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SAIS Review of International Affairs, Volume 33, Number 1,
Winter-Spring 2013, pp. 171-178 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2013.0003>

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Review of Charles Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). 258 pages.

Charles Kupchan has written a bold book designed to answer what is arguably the biggest question in international affairs: where is the global system headed? Although political scientists and policy makers have always paid close attention to this matter, it has taken on heightened intellectual importance since the end of Cold War. Now that the United States has manifestly become the world's most powerful state, how will this unipolar situation affect U.S. behavior and the behavior of other states that can justifiably be called great powers, but not superpowers? How will the global system evolve, especially in view of the West's faltering economic performance vis-à-vis rising countries such as China, India, and Brazil? To what extent will the international practices and domestic institutions established by the U.S. and its allies shape the behavior of these rising states at home and abroad?

These questions are vitally important, but attempting to answer them requires us to accept two fundamental assumptions. The first is that the ablest scholars and analysts have the intellectual capacity to make worthwhile assessments of this kind about the global future. The second is that, whatever the deficiencies of particular forecasts, such foresight is at least possible in principle. But are these assumptions valid? Could it be that the patterns of the future are not only undecipherable but undetermined—that is, that they hinge in substantial measure on decisions that statesmen and ordinary people have yet to make? Kupchan is not a determinist, and he believes that choices by future leaders will have important consequences. In my view, however, he does not treat the problems of social causality and historical contingency with sufficient caution. To see why, we must first consider the book's central arguments.

Kupchan's Critique Of The "End Of History"

Without pretending to predict the future, Kupchan sharply criticizes the buoyant anticipations of the "end of history" and the worldwide march of democracy that flourished immediately after the Cold War. This liberal optimism peaked at the start of the new millennium and has plummeted during the past decade.

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Kupchan puts it bluntly: “the end of history is history.” But scholars such as John Ikenberry continue to believe that the structure of liberal international institutions created under the leadership of the United States is sufficiently durable to accommodate the rise of other major states, including China. Kupchan disagrees. In the future, he maintains, U.S. power and Western-style institutions are unlikely to dominate the international arena nearly as fully as they have in the recent past. In fact, they will not dominate international relations at all. The new global configuration of dispersed international power will be “no one’s world.” In Kupchan’s view, “well-run autocracies” will “hold their own” against liberal democracies, and even rising powers that are democratically ruled “will also regularly part company with the West” (p. 5). As he sees it, Western policymakers must recognize this truth and act accordingly.

Kupchan’s Historical Approach

To make his case, Kupchan takes a long historical view of recent international changes, and he sees this historical approach as a distinctive feature that sets his book apart from other studies. In principle, this methodological choice is a welcome antidote to the ingrained American habit of reducing complex international situations to simple slogans—the “American century,” the “indispensable nation,” China as a “new superpower,” and so forth. The book certainly displays Kupchan’s extensive knowledge of international history. However, it is built around a schematic analytical framework that obscures important historical complexities and raises fundamental doubts about his general assessment of present-day trends. Consulting history to shed light on contemporary issues turns out to be a much trickier business than it seems, especially for non-historians.

Why does this matter? Ian Lustick has argued convincingly that social scientists who turn to historical scholarship to test their theories run a serious risk of intellectual bias—specifically, selecting particular historical accounts that favor their theory and overlooking other accounts that undercut it. This warning about selection bias points to a more general epistemological problem. Depending on the intellectual predisposition of the observer, any historical event may be situated in several different historical contexts—rather like a Venn diagram in which the event is located in the area where several circles overlap but each circle contains a unique combination of prior events and influences. These multiple contexts, in turn, can validate quite divergent perspectives on the present. Empirical research can disprove far-fetched interpretations of a recent event, but sometimes the few explanations that remain account for the event with equal plausibility.

To put the matter differently, the chronological point at which a historian begins a story can have a decisive effect on which circumstances and influences are considered or excluded as possible explanations of the story’s outcome. The same holds true for the spatial boundaries of a narrative account. An adequate analysis of the Korean War, for example, requires us to consider how Soviet and U.S. policymakers interpreted the Berlin Blockade, the formation of NATO, and the “loss” of China to communist revolutionaries. And of course interpretations of the past and the selection of current policies powerfully affect one another;

witness the dubious role of the Munich analogy in American decision-making during the Cold War, and how this prompted a more assertive foreign policy due to fears of “appeasement.”

Kupchan’s general approach to his subject implicitly suggests that the “no one’s world” looming on the horizon will be an historically novel phenomenon. He may be right in a narrow sense, but America has enjoyed the standing of sole proprietor of the international order for only a short period, and constraints on U.S. power are not as unprecedented as his formulation implies. Kupchan’s historical account pays only passing attention to the Cold War and to the fundamental geopolitical challenge the USSR and its client states posed to the West. One small sign of this intellectual proclivity is his passing remark that the military destruction of European fascism in World War II was accomplished by the Western democracies under American leadership. This statement overlooks the signal geopolitical importance of the USSR’s colossal military clash with the Nazis on the Eastern Front. It goes without saying that Stalin’s totalitarian regime was anti-democratic and profoundly evil. Nonetheless, the USSR accounted for four-fifths of the Nazi soldiers killed in Europe during World War II, thereby arguably preserving the lives of millions of Western soldiers and greatly increasing the likelihood of fascism’s ultimate defeat. Viewed in this context, the victory of the West looks quite different.

Similarly, had Kupchan given more attention to the historical dynamics of the international situation after the war, his account would have thrown a different light on contemporary developments—especially the rise of China. A concise discussion of the Soviet-American competition for primacy during the Cold War would have provided a useful reminder that American fears of being eclipsed by a global rival have a long pedigree. After all, for decades U.S. observers feared that the USSR would surpass the United States economically as well as strategically—especially after the launch of Sputnik dramatized this possibility. But in the end these fears turned out to be completely off the mark. Whether the Sino-American economic competition might have a similar long-term outcome is a topic to which I return below.

The Emergence Of Modern States In Europe And North America

Kupchan’s view of the ebb and flow of recent international tides of democratization is likewise linked to his long-term historical outlook. In his telling, the dynamic modern states of Europe and North America emerged under novel historical circumstances that are unlikely to be repeated. The key to their early economic dynamism, he maintains, was that their governments were too weak to suppress the rising commercial class of merchants and manufacturers, and during the nineteenth century the break-neck pace of industrial change propelled the leading countries of Europe and North America far beyond the economic capabilities of major states from other regions. The widening gap between industrializing and pre-industrial societies gave European states the wherewithal to extend their political and military power across the globe—a pattern that the United States repeated after it broke free of the British Empire.

However, in Kupchan’s view, contemporary international conditions are fundamentally different from past ones, and they do not privilege limited

governments of the American or European type. States that dominate their societies may nevertheless be highly effective drivers of technological and economic progress, and we cannot know whether they will evolve toward democratic capitalism in the future. Countries such as South Korea, which began as a dictatorial “developmental state” and then evolved into a democracy, have followed this path. But certain BRICS countries—preeminently China and Russia—show few signs they will do so. In contrast to the European historical pattern, the middle classes in China favor the status quo rather than political liberalization. As a result, the advanced countries of the West can no longer be regarded as the international standard for measuring political and economic achievement. Instead, the world is entering an era of “multiple modernities.”

The West and Multiple Modernities

In making this sweeping historical argument for the distinctiveness of past Western experience, Kupchan recounts only part of that experience. One problem is the way he interprets the concept of “the West.” He adopts a retrospective view of the West which is largely essentialist—that is, he traces the roots of European and North American liberal institutions deep into the past, but he omits much of the illiberal political history of those same countries. He carefully traces the bloody ideological conflicts over religion in medieval and early-modern Europe, but he gives far less attention to the period between the French Revolution and the Cold War. In particular, he takes virtually no account of the imperialistic behavior of the European powers and the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—including the major contributions of that predatory behavior to Western economic dynamism. He does briefly discuss India, which perhaps represents the best case for the positive foreign impact of Western imperialism, but he does not mention colonies such as the Belgian Congo, South Africa, or the Philippines, which exemplified European and American ruthlessness. Instead he depicts the West as merely exporting its political and economic principles, including democracy and “secular nationalism,” which he misleadingly describes as an unalloyed good, to other parts of the world. Another indicator of this overly benign view of the West is that Kupchan provides no serious examination of the anti-democratic, hyper-nationalistic phases of recent European history—Nazism and Italian fascism being the most vivid examples.

The result is a sanitized version of modern history that overlooks the violent elements of the liberal past. By overstating the contrast between the West’s past evolution and recent trends in the BRICS, this perspective rules out rigorous, point-by-point comparisons among different patterns of development. One noteworthy example is Kupchan’s failure to present a genuine comparison between the political impact of the middle classes in European history and the political impact of the expanding middle classes in the emerging economies. Another is the absence of a rigorous empirical assessment of other scholars’ claims about the stabilizing international effects of liberal institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. The intellectual result is paradoxical. Kupchan rightly attacks the simplistic liberal optimism about global trends that flourished in

the 1990s, but his formulaic reading of Western history clouds his own analysis of the same trends.

Consider, for instance, Kupchan's notion that the world is entering a period of "multiple modernities." The idea that multiple conceptions of modernity are a recent phenomenon does not jibe with the historical record. Ever since the French Revolution, "modernity" has been a contested idea. Broadly speaking, it has been contested because the word's extraordinary ideological potency gives any political actor who succeeds in appropriating it a formidable political advantage. That is one reason that great powers—especially imperial powers—have often claimed that they are modern but their international rivals and victims are not. One need only recall the mid-twentieth century controversies comparing the future prospects of capitalist democracy with those of communist socialism to grasp this point. Kupchan, however, skirts the intellectual complexities inherent in the idea of modernity.

The same tendency toward oversimplification mars the book's discussion of the contemporary West. The introductory and summary chapters treat the present-day Western order as an undifferentiated whole, but each component of this order requires separate analysis. The BRICS, for instance, may accept some elements of the global order but not others. It is hard to believe that they will reject the features of the international economic system that have helped them make such dramatic economic progress—above all, the prolonged surge of foreign direct investment, broad access to America's vast domestic market, and, to a lesser extent, the recent explosion of international capital flows.

This is not to minimize the geopolitical significance of the BRICS. Undoubtedly the countries whose economies continue to grow rapidly will demand a larger place in international institutions such as the United Nations Security Council and the International Monetary Fund. In the long run some might even favor the introduction of an international reserve currency to displace the dollar. But these states have, essentially, made their peace with capitalism. Today there is no global counter-ideology that can plausibly claim to provide an economic alternative to capitalism, as the countries of the Soviet Bloc once did. Islamism, of course, is a compelling counter-ideology in some countries, but thus far it has failed conspicuously as a rationale for economic growth and technological progress.

Has the exceptional economic dynamism of China and other BRICS neutralized the international appeal of Western political ideas? In Kupchan's view, it has. The rise of these powers, he asserts, is depriving the West not only of its material primacy, but of its ideological dominance. The world's autocracies, far from being on a downhill slope, are faring quite well. Kupchan does not go as far as Stefan Halper, who contends that a new "Beijing consensus" is replacing the neoliberal Washington consensus of the 1990s, and that this shift "has legitimized authoritarianism in our time." But Kupchan holds a milder version of this view, and the argument for it is unconvincing. To begin with, democracy is not uniquely Western; three of the five BRICS are democracies. Moreover, even if we accept that the West enjoyed a remarkable ideological hegemony in the 1990s, this was a brief exception to a far more durable historical pattern of international ideological diversity; hence a return to diversity

would be less significant than Kupchan suggests. The most important point, however, is that there is little evidence of a significant ideological shift away from democratic values among individuals on a global scale. In most of the countries where reliable polling has been conducted during the past decade or so, a large proportion of the respondents continue to say they favor democracy as the best system of government.

Alternative Views Of The Future International System

In the coming years the dramatic shift of global economic resources to rising powers will almost certainly continue, but the geopolitical implications of this process are highly uncertain. Applying different historical yardsticks, scholars like William Wohlforth have argued that today's unipolar global system concentrates the greatest share of international power in a single state since the Spanish empire reached its apogee several centuries ago. Seen from this perspective, U.S. international power may have diminished from the overwhelming preponderance of the 1990s, but it is still nearly unprecedented. In contrast to this view, Joseph Nye has argued that all major states, rising or not, are losing power to a growing constellation of non-state actors that encompasses multinational corporations and financial institutions, international human-rights groups, transnational religious confessions, social-media activists, cross-border criminal gangs, and Internet groups such as *Anonymous*. These deeply divergent depictions of international realities suggest how difficult it is to map and forecast the shifting power relations among the United States, its European allies, and the BRICS.

A great deal will hinge on what happens inside the BRICS themselves—and above all, inside China. China's economic dynamism during the past two decades has justifiably inspired awe among outside observers. But skeptics are right to question whether China will continue its rapid economic advance in the future—not simply on economic grounds, but on political ones. Immediately after the disintegration of the USSR, China's leaders, still reeling from the domestic political crisis that culminated in the massacre in Tiananmen Square, revealed an unmistakable fear that their own regime could suffer a similar fate. Since then, Chinese social scientists have remained intensely interested in studying the causes of the Soviet collapse. It is a reasonable surmise that a major source of their interest is the party leadership's abiding fear of a similar chain of events in China and its strong desire to find a way to avoid that possibility.

In this respect, the legitimacy of the Chinese regime among members of the elite and ordinary citizens is a matter of paramount importance. Today Beijing's official line is that Mao's policies were "seventy percent right," but the government systematically suppresses any public discussion of the cost of Mao's permanent internal revolution to the Chinese people. A critical threshold will come when that human cost—numbered by some Western scholars as high as sixty million deaths—becomes a matter of public debate among ordinary citizens. Only then will it be possible for outside observers—and for the Chinese leaders themselves—to gauge the long-term stability of the political system with any accuracy. Although China has enjoyed far greater economic

success than the USSR ever did, the demise of the Soviet regime in the wake of the full public revelation of Stalin's crimes against Soviet citizens remains a sobering historical fact.

Barring a political calamity of this kind, will China eclipse the United States in economic and technological terms? This idea has to be taken seriously, but there are good reasons to question its validity. In the first place, if and when China's GDP matches that of the United States, its GDP per capita will still remain a fraction of America's, and GDP per capita is a much better gauge of a state's capacity to generate international power than GDP measured in aggregate terms. Moreover, to maintain a high rate of technological development China will have to compete against the United States and other Western countries to attract the world's most talented scientists and engineers. If rapid scientific and technical innovation is the heart of modernity, then the international competition to attract and retain highly sophisticated specialists is likely to exercise an increasingly important influence on state power and interstate relations.

Kupchan and other observers seem to think that China has already surpassed the United States in this respect, but it has not. It is true that the Chinese regime has embarked on a remarkable campaign to create a large group of first-rate universities, and this campaign contrasts vividly with the current time of troubles in American higher education. However, large numbers of foreign doctoral students continue to pursue their studies in the United States, and many of them remain in America after they obtain their degrees. Despite what Kupchan says, the high level of foreign enrollments in American scientific and engineering programs is a source of strength, not a weakness. Repeated public assertions that the United States faces a dangerous shortage of scientific and technical manpower have given the American R&D establishment an effective rhetorical device in the annual struggle to increase federal spending on science, but so far they have been wildly inaccurate, as the science journalist Daniel Greenberg has shown.

In the coming years, countries with dynamic economies will become engaged in an intensifying struggle to attract and retain top-flight scientists, engineers, and other highly skilled personnel. The generosity of government research funding and the quality of research facilities will certainly be important criteria in individual specialists' decisions about where to pursue their professional careers. But another important criterion will be whether a country is a democracy that offers personal liberties, including the freedom to speak one's mind in public and to protest against the government's failures to abide by its own declared principles. On this score, contemporary China cannot compete with liberal Western regimes. This could be a realm in which the Chinese drive for technological progress and the rigidity of the Chinese political system come into deep conflict.

However, even if China encounters such difficulties, this will be no cause for Western complacency. There are plenty of independent reasons to worry about the future international standing of the United States and the countries of the European Union. All of these democratic states urgently need better political leadership and more enlightened public policies to promote economic

growth and social development. Kupchan argues forcefully that wiser domestic policies are a vital component of Western interactions with rising powers, and on this point he is undoubtedly right. The fact that the United States and other Western countries pursued more effective domestic policies after World War II than during the Great Depression had a substantial impact on the outcome of the geopolitical competition between East and West. It seems reasonable to expect that similar effects can be achieved in the future—but only if the Western democracies, their leaders, and their citizens meet these new challenges.

Conclusion

To sum up, Kupchan's book will provide ample food for thought but leave hearty appetites unsatisfied. It is certainly worth reading for its policy prescriptions. But refining the analytical framework and systematically gathering the relevant contemporary evidence would have made the book more illuminating. Approaching the subject in this way would have made it more difficult for Kupchan to present a sweeping interpretation of the European past and to weigh the relative probabilities of alternative scenarios for the global future with any confidence. It would, however, have helped less ambitious researchers track short-to-medium-term developments and modify their forecasts as necessary—meaning frequently. It is the fate of especially venturesome political scientists who peer into the future that their most valuable insights often seem commonplace in retrospect, whereas their misjudgments are glaringly apparent. At best, their genuine discoveries are folded into a new master narrative that is ultimately accepted as authoritative. Whether Kupchan's thought-provoking book will become history in this sense remains to be seen.