically handle the kind of breakdowns in collective perceptions discussed in this article. It also tells us that given the way that competing narratives about the current shape of the interstate order are producing an ambiguous picture simultaneously involving images of unipolarity, US decline, a growing US-Sino bipolar rivalry, and an imminent multipolar 'rise of the rest', the conclusion that this spells the end of great power management is premature. What the nineteenth century tells us about the prospects for order in the future is that the social institution of great power management can endure even under an ambiguous interstate order.

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Biographical information

Benjamin Zala is Research Fellow in the Department of International Relations in the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University. His work focuses on major powers relations, polarity analysis, and nuclear weapons-related issues. His work has appeared in journals such as *The Pacific Review, Cooperation and Conflict*, and *The Australian Journal of International Affairs*.

[132] Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States*, p. 92.
[133] Justin Morris, 'From "peace by dictation" to international organisation: Great power responsibility and the creation of the United Nations', *International History Review*, 35:3 (2013), p. 516.
[134] Adam Watson, *Diplomacy: The Dialogue between States* (London: Routledge, 1982), p. 211.

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