



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:

Rising Titans, Falling Giants

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Summary

In this roundtable, four authors review Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin's *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, which looks at relations between ascendant states and great powers in decline.

1. “Rising Power Strategies toward Declining States: Is there a Goal?”

Deborah Welch Larson

Motivated by the rise of China and the resurgence of Russia, scholars have devoted increasing effort to explaining the dynamics of great power transitions. While much has been written about the strategies of rising powers, and whether they are likely to go to war to attain hegemony, very little has been written about their stance toward declining states. In this respect, Joshua Shiffrin’s new book, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, breaks new ground.¹ Indeed, Shiffrin shows that rising powers may provide assistance to a declining rival, if it is in their strategic interests to do so.

A rising power’s goal and choice of means influence its strategy toward the declining power. Based on these two variables — goal and means — Shiffrin develops a typology of strategies that a rising power may pursue toward a declining power. A rising power may adopt a predatory goal of seeking to undermine the declining state’s relative position as much as possible. Or the rising power may pursue a supportive goal of attempting to halt or restrain the declining state’s loss of power.² Intense means seek a change or preservation of the declining state’s power position in the near future. Less intense means — aimed either at predation or supporting the declining state — are defined by a more gradual pace.³

¹ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

² Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 17-18.

³ Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 19-20.

According to Shiffrinson, the combination of goals and means lead to four ideal types of strategies that rising states can pursue: relegation (intense efforts to undermine the great-power status of the declining power); weakening (undermining a declining state's position gradually through limited efforts); bolstering (a less costly method of arresting a further deterioration of the declining state's power); or strengthening (determined efforts by the rising state to prevent the declining state from falling out of the ranks of the great powers). Relegation and weakening are predatory strategies; bolstering and strengthening are supportive ones.

What determines a rising power's orientation toward the declining state? Shiffrinson follows realist theory in identifying material causes. The rising power decides on whether to adopt a supportive or predatory strategy depending on the declining state's strategic value.⁴ Following the structural realism of Kenneth Waltz, Shiffrinson's notion of strategic value depends largely on whether the international system is bipolar or multipolar.⁵ If the international system is bipolar, for example, then the rising power would have little need for the declining state as an ally — indeed, it would be to its advantage to eliminate the rival.

The intensity of the means used depends on the military posture of the declining state. Military posture may be classified as robust or weak, depending on the declining state's capability to deter an attack or inflict unacceptable costs on the opponent.⁶ A rising state pursuing a supportive strategy toward a declining state with a robust military would not spend as many resources out of concern that it might encourage the weaker state to get

⁴ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 24-28.

⁵ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 24. For Waltz's theory of structural realism, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

⁶ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 30-31.

involved in a conflict with a third power or alarm other states and encourage a balancing response. In such circumstances, a less intense strategy of strengthening the declining state would be warranted. If the declining state has strategic value as an ally, however, but has a weak military posture, the rising state would have to devote sufficient resources to prop it up lest the state collapse — what Shiffrinson calls a bolstering strategy. On the other hand, the rising state would be tempted to follow a strategy of relegation toward a declining state with a weak military posture, because it could eliminate a rival and attain hegemony. If the declining state nevertheless has a robust posture and the ability to defend itself, the rising state will be more cautious about possibly provoking a conflict, and will follow a less intense strategy of weakening. Thus, two variables — strategic value and military posture — generate the four types of strategies.

Shiffrinson applies his theory to two historical cases: the decline of Britain relative to the United States and the Soviet Union from 1945 to 1949, and the decline of the Soviet Union from 1983 to 1991. The results are surprising. He shows that what he calls his predation theory provides a different interpretation of Soviet policy toward Britain from 1945-1949 and for US policy toward the Soviet Union at the conclusion of the Cold War. The Soviet Union supported Great Britain's postwar efforts to remain a great power far longer than previously believed. Conversely, the United States took advantage of the Soviet Union's collapsing power to make long-term strategic gains in Europe.

Overall, the reviewers in this roundtable offer high praise of Shiffrinson's book. Stacie Goddard judges that it is an "impressive contribution to the expanding literature on rising and declining powers." In contrast to previous work by realists, she writes, Shiffrinson focuses on rising rather than declining powers and explains variation in the strategies that rising powers adopt toward declining states. Jeffrey Taliaferro agrees that the book offers new insights by adopting the perspective of the rising power, including uncertainty

about the future distribution of power. Taliaferro also draws attention to the book's enrichment of offensive realism by identifying when a rising power will adopt a predatory strategy and predicting the means that it will use to maximize its power. William Wohlforth writes that *Rising Titans, Falling Giants* "undermines big chunks of conventional wisdom in security studies" and calls the book a "scholarly tour de force." Taliaferro calls *Rising Titans, Falling Giants* a "superb book" that will be widely read by scholars "interested in grand strategy and the dynamics of great-power politics in the 20th and 21st centuries."

The depth of Shiffrinson's research in the two historical case studies also receives commendation. In Goddard's opinion, Shiffrinson "demonstrates the importance of revisionist historical work in political science" by providing evidence that the United States exploited the Soviet decline to obtain the preferred outcome — a unified Germany within NATO.

Goddard offers a few criticisms. While praising Shiffrinson's typology of strategies for its elegance and parsimony, she observes that the criteria for applying these concepts to real-world behavior are unclear. Goddard suggests that the strategic value of the declining state depends more on the policy pursued by leaders of the rising state than the material factors emphasized by Shiffrinson, such as whether the system is multipolar or bipolar or the declining state's geographic proximity to potential threats. For example, Japan has more strategic value when the United States regards China as a potential security threat than when it views China as a "responsible stakeholder." Changes in how the United States views China are not necessarily correlated with whether the system is regarded as multipolar, bipolar, or unipolar.

While I concur with much of the praise offered by the reviewers, I also agree with Goddard that the criteria for applying the theoretical concepts to the behavior of states need to be elaborated with specific examples. This question is not academic, as the United States is currently attempting to determine whether China is trying to undermine U.S. relative power or merely to advance its own status. The difference between supportive and predatory strategies depends on the objectives pursued by the rising power, but whether the state is trying to undermine or strengthen a declining power is not always evident in its behavior. In addition, governments are not unitary actors, and the leadership may have different objectives than lower-level officials. I illustrate the problems in applying the concepts below in sections on Soviet policy toward Britain after World War II and the George H.W. Bush administration's policy toward the Soviet Union after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Soviet Policy toward a Declining Britain after World War II

Conventional accounts of Soviet policy after World War II maintain that Joseph Stalin regarded Britain as a potential threat, largely because of its capitalist ideology.⁷ Some experts on Soviet policy, however, point out that Soviet interpretations of Marxist-Leninist ideology expected economic competition between the United States and Great Britain. The Soviet Union could exploit these inter-capitalist contradictions. Stalin

⁷ Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg Khlevniuk, *Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945-1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Jonathan Haslam, *Russia's Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

adopted a more orthodox Marxist view of capitalist hostility toward the Soviet Union after the United States enacted the Marshall Plan.⁸

Shiffrinson argues that the Soviet Union expected Britain and the United States to be economic and strategic rivals.⁹ The Soviets, he claims, believed that Britain, although a declining power, had strategic value as a potential ally against the United States on postwar issues. “It was only after the second half of 1947 that Britain’s availability as a partner to the United States and Soviet Union diverged,” Shiffrinson writes. “Britain was available as a U.S. partner throughout 1945-49, but was a viable Soviet partner only before the latter part of 1947.”¹⁰ In line with his theory, Shiffrinson claims that the Soviet Union tried to bolster Britain’s position from 1945-1946. It moved to a strengthening strategy early 1947 to keep Britain as a viable partner, before moving to a weakening or relegation strategy in late 1947.¹¹

For inferences about Soviet policy from 1945 to 1949, Shiffrinson uses excerpts of reports written by Soviet diplomats, Maxim Litvinov, Andrei Gromyko, and Ivan Maisky, from early 1944 until summer 1945.¹² These memoranda lend support to the idea that the Soviets predicted Anglo-American conflict. Shiffrinson reminds us that the world was still

⁸ William C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin’s Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006)

⁹ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 50-52.

¹⁰ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 52.

¹¹ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 59-60, 83-95.

¹² Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 83; Vladimir O. Pechatnov, *The Big Three After World War II: New Documents on Soviet Thinking about Postwar Relations with the United States and Great Britain* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Cold War International History Project, Working Paper No. 13, May 1995).

viewed as multipolar rather than bipolar at the end of World War II. But Shiffrinson's case that the Soviets bolstered British power is not persuasive. Far from trying to prop up Britain, the Soviets sought to undermine traditional British dominance of the Mediterranean.

Shiffrinson claims that General Secretary Joseph Stalin sought to restrain communist parties from seeking to take power in France, Italy, and other areas occupied by the British and Americans in order to bolster the British position.¹³ To be sure, Stalin respected the boundaries of western and eastern spheres of influence, as indicated by his withholding of support from communist-led Greek insurgents.¹⁴ But it is hard to see this restraint, which was based on the desire to obtain reciprocal British respect for Soviet interests in Poland and elsewhere, as intended to "bolster" Britain, as Shiffrinson claims. As Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov commented on the reorganization of the Lublin government after Yalta, "Poland — big deal! But how governments are being organized in Belgium, France, Greece, etc. we do not know. We do not say that we like one or another of these governments. We have not interfered because there it is the Anglo-American zone of military action."¹⁵ Arguably, the Soviet Union was pursuing its own interests rather than trying to support Great Britain.

The Soviets tried to undermine Britain's traditional dominance of the Mediterranean by gaining a trusteeship over one or more of Italy's former colonies — Libya, Somalia, and Eritrea. Litvinov's commission on treaties and the postwar order recommended going

¹³ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 85-86.

¹⁴ Vladimir O. Pechatnov and C. Earl Edmondson, "The Russian Perspective," in *Debating the Origins of the Cold War: American and Russian Perspectives*, eds. Ralph B. Levering, Vladimir O. Pechatnov, Verena Botzenhart-Viehe, and C. Earl Edmondson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 96-97, 101.

¹⁵ Pechatnov and Edmondson, "Russian Perspective," 97.

after Italy's colonies and acquiring a base on the Turkish Straits, areas that were strategically important to Britain.¹⁶ "To knock Britain down from her positions," Litvinov wrote to Stalin and Molotov, "we would undoubtedly need strong support from the USA."¹⁷

Soviet demands for a trusteeship over one of the Italian colonies or a base on the Mediterranean were rebuffed by Britain and the United States at the Potsdam Conference. But the Soviets persisted in demanding a share of the Italian colonies from September 1945 through October 1946.¹⁸ Stalin was pursuing traditional Russian geopolitical objectives— access through the Turkish Straits to the Mediterranean and the wider ocean.¹⁹ These Soviet actions were part of Stalin's strategy to win recognition for the Soviet Union as a superpower. If the Soviets were primarily concerned with security rather than status, they would have refrained from alienating Great Britain for the sake of colonies in which the Soviets had little economic or strategic interest.

Goddard questions the criteria for Shiffrinson's classification of Soviet actions, in particular, his interpretation of the Soviets' formation of the Cominform and purges of governments in Eastern Europe in response to the Marshall Plan. She observes that these

¹⁶ Pechatnov and Edmondson, "Russian Perspective," 91, 103-104.

¹⁷ Pechatnov and Edmondson, "Russian Perspective," 104.

¹⁸ Pechatnov and Edmondson, "Russian Perspective," 103-104; Vladimir O. Pechatnov, "'The Allies are Pressing on you to Break your Will . . .': Foreign Policy Correspondence Between Stalin and Molotov and Other Politburo Members, September 1945-December 1946," trans. Vladislav M. Zubok (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Cold War International History Project, Working Paper No. 26, September 1999), 19; and Sergei Mazov, "The USSR and the Former Italian Colonies, 1945-50," *Cold War History* 3, no. 3 (2003), 49-78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682740312331391618>.

¹⁹ Mazov, "The USSR and Italian Colonies," 75.

actions, which Shiffrinson uses as evidence for a Soviet strategy of “relegating” Britain to minor-power status during the period from 1947 to 1949 appear to be part of an effort to reinforce Soviet leadership of the world communist movement and consolidate its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe in response to the Marshall Plan.²⁰ The Soviet Union was trying to formalize its status as a superpower with its own buffer zone of “friendly governments” rather than to deprive Britain of its great power position.

In sum, whether state actions are aimed against a declining state’s power position or in pursuit of other, unrelated goals is not always clear, even in hindsight. Now that the United States is supposedly moving into an era of great-power competition, when attempting to interpret Russian and Chinese behavior, it is important that we have ways of determining whether their goals are predatory. More work needs to be done on operationalizing Shiffrinson’s theoretical categories before they can be applied by other scholars.

US Response to Soviet Decline at the End of the Cold War

Most scholars have portrayed the peaceful end of the Cold War, including the freeing of Eastern Europe, as an example of cooperation and trust-building among former adversaries. President George H. W. Bush, in particular, refrained from triumphalism and reassured Mikhail Gorbachev that the United States would not expand into the vacuum left by Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe.²¹

²⁰ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 93-94.

²¹ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 104-105. See, for example, Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition American Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1994); Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2004); Andrew Kydd, “Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation,” *International Organization* 54, no. 2 (2000), 325-57,

Shifrinson argues that because there were no other major power threats on the horizon, partnership with the Soviet Union offered little strategic value. Consequently, according to Shifrinson, the United States pursued predatory strategies of either weakening or relegation toward the Soviet Union when it was declining under Gorbachev, depending on the strength of the Soviet military posture. Shifrinson argues that the Reagan administration was restrained toward Gorbachev because the Soviet Union was regarded as a powerful military state.²² The Bush administration, he writes, initially pursued a weakening strategy toward the Soviet Union, due to the Soviet military position.²³ After the Eastern European revolutions and the fall of the Berlin Wall, which weakened the Soviet's military posture, Shifrinson observes that the Bush administration accelerated German unification as part of a strategy of relegation.²⁴

The Bush administration, he claims, also tried to take advantage of the Soviets' weakened position by laying the groundwork for future membership of the Eastern European countries in NATO. Shifrinson summarizes U.S motivations: "en route to establishing U.S. dominance in post-Cold War Europe, the United States systematically maximized power at the Soviet Union's expense."²⁵

<https://doi.org/10.1162/002081800551190>; Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), 192-223.

²² Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 107-108, 123.

²³ Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 129-130.

²⁴ Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 140-141.

²⁵ Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 158.

The United States was not motivated by security considerations as in defensive realism but the desire to maximize its power position when it could — regardless of the dire effects on the Soviet Union.

To support these claims, Shiffrinson provides evidence in the form of memoranda by National Security Council and State Department officials.²⁶ But the strategy pursued by the United States toward Soviet decline depends on how one interprets the goals of President George H. W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker, which is not always easy to determine from archival documents. Memoranda are usually written by lower-level officials rather than the president.

The recently published *To Build a Better World*, by Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, who both served on the National Security Council during this period, offers a different perspective on the same events.²⁷ Their account suggests that Bush and Secretary of State James Baker were trying to create a broader European community, rather than trying to undermine the Soviet Union's status.²⁸ According to Zelikow and Rice, the U.S. government was divided on whether Gorbachev had a chance. Bush and Baker decided that the United States should make every effort to help the Soviet leader succeed while seeking to lock in agreements on arms control and conventional forces as long as the “Gorbachev window” was still open.²⁹

²⁶ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 140-142, 145.

²⁷ Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *To Build a Better World: Choices to End the Cold War and Create a Global Commonwealth* (New York: Twelve, 2019).

²⁸ Zelikow and Rice, *To Build a Better World*, 142.

²⁹ Zelikow and Rice, *To Build a Better World*, 173-174, 177-178.

November 9 — the date on which the Berlin Wall was breached — was a turning point not because it was the beginning of the decline of Soviet military power, but because freedom of travel between East and West Germany meant that preserving two states was no longer feasible. Public pressure inside the two Germanies drove events.³⁰ In early 1990, according to Zelikow and Rice, no one thought that Gorbachev’s position was hopeless. The Soviet Union still had leverage — over 400,000 troops in East Germany.³¹

There were disagreements among U.S. officials over whether the United States should signal to the Eastern European countries that the door to NATO membership might be open in the future. At America’s initiative, the NATO conference in London in July 1990 decided to invite the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries to send liaison missions to NATO, the basis of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council.³² There was no final decision to admit the Eastern European states to NATO until the Clinton administration.³³

³⁰ Zelikow and Rice, *To Build a Better World*, 212-214.

³¹ Zelikow and Rice, *To Build a Better World*, 195, 242.

³² Zelikow and Rice, *To Build a Better World*, 285-286, 477n.

³³ M. E. Sarotte, “How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993-95,”

International Security 44, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 7-41, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00353.

Policy Implications

In his contribution to this roundtable, Wohlforth is concerned with the policy implications of Shiffrinson's predation theory. He infers from it that a rising power should crush, or at least weaken, a declining power if it can do so without risking its own security and if it does not need that power to deal with challenges from other major powers. This is a new and different argument, he observes, for why the United States remained in Europe after the waning of the Soviet threat, instead of moving to "off-shore balancing."³⁴ Shiffrinson provides a realist, power-centric explanation for why the United States maintained its alliance commitments and overseas bases, one that is not based on the distorting effects of liberal ideology or the nefarious influence of the foreign policy establishment.³⁵

The question is whether this justification for the continued U.S. presence in Europe still stands, now that China is rising. Based on predation theory, Wohlforth deduces that the United States might want to bolster or strengthen Russia to obtain its help against China.

Taliaferro is more cautious about the benefits of predation, pointing out that Russia's current interference in Ukraine and its disinformation campaign in Western democracies have their origins in bitter and long-standing resentments over how the Cold War ended. Taliaferro observes, "while relegation in 1990 succeeded in pushing the Soviet Union out of the great power ranks, it could never guarantee that post-Soviet Russia would remain

³⁴ On off-shore balancing, see for example John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July/August 2016), 70-83.

³⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

‘down’ indefinitely.” Refusing to accept the status claims of a declining power evokes strong emotions that can lead to an offensive reaction. Former great powers may, over time, recover some of their capabilities, and an aggrieved major power may be able to act as a spoiler, as Russia has done by interfering in Western elections and intervening in Syria.³⁶

Treating the declining state with respect and offering it a chance to exercise leadership can go a long way toward diminishing the likelihood that it will adopt a policy of seeking revenge and increase the chances that it will cooperate with the rising state in preserving world order. Status incentives are also less costly — and less risky — than efforts to bolster the power of a declining state.

In sum, reservations about Shiffrinson’s book largely concern the criteria for applying the typology to historical evidence. He does offer a fresh perspective on past events, one that is likely to provoke additional research and debate. The reviewers concur that the distinction between predatory and supportive strategies is a valuable way to make sense out of the differing foreign policies of rising powers toward declining states. Goddard highlights Shiffrinson’s contribution in showing how the transition between a rising and declining state need not be conflictual or dangerous. Wohlforth and Taliaferro agree that Shiffrinson has improved offensive realism by providing a more fine-grained interpretation of when and how rising states will seek to undermine the position of the declining power. Shiffrinson’s theory provides an alternative, realist explanation for continued US expansion in the post-Cold War period despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, and for the enlargement of NATO, which has done much to alienate Russia. He also provides a

³⁶ Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 10, 13, 243-244.

framework for understanding China's current policy toward the United States, which could turn toward weakening or relegation if the United States fails to combat the Covid-19 virus.

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2. Even Rising States Fear the Future

Jeffrey W. Taliaferro

In his recent book *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, Joshua Shiffrin makes an important contribution to our understanding of the rise and decline of great powers in the nuclear age.³⁷ Security studies literature abounds with works on the durability of the unipolar system,³⁸ whether the United States and China can avert the “Thucydides trap,”³⁹ how great powers manage their relative decline,⁴⁰ how rising states attempt to acquire higher international status,⁴¹ and how established powers might peacefully accommodate rising states.⁴² Yet, as Shiffrin notes, questions about the specific types of diplomatic and

³⁷ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

³⁸ Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World’s Sole Superpower* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³⁹ Graham T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); and Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011).

⁴⁰ Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); and Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

⁴¹ Xiaoyu Pu, *Rebranding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019); Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); and Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁴² T. V. Paul, ed., *Accommodating Rising Powers Past, Present, and Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

military strategies that rising states pursue toward their declining peers have received considerably less attention.

According to Shiffrinson, two variables shape a rising power's strategies: the declining state's strategic value and its conventional military posture. Consequently, a rising state will only pursue an extreme predatory strategy if the declining state can provide little or no help in opposing other great-power threats and if it lacks the conventional military capabilities required to protect its interests against encroachment by the riser or other competitors. By contrast, if neither of these conditions hold, a rising state is likely to pursue a supportive strategy. Whereas the declining state's perceived strategic value determines whether the riser will pursue either a supportive or predatory strategy, the decliner's conventional military posture shapes the intensity of the rising state's support or predation.

Shiffrinson identifies four ideal types of strategies that a rising great power might pursue toward a declining peer. In descending order of predation, these strategies are relegation, weakening, bolstering, and strengthening. In pursuing a relegation strategy, the riser seeks to drain the decliner's material resources and dramatically undercut its strategic position using all means short of the overt use of military force. A weakening strategy involves degrading a decliner as a peer competitor through more limited means with the aim of gradually shifting the power distribution against it. A bolstering strategy aims to forestall a further deterioration in the declining power's strategic position — but without the rising state having to incur significant costs or provoking the enmity of third parties. Accordingly, the rising state offers the decliner diplomatic, economic, or military support but does so on an ad hoc basis. The final strategy, strengthening, constitutes the decliner's ideal outcome: The rising power actively and consistently tries to sustain and improve the decliner's strategic position.

Drawing upon declassified documents from American and British archives, Shiffrinson tests hypotheses from his predation theory to explain the variation in the strategies that rising great powers in the late 19th and 20th centuries pursued toward their declining peers. The book focuses on U.S. and Soviet strategies toward the United Kingdom between 1945 and 1949, and America's strategy toward the Soviet Union between 1983 and 1991. Shiffrinson's predation theory offers an elegant explanation of the types of military, diplomatic, and foreign economic strategies that rising great powers pursue toward their declining peer competitors. Moreover, the book's main case studies are exhaustively researched and cogently written.

Rising Titans, Falling Giants is a superb book. It will be widely read by political scientists and international historians interested in grand strategy and the dynamics of great-power politics in the 20th and 21st centuries. In this renewed era of great-power competition, the policymakers charged with formulating America's strategies toward a rising China and a revanchist Russia should also ponder this book's core arguments.

Uncertainty in Great Power Transitions

In the first book of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides writes, "What made the war inevitable was the rising power of Athens and the fear that this caused in Sparta."⁴³ States facing relative decline have good reasons to fear the future since they will become more vulnerable to predation once the power transition is complete. That fundamental insight underpins the vast literature on preventive war, the preemptive use

⁴³ Thucydides, Robert B. Strassler, and Richard Crawley, eds., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press, 1996), Book 1, paragraph 23, 49.

of force, and other forms of anticipatory defense.⁴⁴ However, Shiffrinson's book suggests that *rising* states also have good reasons to fear the future.

Declining great powers may still have the military wherewithal to protect their vital interests and impose significant costs on the riser. There is also the possibility that a declining state might be recruited by other rival great powers to check a rising state's ambitions. "Just because one state surpassed another does not mean that the rising state stops worrying about the challenge posed by the decliner or other great powers," Shiffrinson observes.⁴⁵ While rising states may be in a better strategic position once the power transition is complete, they can never be certain of the future. Therefore, it behooves them to hedge their bets against future threats by either preserving declining great powers to block future threats or by preying on those powers to forestall the possibility of their recovery.

In the book's two main case studies, policymakers faced considerable uncertainty about the evolving distribution of power and confronted a series of daunting questions: Was the global distribution of power moving from a multipolar configuration to a bipolar one? Was it moving from a bipolar configuration to a unipolar one? If and when a declining state tumbles from the great-power ranks, how quickly might it recover the economic and military capabilities necessary to reenter those ranks and challenge the new international status quo? Alternatively, how might a failure to prevent, or at least slow, the military decline of a peer harm the long-term strategic interests of the rising state?⁴⁶

⁴⁴ See for example Jack S. Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics* 40, no. 1 (October 1987), 82-107, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2010195>.

⁴⁵ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 179.

⁴⁶ Despite his attention to the complexities of power assessments and how leaders formulate national security policy, Shiffrinson does not claim that predation theory falls within the rubric of neoclassical

The international system did not suddenly transform from multipolarity into bipolarity when Germany unconditionally surrendered to the Allies in May 1945. Instead, Shiffrinson argues that, in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the international system still appeared to be multipolar, with the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom comprising the three poles.⁴⁷ The former two surpassed the latter in relative economic and military capabilities, but the power disparity among them was not so wide as to render Britain inconsequential for the balance of power. According to Shiffrinson, between 1945 and 1947, U.S. and Soviet officials considered Britain to have high strategic value. As a result, they pursued relatively supportive strategies toward the declining empire. These strategies only began to diverge in early 1947, with the United States becoming more overtly supportive and the Soviet Union becoming more overtly predatory.⁴⁸

Similarly, between 1989 and 1991, officials in Washington and Moscow appear to have been aware that a major power transition was underway. In the winter of 1989 and 1990, officials in President George H. W. Bush's administration could "see Soviet decline as presenting an opportunity to move toward American dominance of Europe by undercutting Soviet power and unifying what George Kennan called one of the centers of 'industrial and military power' under the United States' aegis."⁴⁹ Yet, the timetable for a possible revival of Soviet (or Russian) power over the longer term was not clear to officials in either country. Nor was it any clearer what a unipolar international system

realism. On this theoretical perspective, see Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁴⁷ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 45-46.

⁴⁸ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 83-95.

⁴⁹ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 109-110.

would mean for the types of threats and opportunities the United States and other states might have confronted in the 1990s and beyond.

One of *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*' contributions is to advance the debate between offensive and defensive realism. That debate essentially revolves around the types of strategic behavior that the international system rewards.⁵⁰ John Mearsheimer, the father of offensive realism, argues that the anarchic structure of the international system “primes” states for the offense.⁵¹ Because great powers face pervasive uncertainty about one another’s intentions and possess the wherewithal to harm one another, they are bound to strive to maximize their relative power as the best route to security.

Shiffrinson explicitly grounds his predation theory in offensive realism’s assumptions. However, he goes beyond the extant treatments by better specifying when, where, and with what intensity rising states will adopt predatory strategies toward their declining peers. Likewise, supporting the declining state may be an effective way to contain and weaken other great power rivals, as well as to forestall the emergence of opposing alliances.⁵²

⁵⁰ For an analysis of this debate, see for example Jeffery W. Taliaferro, “Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited,” *International Security* 25, no. 3 (Winter 2000-2001), 128-161, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2626708>.

⁵¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 3.

⁵² The pursuit of bolstering and strengthening strategies toward a declining great power may also overlap with a wedge strategy, a deliberate effort to forestall the emergence of a hostile alliance or coalition. On wedge strategies, see Timothy W. Crawford, “Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics,” *International Security* 35, no. 4 (Spring 2011), 155-189, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00036.

Regional Power Distributions and Conventional Military Postures

Shiffrinson's two case studies suggest that regional power distributions and conventional military postures still matter in great-power politics — even in the nuclear age.

Policymakers in the rising state were not just concerned about the relative distribution of capabilities either in the international system or between their state and the decliner.

Rather, they were also concerned about the relative distribution of particular *types* of capabilities — namely, conventional military power — in key regions of strategic interest.

In both cases, the United States acted to forestall the emergence of regional power vacuums and improve its own strategic position over the long term. Prior to the spring of 1947, the United States was not the guarantor of the stability of Western Europe. In 1945 and 1946, the Roosevelt and Truman administrations resolved to pursue a bolstering strategy toward Britain, which entailed providing London with only limited assistance.⁵³

However, the near-collapse of Britain's economy, which precipitated the sharp decline of British military posture in Western Europe and the Mediterranean during the winter and spring of 1947, raised the prospect of the Soviet Union filling that power vacuum.⁵⁴ Thus, in designing the European Recovery Program, the Truman administration not only provided the United Kingdom with \$3.2 billion in economic assistance out of the total \$13 billion allocated but also allowed Prime Minister Clement Altee's government to shape the terms of U.S. assistance.⁵⁵ The following year, American strategists took steps to ensure

⁵³ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 71-72.

⁵⁴ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 83-95.

⁵⁵ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 77.

“the security of the British Isles” against the Soviet Union.⁵⁶ The Truman administration’s adoption of a strengthening strategy toward the United Kingdom in 1947 and 1948, Shiffrinson concludes, laid the groundwork for the United States to become the security guarantor of Western Europe.

Shiffrinson’s argument about the continuing importance of the declining state’s conventional military posture is especially striking in his discussion of how the Bush administration approached the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. Even after the Berlin Wall came down in November 1989, Bush’s national security team reacted cautiously and did not move to precipitate the collapse of the German Democratic Republic.⁵⁷ A few months later, however, the rapid withdrawal of Soviet troops from Warsaw Pact states allowed America to not only insist upon German reunification within NATO but also squash any serious consideration of alternative security architectures for post-Cold War Europe. Indeed, the Bush administration exploited this window of opportunity despite the fact that the declining superpower rival still possessed a second-strike nuclear arsenal. Moreover, Shiffrinson argues that the Bush administration reverted to a weakening strategy toward the teetering Soviet Union the following year. In order to avert a disorderly Soviet collapse and ensure the stability of its nuclear arsenal, Washington continued to back the embattled Mikhail Gorbachev over his ascendant rival, Boris Yeltsin.⁵⁸

Even in the nuclear age, then, a declining state’s conventional military capabilities still matter. Declining states with robust military forces can defend their strategic interests

⁵⁶ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 80-81.

⁵⁷ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 137.

⁵⁸ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 152-156.

and threaten harm to potential challengers. But, declining states with weak military postures — even if they possess nuclear weapons — might be incapable of defending themselves or imposing significant costs on potential challengers.⁵⁹

Rethinking the Cold War’s Endgame and the Unintended Consequences of Relegation

Shiffrinson’s analysis of the strategies that the United States pursued toward the Soviet Union between 1983 and 1991 — which challenges some of the conventional wisdom about the Cold War’s ending and, by extension, the underlying causes of Russia’s revanchism in the 21st century — represents a final contribution of *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*. As Shiffrinson writes, the standard view of the Cold War’s end emphasizes the emergence of U.S.-Soviet cooperation.⁶⁰ This sort of argument comes in two different varieties.

One line of scholarship, Shiffrinson observes, holds that President Ronald Reagan’s administration, which embodied “crusading conservatism,” pursued far more hardline strategies toward the Soviet Union, especially during Reagan’s first term, than did the more “pragmatic” administration of his successor, George H.W. Bush. But, so the story goes, the rapprochement between Reagan and Gorbachev ushered in a remarkable period of U.S.-Soviet cooperation. Gorbachev’s sweeping domestic reforms and willingness to make unilateral concessions on strategic and conventional arms reductions convinced Reagan and his advisers that the new Soviet leader was someone with whom they could do business. This cooperation culminated in the relatively peaceful revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990, followed shortly thereafter by the collapse of the

⁵⁹ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 31.

⁶⁰ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 104.

Soviet state. During those events, most accounts claim, the Bush administration continued to extend diplomatic support to Gorbachev and avoided taking advantage of the Soviet Union's spiraling problems.

A second line of scholarship, Shiffrinson notes, posits a crucial role for ideational variables in the Cold War's ending. Broadly, scholars in this camp hold that the Soviet "new thinking" espoused by Gorbachev and his advisers after 1985 decreased the ideological distance between the Soviet Union and the West, thus paving the way for the peaceful end of the Cold War. Specifically, scholars in this camp claim that U.S. policymakers came to believe that Gorbachev was a different type of Soviet leader and that his *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies offered the prospect for real change in both Soviet domestic politics and foreign policy.

Shiffrinson makes a persuasive case that it was the "pragmatic" Bush administration — and not the "crusading" Reagan administration — that actually pursued a relegation strategy. Prior to 1985, the year that Gorbachev came to power, the Reagan administration's strategies were actually less predatory than conventional wisdom suggests. The hawkish rhetoric notwithstanding, Reagan and his advisers were aware of the risk of inadvertent escalation. And, despite its accelerating economic decline, the Soviet Union was still a nuclear-armed superpower that enjoyed a conventional force advantage in Central and Eastern Europe.⁶¹

Shiffrinson argues that during the Reagan administration's second term, America's policies toward the Soviet Union were also far less accommodating than conventional wisdom suggests. In those years, the administration did negotiate landmark strategic and

⁶¹ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 110-111 and 120-121.

conventional arms control agreements with the Soviets, notably the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces and Conventional Forces in Europe Treaties. However, those agreements were, according to Shifrinson, designed to exploit the Soviets' mounting economic and military woes.⁶²

As for the Bush administration, its policies after the Eastern bloc revolutions in 1989 were, in Shifrinson's view, quite predatory, even more so than those of the Reagan administration. From late January to October 1990, the administration's overriding aims were to secure German reunification within NATO, expedite the withdrawal of Soviet conventional forces from Central and Eastern Europe, and preclude any serious discussion of a pan-European security architecture to replace NATO and the soon-to-be-defunct Warsaw Pact. On the diplomatic front, this approach entailed isolating the Soviets and "neutering" the Four Power talks on German reunification to block Soviet opportunism. On the security front, it involved staunch opposition to any security arrangement that might salvage Soviet influence in Central and Eastern Europe. To add insult to injury, Bush declined Gorbachev's request for a \$15-\$20 billion loan to assist the Soviet transition to a market economy.⁶³

By the summer of 1991, however, as the Baltic states and several other Soviet republics began demanding greater autonomy or outright independence from Moscow, the Bush administration's focus shifted toward averting a disorderly collapse of the Soviet Union and ensuring the security of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. Consequently, Bush and his

⁶² Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 119-129. Shifrinson's analysis in this area dovetails with the scholarship of Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth. See for example Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas," *International Security* 25, no. 3 (Winter 2000-2001), 5-53, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228800560516>.

⁶³ Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 149-150.

advisers moderated their predation and reverted to a weakening strategy. Still, it is difficult to reconcile the documentary record of what U.S. policymakers privately discussed and the policies they actually pursued with claims about a growing ideological convergence between the superpowers.

Elsewhere, Shifrinson has argued that, in 1990, Secretary of State James A. Baker and other officials made implicit and informal promises to their Soviet counterparts to the effect that NATO would not expand into Eastern Europe, provided that the reunified Germany remained in NATO. However, Shifrinson claims that, over the course of the Two-Plus-Four negotiations, U.S. officials “walked back” those informal guarantees.⁶⁴ Shifrinson briefly touches upon this issue in the book. About the Treaty on the Final Settlement with respect to Germany, he writes: “Not only was all of Germany to be in NATO, but US military forces could now begin to move into territory that had previously been part of the Warsaw Pact. The eviction of Soviet power from Central-Eastern Europe was complete.”⁶⁵

To a certain extent, whether or not U.S. officials made implicit guarantees to Gorbachev that NATO would not move eastward in 1990 is beside the point. Soviet, and later Russian, leaders quickly came to see NATO’s very existence after the Cold War and the exclusion of Russia from that alliance as affronts. The alliance and America’s role in it

⁶⁴ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, “Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion,” *International Security* 40, no. 4 (Spring 2016), 7-44, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00236. For competing perspectives on this issue, see for example Mark Kramer, “The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia,” *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2009), 39-61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600902773248>; and Mary Elise Sarotte, “A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014), 90-97.

⁶⁵ Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 152.

were tangible indications of Russia’s greatly diminished material power and international status. In a sense, then, NATO expansion merely added insult to injury.⁶⁶ Furthermore, neither the first Bush administration nor the administrations of his successors — Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama — were prepared to accommodate Russia’s demand for co-equal status in shaping European security.⁶⁷

Acknowledging Russian leaders’ status concerns and resentments over NATO expansion is not to suggest, as others have, that the United States somehow “caused” Russia’s revanchism.⁶⁸ But, the fact remains that, even though relegation in 1990 succeeded in pushing the Soviet Union out of the great-power ranks, it could never guarantee that post-Soviet Russia would remain “down” indefinitely. Just as launching a preventive war can have unintended consequences for the declining state, successful relegation can have unintended consequences for the rising power.

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⁶⁶ For the argument that Russian hostility toward the West predated NATO’s expansion, see Kimberly Marten, “Reconsidering NATO Expansion: A Counterfactual Analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s,” *European Journal of International Security* 3, no. 2 (June 2018), 135-161, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2017.16>.

⁶⁷ On the importance of status concerns in the foreign policy of post-Soviet Russia, see Larson and Shevchenko, *Quest for Status*, 177-231.

⁶⁸ See for example John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014), 77-89.

3. Realism and the Politics of Decline

Stacie E. Goddard

With *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts*, Joshua Shiffrin has made an impressive contribution to the expanding literature on rising and declining powers.⁶⁹ This is a diverse literature, spanning the spectrum of theoretical approaches to international politics. What this literature shares in common is a wholesale rejection of the theory that power transitions involve a “Thucydides Trap,” which is the idea that conflict between rising and declining powers is inevitable. While much of this literature focuses on the strategies that declining powers adopt toward rising powers, Shiffrin instead asks what strategies rising powers are likely to use to manage their relations with declining powers. He posits that rising powers face a choice about how they manage a declining rival: They can strengthen a falling giant, ensuring that it maintains at least some of its stature, or prey upon the declining state. How a rising power makes its decision depends upon two different variables — the declining power’s strategic value and its military posture.

⁶⁹ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018). A sample of this literature includes Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy, and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); David M. Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017); Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Carla Norrlof, “Hegemony, Hierarchy and Unipolarity: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Hegemonic Order Studies,” in *Encyclopedia of Empirical International Relations Theory*, ed. William R. Thompson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relation: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

There are three things that *Rising Titans, Falling Giants* does very well. First, Shiffrinson demonstrates the power of a spare theory by showing the advantage of a parsimonious approach without sounding polemical or playing fast and loose with historical evidence. Shiffrinson's realist roots are clear in his reliance on structural and materialist factors to explain broad patterns in state behavior. Certainly, realists have long been interested in power transitions, but many cling to the assumption that power transitions are inherently dangerous. Shiffrinson's recognition of the variations in revisionist behavior is a welcome turn.⁷⁰

Second, Shiffrinson's empirical work is exemplary. Indeed, it will likely serve as a model of how to construct qualitative case studies. The book is oriented around two substantial case studies: how the United States and Soviet Union responded to the decline of Britain after World War II and how the United States responded to the decline of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. In each case, he carefully explains his research design, thoughtfully operationalizes key concepts, and conducts thorough and original archival research.

Third, Shiffrinson demonstrates the importance of revisionist historical work in political science. The case study of the U.S. response to Soviet decline is important, not only for

⁷⁰ For other works that take a similar approach, see, for example, Edelstein, *Over the Horizon*; MacDonald and Parent, *Twilight of the Titan*; and Alexander Cooley, Daniel H. Nexon, and Steven Ward, "Revising Order or Challenging the Balance of Military Power? An Alternative Typology of Revisionist and Status-Quo States," *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 4 (October 2019): 689–708,

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210519000019>.

what it demonstrates about his theory, but also for what it does for our understanding of America's strategy at the end of the Cold War. Shiffrinson convincingly shows that the United States did not generously manage Soviet decline, carefully folding that power into an emerging "New World Order." Instead, Shiffrinson tells a story of predation, in which the United States purposefully shattered Soviet control. Particularly powerful is Shiffrinson's reconstruction of the negotiations leading to German unification, in which the United States successfully strong-armed the Soviet Union into accepting a unified Germany within NATO.

Classifying Rising Power Behavior

Rising Titans, Falling Giants is an impressive work but, of course, any book that says something of interest will also raise questions. To begin with, it is not clear if Shiffrinson's theory is as parsimonious or materialist as he suggests. Most notably, the meaning of a declining state's "strategic value" is not always clear, and it seems that Shiffrinson pulls a number of factors into this concept, some of which are not always consistent with his realist roots. Among other considerations, Shiffrinson argues that a declining state's strategic value includes whether it is "politically available to help against other powers."⁷¹ Certainly it is plausible, as Shiffrinson argues, that a declining power might be more willing to help a potential ally and partner in the emerging world order. But whether or not a declining state is likely to be "politically available" seems extraordinarily broad in scope. Indeed, as Shiffrinson argues, in the case of British decline, what made Britain less strategically valuable to the Soviet Union was a change in Britain's government, which brought to power anti-Soviet politicians. This led the Soviets to move toward a strategy of relegation. Similarly, in the United States, what seems to have made Britain more

⁷¹ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 25.

strategically valuable was the settling of the “Cold War consensus,” which solidified the narrative that the Soviets were an existential threat and made an alliance with Britain necessary.⁷²

Moreover, at times it is difficult to classify rising powers’ strategies along the continuum that Shiffrinson suggests. According to Shiffrinson, these strategies vary both in terms of their aim — they might seek to support a declining power or to weaken it — and in terms of their intensity — the amount of blood and treasure a rising power is willing to invest in pursuit of these aims. This produces four ideal types of strategy a rising power might pursue: bolstering, strengthening, weakening, and relegation. Although a useful classification method, at times it is unclear how these concepts translate into empirical observations. For example, Shiffrinson classifies the Soviet decision not to intervene in the Greek Civil War in 1946 as a strategy of bolstering Britain, but it is unclear how Soviet restraint was meant to support Britain as the declining power.

It is also unclear whether what Shiffrinson classifies as the Soviet move toward the relegation of Britain between 1946 and 1949 was really all that significant of a strategic shift. Many of the strategies Shiffrinson identifies — support of a communist network, for example — seem familiar. And, indeed, Shiffrinson’s interpretation seems at odds with other historical work that suggests that this was a period of Soviet consolidation of control behind the iron curtain.⁷³ Likewise, although it is not a case study he explores in this book, Shiffrinson’s portrayal of U.S. strategy toward Britain in the 19th century as

⁷² On this point, see, for example, Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁷³ For example, see, William Hitchcock, “The Marshall Plan and the Creation of the West,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Vol. 1: Origins*, ed. Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 154–74.

relegation seems puzzling. Apart from maintaining its position in Canada, by the early 19th century Britain had accepted America's dominance of the western hemisphere, and the United States had no particular reason to aggressively undercut Britain in the places it still held sway.

Implications for Policy

This conceptual confusion is not merely theoretically and historically important; it has implications for how Shiffrinson's arguments might translate to policy in contemporary international politics. Most notably, Shiffrinson argues that China is likely to engage in "weakening, not relegating" strategies toward the United States.⁷⁴ This seems spot on. It would make little sense for China to engage in a head-on fight with the United States, which still maintains a formidable military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. Still, Shiffrinson's theory raises a few questions. To begin with, to what extent are rising-power strategies not distinct, but path-dependent? Might it be likely, for instance, that China's weakening strategy will set the stage for more aggressive relegation later on?⁷⁵ Moreover, it seems possible that China could deploy a mixed strategy, choosing to weaken or bolster the United States in certain areas, while remaining willing to turn to relegation on issues that it views as its "core interests."

⁷⁴ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 183.

⁷⁵ On this point, see, for example, Randall Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline," *International Security* 36, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 41-72, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00044; and Daniel W. Drezner, "Counter-Hegemonic Strategies in the Global Economy," *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 505-31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1604985>.

Finally, when it comes to Japan, the questions of strategic value and the importance of political context again become central. On the one hand, Japan will likely never be strategically valuable to China, given those two states' political histories. On the other hand, the extent to which Japan maintains strategic value to the United States seems less tied to Japan's geopolitical significance, and more to how the United States views its national interests in East Asia, and the threat China presents to those interests. If China is seen as not particularly threatening, then Japan loses its strategic value. If China emerges as a significant threat, then Japan's position as a valuable ally is secure.

These are significant questions, and they indicate the importance of Shiffrinson's work to our understanding of how international relations theory can inform our understanding of history and contemporary politics. By unpacking the myriad choices rising powers face in managing their declining counterparts, Shiffrinson has made an invaluable contribution to the understanding of great-power politics.

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4. Not Necessarily Done When You've Won: On Kicking a Great Power When It's Down

William C. Wohlforth

Backed up by exhaustive research in primary and secondary sources, *Rising Titans*, *Falling Giants* undermines large areas of conventional wisdom in security studies.⁷⁶ In this scholarly *tour de force*, Joshua Shiffrinson argues that the optimal strategy for a rising great power vis-à-vis a declining peer is to crush it, or at least weaken it, if it can do so without risking its own security and if the target is not needed for dealing with challenges from other great powers. Friendlier strategies are called for only when those conditions are not met. According to Shiffrinson, leaders of a rising great power would be foolish to weaken a declining peer if it could help contain, divert, or otherwise weaken a more pressing great-power challenge. Hence, the United States and the Soviet Union each attempted to bolster the faltering British Empire in the immediate wake of World War II, in hopes that it could prove helpful against the other. Only when London opted clearly for the U.S. camp did Moscow's dominant strategy shift to weakening Britain.⁷⁷

But, Shiffrinson warns, it would be equally foolish for a great power—perhaps out of a surfeit of caution or in an effort to come to some great-power concert arrangement—to pass up the chance to cut down a declining peer if the circumstances were ripe. This is a strong claim that runs against much of international relations scholarship. Shiffrinson is saying that even though the peer's decline is increasing the rising great power's security, and even if the decliner is cooperative, that is no reason not to grab even more relative

⁷⁶ Joshua R. Izkowitz Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁷⁷ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 63-98.

power so long as the decliner cannot help against other great powers and lacks the ability to resist. When the Soviet Union declined in the 1980s, it could be of no use to the United States in battling other great powers because there weren't any. According to Shiffrinson's "predation theory," Washington's optimal response to this strategic setting was to weaken the Soviet Union as much as it could in view of Moscow's inability to fight back. When the Soviet Union's capability to credibly use force in Central Europe waned in 1989-90, U.S. leaders were therefore right to ramp up from the mainly covert and generally ineffectual weakening strategies they had deployed for most of the Cold War, for want of more potent alternatives, to measures truly meant to push Russian power back east of the Elbe. But when the Soviet Union itself began to come apart, Washington sagely restrained itself from intense weakening strategies due to the credibility of Russian power so close to home.⁷⁸

Shiffrinson's book forces scholars to think about rise-and-decline dynamics in a new way, one not fixated on power transitions. It shows how great powers' strategies can vary from predatory to cooperative with a novel power-centric explanation that appears to outperform competing explanations in key cases. Shiffrinson's admirably rigorous research sheds new light on lesser known aspects of the Cold War, especially the Soviet Union's relatively supportive policies toward the British Empire in the early post-World War II period and America's predatory policies toward the Soviet Union in 1989-91.

The Realist Logic Behind the NATO Expansion

But the biggest piece of conventional wisdom that Shiffrinson undermines is one that he does not talk about: the popular notion among realist security studies scholars that

⁷⁸ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 119-159.

America ought to have abandoned its leadership role — or “primacy” — in post-Cold War Europe. I hardly need to remind readers of this publication of the hugely influential arguments presented by the likes of Eugene Gholz, Daryl Press, Harvey Sapolsky, Barry Posen, Stephen Walt, John Mearsheimer, Chris Layne and many other luminaries in the field of security studies that once the Soviet Union declined the United States no longer had a national interest in preserving its primary role in European security via NATO.⁷⁹ With a theory that is “born of familiar realist roots,” Shiffrinson reaches the opposite conclusion.⁸⁰

The key practical divergence between predation theory and the theories deployed by advocates of NATO abandonment is the threshold for a U.S. onshore presence in Europe.⁸¹ The conventional wisdom among “Come Home, America” scholars is that the United States needs to be in Europe only if there is a credible threat of military hegemony in the region. The very stimulus that such theories argue should trigger the United States to pull back — Soviet decline and the corresponding evaporation of the threat of

⁷⁹ For the canonical statement, see Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, “Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security* 21, no. 4 (Spring 1997), 18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539282>. “The threat that NATO was created to deter disappeared when the Soviet Union collapsed,” the authors argue. “Consequently, NATO should be dismantled.”

⁸⁰ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 161.

⁸¹ I use the awkward wording “theories deployed by advocates of NATO abandonment” because it is a complex matter. It is often asserted that the theory underlying this position is defensive realism, but in a careful analysis Charles Glaser showed how defensive realist arguments can yield a recommendation for the preservation, and even expansion, of NATO. See Charles L. Glaser, “Why NATO is Still Best: Future Security Arrangements for Europe,” *International Security* 18, no. 1 (Summer 1993), 5-50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539031>. Meanwhile, the author of offensive realism, John Mearsheimer, prominently advocates NATO abandonment. See John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior US Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July/August 2016), 70-83.

hegemony — is what predation theory sees as a reason for expanding U.S. commitments. If you want to weaken Moscow’s power, as predation theory says you should, you don’t pull back; you don’t even stand on the defense by merely preserving NATO as a hedge. No, you lean forward and expand NATO to sweep up former Soviet allies in Central Europe.

It is important to stress that even though *Rising Titans, Falling Giants* is about the end of the Cold War and thus concerns actions that predate the big debate about whether to come home or to expand NATO, Shifrinson shows that the die was already cast during this period:

[B]y March 1990, U.S. strategists began exploring ways of expanding NATO further in Eastern Europe and gaining influence over members of the rapidly dissolving Warsaw Pact; within months policymakers were debating whether and when to signal that Eastern European states could join the alliance. Dominance was the name of the game.⁸²

And that meant no coming home, no “restraint,” no offshore balancing, no concert of powers with Moscow as an equal player, and no new security architecture in Europe to replace NATO.

Given the centrality of NATO and Europe to U.S. grand strategy, predation theory is a novel entry into this longstanding debate. Typically, the “Come Home, America” position is contrasted with an array of arguments that, for lack of a better word, seem more defensive than the theory Shifrinson develops in *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*. They portray continued U.S. primacy in Europe as necessary for preventing the reemergence of

⁸² Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 148.

security competition among European states, for warding off Yugoslavia-style wars of nationalism and irredentism, for hedging against a possible Russian resurgence, and for helping elicit European cooperation on a range of non-security matters such as economic policy.⁸³ They generally have a broader conception of U.S. security requirements that go beyond great-power politics and greater sensitivity to non-security interests. Predation theory, by contrast, occupies the same turf as the “Come Home, America” arguments, but is focused like a laser beam on classical security interests and the great-power chessboard.

Predation theory strikes me as more akin to a carefully developed, contingent version of offensive realism, arguing that it makes sense for great powers to pursue security aggressively but not wantonly, choosing their peer victims carefully. Shiffrinson notes this affinity with offensive realism but stresses the ways in which his approach can explain cooperative great-power strategies where offensive realism cannot.⁸⁴ Needless to say, in naming it “predation theory,” Shiffrinson also wants the more offensive implications of his argument to register. And they *should* register in this debate — a debate from which offensive realist power-grabbing arguments have been largely absent.

Indeed, realist arguments in favor of abandoning U.S. primacy in Europe are so prominent that many people conflate realism with grand strategic restraint, forgetting that from the same basic school of thought one can derive arguments for the strategic sagacity of kicking great powers while they are down. And Shiffrinson’s extensive research documents decision-makers expressing precisely this kind of logic within the corridors of

⁸³ Glaser, “Why NATO is Still Best,” 5-50.

⁸⁴ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 178.

power, whatever reassuring liberal rhetoric they may have adopted for public consumption.

Overall, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants* offers a great deal of evidence that runs counter to popular realist portrayals of the causes of U.S. primacy-seeking. Scholars like Mearsheimer and Walt are puzzled by America's post-Cold War expansionism and attribute it to motivations outside the security realm. But in the pages of *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, Shiffrinson offers deep and thorough research on the internal deliberations that resulted in the grand strategic choice to sustain and extend U.S. primacy in Europe. This copious documentation reveals U.S. decision-makers who are "attuned to changes in the distribution of power and [who] privilege the resulting concerns and opportunities when shaping strategy."⁸⁵ There is scant evidence here of the reckless liberal crusaders, drunk with power, who star in Mearsheimer's *The Great Delusion*, or of the complacent, self-serving, bubble-dwelling denizens of the "blob" who feature in Walt's *The Hell of Good Intentions*.⁸⁶ Instead, we see, well, realists: "leaders [who] recognized that preying on the Soviet Union improved the relative power of the United States, affording it advantages in peacetime negotiations and improving the odds of wartime victory."⁸⁷ Sound like realism to you?

⁸⁵ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 161.

⁸⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); and Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018).

⁸⁷ Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 158.

Probing the Prescriptive Power of Predation Theory

Now, as someone who is on record arguing against abandoning NATO and coming home, I might be suspected of deriving unwarranted implications from *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*.⁸⁸ After all, as noted, Shifrinson himself does not tout the book's implication for this hoary grand strategy debate. If I have misread the book's implications for that debate, the format of this roundtable gives him the opportunity to correct the record. So, let me close with a discussion of two potential objections to the implications I have derived here.

First, Shifrinson does not use normative language, as I have done, instead writing about his theory in terms of prediction and explanation. But that is a distinction without a difference, for he posits that great powers are rational and driven first and foremost by the desire to secure themselves. If, as he writes, predation theory “provides the most powerful and consistent account of rising state behavior,” it follows that he is claiming that what the United States did to the Soviet Union as the Cold War wound down is what a rational rising great power interested in security *should* have done.⁸⁹

Second, it could be that predation theory and the theories that have yielded the “Come Home, America” argument converge in recommending that a less primacy-oriented U.S. strategy is needed for Europe as Russia's decline and China's rise continue. If so, it would be a service to the grand strategy debate for Shifrinson to spell out this logic. Presumably, at some moment China's rise might become salient enough to raise Moscow's strategic

⁸⁸ Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁸⁹ Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 161.

value as a counter to Beijing, and so predation theory might call for a total revamping of the U.S. position in Europe to bolster or even strengthen Russia.⁹⁰ If so, one wonders *when* in this process the revamp should have occurred, according to the theory: When is China strong enough and Russia weak enough to warrant trading U.S. leadership in Europe for Moscow's help versus Beijing? According to predation theory, when in the post-Cold War period — if ever — does America's policy of sustaining primacy in Europe and keeping Russia out begin to undermine U.S. interests?

Rising Titans, Falling Giants presents its arguments and first-rate empirical research efficiently and with verve. Shiffrinson proves that the classical explanatory architecture that we know as realism, which has been with us in one form or another for centuries, can, when wielded by a smart and hard-driving scholar, still deliver novel insights.

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⁹⁰ Another response could be that Russia drops from the great power ranks, but that would be unpersuasive. Indeed, no arguments are provided in the book for why the theory does not apply to all states in anarchy, not just great powers.