Great Power Politics and Strategic Narratives

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March 2010
Working Paper No. 7

University of Sussex

CGPE Working Paper Series

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GREAT POWER POLITICS AND STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

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Abstract

Great powers use strategic narratives to establish and maintain influence in the international system and to shape the system itself. This is particularly the case in periods of transition in the international system when challengers to hegemonic powers emerge. Strategic narratives are an important tool which must be considered alongside material resources as a determinant of whether emerging great powers are able to shape a new systemic alignment. Strategic narratives are a tool through which great powers can articulate their interests, values and aspirations for the international system in ways that offer the opportunity for power transitions that avoid violent struggle between status quo and challenger states. Complicating this picture, however, is a complex media ecology which makes the process of projecting strategic narratives an increasingly difficult one. Analysis of international political communication within this media ecology is central to evaluating how strategic narratives are projected and the interactions that follow. We argue that empirical analysis of the formation, projection and reception of strategic narratives in that media ecology offers a framework through which to generate important findings concerning power transition, domestic and international legitimacy, and recognition and identity – important because many international relations scholars thus far failed to take into account the difference such narratives make, and can make.

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Introduction

The world is going through a period of profound transition in the way in which power within it is organised, distributed and operates (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2008; Zakaria, 2008). Since the mid-1990s Russia has adopted a more assertive stance in its foreign affairs, China has tried to promote its own way of doing international relations (Taylor, 2006; Johnston, 2008), India's self-perception as a rising global power has strengthened through co-operation with other emerging powers. Brazil and India took a leadership role among developing countries in international trade negotiations. The European Union has grown in stature as an international actor since the end of the Cold War, through a process of enlarging its membership and becoming a more active player in military crisis management. Foreign Minister of the United Kingdom, David Miliband (2008), described these shifts in power in the following terms: 'There are three big shifts in power. First there is a shift from west to east, with the rise of China and India. Second there is a shift between the national and the international spheres, with the growth of regional and global institutions. Third there is a shift between states and citizens, what I call the "civilian surge"—the idea that around the world people who have hugely different access to opportunities and wealth nonetheless inhabit an increasingly common universe'.

Yet these states' identity and the role they desire to play in world politics are far from consolidated. For instance, the question 'what is globalisation' was translated in the EU and Russia in to the rather existential questions of 'what is European' and 'what is Russian'. The EU faced the dilemma of maintaining contradictory dimensions to its identity: a social democratic commitment to social welfare vs. being 'competitive' in the 'global economy', and a commitment to free trade and 'openness' vs. the imperative to protect workers' rights and communities (Hay, 2002; 2006; Hay and Rosamond, 2002). Such contradictions can be exposed by other states, for instance through disputes over trade, development, or industrial policy (see Antoniades, 2008). Conditions of globalisation - and the attendant diffusion of norms of human rights and democracy - have also posed problems for Russia. Under Putin, Russia moved towards a 'reaffirmation' of its state sovereignty through a narrative that emphasised the distinctiveness of Russian state and culture, and therefore a distinctive Russian take on democracy (Hopf, 2005, esp: 238-240; Glinchikova, 2007; Prozorov, 2007), for example by developing the concept 'sovereign democracy' (Ortmann, 2008). The financial crisis that broke out at the end of 2007 has challenged common and mainstream wisdom as to how economy and markets operate, with prospects of protectionism appearing more likely. The international community faces a range of problems such as the climate change, extreme poverty, pandemics, aids, international terrorism, and nuclear proliferation. How states define and respond to such problems depends on their use of strategic narratives.

This article proposes a research agenda focused on the narrative work great powers undertake to establish and maintain influence in the international system and shape the system itself. This is particularly the case in periods of transition in the international

system when challengers to hegemonic powers emerge. Strategic narratives are an important tool which must be considered alongside material resources as a determinant of whether emerging great powers are able to shape a new systemic alignment. It is through the use of strategic narratives that emerging and great powers can project their values and interests in order to extend their influence, manage expectations and change the discursive environment in which they operate. These are narratives about both states and the system itself, both about 'who we are' and 'what kind of system we want'.

Complicating this picture, however, is a complex new media ecology which makes the process of projecting strategic narratives an increasingly difficult one. This transformed communications environment means narrative strategies must account for an extended global media 'menu' of channels, the recording, archiving and unforeseeable dissemination of digital content, and the unpredictable presence of dispersed, participatory media which can undermine or disrupt their narratives. As such, the patterns of communication in the international system become intrinsically less predictable, and major powers will have to adapt their processes of narrative formation and projection. Hurrell writes, 'all human societies, including international society, rely on historical stories about themselves to legitimize notions of where they are and where they might be going. An important element of International Relations is therefore the uncovering of actors' understandings of international politics and the ways in which these understandings have been gathered into intelligible patterns, traditions, or ideologies' (Hurrell, 2007: 17). In this context, we seek not only to uncover actors' understandings, interests and goals, but also to examine the complex ways in which these narratives operate and the kind of 'life-on-their-own' they acquire once they put out at the public realm.

Two important examples have occurred in recent US-Middle East relations. On May 8, 2006, President Ahmadinejad of Iran sent a letter to President Bush of the US. It was the first official communiqué from the Iranian government to the US since diplomatic ties were broken in 1979. This 18 page letter was delivered by Swiss go-betweens, but critically it was also published online. While Bush himself did not reply, US officials dismissed the letter at the same time as individuals around the world were responding through online chatrooms and news blogs. Ahmedinejad took a risk, not knowing how his letter would be responded to, but the transparency of his communication caused a problem for the Bush administration (Goodall, Jr. et al., 2008; Sreberny, 2008). On 4 June 2009 President Obama made a speech in Cairo, Egypt to 'the Muslim world', and he made great use of social media to enlarge the audience. His words were disseminated through Facebook and Myspace, text messages and tweets, live streaming on the White House and State Department websites, and it was broadcast live on Al Jazeera and other Arabic television channels. Translations in multiple languages were offered. Instead of simply 'getting a message out', the White House press secretary, Robert Gibbs, spoke of a generating 'continuing dialogue' – in other words, sustained two-way communication in which Obama and his administration would listen as well as speak. This marketing effort exemplifies the way a new media environment has changed how political leaders can

manage the expectation and responses to their speeches. The speech was extensively trailed, through pre-departure interviews with NPR and the BBC, to hint at what audiences around the world might expect. The relentless self- and official commentary through tweets enable interpretation to be subtlety steered as the speech is delivered. By creating spaces for feedback and 'conversation', leaders can structure the responses in several ways. By moderating what gets published, Obama's team demonstrated a global response, and that responses fell into several categories (ecstatic, cautious, and perhaps – to suggest transparency and credibility - even a few critical comments). In line with McLuhan's thesis that 'the medium is the message', the strategic narrative work of Ahmedinejad and Obama shows that the form or mode of communication may be as significant as the content in our new media ecology.

Defining Strategic narratives

Narratives are frameworks that allow humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation (Todorov, 1977: 45). The end-point of this transformation bestows meaning upon all parts of the whole. At the intersection of IR and history, Geoffrey Roberts describes narrative as 'simply the practice of telling stories about connected sequences of human action' (2006: 703-704). ÓTuathail combines story and narrative: 'Storylines are sense-making organizational devices tying the different elements of a policy challenge together into a reasonably coherent and convincing narrative' (ÓTuathail 2002: 617). A narrative entails an initial situation or order, a problem that disrupts that order, and a resolution that re-establishes order, though that order may be slightly altered from the initial situation. Narrative therefore is distinguished by a particular structure through which sense is achieved.

The effect of the structure of narrative is selectivity. Here we must distinguish between *story* and *plot*: 'the story is what happened in life, the plot is the way the author presents it to us' (Todorov, 1988: 160). The practice of international relations involves constructing plots from the raw material or story of political history, filtering (strategically) as the situation demands. Narratives are, in effect, 'structures of attention' and 'structures of inattention' that can draw an audience's focus away from certain events or claims and towards others (Bal, 1988). Narratives are therefore politically efficacious, since an overall heroic or inspiring national or personal plot may mask any episodes that contradict that plot. As with 'frames' in social and political analysis, events can be 'organised in' or 'organised out' of the narrative (Schattschneider, 1960). Some analysts have turned to the dramaturgical metaphor of foreign policy actors as following 'scripts' according to the role and situation, but we must be careful that such a move also entails organising data and stages of analysis in and out. ÓTuathail (2002: 609) argues the drama/script metaphor illuminates 'how statespersons reason about the daily dramas they face', and how scripts provide 'building-blocks' of storylines for them to follow:' It is a tacit set of rules for how foreign policy actors are to perform in certain speech situations, and how they are to articulate responses to policy challenges and problems. It is a public relations briefing

book' (2002: 619-620; cf. Fierke 1998). Billig (1987, 10-16) has suggested that such metaphors are partial, however: attention to the performance of scripts and the regularities of scripted public sloganeering captures only one aspect of theatre, the moment when backstage argument between producers, writers and actors over the content and choice of script is suspended. It also avoids addressing audience interpretation of the script, and whether the intended meaning was achieved. Analytical attention must be given to the formation and reception of a narrative, not just the moment of projection.

Laura Roselle's (2006) work exemplifies the analysis of how great powers form and project narratives and how they are received and interpreted by audiences. She documents how the US and USSR explained their respective military defeats in Vietnam and Afghanistan to their domestic publics and to international audiences. Each began with the claim that order had been disrupted and needed to be restored, for the sake of national interest and the good of the international system. Each then continually offered a narrative of progress, fortitude and inevitable victory, as fighting went on for over a decade in each case. Finally, as victory seemed impossible, each sought to narrate a form of resolution acceptable both to domestic public opinion and to signify strength and honour to external actors. Roselle's analysis highlights how political leaders attempted to use their domestic media systems to project their narrative, and how elite dissent was managed.

Lawrence Freedman writes, '[n]arratives are designed or nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events' (2006: 22). That is, if others are convinced that that narrative "fits" ongoing historical developments or understand those developments in terms of that narrative, then their responses become predictable. This cognitive dimension of narratives (understandings of cause/effect and means/ends) can work in parallel with a normative dimension. That is, interests and values can be co-constituted. Narratives can be used strategically to create or cohere identity groups and establish shared normative orientations (Ronfeld and Arquilla, 2001). For example, once individuals are convinced by a cause/effect narrative of climate change – that carbon emissions play a causal role and must therefore be limited – an identity group forms between those convinced by this, and they will distinguish themselves from 'deniers' in 'the other camp'.

Following this analysis about the strategic use of narratives in international relations and considering the changing nature of the international system and the impact of the new media ecology that we analyse below, we suggest the development of a new research agenda in the study of great power politics based on the concept of strategic narratives. Strategic narratives are representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political elites attempt to give determined meaning to past, present and future in order to achieve political objectives. Examples include the justification of policy objectives or policy responses to economic or security crises, the formation of international alliances, or the rallying of domestic public opinion.

Hence our conception of strategic narrative reflects Hajer's definition of storylines in politics: 'the key function of storylines is that they suggest unity in the bewildering variety of separate discursive component parts of a [policy] problem … The underlying assumption is that people do not draw upon comprehensive discursive systems for their cognition, rather these are *evoked through* storylines' (1995: 56, italics added). That storylines are used to evoke certain cognition points to the strategic usefulness of narratives. They are *strategic* insofar as they suggest medium- and long-term goals or desirable end-states and how to get there, based on representations of the situation, the key actors, and 'causal beliefs' about how social and political processes operate and thus how certain actions could be expected to play out (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 3). They also involve political struggles over 'whose story wins' (Nye, in Gardels and Medavoy, 2009: viii).

Critically, then, strategic narratives integrate interests and goals – they articulate end-states and suggest how to get there. The self-understandings expressed through strategic narratives reflexively influence states' perception of their interests and how the world works and should work (Harnisch and Maull (eds.) 2001; Tewes, 2002). An interesting intervention here is the analysis of strategic narratives by Mary Kaldor, Mary Martin and Sabine Selchow (2007). In particular Kaldor et al (2007: 273) suggest that the EU should adopt the concept of 'human security' as an 'organizing frame' from which to develop a new strategic narrative in the field of foreign and security policy. Here, the frame represents an ideal or end-point around which action could be organised, thus creating a narrative that actors could subscribe to. They argue that such as move would represent a qualitative change in the EU's international relations, and would have the potential to further EU foreign policy integration (ibid.: 274), increasing its coherence, effectiveness and visibility (ibid.: 287). Focusing on the case of EU foreign policy, Mary Martin (2007) emphasises this internal/external dimension of strategic narratives: the internal aspect is about 'making sense of what European foreign policy is for, to those inside the EU who implement it, fund it and legitimise it … It also supplies the fabric for public engagement … and is the means by which public support...might won, lost, or recaptured' (ibid.: 9-10); on the other hand, the external aspect refers to 'its capacity to express and project the Union's intentions towards third parties … It serves to make sense of the Union's international presence for outside elites and populations'. Martin concludes by stressing that a strategic narrative defines and enacts two key processes in politics: identification and legitimation (ibid.: 10). It can thus be argued that strategic narratives represent a crucial form of strategic agency in world politics, i.e. agency that aims to transform itself and/or change the nature of the environment in which it exists and operates.

Amassing material resources is not the only mechanism a country can pursue its interests. By projecting its narrative and that narrative being comprehensible and appealing to other powers or transnational audiences a country may meet aims where the use of material resources and capabilities would fail to do so. Thus we posit a degree of agency for state leaders in the international system. They face choices about how to respond to changing context and uncertainty about the most optimal or fit set of policies, such that

any choice requires justification. Since other actors in the system will be performing similar acts of narrative projection, an emerging or great power must continually refine and adapt the narrative in response to others' communications, others' actions, and in response to critical events which may appear to contradict that great power's narrative.

Strategic narratives in the new media ecology

The recent developments in communication, both as a technology and as a culture, render traditional assumptions used in studies of public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy or propaganda studies outdated. Below we outline a transformation in communication so profound that its impacts extend far beyond 'controlling a message' to influence the content of this message itself and as a result, even deeper, to influence the identity of the messenger herself. We inhabit a new 'media ecology' – understood as environment, sum of all media devices, and the cultures thereby generated (Cottle, 2006; Fuller, 2007; de Waal, 2007, Awan et al. 2010 forthcoming) characterised by a connectivity and scale that ushers in a different problematique and transforms the way we traditional think about state narratives and their impact on world politics. The question of *who* is the narrator of a strategic narrative, *how* media are used, and identifying *what effects* of media use have all been problematised by this transformation in communication.

i.   *Who narrates?*

The new media ecology is characterised by the collapse of dualisms: that between broadcast and post-broadcast media, and that between national and international media. Not only have we witnessed the recent proliferation of transnational television *channels* such as Al Jazeera, Telesur, Press TV, Russia Today, and CCTV9, alongside BBC World and CNN International, but many of these media organisations also provide *platforms* and interactive features allowing for forms of public participation and conversation, such as the BBC's 'Have your say' message boards. Hence these media organisations act as tools for strategic narratives as per traditional public diplomacy – the transmission of content to overseas governments and publics – but also allow new 'bottom up' public diplomacy by enabling publics to interact and, perhaps, 'influence' each other independently of government communications, with 'soft power' reconceptualised as horizontal and dispersed. This presents an ambivalent picture: democratisation of the production and consumption of media content, alongside consolidation and the channelling of citizen media through 'Big Media' organisations (Gillmor, 2006). Additionally, authority is increasingly mobile, provisional, collective and anonymous. Sites such as Amazon, E-Bay, Digg, Slashdot and others aggregate ratings to offer continual evaluations of artefacts, news stories and even the contributors themselves (de Waal, 2007). We face another tension then: On the one hand, the notion of expert gatekeepers or statesmen safeguarding a political narrative appears to be undermined; between policymakers, journalists and publics. On the other, certain political and religious leaders (and journalists/commentators) retain credibility and authority within these conditions.

ii.   How: Emergence and diffusion rather than discrete messages

It follows that it is difficult, ontologically speaking, to demarcate discrete 'messages', 'senders' and 'receivers'. A political address is not simply transmitted and is never final: the communications of corporations, politicians, and even celebrities are packaged by pre-press releases, pre- and post-hoc commentary, and picked up and re-packaged, mashed-up and subverted by blogs. As mentioned earlier, President Obama's speech in Egypt in June 2009 was trailed for weeks beforehand, including interviews in which Obama previewed his message, and then digested for weeks afterwards, during which several core interpretations sedimented. Identifying a moment at which an audience receives any address has become a methodological headache. The notion of a definitive statement is undermined by these filters and feedback loops which alter the linear temporality of communication.

Narrative may appear to imply a linear conception of time, a sequence of events and actors determining what happens next, but in international affairs this need not be immediately obvious. The meaning of the Cold War as Western 'victory' was not apparent until it happened: the collapse of the Soviet Union could be interpreted as signifying its defeat and by implication the triumph of liberal democracy, allowing for a coherent meaning to be imposed retrospectively (Fierke and Weiner, 1999: 729) [3]. The new media ecology, however, radically increases the potential for re-evaluation, disruption and re-inscription of historical events and timelines. Take wars: once, the collective memory of a war could be relatively settled, mediated by artefacts and the slowly diminishing memory of still-living participants. With the proliferation of digital media devices and the greater recording, storage and transfer of creating a permanent 'long tail' (Anderson, 2007) of media content from warzones, the relation between media and memory of war is qualitatively different: 'whereas before forgetting was the norm, remembering becomes the default condition' (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2009b forthcoming). Images from Abu Ghraib prison, made public in 2004 and still a matter of debate, exemplify the potential for images to literally emerge and destabilise state narratives. In response to this potentiality, the BBC journalist Nik Gowing – an original analyst of the 'CNN effect' in the early 1990s when it seemed live satellite television broadcasts would force policymakers' hand on matters of intervention (Gowing, 1994) – has recently argued that policymakers must accept it is impossible to dominate control of 'the message' (Gowing, 2009). Indeed, to be seen trying to control will harm trust in the state. Instead, the rational mode of narrative projection is to maximize transparency and citizen participation (as checks, and as proxies or vehicles for the narrative work). In a media ecology defined by uncertainty about control of and global response to communications, the meaning of 'strategic' use of media to project narratives is altered.

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[3] Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2009a) offer a similar analysis of 'retrospective premediation' in media coverage of terror suspects.

iii.   (To) what effect?

Identifying the 'effects' of news media or narrative strategies is an unresolved methodological problem. At the intersection of IR and political communication, several theories have been proposed but none has generated a substantial body of literature adequate to the task (for an overview see Cottle, 2006 or Miller 2007 chapter 1). The most established body of research concerning the relation of media to foreign policy suggests media criticism within a national polity is 'indexed' to the degree of elite consensus pertaining; if national parties begin to contest a policy, or a policy vacuum appears, then media will contain more oppositional sources and 'frames' (Entman, 1993, 2004) and, in conjunction with political opposition, have greater effect on policy (Bennett, 1990; Bennett et al., 2007). Yet just as a theory of media effects stabilised in the 1990s, so the media ecology transformed; according to the Dean of the Annenberg School of Communication, possibly the leading political communication centre in the world, researchers are left 'largely at sea' (Carpini, 2009: 55). The conditions within which the theory was generated – stable national media based on finite broadcast channels and newspapers, little audience interaction – no longer exist; the internet, the proliferation of transnational television stations and altered relations media production and consumption all produce a 'paradox of plenty' (Nye, 2002: 68) where audience attention is spread increasingly thin and hence top-down broadcasting and state public diplomacy initiatives become diluted. The challenge now is to identify how narratives are projected across media systems, re-mediated and translated, and responded to in countries perhaps not envisaged as part of the intended audience (Archetti, 2008; Corman, 2008; Eide et al. (eds.) 2008; Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2009b forthcoming). This is not to say that national media, and models of effects based on national media, are simply obsolete; rather, for policymakers as well as scholars, the challenge is to understand how strategic narratives will be received domestically, internationally and transnationally in ways that feedback into each other.

By focusing on the implications of a radical new communication environment in the formation, projection *and* reception of strategic narratives, the empirical tracing and theorisation of international communication becomes central to IR. Other scholars have looked at the formation and evolution of great powers' ideas about themselves and the international system, for instance whether they identify their relation to the system as one of integration, revision or separation from the system's values and operations (e.g. Legro, 2007). What such analysis overlooks is the importance of states *then projecting* an integrationist, revisionist or separatist identity in order to persuade domestic and international audiences of their intentions and aims *and the effects such projections have*. Thus China projects a narrative about how it believes power should be used (by sovereign independent states, and peacefully) so as to create international expectations and to generate legitimacy among Chinese publics. Vivien Schmidt is one scholar to devise a framework to evaluate all three phases of strategic narratives (Schmidt, 2002; Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004). She has analysed the formation and projection of 'coordinative discourses' that are generated within political elites which serve to provide 'a common

language and framework through which key policy groups can come to agreement in the construction of a policy program'. Such coordinative discourses differ in strategic purpose from what she calls 'communicative discourse', a tool to persuade publics of the necessity of policies developed at the coordinative stage. There is scope in IR for institutional or even ethnographic study of these practices in different government departments and policy communities as well as the media organisations without which strategic narratives could not be projected. Schmidt attempts to discern the impact these discourses have, once projected, on the opinion of publics, policymakers and interest groups, and ultimately on policy change. Indeed, the increasing digitization of communication affords new possibilities to traditional methods for measuring the effect of strategic narratives, such as public opinion polling and audience ethnography. Gary King writes of a 'changing evidence base' for social science research, and IR can take advantage of this:

> *Instead of trying to extract information from a few thousand activists' opinions about politics every two years, in the necessarily artificial conversation initiated by a survey interview, we can use new methods to mine the tens of millions of political opinions expressed daily in published blogs. Instead of studying the effects of context and interactions among people by asking respondents to recall their frequency and nature of social contacts, we now have the ability to obtain a continuous record of all phone calls, emails, text messages, and in-person contacts among a much larger group.* (King, 2009, in King et al. (eds.) 2009: 92)

In theoretical terms, our approach to strategic narratives would seem, at first glance, to fall between two stools. On the one hand, we conceive of strategic narratives as instrumental tools used by rational actors in their political communication to achieve ends such as the shaping of interests and identity groups. On the other, if strategic narratives are effective then they will help constitute interests and identities, including what would have counted as strategic before the rational actors deployed their narrative tools - as would be supported by discourse and poststructural analysts of foreign policy (Campbell, 1992, 2007; Epstein 2008; Hansen, 2006). Our focus is on the strategic narrative work done by great powers, based on the premise that empirical tracing of the *formation*, *projection* and *reception* can help explain how great powers shape their international relations and the international system. The study of strategic narratives entails analysis of how states project their interests and values, and how other states respond, and attempts to ascertain what difference the interactions that follow make to core IR problematics such as power transitions and legitimation. Given that strategic narratives may fail, we cannot assume *a priori* that they constitute interests and identities.

The struggle for power: war and identity

Few analysts dispute the fact that there seems to be new dynamics and shifts in the organisation, distribution and operation of power in world politics, along the lines we discussed in our introduction. Similarly few analysts dispute that these dynamics point to a new period of great power politics where emerging and currently dominant powers will (re)negotiate the nature and organising principles of the *international*. Yet there seems to be no agreement among IR scholars on the nature of this new era of great power politics. On the one hand, there are those theories that assume that whenever there has been a redistribution of power in the international system that challenges the dominant position of the each time existing hegemon, conflict and war have been unavoidable. Most analysts writing within the confines of such an understanding of world politics are inspired by texts that appeared in the second half of the 20th century that used variants of the concept of hegemonic war in their attempt to develop theories for analysing historical change and continuity. These include A.F.K. Organski's model of 'power transition' and George Modelski's work on 'long cycles' and 'global wars'. The work of historian Paul Kennedy on the rise and fall of great powers could also be included here. Yet, the most influential and most frequently used source on the theory of hegemonic war is the work of Robert Gilpin, and especially his book *War and Change in World Politics*.

According to Gilpin the theory of hegemonic war founds its origins in Thucydides' analysis of the Peloponnesian War, where, for the first time, the uneven growth of power among states is taken to be the main driving force in the evolution of international relations. Gilpin distinguishes between five stages in Thucydides analysis of hegemonic war. Firstly, there is a relatively stable international system characterised by a rather stable hierarchy of states. Over time, however, the power of a subordinate state begins to grow disproportionately, and this leads to a collision between this rising state and the dominant state of that system. Thirdly, this struggle between the dominant and the challenging state for pre-eminence leads to the formation of system-wide alliances and thus to the bipolarisation of the international system. As a result, the international system becomes increasingly unstable. A new equilibrium will be restored when this disjuncture between the old structure of the system and the new redistribution of power within the system will be resolved. In history, in most cases, this new order is the outcome of a hegemonic war, i.e. the struggle between the hegemon and its challengers.

This rationale is put forward for instance by John Mearsheimer in his seminal Neoclassical Realist statement *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. There, Mearsheimer concludes that a wealthy China would not be a status quo power but an aggressive state, and therefore the US should do what it can to deter the rise of China. Even if it does not do so, it will be forced to do it by the structural imperatives of the international system. Along similar lines, Power Transition theory, developed by Organski, focuses on quantifying power resources to ascertain tipping points in history when dominant states are challenged by rapidly developing powers (Organski and Kugler, 1980, 1989; Dicicco

and Levy, 1999; Chan, 2005; see also Kupchan et al., 2001; Chan, 2005, 2007; Lemke, 1997; Kim, 1992). Doran, Houweling and Siccama stress the importance of 'critical points' in power transitions when opportunities for emerging states are most conducive (Doran, 1989; Houlweling and Siccama, 1991). Quantifying internal growth in emerging states relative to dominant states is the key focus, although writers such as Kim have also pointed to the importance of forging alliances.

As a result of the peaceful end of the Cold War, key assumptions and understandings about hegemonic rivalry and hegemonic wars within the Realist tradition were (and had to) re-thought and reworked (mostly in the form of moving away from 'structural realism' and re-reading classical realist texts). William Wohlforth (1994/95) for instance discussed the importance of decision-makers' assessments of power, and not material capabilities themselves as crucial for the outcome of any hegemonic rivalry. The importance of perceptions was also stressed in Gilpin's (1981) original work. Gilpin suggested that 'psychological factors' are a precondition for the outbreak of hegemonic wars. According to Gilpin these factors refer to an emerging perception among the key players of the system that a fundamental historical change is under way, and an increasing fear on the side of the hegemon that time works against it. In an attempt to deal with challengers while the advantage is still at its side, the hegemon engages in pre-emptive wars.

More recent works however try to move beyond a 'security dilemma' reading of world politics predominantly defined in military terms. Pape (2005) argues that in the face of significant American dominance in military affairs, rising powers such as the European Union will 'soft balance', i.e. challenge United States' dominance in all areas of interaction, bar defence (see also Paul, 2005).[4] Within the power transition fold, Tammen suggestions that *socializing* a challenger into an international system with rules and norms defined by the dominant state might play a crucial role in deciding whether the emerging state will challenge the status quo (Tammen, 2008). Much of the literature on the United States of America and potential challenges to its dominance in the international system focuses on the potential impact of the transition of power to the East and in particular, the emerging roles of China and India as foreign policy actors (El-Khawas, 2007; Christensen, 2006; Friedberg, 2005; Shambaugh, 2004/05; Grinter, 2006; Lemke and Tammen, 2003; Kugler, 2006; Chan, 2007). Christensen argues that relations between China and the USA are characterised by positive-sum thinking on developing closer institutional contacts and economic co-operation and negative-sum dynamics on a number of intractable issues such as the status of Taiwan (Christensen, 2006). Relations

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[4] Brooks and Wohlforth (2005) and Lieber and Gerard (2005) argue that there is little evidence to support to idea of 'soft balancing' as contenders to the United States' pre-eminent position are largely satisfied with present conditions. Despite studies which contest the existence of soft balancing behaviour by emerging states towards the United States, nevertheless, there are numerous studies suggesting that America's influence, particularly under George W. Bush, has begun to wane (cf. Brooks and Wohlforth, 2005; Ikenberry, 2003). Evidence exists to support the idea of American decline, even if potential rivals are not energetically rushing to challenge Washington's dominance.

between the dominant state and potential challengers are characterised not by black and white assertions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, but as a mixture of the two.

Friedberg argues that, 'Even those who accept that China's power is growing, and believe that rising powers tend to be dissatisfied, do not necessarily believe that China will behave in an especially assertive or aggressive fashion. This may not simply be a function of China's capabilities but a reflection of its underlying intentions' (2005: 26). China has become more active in foreign policy in attempt to be a more influential player in international affairs, particular within its own region (Medeiros and Fravel, 2003). Yet, as Medeiros and Fravel correctly point out, the development of a more engaged foreign policy has significant domestic reverberation within China, at a time of significant adaptation within the country (ibid). With such rapid change taking place domestically, Medeiros and Fravel argue that this will limit China's ability to project its foreign policy and go through substantial change in the domestic self-perception of China's role in international affairs. In other words, what kind of foreign policy actor China becomes, will have a significant bearing on both China's domestic politics and its national identity. Developing this ideas further, Friedberg (2005: 19) contends that, '[r]ising powers seek not only to secure their frontiers but to reach out beyond them, taking steps to secure access to markets, materials, and transportation routes; to protect their citizens far from home, defend their foreign friends and allies, and promulgate their values; *and, in general, to have what they consider to be their legitimate say in the affairs of their region and of the wider world*' (emphasis added).

Studies of the EU's emerging international role have stressed the role of soft power, the centrality of foreign policy influence and the role of norms. The concept Normative Power Europe developed by Ian Manners (Lucarelli and Manners, 2006; Manners, 2002, 2006), Helene Sjursen and others posits that the EU exerts foreign policy influence without the military trappings of power which scholars such as Kagan (2003) insist are necessary for emerging powers to play a leading role in international affairs. According to scholars of the EU's normative power, the projection of EU norms plays a significant role in the EU's ability to play a constructive role in world affairs and has been particularly important in forging stability and peace in the region and periphery of Europe. Manners outlines how the EU diffuses its norms through the use of strategic communication - policy initiatives, declaratory communications and initiatives instigated by EU institutions (Manners 2002: 244-45). This is particularly useful for our conception of strategic narratives. Manners has not outlined how this diffusion of norms takes place, a gap which our study aims to fill. Institutionalising co-operation between states and extending the rule of law in international affairs is also a means to spread EU ideas.

It could be argued that much of the EU's strategic narrative work is secondary to its encouragement of institutional emulation and rather de-politicised best practice. This is evident in the extensive literature on how EU institutions shape policy in member states (Börzel and Risse 2006, Schmidt, 2006; Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004). Indeed, while the EU can be considered an actor in global affairs (Börzel and Risse, 2007) with particularly

European ideas, it could be argued that the EU's strategic narrative is less driven by the force of ideas (neither social and economic liberalism nor human rights are particularly European notions) but a particular way of achieving them. Thus the EU shapes the international system through regulation setting, for instance US car manufacturers must comply with EU carbon emissions regulations to sell in the EU market, such that it becomes rational for those manufacturers simply to make all their cars to meet those standards.

Reflecting this, empirical analysis of what Hurrell calls *social power* has been undertaken in IR and political science. Through the diffusion and institutionalisation of policy ideas, emerging and great powers have sought to reframe international relations and the structure and character of the international system in order to achieve their interests. A number of methods have been used to trace and document these processes. Qualitative studies have focused on the role of ideational entrepreneurs who actively and strategically "push" ideas into policy communities and public debate (Berman, 1998; Finnemore, 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998), the formation of epistemic communities that sustain and legitimise policy ideas (Haas, 1992), policy transfer between nation-states (Brueckner, 2003; Geddes and Guiraudon, 2004), and the importance of local context for the acceptance, negotiation or rejection of policy ideas (Acharya, 2004). Many studies of the international "flow of ideas" emphasise that the adoption of policy ideas may be less the outcome of a great power's grand strategy than by mundane emulation of apparently-legitimate practices, 'institutional isomorphism' at local level (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991) or competitive pressures to find optimal arrangements or best practice.

Thus, there has been a shift in the reading of this new emerging great power politics. Instead of employing a 'hegemonic war' approach, various IR scholars underlie the important role of state intentions, state perceptions and expectations, socialisation, the connection of domestic/international, and the role of international governance in meshing a state into an identity group. This shifts in understanding great power competition seems to be in line with key assumptions of the English School (Bull, 2002; Hurell, 2007) and constructivist (Adler, 1997; Hopf, 1998; Wendt, 1999) approaches to world politics, and especially their understanding of international relations as a social process. For these approaches, as states seek status and recognition, so hierarchies emerge that offer (explicitly or not) criteria by which membership of international society is achieved and recognised by other members. Such hierarchies may be formal, such as membership of international organisations such as the UN, G20 or the WTO, or informal and fluid such as participation in international sporting or other cultural events such as the Olympic Games. Through this perspective, instead of seeking the violent conquest or subordination of rivals, emerging powers such as China can seek status and prestige by integrating into the given system and hierarchy, for instance by joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO). They may demand their recognition as great powers without aiming to overturning the existing hierarchy in their favour.

Any detailed reference to the English School or Constructivism is beyond the scope and purposes of this article. Our point here is the following. There is a reading of the changing international system that runs counter to the assumptions and predictions of the hegemonic wars and balance of power approach. To this reading, the current emerging powers do not seem to present a direct challenge to the US predominant position in world politics, neither to lead to a period of hegemonic antagonisms and wars (see Gilpin, 1981; Organski and Kugler, 1980). That is, the emerging great powers do not seem to act as traditional challengers in a race for global dominance/hegemony (Gilpin, 1981). In contrast, what seems to be at issue is *recognition* rather than *domination* or *redistribution*[5]. Put differently, the aim of the emerging powers seems to be to 'register' their status as great powers in world politics, rather than to implement their own global hegemony. Their aim therefore is not to take over the place of the existing sole superpower. But rather to change the context in which this superpower operates. Their aim is to delineate an *identity space* (both domestically and externally) that, having been challenged by, aims to challenge the monopoly of the 'justifiable use of identity' that the US enjoyed after the end of the Cold War, and severely abused during the long 'Bush years'[6].

Such an approach then seems to point to a different balance that exists in world politics, a balance of identity. This notion of a balance of identity does not come to replace, but to complement the notion of a balance of power in world politics. Yet a balance of identity approach brings to the fore very different things in comparison to the traditional balance of power approach. The focus of the balance of identity is not on states' balancing behaviour that is animated by shifts in (material) capabilities. Rather its focus is on how emerging powers try to resolve domestic conflicts and/or participate in the making of world politics by articulating and projecting narratives that are based on identity claims about themselves and their place and stance in world politics. A balance of identity approach does not rule out the possibility of conflict or war. Different understandings of legitimate statehood and the norms of international order exist between for instance the US, EU, Russia, China and India. Thus, in a period in which power, norms and memberships are contested and in transition, tensions will unavoidably arise. A lack of shared understanding of what constitutes and should constitute acceptable rules and behaviour could lead to competing and conflicting interpretations and strategies (Clark, 2005; Hurrell, 2007) that may lead to conflict and war.

Following this assumption we urge for a careful focus on and analysis of the strategic narratives used by dominant and emerging powers, as well as the socio-communication environment that influences the way these narratives operate and take (or not) a life on their own. Analysing the 'content/message' of these narratives will allow us to analyse

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[5] For the problematique 'recognition vs. redistribution' see Fraser, 1995.
[6] In this context, 'monopoly of identity' refers to the claim of: having the normative power and legitimacy to define good and evil, knowing better how other people should live their lives, and feeling justifiable to being the state of exception.

understandings and projections of identity and related strategic interests and goals and their (potential) implications in the domestic and international realms. Analysing the socio-communication environment will allow us to see how a new media ecology effects, influences and possibly alters this 'content/message' itself and the way it operates.

Conclusion and future directions

This article has set out a research agenda for the study of strategic narratives of great powers in order to account for the transition process towards new forms of international order that the current dynamics point to. We suggest that great powers attempt to determine that by using strategic narratives to project their interests and identities. It is through the interactions that follow as other emerging and great powers engage with these projections that a violent struggle for hegemony can be avoided, enabling actors to reduce uncertainty, adapt their narratives and policies in response to both others' narrative work and to unexpected events, and achieve domestic legitimacy. Theories of hegemonic rivalry and wars focused on material factors overlook the importance of these processes and the significance of what we have called the 'balance of identity'. IR studies that do account for the latter either fail to study the actual communicative mechanisms through which identity, status and interests are negotiated, downplay the agential/strategic aspects of power transitions, or privilege explanations of identity and interests rather than what happens when those identities and interests are 'put into play'. Meanwhile, IR as a whole has yet to take into account in any sustained manner the medium or arena in which much of this 'battle of ideas' will be waged, the new media ecology, which renders the political communication of strategic narratives more complex and possibly more difficult. Who gets to speak, how communication occurs, and the effects thereby generated, become more diffuse and unpredictable, albeit also offering new opportunities for states to harness citizen and media voices and spaces to project, defend, and even refine its strategic narrative.

In this conclusion we wish to point to some unresolved analytical issue. First, it is possible to distinguish instances when a narrative becomes detached from its original narrator. Ikenberry notes that liberalism has 'taken on a life of its own' beyond its original US progenitors, such that as countries in East Asia and Latin America maintain but adapt the doctrine through dialogue and through practice, it becomes 'a reality that America itself must accommodate to' (2009: 84). This disrupts the relationship between power, action and intentionality that a strategic narrative might be presumed to connect. Second, we must be careful to distinguish what does and does not count as strategic narrative work. Not all political leaders' communications are necessarily or intentionally strategic. It may also be that states also "speak through action" without any narrative crafting. What counts, however, may be in the eye of the beholder; in the new media ecology states, journalists and citizens anywhere may be interpreting an emerging or great powers' words or deeds *as if it was* its primary strategic narrative. Third, it follows that strategic narratives may also be a constraint, as well as a tool, because understandings of identity,

interests and narrative legacies will be difficult for contemporary political leaders to overcome, and there will be expectations about the parameters a narrative must fall within. Fourth, in the hall of mirrors of international communication, analysis must account for the manner in which leaders and media can mediate other states' strategic narratives on behalf of publics. In Russia, Iran or China, it is not necessarily the case that publics have direct access to the words of EU or US leaders, but these are translated on their behalf by journalists and officials. There is great potential for a lack of recognition, or misrecognition (Ortmann, 2007). Thus the dynamics of translation remain underexplored here. Finally, the role of the visual image in strategic narratives requires research. Practically, assembling and analysing a corpus of linguistic textual data is easier than constructing a systematic study of images, and IR scholars are rarely trained in visual interpretation and methodologies. Yet as Cynthia Weber (2008) has recently argued, much of international politics involves 'visual language': flags, photos of dead or injured soldiers, civilians or even leaders, or images that symbolise suffering or of triumph – all are used in the projection and contestation of strategic narratives and hence must be accounted for.

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