



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The return of Prometheus. Dominant powers and the management of careful revisionists

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## Abstract

After defeating the 20th-century challengers to the international order, the United States must today calibrate its response to the rise of the PRC, whose foreign policy poses problems both for policy-makers and IR scholars. Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and USSR have left a heavy mark on the scholarship on revisionist threats and their management. Like the mythological Titans, these states launched their challenge all the way to ‘Olympus’: they longed to build a new international order by war or a large-scale and long-standing competition. However, the myth of Prometheus teaches us that this ‘revolutionary’ path is not the only road for secondary states to gain primacy. Revisionism can also take a more careful shape, both by means and objectives. The article preliminarily discusses the understudied type of careful revisionism and distinguishes the subtypes of ‘incrementals’, ‘moderates’ and ‘gamblers’. These more nuanced forms compel status quo power(s) to face a dilemma between two strategic options: engagement or confrontation. Then it posits that a wisely gauged assessment of the careful revisionist challenge by the dominant power must inevitably lay at the basis of any grand strategy for preserving the status quo and preventing systemic change. Finally, it tests this hypothesis by investigating the confrontation between a dominant power – the United Kingdom – and six careful revisionists – namely the United States (1814–1860), the Kingdom of Sardinia/Italy (1852–1882), France (1875–1904), Russian Empire (1864–1907), Imperial Japan (1919–1936) and Fascist Italy (1922–1935).

**Keywords:** careful revisionism; gamblers; incrementals; management; moderates; United Kingdom; United States

## Introduction

Greek myths tell us that the Oceanid Asia and the Titan Iapetus gave birth to four sons who could not be more different. On one side, Menoetius, Atlas and Epimetheus – who ‘thinks after’ – were hot-headed, impetuous and irrational, always prone to conflict. They ended up waging war against Zeus, who in return imprisoned them in Tartarus. On the other side, Prometheus, the wisest of his race (Graves, 1955), had the gift of forethinking, which kept him away from a full confrontation with the Olympians. Prometheus was level-headed, rational and careful and ‘thought in advance’. When the moment to challenge the ruling gods’ omniscience and omnipotence came, he opted for deception and illusion and eventually managed to steal fire from them.

Myths hint at the ever-recurring patterns of human affairs. The cyclical rise of rebellious actors in international orders from time to time translates into revisionist foreign policies and is indeed regarded as a constant of international politics (Wolfers, 1962; Organski and Kugler, 1980; Tammen *et al.*, 2000; Goddard, 2018a).

It goes without saying that the literature on this topic has been deeply influenced by the experiences of radical challengers such as Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and USSR

which have all left a heavy mark on the scholarship on revisionist threats and their management (Carr, 1939; Aron, 1966). Their immense fiasco constitutes a striking warning to those determined to revise the international order at the expense of Washington.

Nowadays, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is believed to be equipped to challenge the US superpower (Heath *et al.*, 2021), but it seems instead acting à la Prometheus (Natalizia and Termine, 2021) leaving scholars and policy-makers puzzled on whether Beijing is revisionist at all.

Its measured challenge raises two thorny issues, for both IR scholars and practitioners. On the one side, it prompts the need to reaffirm the – too often forgotten – differences between the above-mentioned cases and non-revolutionary revisionists, here preliminary defined as the 'careful'. On the other side, it imposes the urgency of identifying revisionism management options – i.e. engagement or confrontation – being aware of the risks they can bear.

The article advances a distinction of the careful camp between 'incremental' – non-intensive in terms of means but with systemic revision as goal – 'moderate' – non-intensive in terms of means and with selective goals – and 'gamblers' – intensive in terms of means but with a selective revision in mind – revisionists. Then, it posits that a wisely gauged assessment of careful revisionist challenges – incremental, moderate or gamblers – must inevitably lay at the basis of any dominant powers' grand strategy of preserving the status quo and preventing systemic change.

Finally, this hypothesis is tested through a historical comparative investigation of the strategic choices implemented by a ruling power of the past – the United Kingdom. Three cases of successful management of careful revisionism will be presented – namely the United States (1814–1860), Russian Empire (1864–1907) and France (1875–1904) – as well as three failures – the Kingdom of Sardinia/Italy (1852–1882), Imperial Japan (1919–1936) and Fascist Italy (1922–1935).

The article is organized as follows. The first section reviews the literature on revisionism, points out its voids and advances a distinction between incremental, moderate and gambler revisionists. The second section discusses the strategic dilemma that ruling power(s) face in dealing with this brand of challenge to the international order. The third investigates past cases of careful revisionism as well as the successes and failure of the United Kingdom in handling these challenges. Conclusions discuss the findings of the previous section and hints at the risks of US mismanagement of the Chinese challenge.

### ***Distinguishing the Titans***

Revisionism is a long-lasting topic within the International Relations literature. After the classics (Carr, 1939; Schuman, 1948; Wolfers, 1962) the issue of states striving to change the status quo has been brought to the fore by power transition theories (PTT) and studies on hegemony (Organski, 1958; Gilpin, 1981; Tammen *et al.*, 2000). While dominant states in the system develop the economic, military and diplomatic laws governing the system, a share of powerful actors experiencing a differential growth of power may result in dissatisfaction with the status quo and might mount challenges against it (Organski and Kugler, 1980; Thompson, 2009).

According to the literature, the causes of their dissatisfaction are heterogeneous. By way of example, if they were defeated in the last war (Morgenthau, 1948), if they have conflicting vested interests or they did not receive as much as they felt to deserve from the new circumstances (Organski, 1958), if they experience a status gap (Ward, 2017) they will perceive a growing mismatch between their power and the existing material and normative conditions (Gilpin, 1981). These actors may, then, turn into revisionists and opt for altering the status quo or – when they behold a critical incompatibility – overthrowing and wholly replacing it.

The unfolding of this phenomenon usually triggers the division of states into two antagonistic fields whose confrontation takes place both in the distributive and in the normative dimension: the status quo powers led by the dominant power(s), and the revisionist countries that advance the alternative version of international order (Organski and Kugler, 1980). When the former

prevails, the international order is reconsolidated, even if it may be partially reshaped. On the contrary, the success of the latter fuels systemic changes (Gilpin, 1981).

As a result of the 20th century's tragedies, the established studies on revisionism are highly biased towards this typology of interaction between conservative and revisionist powers, rooted in war and absolute competition. The major benchmark is in fact war breakout and war-alliances. Therefore, IR scholars all guess which are the revolutionary revisionists of each age and order, but little is known about who, gradually and/or selectively, challenged the status quo.

However, this is not the only nor the most common form of revisionism throughout history. History is replete with cases of powers that every now and then opt for restraint instead of mounting a radical challenge. As a matter of fact, a large part of confrontation between states happens below the threshold of war. Indeed, revisionism can also – without prejudice to its nature of change-seeking effort – entail more careful options.

This fashion of revisionism has been largely neglected by IR schools despite it has both a relevant theoretical significance and a historical–empirical profundity (Termine and Natalizia, 2020). However, some attempts have been made to explain careful revisionism. Especially liberal, institutionalist and constructivist scholars attribute this moderation to interstate cooperation, interdependence and institutional binding effects (Keohane and Nye, 1977; Ikenberry, 2012; Goddard, 2018b).

The topic has tangentially gained interest also from realists who trace it back to some limited aims of revision (Schweller, 1994, 1998; Tammen *et al.*, 2000). Robert Gilpin, one of the leading voices on the topic, has focused the attention on the potential of 'incremental' transformation in world politics, namely gradual systemic change occurring one step at the time but has not written on state revisionisms behind that (Gilpin, 1981).

More recently, Grygiel and Mitchell (2017) highlight that contemporary 'rising powers' are 'curious but careful'. While they are eager to push the 'existing boundaries of their influence' they are not certain of 'how far they can do so without meeting a firm opposition of the other power'. As a result, US rivals – 'China, Russia, and Iran' – are still cautious 'to avoid a direct confrontation with the United States' (p. 43).

However, it is Michael Mazarr who has delivered the most lucid analysis on the topic so far. According to him, revolutionary revisionists are expected to climb the whole ladder of challenge options by waging war, building up military, seizing territories, forging alliances, promoting different versions of international order and institutions. Conversely, he points at the puzzling nature of what he labels 'measured revisionism' which is carried out by 'a strange hybrid, largely cautious, conservative state' which is 'determined to foster a transformation of the international order' (Mazarr, 2015, 22). This moderation is determined by the State's 'inherent conservatism' facing 'the costs of major war' but also bearing a 'dependence on the [existing] system for key national interests' (Ivi, 25). Then, Mazarr anticipates measured revisionists to mount challenge to a lesser degree by, for example, eschewing direct confrontation, scaling up military, cautiously altering the distribution of territories and fostering less conflicting alternative institutions.

In the present contribution, these powers have been described as 'careful revisionists' because their challenge occurs below the threshold of war or absolute competition and differ from ideal typical revolutionary revisionism. This umbrella concept hints the possibility of different degrees and forms of revisionism which – we argue – are explained by different combinations of goals and means.

Goals are understood as either systemic or selective. Systemic goals imply a rejection of the fundamental normative and distributive aspects of the status quo. Selective goals hint at a more circumscribed dissatisfaction towards the status quo, which is troubling the revisionist power only in relation to certain features. As Pisciotta (2020) point out, revision may be at the global or regional level, with the latter being more selective than the former.

Foreign policy means are interpreted as either intensive or non-intensive resorting to the literature (Narizny, 2007; Shiffrinson, 2018; see also Pisciotta, 2020). Accordingly, intensive foreign

Table 1. The goals-means typology of revisionism

		Means	
		Intensive	Non-intensive
Goals	Systemic	Revolutionary Revisionism	Incremental Revisionism
	Selective	Gambler Revisionism	Moderate Revisionism

Grey cells include careful revisionist sub-types.

policy includes escalatory options of foreign policy which imply that the state is willing to pay all the costs and consequences of its actions. Similar to the notion of ‘geopolitical backlash cost’ (Zhang, 2019), these means are more risky as the likelihood of swift counteraction by the defender(s) of the status quo is high. On the contrary, non-intensive means are those associated with less risk of swift counteraction by the status quo protector(s) and are thus less escalatory.

As a result, this article distinguishes the careful revisionists into three subtypes: those non-intensive in terms of means but systemic in terms of desired revision, namely the ‘incrementals’, those non-intensive in terms of means and selective in terms of revision, namely the ‘moderates’, and finally the ‘gamblers’, those intensive in terms of means but with selective revision in mind. In the first case, carefulness is a strategic attitude adopted by a power that is searching for a general change of the status quo but with graduality – or incrementality as per Gilpin (1981). In the second case, carefulness refers to the selective nature of what the revisionist power is trying to achieve, usually in relation to the need for an improvement of its conditions in the security environment where it operates. Moreover, as it yearns for limited adjustments it does not employ intensive foreign policy means. Lastly, the third type is eager to achieve selective changes in the status quo and thus resorts to intensive foreign policy means. Accordingly, our typology looks like in the following table (Table 1).

**Dealing with careful challenges: the dominant power’s dilemma**

The IR literature suggests that conservative states have two main strategic options for dealing with revisionist powers: engagement and confrontation (Schweller, 1999).

Engagement means the dominant country’s disposition for bargaining and, as a result, a willingness to make certain concessions, or to broaden contacts in areas of mutual interest (Mastanduno, 2019) or to recognize the relative challenger’s increasing power by cutting

commitments in non-strategic areas (Carr, 1939). After all, the order can stay sustainable also in presence of a certain degree of grievances, if its basic rules are respected by the most influential actors as a result of *détente* (Kissinger, 1957).

Confrontation, on the other hand, entails conceding nothing to the revisionist powers' demands or – in its most extreme form – even launching preventive absolute competition to take advantage of the enduring political, military, economic or technological advantage (Schweller, 1999). However, for much of the time confrontation takes the shape of deterrence – regional or extended to overseas allies and partners – that is by definition a threat to keep an adversary 'from starting something,' or 'to prevent [an adversary] from action by fear of consequences' (Schelling, 1966, 69). Deterrence as such is for the purpose of the maintenance of a certain status quo (Biddle, 2020). Dominant countries may be tempted to exploit the asymmetry of power with the nascent state to counter or de-legitimize its policies as long as this option remains rational in terms of political, diplomatic and economic costs (Allison, 2017).

Engagement and confrontation are successful when they achieve the same goal: the reintegration of the careful revisionist into the international order led by the dominant power or – at a minimum level – the expiration of its challenge. The dominant country's policy toward revisionism is then successful or failing based on the outcome of revisionism on the status quo. If revisionism continues troubling the status quo and produce the desired change or, even worse, shift to a more destabilizing pattern of action, then the dominant country is considered having failed managing the challenge (Organski and Kugler, 1980).

The experience of other ruling powers of the past – such as the United Kingdom – have something to say on the topic. Devised as a historical comparative investigation, the article aims to prove that states have adopted different revisionist strategies towards the status quo, to bring out the different policy responses that dominant countries may adopt facing a rising challenge, and to highlight the different outcomes of revisionism management on international stability. Because of its bicentennial global hegemony and a 'command of the commons' (Posen, 2003) close to that of the United States, the case of the United Kingdom is instructive in gaining some insights into how to deal with disgruntled powers that take a cautious approach to challenging the status quo.

In Table 2, for each type, the cell contains a case of both success (bottom left corner) and failure (top right corner) of revisionism management by the dominant power, the United Kingdom. The next sections will dig into the six case studies presented.

#### *A successful management of an incremental: the Russian Empire (1864–1907)*

Starting in the 1830s, the United Kingdom engaged the Russian Empire in a confrontation that came to be known as the 'Great Game' in Central Asia. With the decline of Persian and Ottoman influence in the region, as ratified by the Treaties of Turkmenchay (1828) and Adrianople (1829), St. Petersburg developed the ambition to fill the power vacuum that emerged in the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia, thereby altering global balances. Specifically, Russian rulers of the 19th century were convinced that this scenario would unfold if the Tsarist Empire achieved access to a warm-water port in the Mediterranean or the Indian Ocean, enabling them to counter British maritime dominance.

However, Russian activism in Central Asia must be interpreted within a broader strategy. Indeed, the gradual attainment of territorial proximity to British India was functional to threaten the security of the Empire, keep a substantial portion of its military force engaged in the region, and incrementally enhance the Russian position in Europe (Jelavich, 1974). On the other hand, London's desire to protect its 'jewel in the crown' drove it towards increasing involvement in the region, particularly in the Emirate of Afghanistan, suspected to be used as a foothold in case of a Russian invasion of the subcontinent. This confrontation was constant but indirect, relying on intrigues, covert operations and evolving agreements with local Khans, earning it the moniker 'Tournament of Shadows' (Meyer and Blair Brysac, 1999).

Table 2. Case studies of careful revisionism

		Means	
		Intensive	Non-intensive
Goals	Systemic	[Hatched Box]	<b>Incremental Revisionism</b>  Fascist Italy (1922-1935)  Russian Empire (1864-1907)
	Selective	<b>Gambler Revisionism</b>  Imperial Japan (1919-1936)  United States (1814-1860)	<b>Moderate Revisionism</b>  Kingdom of Sardinia/Italy (1852-1882)  French Third Republic (1875-1904)

Despite the competition for Central Asia ongoing for a quarter century, only in 1864 did Chancellor Alexandr Gorchakov release an official memorandum on Russian expansion in the region. It emphasized necessity, power and the spread of civilization, echoing justifications for contemporaneous colonial expansion by European powers in Africa and Asia (Mahajan, 2002). Gorchakov’s directive officially identified consolidating the frontier with Khokand as the limit for further advancements (Hopkirk, 1992). However, subsequent annexations greatly exceeded this, being presented as a result of autonomous initiative by local military commanders, later accepted as a *fait accompli* in St. Petersburg (Morrison, 2021).

The Russian penetration into Central Asia occurred in two waves. The first one aimed at extending influence towards Afghan Turkestan, capturing Chimkent (1864), Tashkent (1865), Khokhand and Bukhara (1866) and Samarkand (1868). In response to Russia’s extensive conquests, the United Kingdom abandoned the ‘masterly inactivity’ principle and embraced a proactive ‘forward school’ approach, advocating an aggressive policy of expanding influence and pushing the British frontier forward (Meyer and Blair Brysac, 1999). This involved establishing friendly or vassal Khanates along the thinly guarded borders, supporting their independence with resources and military advisors (Hopkirk, 1992).

The first implementation of this policy was directed to establish a partnership with the newly formed Emirate of Kashgaria (1865), in the Chinese Turkestan. After the dramatic failure of previous attempts, a British mission successfully reached an agreement with Emir Yakub Beg in 1873. He saw the British proposal as a means to balance the encroaching influence of St. Petersburg, which had coerced him into opening the Kashgarian market to their commerce under favourable conditions after occupying the adjacent Muslim territory of Hi in 1871 (Meyer and Blair Brysac, 1999).

Subsequently, Calcutta worked to restore order in the neighboring state of Baluchistan, where internal tribal conflicts threatened the throne of the Khan of Kelat. In 1875, Captain Robert Sandeman was sent to the region to persuade the Baluchi chiefs to submit to the Khan’s

authority. The success of the mission, combined with a substantial annual subsidy granted to the Khan, earned the British the opportunity to establish a frontier garrison in Quetta and permanently lease the Bolan Pass, the gateway to southern Afghanistan (Hopkirk, 1992).

Simultaneously, there was a setback regarding the crucial British objective: Kabul. In 1873, Afghan Emir Sher Ali, alarmed by the collapse of Khanates, proposed a formal alliance with Britain, committing them to aid in case of attack, recognize the Barakzai dynasty and provide an annual subsidy. However, Viceroy Lord Northbrook rejected this proposal. Consequently, the Emir of Afghanistan established amicable relations with Russia. Three years later, Lord Lytton offered Sher Ali's requests, with the condition that British officers could reside in Kabul or Herat. This time, the Emir refused, arguing he would lose grounds to reject a Russian mission. Finally, in 1878, when he declined to host a British delegation to discuss relations, Calcutta discovered his secret welcome of a Russian mission (Meyer and Blair Brysac, 1999).

In the meantime, the second Russian wave of penetration into Central Asia had begun from the Caspian Sea towards Herat, leading to the conquest of Khiva (1873) and later that of Merv (1884) (Mahajan, 2002). The Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–1880) emerged both as a response to Russia's expanding influence and as a result of Sher Ali's decision, following the counsel of Russian General Konstantin von Kaufman, to temporize in light of the British ultimatum to accept a new mission in Kabul. However, no military aid was sent by Russia to the Emir, and the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–1880) ended with a significant victory for the United Kingdom. The Treaty of Gandamak (1879), which established a new Emir selected by Calcutta, transformed Afghanistan into a UK protectorate, turning it into a buffer state between the British Raj and the Russian Empire (Meyer and Blair Brysac, 1999).

At the dawn of the 20th century, a turning point emerged in the relations between the two powers. The high costs of the power struggle in Central Asia combined with Russia's humiliation in the War with Japan (1904–1905), significantly supported by the United Kingdom, and London's subsequent concerns about St. Petersburg's desperate attempt at redemption through an invasion of Herat and Afghan Turkestan. This progressive rapprochement culminated in the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention, delineating the respective spheres of influence between the two empires in Central Asia. This checked St. Petersburg's ambitions in the region and solidified the cornerstone of the status quo alliance that would confront the German-led revisionist front since 1914 (McDaniel, 2011).

#### *A failed management of an incremental: Fascist Italy (1922–1935)*

When Benito Mussolini seized power in 1922, the United Kingdom stood waiting to understand the new Fascist foreign policy.

The first major dossier whom Prime Minister Mussolini had to deal with after October 1922 was the peace negotiation with Turkey and the general Eastern Mediterranean arrangement (Lefebvre D'Ovidio, 2016). Mussolini maintained the same objective of previous Italian governments: to denounce the Tittoni-Venizelos agreement and retain the previously Greek, now controlled by Italy, Dodecanese Islands. By giving up on other demands of recognition of Italian parity, Mussolini managed to obtain the British approval (Micheletta, 1999).

Even when, after the assassination of an Italian legate in Greece and an impossible list of conditions demanded from Greece, the Duce launched the occupation of Corfu, the British reaction left room for diplomacy as London stationed its fleet around Malta to pressure Italy to back down. In that moment, with British negligence and French support, competence was transferred to the Conference which produced a note to Greece where, among some minor adjustments, Italian demands were substantially confirmed, under the condition of Italian evacuation of the island. The Duce could boast Italian prestige was restored (Stefanachi, 2023).

In the meantime, Mussolini managed to exploit the political turmoil and decline of the city of Fiume to stage a *fait accompli* which did not include a formal annexation but forced 'the

Yugoslavs to negotiate on his conditions' (Lefebvre D'Ovidio, 2016, 373). Based on these new conditions on the ground, Mussolini felt to have the upper hand and started new negotiations with Yugoslavia. With London turning a blind eye, the 1924 treaty recognized Italian sovereignty over the city and port of Fiume.

However, Mussolini did not have only European ambitions but imagined an Italian empire. Rome had been promised colonial recompenses for its participation in the Great War. The first interactions between Italy and the United Kingdom were unfruitful but eventually, the United Kingdom ceded the Jubaland to Italy and later Rome managed to force Cairo – a British protégé – to hand over the oasis of Jaghbug.

These were small, incremental steps in what Mussolini saw as the restructuration of the post-war order. It was the Duce himself who foresaw major changes ahead. For that reason, Italy had to 'finalize its armed forces of land, sea, air', so that in a decade, 'between 1935 and 1940', Rome will be able to 'speak out and see its rights finally respected' (Mussolini, 1957, 386).

While central Europe drew much of British attention, Italy could focus on the Balkans. After the Italo-Yugoslav agreement of January 1924, Rome aimed at expanding its influence and control over Albania, partly in accordance with what the London pact and the 1921 Conference decision posited (Pastorelli, 1967a). Negotiations were started which led on 25th August 1925, to the secret Italian-Albanian pact of guarantee (Pastorelli, 1967b). Rome assured Tirana 'military assistance to guarantee its independence and territorial integrity' (Collotti, 2000, 43). The pact established a privileged relationship of power between Italy and Albania which was ratified and expanded by the following treaty of friendship and security signed in 1926. The new relationship emended significantly that which came out of WWI and the Ambassadorial Conference of 1921 and represented the first substantial revisionist initiative by Mussolini with regards to Albania. Notwithstanding French opposition, the British did not sanction Italy's growing clout over Albania. Eventually, the Albanian dependence was perfected with the 1927 treaty of alliance between Rome and Tirana which was secretly signed in the Albanian capital and provided for a 20-years defensive alliance. From then on, Italy remained the only guarantor of Albanian security and independence in a move that contradicted substantially not only the provisions in the peace treaties and the Locarno treaty but also the 1924 and 1925 agreements with Yugoslavia.

At the end of the 1920s, Rome had obtained gradual changes both in the European and the colonial status quo. This was true also with regard to political ideologies. After all, Mussolini envisaged a coming 'war of doctrines' of the 'immortal principles' of democracy against the 'indomitable Fascist Italy, antidemocratic, antiliberal, antisocialist and anti-Masonic' (Mussolini, 1957, 386).

In 1929, Mussolini handed foreign policy to his right-hand man Dino Grandi, considered a strong pro-British advocate, who immediately launched a peace offensive (Burgwyn, 1997, 57). When Grandi took office, a new labour government in London did not give great hopes for deeper Anglo-Italian cooperation. However, in an appeasing diplomatic move, the British foreign secretary, Arthur Henderson, who one year earlier 'had branded Mussolini as an assassin', travelled to Rome in early March 1931 to pay his respects to Grandi and the Duce (pp. 58–9).

To tame Italian adventurism, London even accepted with sympathy Rome's Four Power Directorate plan which was signed in 1933 with Paris and Berlin. The Pact boosted Italian prestige and gave it political and diplomatic parity with the United Kingdom and France. This was Mussolini's foremost objective since 1922 and by institutionalizing a four great power concert over Europe, the treaty was the Duce's answer to the League, which he deeply despised and aimed to bypass.

In 1932, the Fascist leadership started wondering about a potential invasion of Ethiopia. Given recent British cordiality, Mussolini and his acolytes felt to have room for manoeuvre in Eastern Africa. In late January 1935, Grandi touched base with London on Rome's ambitions over the Eastern African country and met an ambiguous – to say the least – response: although implicitly not approving Italian designs, the United Kingdom blocked Ethiopia from bringing a case before the League to solve the ongoing tensions with Italy. This gave Mussolini the impression of a



substantial negligence from London which was confirmed during the negotiations for the Stresa conference, when Britain ditched asking about Italian war preparations so as to not block the conference preparations.

In October 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia from Eritrea without a declaration of war. The following year Rome signed the anti-Comintern pact with Berlin, finding a useful ally in Hitler's revisionism.

*A successful management of a moderate: the French Third Republic (1875–1904)*

In the last quarter of the 19th century, Paris tried to run away from the humiliating condition of not being able to revise the post-Franco-Prussian war status quo in Europe in the short term and launched a moderate attempt to tilt the African and Asian balance of power in its favour. Indeed, the horizon of its dissatisfaction only pertained to the distribution of influence in the overseas territories (Gifford and Louis, 1971).

This choice caused the cessation of that first de facto entente cordiale that had emerged between the United Kingdom and France in the early 1840s and was subsequently maintained despite the expansionist policy of Napoleon III (Brown, 2006). If Paris's colonial ambitions were largely at odds with the British Empire's interests, on the other hand, the fundamental goal of the return of Alsace-Lorraine suggested moderation in the relationship with London, the support of which was critical to its success against the Second Reich (Kissinger, 1957).

The inflection point came in 1875 when the new French army law generated a war-in-sight scenario between Paris and Berlin (Otte, 2006). London did not side with the former but used this turn of events to reassert the balance of power in Europe through the mediation of St. Petersburg and to obtain the approval of the latter for its expansion into the eastern Mediterranean. Therefore, the United Kingdom purchased the Suez Canal Company, which was founded by Ferdinand de Lesseps and had mostly French shareholders. When the United Kingdom definitively downsized Egypt in 1882 and nullified France's influence in the country, a renewed anti-British sentiment took hold in French foreign policy (Mulligan, 2020). Then, Paris's careful revisionism shifted to Asia and took the shape of a creeping commercial penetration into Burma (Christian, 1941). As soon as a covert Franco-Burmese arms supply was uncovered, the London military annexed the Reign in 1886 to secure it as India's eastern stronghold (Langer, 1972).

Bilateral relations definitively soured for the following decade, as anticipated by the British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, who observed that, 'for the present, the enemy is France' (Seton-Watson, 1968, 566). Indeed, Paris launched an extensive preparation of its naval fleet at Toulon that triggered a naval scare in 1888 and established an alliance with Russia between 1891 and 1894. For its part, London temporarily became closer to Berlin, with which it signed the Heligoland-Zanzibar agreement, and passed the Naval Defence Act in 1889, which, in accordance with the 'two-power standard,' required the Royal Navy to be at least as strong as the next two largest navies in the world – then France and Russia – combined (Marder, 1976).

Siam and Egypt lay at the centre of this confrontation. The French sent the Siamese an ultimatum to hand over the territories east of the Mekong in 1893 and urged the British gunboats to leave the river delta. The United Kingdom was not interested in defending Indochina per se, but it categorically opposed any French imposition. When war appeared to be imminent, France stated unequivocally that its actions had been misinterpreted and stepped back from advancing any further claims on the west Mekong coast (Christian, 1941). However, Paris's most problematic objective remained London's evacuation from Egypt (Andrew, 1967). There, France sought to gain control of the upper Nile basin, which was critical to British Egypt's security as well as the unification of French Africa from Dakar to Djibouti. Captain Jean-Baptiste Marchand then led a small expeditionary force to the Nile Valley in 1898, where he established a French base at Fashoda. Meanwhile, the British travelled upriver from Egypt to complete the Anglo-Egyptian conquest of Sudan and isolated the Fashoda Fort. No exit strategy remained to Paris but withdrew its force, which it did (Langer, 1972).

Despite some persistent issues of concern, there was a change in bilateral relations between the two powers because of British steady resolve in not appeasing France on strategic dossiers. Combined with the Second Reich's impressive revisionist turn, it fostered the Anglo-French rapprochement, which resulted in the 1904 Entente Cordiale (Andrew, 1967).

*A failed management of a moderate: the Kingdom of Sardinia/Italy (1852–1882)*

In the mid-19th century, the United Kingdom pursued a strategy of engagement through concessions toward the Kingdom of Sardinia, later Italy, a moderate revisionist in the new European status quo. The Congress of Vienna had restored and expanded the power of Turin but also magnified its ambitions. Since the 1840s, not only the House of Savoy has been searching for a more advantageous equilibrium by subtly exploiting the Risorgimento (Mack Smith, 1999) but strived for getting an influential role for the new Italian state within the Concert of Europe in the wake of the nationalist afflatus, its centrality into the Mediterranean basin and the cultural heritage of Rome's greatness (Mammarella and Cacace, 2006).

However, the United Kingdom identified the aggressive stance of Central-Eastern European absolute states, along with growing nationalism and uncontrolled libertarian ideas, as the main threats to the Pax Britannica in the mid-nineteenth century (Kissinger, 1957). In light of this, the strategy of the Count of Cavour, which sought to unite the Italian Peninsula under the Savoy constitutional monarchy with the support of the dominant power, gave London many opportunities (Greppi, 2012).

The first was the assembling of a liberal coalition aiming eventually to counterbalance the Austrian Empire's hegemonic ambitions over Europe. Together with France, the transformation of the small Kingdom of Sardinia into a great southern regional power could have served this purpose well. Furthermore, London welcomed the advent of a liberal state committed both to opposing the radical wings of the Italian nationalist movement and to ending the Habsburg's and other Italian countries' economic protectionism in the Peninsula (Mammarella and Cacace, 2006). Finally, a unified Italy could become a stumbling block for the rising ambitions of Napoleon III (Brown, 2006).

Therefore, the United Kingdom implemented a two-track strategy aimed both at preserving the balance of power in Europe and at fostering Italian emancipation. Considering this, Sir James Hudson, a well-known Italophile described as 'more Italian than the Italians themselves' (Carter, 1997) by British Minister for Foreign Affairs Lord Malmesbury was appointed plenipotentiary of the British Legation in Turin in 1852 and exceptionally confirmed in this role for 11 years. From 1854, the United Kingdom worked for Sardinia's intervention in the Crimean War, which occurred in 1855, with the additional aim of securing it under its aegis and reducing the predominant role of France on the battlefield (Hearder, 1996). Therefore, London ensured Turin's inclusion in the 1856 Paris Congress alongside the European great powers, whereby Cavour seized the opportunity to discuss the 'state of Italy' and to marginalize Austria. Later, while the British Government attempted to avoid the Austro-Sardinian war in 1858 by proposing a peace conference, it also proclaimed its neutrality in the event of belligerence (Mack Smith, 1999). Finally, the British Royal Navy covered the landing in Sicily of the 'Expedition of the Thousand' led by Giuseppe Garibaldi, since London preferred a unified Italy rather than French and Russian presence in the Mediterranean right in front of the Suez Canal (Greppi, 2012).

Despite having first supported and recognized Italy's independence, the United Kingdom quickly lost its influence over the new state. Taking advantage of this momentum of distraction, the Italian revisionism took off and, unchained from its partnership with the United Kingdom, Italy sought new sponsors and patrons on its new path towards greatness. As a result, Prussia became Italy's strongest ally at the time, both in its rivalry with Austria, which still controlled the Veneto in 1866, and in its tensions with France, which gave military support to the Church's State until 1870 (Mammarella and Cacace, 2006). London ended up keeping a low

profile in the subsequent phase of the Italian unification, throughout the third war with Austria and until the taking over of Rome in 1870. In 1878, Italy was admitted among the great powers at the Berlin Conference but ended up holding an even bigger grudge (Santoro, 1991). The deepening of the Austro-Hungarian Empire's presence in the Balkans and the Adriatic Sea was not the worst news for Rome at this meeting. Indeed, after London endorsed the French occupation of Tunisia (1881) – where there were 20 Italian residents to one French – to secure its strategic corridor in the Mediterranean, a now powerful and united Italy joined the forming revisionist front of the Triple Alliance in 1882 (Mack Smith, 1997).

*A successful management of a gambler: the United States (1814–1860)*

A strategy of engagement was rightfully pursued by the United Kingdom vis-à-vis a rising United States during the 19th century. Following the American Revolutionary War with the Paris Treaty of 1783 and the War of 1812–1815, the United Kingdom knew that the newly established United States swayed between two different orientations in foreign policy. On one side, the former 13 colonies were evidently still not satisfied with the continental territorial distribution as well as with their status in the world. On the other, George Washington's 1796 farewell address, which called for the United States not to be entangled in European power politics as well as advising it 'to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world,' clearly resounded – and constrained the following US foreign policy. Facing this at times cooperative brand of revisionism, London did not feel threatened by a revolutionary, voracious power and accorded Washington a mostly non-confrontational approach even though Washington employed intensive foreign policy options (Burk, 2018).

In 1823 the United States announced its Monroe Doctrine, a radical claim of dominance over the Americas that vindicated the exclusion of European control over the continent and the surrounding seas and thus the revision of the regional status quo hitherto. The Doctrine indeed was aimed at incrementally revising the balance of forces and gaining a hegemonic control over the Americas (Perkins, 1937). The Doctrine was preceded by a significant warming of US–UK relations and even a flattering proposal by London to coordinate an anti-European powers design in the former Spanish colonies in the New World. As the Monroe Doctrine was enunciated, the British engaging approach had already made a rapid breach of the US Senate, which tempered the President's and US diplomacy's intensive foreign policy. Although President James Monroe's statement temporarily unsettled the British, London was rapid in acknowledging the fundamental shared interest of the Anglophone countries in preventing other European powers from gaining any foothold in the Americas. Eventually, the alignment of interests was such that the British ended up abiding by the Monroe Doctrine for 50 years (Schake, 2017).

Another dossier of relevant United States discontent regarded the border with Canada and especially the thorny question of Oregon. For its part, Britain proposed the 49th parallel as a convenient borderline in North America, but the idea did not meet United States favour. From then on, border disputes frequently arose, and US unofficially backed militias, companies and even private settlers began to storm the border, but the northern frontier was never crossed by an insignia-holding army. In 1845, the newly elected Polk administration advanced a reinvigorated anti-British rhetoric and invoked the Monroe Doctrine in its claims over Oregon. The rhetoric of James Knox Polk was radical as the Doctrine had ignored extant British possessions and had specifically addressed European powers' new colonial ambitions instead. Denouncing Oregon as a non-legitimate British belonging, Polk de facto supported the 54°40' solution, which supposedly extended US sovereignty over almost all British Columbia. Facing the deteriorating scenario, the British felt that a compromise was desperately needed. In the meantime, Washington started the Mexican War, which caused moderate concern in London but greatly burdened the US foreign policy and defence spending. The British decided the course of action: a combination of disinterest from the South, leaving Texas and Mexico at the mercy of the United States, but a significant show of British force that complemented a UK olive branch, the renewed proposal of the 49th

parallel border. Polk eventually came to his senses and agreed on the frontier line, which gave the United States the present-day Oregon, Idaho and Washington but reassured the British about the free navigation of the Columbia and other rivers as well as its sovereignty over Vancouver Island.

Finally, London also maintained its temper and engagement policy when the tensions moved to Central America where growing Washington's penetration troubled British interests. American expansionism southward was then viewed with great apprehension in Britain, especially after the Texas annexation and the Mexican–American War, which handed California to the United States. In London's eyes, who would build the Isthmian Canal, the massive infrastructural project connecting the two oceans, was at stake. In a few years, the United States secured a de facto protectorate over the then New Grenada – today's Colombia and Panama – and, as the Federal Republic of Central America broke up and the war with Mexico ended, Washington tried to build an anti-British front with Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras. The diplomatic tit-for-tat for influence in Central America un eased London–Washington relations, especially when the latter revived the Monroe Doctrine to oppose any new British colony in the region. London, even holding the whip hand in the region militarily, opted once again for the negotiation table. The result was the 1850 Clayton–Bulwer Treaty, which, by ruling out exclusive control over the future canal and every occupation, fortification, or colonization of Central American territories, stabilized Anglo-American relations. Risky incidents did not end, as the 1854 US bombing of the UK-protected city of Greytown demonstrated, but, between 1856 and 1860, Britain agreed to withdraw from Central America through a series of treaties (Ward and Gooch, 1923).

Born from an anti-British revolution, the United States grew stronger but did not end up overturning the many British possessions in the Americas (Canada, Bermuda, Virgin, Windward, Turks and Caicos, Cayman and the Leeward Islands, Bahamas, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Falkland Islands, British Guyana and Barbados) nor the global balance of influence. The United States kept its intense challenge restricted to the regional balance of influence in the Americas.

#### *A failed management of a gambler: Imperial Japan (1919–1936)*

In 1902, London adopted what Schweller defined as a strategy of binding by allying with the rising power of Japan. In the British mind, the alliance was intended to constrain what would otherwise be a dangerous expansionist foreign policy (Schweller, 1999).

Stuck in the First World War, Japan pledged with the Western powers to uphold China's 'Open Door' policy and support its territorial integrity and sovereignty. For its contribution to the conflict, Japan gained temporary control over the Shandong area and a mandate over several former German Pacific islands. It was also granted the status of founding member of the League of Nations. Immediately after the war, Tokyo knew that it ought to retain the alliance with London, to cooperate with those countries alongside which it had just fought and even to promote more cordial relations with Beijing. The Empire then emerged from the war as one potential defender, albeit a minor one, of the new status quo, but it still harboured a selective revisionist discontent with the post-war arrangement (Nish, 2002). For instance, throughout the Paris Treaty negotiations, it was the topic of racial equality that disgruntled Japan the most (Shimazu, 2003). Tokyo's demands for official recognition of the Japanese race's parity with the European peoples were rejected by the Anglophone countries. The main reason for the British opposition to the clause can be found not solely in the Empire's concerns about racial stability in the Asian colonies but especially in the Asian immigration scare raging throughout the British dominions, especially Australia, which had a strict anti-immigration policy. The topic of the Asian race being mistreated continued to unsettle Japan's relations with the West and was to play a central role in Tokyo's 1938 'New Order in East Asia' vision and an even larger one in the 1940 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere' grand design (Yellen, 2019).

In the wake of the Paris Treaty, numerous rounds of the Washington Naval Conference were held from November 1921 to February 1922. As a result of the Conference, Japan half-heartedly

pledged, together with the United Kingdom, the United States and France, to preserve the status quo in the region in accordance with the Four-Power Treaty as well as to terminate its alliance with London, which thus abruptly ended its binding strategy vis-à-vis Japan. Due to growing Western pressure, Tokyo also agreed to restore Chinese control over Shandong. The return of the peninsula to Beijing was hailed as a national humiliation for Tokyo, and the recognition of its exclusive rights over some Chinese territories met with strenuous opposition from the Anglo-American side – especially from the United States, with London temporarily unloading the burden onto Washington – which eventually prevailed. The Five-Power Treaty, which was devised to prevent an arms race, limited naval build-up through differentiated shipbuilding limits, and Japan did not receive the same treatment as the United Kingdom and the United States. The three-month long Conference resulted in a harsh downgrading of Tokyo's ambitions. At the outset of the Conference, Japan had a 10-year-long programme of naval shipbuilding – the 8–8 fleet blueprint – founded on the need and the objectives of a great power with the most powerful navy in the Pacific. Through the Treaty, London de facto ended the programme and triggered Japanese military discontent, contributing to the Government's growing militaristic orientation (Nish, 2002). Generally, Japanese dissatisfaction had just a portion of the post-WWI international order in target while much of the rest still pleased Tokyo who had seen its status upgraded after the war and had sat among the winning powers in Versailles.

Between 1928 and 1933, the Anglophone powers lost their grip on Japan which resorted to intensive foreign policy options. In a row, Tokyo sponsored the assassination of a Chinese warlord, staged an incident of Mukden which led to the seizure of Manchuria and the bombing of Shanghai. The United Kingdom did not change its course of management and eventually Japanese felt that the system was too rigid to accommodate selective changes. Tokyo's withdrawal from the League of Nations paved the way for a radical challenge to the Asian status quo built and partially maintained by London. The British reaction to Manchukuo convinced the Japanese of the inherent hypocrisy of Western democracies, who criticized Tokyo for its imperial ambitions while 'exploiting their own formal and informal empires in order to construct closed economic blocs'. Imperial Court believed that racism, which was already evident in the West's refusal to give Japan naval equality and in the United States' and Australia's immigration laws, was the only simple explanation for such behaviour. The Japanese government ended being the 'prey to the ultra-nationalists' demands for further expansion' (Best, 2000, 29). Facing such a radically revisionist Japan, the United Kingdom could not take any military action against Japan and once and for all passed the buck of confrontation to the United States that, bogged down in financial and economic crisis, did not take immediate action. Japan then turned to rising Nazi Germany and signed the first treaty of alignment, the Anti-Comintern Pact of 1936.

## Conclusions

From the dominant power's standpoint, the challenges launched by careful revisionists are less intelligible since the moderation of their means does not always correspond to the moderation of their goals and vice versa.

This article has – hopefully – laid blocks for further research into the topic. In light of this, it has advanced a preliminary distinction between those challengers of the status quo whose revisionist strategy is marked by careful means and systemic goals – the so-called 'incrementals', those whose revisionism combines careful means and selective goals – the so-called 'moderates', as well as those that albeit their intensive foreign policy means to aim for selective changes, the-called so 'gamblers'.

However, an even thornier issue lies beneath it: what happens when careful revisionism is mismanaged by the status quo power(s)? The historical experience shows different brands of revisionism as well as different outcomes of revisionism management by the United Kingdom.

Three cases of success ended with the reintegration of the challenging power into the status quo coalition or the neutralization of the challenge or its confinement to a disposable portion of the status quo. The United Kingdom adopted a confrontational strategy towards the Russian Empire in Central Asia, neutralizing its strategic threat on India and, after a long and exhausting struggle, inducing it to enter into an alliance to maintain the status quo. A confrontational approach also led to the realignment of a secondary rival such as the French Third Republic, whose colonial aspirations were curtailed whenever they jeopardized British control of choke-points or engaged in high-symbolism showdowns. Diversely, the UK maintained a strategy of engagement and negotiation with the United States in the first half of the 19th century and kept its challenge confined both the Americas and against other European countries.

On the contrary, the three cases of failure ended with the escalation of demands from the revisionist power or its siding with the revolutionary revisionists. This is what happened to Fascist Italy which harbored selective dissatisfaction after WWI as it felt to have won a 'vittoria mutilata' and attempted to change features of the Versailles status quo with non-intensive foreign policy means. This was met with growing opposition from the United Kingdom which mostly sided with France, increasingly rival with Italy. Eventually, Rome felt that post-war arrangement was substantially stranded and embarked on a more radical, systemic revision. The Kingdom of Sardinia had previously launched a moderate revisionist challenge which was emboldened by the British engaging support. When London loosened its control over Italy, Turin felt that it could scale up its challenge and sideline with the revisionist front led by Wilhelmine Germany. Finally, Imperial Japan's post-WWI demand of selective changes encountered non-strategic treatment by the international order defenders. When the United Kingdom and the United States did not accommodate Japanese demands in the 1920s this convinced Tokyo that there was no room for its selective revision. This pushed to the edge of the international community and created a breeding ground for upheaval.

The analysis of the United Kingdom experience with revisionism management brought interesting findings that may be useful to understand current US-China tensions. First, when confrontation was preferred in the face of non-intensive challengers, the muscular approach more gradually or more swiftly coerced them to give up their revisionist efforts as they felt not having resources to escalate further. This eventually consolidated the status quo vis-à-vis those challenges. Secondly, on the contrary when the United Kingdom opted for a strategy of engagement, concessions emboldened or strengthened the challenger to a point that the changes it pursued could not be accommodated any longer and the revisionist searched for new patrons. Third, when selective gamblers looked for changes through intensive foreign policy means, accommodation through engagement satisfied their thirst while confrontation convinced them that the status quo was too rigid to be adjusted. As a result, a shift towards a more systemic revision seemed as the only option.

Facing China's carefulness, the United States is at crossroads and needs accurate strategic evaluation. An ill-devised engagement like in the case of the Kingdom of Sardinia and Fascist Italy may induce to downplay the threat and make too generous concessions, resulting in the growth of its strength and aggressiveness and/or feeding the perception of abandonment among long-time partners. In Beijing, concessions could be interpreted as the sign of an overstretched, declining power and United States overall extended deterrence in Asia would be significantly diminished. As a result, pressure may mount against Taiwan, Philippines, South Korea and, to a lesser extent, Japan. Disputes with Vietnam and India may also ramp up as China feels to have the better hand. Furthermore, the reformulation of regional and global security and economic order could lead to detrimental arrangements for the United States and some of its partners as Beijing seeks to reshape institutions, structures and principles to make it more advantageous to its regime and economic system.

Similarly, a wrong policy of confrontation like in the case of Imperial Japan will produce overbalancing, an unnecessary competitive escalation that entraps allies, and measured revisionism to

be pushed onto a more revolutionary road. Cornering China through alliances and security partnerships with regional actors, pushing partners to side with the United States and decouple their economies from the Chinese, turning the Taiwan policy upside down to make the island the bastion of containment of China may induce Beijing to shift to more aggressive postures, look for a formal alliance with Moscow, step up its military build-up and trigger a risky security dilemma in Asia.

However, the picture sketched here is just one facet of Washington's overall strategic dilemma. Even those who consider the first option to be more plausible and more coherent with its careful challenge cannot rule out a future upgrading of Chinese ambitions. 'Se e' tempi e le cose si mutano' – as Machiavelli wrote in his *The Prince* – '[chi] non muta modo di procedere [...] rovina' (Machiavelli, 2004, 97). That translates into English as 'if times and affairs change, [one] is ruined if it does not change its course of action'.

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