

# Introduction

*G. John Ikenberry and Shiping Tang*

One of the great dramas of world politics across the centuries has been the rise and decline of leading states. From ancient Athens and Rome to early modern Europe to the eras of Pax Britannica and Pax Americana, international relations has been marked by the emergence of great powers that seek to organize and dominate their surroundings. Over time, the position of these leading states weakens and new rising states emerge to challenge the old order. These cycles of rise and decline form the most celebrated and enduring narratives that scholars bring to the study of world affairs. Today, this drama is playing out again. After seventy years at the top of the global political and economic hierarchy, the United States is finding its hold on leadership weakening. In the meantime, a variety of non-Western developing states—China first among them—are gaining ground and seeking to influence global rules and institutions. The global distribution of power is shifting and the American-led international order forged in the twentieth century is in transition.

This roundtable brings together distinguished international scholars to reflect on this grand power transition, focusing on the ways that rising states may be shaping and reshaping global order. The essays take up four questions. First, how do the various rising powers view the current American-led, Western-centric international order? How do these states think about the legitimacy and the welfare-improving potentials of the current order? Second, how do rising states seek to reform or modify this order, and what are the various pathways of change? Do rising states share a common critique of the existing order and a shared vision of change? Third, what is the future of the current American-led international order? How stable and resilient is it? Finally, looking beyond the drama of rise and decline, what will global governance look like under the evolving system? When the global order becomes “less American,” will it also

*Ethics & International Affairs*, 32, no. 1 (2018), pp. 15–16.  
© 2018 Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs  
doi:10.1017/S0892679418000060

be less open and rule-based, or will it evolve in ways that preserve these core features?

As the six essays in this collection demonstrate, the answers to these questions have a strong normative dimension. A number of the contributors find that at least some of the norms and values expressed in the current order have a universal appeal, with the implication that the order is relatively stable and that certain elements of it may persist. Other contributors, however, dispute the notion that the Western liberal order holds universal appeal, and assume that a relative U.S. decline will open the door for rising powers to assert their own ethical imperatives. Still, even among the latter, there is disagreement as to whether a less American order would be a welcome development; some envision the future order as fairer and more pluralistic, whereas others see a closed, more illiberal one. In short, this collection of essays will be valuable not only to international relations theorists and those who study rising powers but also to anyone concerned about the normative implications of a shifting global order, including scholars of global governance reform, international law, and human rights.