

The Digital Revolution and the Changing Face of International Revisionism

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1. Introduction

In recent years, states that are dissatisfied with the extant liberal international order have grown louder and bolder. China has become increasingly vocal in its disapproval of the international system, challenging established norms and institutions both through words and action. China has engaged in an extensive military construction effort in disputed international waters, expanded its influence in Africa, deepened its involvement throughout southeast Asia through the Belt and Road initiative. China has also spearheaded the creation of new international organizations, such as the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), which many suspect are intended to serve as counters to the preeminent liberal organizations such as the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Similarly, Russia has also become more assertive, voicing its displeasure with an international system that it views as serving the interests of Western democracies in general, and US interests in particular. Since the 2008 invasion of Georgia, Russia has taken active measures to roll back US influence in what it views as its sphere of influence. During the Syrian civil war, Russia gave its full-throated support to the Assad regime and deployed its military to assist the Syrian government's efforts to defeat the US-backed rebel forces and regain control of the country. When the pro-Russian Ukrainian government succumbed to pro-EU protests in early 2014, the Russian government responded with military force, albeit clandestinely. Russian forces (though wearing non-identifiable uniforms) seized the Crimean Peninsula later in February, which was later annexed by Russian president Vladimir Putin in March of that year. More recently, a variety of actors (including, and especially Russia) sought to influence the course of US political discourse during the 2016, 2018, and 2020 elections, bringing charges of foreign interference from US intelligence agencies and some political leaders.¹

The relative decline of US power and the potential end to the “unipolar moment”—the period of US global hegemony since the collapse of the Soviet Union up until the present—has made the question of rising dissatisfied states all the more pressing. One of the central questions that will motivate international relations (IR) scholars and foreign policy practitioners as the world moves toward either bipolarity or multipolarity is how and in what way dissatisfied states will seek to amend the extant international system and pursue their broader interests. In other words, what can we expect of revisionist states in the coming bi- or multipolar international system? This chapter argues that the behavior, strategies, and objectives of dissatisfied states will include techniques and approaches that have only been made possible as a consequence of the Digital Revolution. Utilizing digital technologies, revisionist states engage in a variety of activities that are low-cost in terms of money and material, low-risk in that they are unlikely to trigger an armed

¹ It should be noted that the US was not the sole target of these “influence campaigns,” and several states throughout Europe have recently accused Russia of attempting to influence the course and outcome of their domestic political processes. An analysis by Martin, Shapiro, and Nedashkovskaya (2019, 20) concluded that Russia had conducted identifiable foreign influence efforts (FIEs) targeting the US, UK, Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, Ukraine, Austria, Belarus, Brazil, Canada, Finland, France, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, South Africa, Spain, and Syria.

response, and which are conducted continually through means that make attribution and deterrence difficult.

Rather than achieving their objectives of systemic change through the use of traditional means – such as formal warfare, attempts to reform existing institutions, the creation of alternative international institutions and organizations, or system exit – revisionist states use digital technologies to undertake continuous, low-level information campaigns, using a combination of propaganda, mis- and disinformation, and botnets to influence the domestic political discourse of target countries. These new digital strategies have clear advantages over the more traditional and direct means of challenging the existing international order. First, though provocative and adversarial, the digital campaigns to affect and shape the domestic political discourse of adversary states falls well short of the dramatic sorts of actions (such as warfare or the creation of new institutions and organizations) that IR scholars typically associate with states that are pursuing revisionist aims. The declaration of war, the overt creation of alternative and competing organizations, and the delegitimation of existing institutions are all directly challenging. They are easily observable, making the revisionist intent of initiating states obvious and apparent. In contrast, the digital campaigns waged by revisionists of the present, are seemingly innocuous, continuous, and effective, falling well short of actions that would justify a military response.

Second, efforts to either force or coerce direct changes to international order are potentially costly. The use of digital technologies by revisionist powers is aimed at altering the structure of the present liberal international order *without having to directly challenge it*. The structure of the liberal international order—which includes formal and informal institutions, regimes, norms, and rules—constrains state behavior (Goddard 2018a). However, the degree to which formal institutions can constrain the behavior of states is, in part, dependent on the degree to which the rules and norms of the system are upheld more broadly, as well as the degree to which the community of states actively voices their support. Not only do the digital strategies employed by revisionist states seek to increase political polarization within their adversaries, but these tactics serve the dual purpose of making it more likely that satisfied states will voice either skepticism or discontent with the extant liberal international order.² In so doing, revisionist states can encourage or induce other states to actively question or undermine existing institutions. In short, the digital strategies of revisionists make it more likely that other states will challenge or undermine existing institutions, changing the network structure of the international order and reducing constraints on revisionist behaviors—all without a direct challenge by revisionists themselves.

The outline of this chapter is as follows. First, I review the discourse on revisionism, focusing on the specific conditions under which IR theorists would expect a state to engage in revisionist behavior, as well as the kinds of actions that revisionist states traditionally deploy in their attempts to amend the status quo. IR theorists generally expect a dissatisfied state to engage in revisionist behaviors when the expected benefits of such an attempt outweigh the expected risks (Gilpin 1981), when revisionist coalitions face a favorable balance of allied resolve relative to status quo states (Davidson 2006), or when revisionists perceive that the structure of the extant order is unable or unwilling to accommodate their rising power or prestige (Ward 2020).

Historically, the strategies that revisionists pursue in their attempts to amend the status quo—such as the use of formal warfare, asymmetric warfare, speech acts delegitimizing the extant

² Crucially, my theory links the digital revolution to the growth of political polarization in “open societies” and liberal democracies *specifically*. The effects that the Digital Revolution has had on autocratic states are different as a consequence of differences in the way that the spread of information and political discourse are conducted in autocratic states.

order, the creation of alternative organizations and institutions, or system exit—are all direct, concrete actions that are relatively easy to observe and identify. Such methods have typically been the most direct means through which dissatisfied states could pursue the changes to the extant order that they desired. However, especially since the end of the Cold War, the continued preponderance of military power by the United States and the constraints placed on states by the liberal international institutions built by the United States during the unipolar moment make direct, forceful challenges to the extant order very costly. Drawing on the work of Stacie Goddard (2018a), I argue that the structural constraints placed on dissatisfied states today make the use of traditional, revisionist strategies of more direct forms of confrontation unlikely, and if pursued deliver only marginal benefits.

I then turn to the effects of the Digital Revolution and argue that the digital technologies employed by revisionist states enables them to pursue systemic change through other indirect means that are seemingly innocuous and effective. Digital technologies allow revisionist states (and a variety of other actors) to bypass foreign governments and directly engage in the political discourse in target countries. The primary goal of these activities is to foment and amplify political polarization, encourage a divergence of interests within and between target states, and to inhibit the formation of a coherent foreign policy. Drawing on recent contributions to the empirical literature, I demonstrate how the new digital strategies of revisionist states indicate that they have shifted gears from a more direct style of confrontation that we have seen in the past to a more continuous form of “influence campaigns.” Unlike more direct tactics that revisionists have historically employed (such as the capture of a territory, the creation of an alternative international organization, etc.), the new digital tactics operate on a continuous basis and with means that obfuscate the role of the initiating state.³

The objective of such operations is to exacerbate polarization in the political discourse of foreign publics in order to (1) inhibit the ability of target states to form coherent foreign policy agendas, (2) promote political discourse that questions or undermines international institutions, and (3) to exploit and expand political cleavages within adversary alliances. These digital strategies are further distinguished in that their success is not necessarily predicated on the achievement of hard and definite objectives such as the capture of a territory, or forcing states to acknowledge a change of rules in international institutions or organizations.

2. The Logic of Revisionism

At its core, the discourse on revisionism is predicated on a series of assumptions. The first is that, at any given time, there exists an international order (one, or more) that consists in the distribution of power among states, and contains an array of institutions, norms, rights, and responsibilities for which there is general acceptance or adherence among states.⁴ The second assumption is that within any given international order there exist states that are either supportive of the existing system and its institutions, and/or there are states that are dissatisfied with them (Wolfers 1968; Gilpin 1981). For those states that are satisfied, the rules, institutions, and distribution of power

³ While there are some similarities between my argument here and the discourse on “gray zone” activity (Mazarr 2015; Jackson 2017; Echevarria 2016), there are important distinctions. My focus here relies less on cyber activities such as hacking, or operational disruptions, and instead focuses more on the direct and concerted efforts to affect domestic political discourse within target countries, and to generate political narratives that legitimate the future use of force (Singer and Brooking 2018).

⁴ This definition is general, and drawn from a variety of sources including A.F.K. Organski (1968), and E.H. Carr (2001).

within the international system are in accordance with their broader interests, meaning that satisfied states prefer the status quo to any potential change. Conversely, the interests of dissatisfied states are not favorably represented in the extant order, while the rules and institutions of the extant international system act as a constraint that prevents dissatisfied states from pursuing their international interests in the manner that they see fit. Revisionist states therefore “seek values not presently enjoyed, whereas status-quo states seek the maintenance of such values,” including territory, status, access to markets, ideology, and the content of international laws, institutions, and organizations (Davidson 2006).⁵

However, even though a state might be extremely dissatisfied with the existing status quo, their dissatisfaction alone does not necessarily mean the dissatisfied state will initiate an attempt to revise it. It is highly likely that no state is entirely satisfied with every feature of the international system as it exists, yet very few states engage in concerted attempts to refashion international institutions and organizations in such a way as to fit their preferences. It is therefore of the utmost importance for the study of revisionism to determine when it is dissatisfied states will decide to undertake such attempts. International relations theorists have identified several conditions that can drive states to challenge the existing international order, through a variety of different means. For the purposes of this paper, I identify three conditions that have historically led states to engage in attempts to revise the extant system, and four general ways that states seek to achieve these changes. Crucially, these are representative of the conditions and methods that have been traditionally used by states that challenge the extant international order—it is not exhaustive of them. For the purposes of length, I provide only an overview of these conditions below. An expanded discussion is included in the Appendix.

Drawing on the work of a variety of IR scholars, there are three general conditions that affect when states will decide to challenge an existing international order. First, states can decide to challenge the extant international system *when the expected benefits are thought to exceed the expected costs* (Gilpin 1981; Fearon 1995). If the dissatisfied state believes that it will reap greater rewards from challenging the system than the costs that status-quo powers can inflict, it will likely do so. Second, dissatisfied states will likely challenge the extant international system *when the balance of (allied) resolve is greater for the dissatisfied state and its allies than for any coalition of status quo states* (Davidson 2006). In this case, the dissatisfied state (and its allies) believe they are willing to incur the costs of a systemic challenge longer than status quo powers are willing to incur costs to defend against it, even in spite of a material disadvantage. Third, dissatisfied states are likely to challenge the existing international order when it feels it is subjected to “status immobility”—that is, *when the dissatisfied state feels that the existing international order will not accommodate its rise* (Ward 2020). Here, perception of status immobility held by citizens within the dissatisfied state provide pressures for politicians to adopt aggressive foreign policy positions, creating momentum for an eventual challenge to the system.

Traditionally, dissatisfied states have used a number of different approaches in their attempts to modify the extant international order, four of which are identified here. First, dissatisfied states can attempt system change *through the use of force*. Historically this has involved attempts at hegemonic war (Gilpin 1981), although at lower levels the use of force in this way can include attempts to establish exclusive spheres of influence (Goddard 2018a). Second, dissatisfied states can pursue desired changes *through institutional engagement*, attempting to use internal mechanisms within existing institutions to achieve a change of rules (Cooley, Nexon, and

⁵ For distinctions between limited-aims and unlimited aims revisionists, see Schweller (1994). For additional and recent contributions to the discourse on revisionism, see Cooley, Nexon, and Ward (2019), and Goddard (2018b).

Ward 2019; Lipsky 2015; Lipsky 2018; Kaya 2017). Third, dissatisfied states can attempt to change the existing order *through the creation of new institutions and organizations*. Here, dissatisfied states can create alternative organizations to act as competitors to existing ones (Lipsky 2018). This competition can induce existing institutions to accept reforms desired by the dissatisfied state, or in the event that this fails the dissatisfied state can use the new institutions as a foundation to create a second international order altogether. Fourth and finally, dissatisfied states can opt for *system exit*, involving their formal withdrawal from existing institutions and either turning inwards toward autarky, establishing an enclave outside the existing order through imperial expansion, or challenging the order outright through a hegemonic war (Goddard 2018a).

2.1 Obstacles to pursuing traditional revisionist strategies in the current international environment

While dissatisfied states have regularly pursued changes to the international system in the past (with varying degrees of success), the present structure of the international system presents a serious obstacle to dissatisfied states that wish to alter the status quo. First, while the United States may be in relative economic and military decline relative to rising states—especially China—the US still retains a significant military advantage over any potential revisionist powers in terms of military strength, military spending, power projection capabilities, and alliance networks. Although the relative position of the United States is falling as other states become economically and militarily powerful, the United States (at least for the short term) remains the only state that “excels in all the component elements of state capability, conventionally defined as size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capacity, military might, and organizational-institutional ‘competence’” (Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth 2009).

Any dissatisfied states that mounted a direct military challenge to the United States for the ability to determine the content of the international system would face the serious possibility of outright defeat. Given that any attempt to launch a hegemonic struggle would require the revisionist to challenge the US and its allies in multiple theaters, the current preponderance of military capabilities of the United States and the restricted ability for dissatisfied states—even increasingly powerful states like China and Russia—to sustain protracted military operations across multiple theaters makes a revisionist challenge on this scale unlikely. The deterrent threat of nuclear weapons also poses a significant obstacle to the possibility of a hegemonic struggle, as a military challenge on such a scale faces the very real danger of nuclear escalation. The role of nuclear deterrence has even led some scholars to suggest that the cycle of hegemonic war as argued by Robert Gilpin has effectively been broken (Schweller and Pu 2011). Consequently, the potential costs of a direct military challenge to the existing US-led international order vastly outweigh the potential benefits, particularly as membership in the US-led order still provides dissatisfied states with a degree of security, stability, and the reasonable expectation of economic growth.⁶

While the pursuit of changes within pre-existing institutions might on the face of it seem an attractive avenue for dissatisfied states the process of institutional reform is lengthy—and, even if desired reforms are implemented, they rarely resolve all outstanding issues held by dissatisfied

⁶ Some might argue that state security under the present US-led international system is actually reduced, particularly if a state is an adversary of the United States. Indeed, the US has engaged regime change operations using its military on a number of occasions in recent years, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya (through the use of air power to support rebel groups on the ground), and an attempted regime change in Syria. Moreover, states such as Russia and China have argued that the United States routinely infringes on their sovereignty by attempting to interfere in their domestic political affairs. Some scholars have also argued that the United States often behaves as a revisionist state itself.

states. International institutions are often constructed by the dominant states of the day, and the rules included in formal institutions and organizations often favor the interests of the dominant states (Gilpin 1981). The process of institutional reform is shaped and affected by the political interests of dominant states, which often moderate the extent of reforms. As both Kaya (2017) and Lipsy (2018) noted, the success of reform campaigns is often dependent on the type of institution itself, where member states play an active role in shaping the trajectory and extent of any reforms that are enacted.⁷ Moreover, international institutions themselves often maintain their own staff, generate their own norms, and like other organizations can be resistant to efforts at reform. Inertia that originates from within institutions—the resistance to change that is typical of many large organizations—is yet another factor that can impede the process of enacting the reforms that are desired by dissatisfied states. Dissatisfied states therefore face several obstacles to achieving desired reforms through purely institutional means. The process of achieving desired reforms is lengthy, and the actual reforms that are implemented are often only partial at best. States that are fundamentally dissatisfied with core features of the contemporaneous liberal international order are unlikely to achieve desired reforms through internal institutional processes alone.

Dissatisfied states that are increasingly frustrated by the slow pace of reform within pre-existing international institutions and organizations can create alternative institutions that threaten serious competition, thereby threatening or eroding the influence that pre-existing institutions wield. The creation of alternative institutions and organizations creates additional outside options for other states that are critical of inequities within the rules of existing institutions, and can create powerful incentives to motivate the enactment of desired institutional reforms. That said, the institutions that tend to be the most vulnerable to this strategy are those that deal with issue areas that have low barriers to entry, or provide functions that are easily replicable by others (Lipsy 2015). Foundational institutions that have universal membership and which perform specialized roles in the international system provide few alternatives, and are typically extremely resistant to any possibility of reform.

The creation of alternative organizations can create competition to incentivize pre-existing institutions to undertake desired reforms, but attempts to pressure foundational institutions to adopt reforms through such means are likely to end in failure. While dissatisfied states could feasibly break with existing institutions and use any newly created organizations as a framework for an alternative international order, doing so incurs risks. First, such an attempt would be readily apparent and signal the dissatisfied state's intention to significantly challenge the existing international system. This could lead states that support the current international order to isolate the dissatisfied state, depriving it of the benefits of membership. Finally, any attempt to create a separate international institutional framework would require the support of many states, and at the present it does not appear likely that an alternative institutional framework would lead to widespread support within the international community—at least, not to the extent that numerous states would be willing to disengage from the liberal international system.

Rather than attempting to construct an alternative international order, dissatisfied states that are unwilling to remain under the constraints of the present liberal order can opt for system exit, either turning inwards toward autarky, or attempting to establish a sphere of influence that operates outside of the liberal institutional framework. Here again, the current structure of the international order makes even this strategy potentially costly. Withdrawing from the liberal institutional order would inhibit the ability of the dissatisfied state to fully partake in the global

⁷ Zangl, et al. (2016) have also noted the tendency of the WTO and IMF to be inconsistent in adapting their policies to reflect changes in power distributions among states.

economy, hampering its growth even further. Meanwhile, attempts by a dissatisfied state to carve out a sphere of influence that would operate outside of the liberal institutional framework runs considerable risks.

Such a move would likely involve some degree of military coercion, and run the risk of provoking a military response. Attempts to establish a sphere of influence through economic means are unreliable, where Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution against the pro-Russian former president Viktor Yanukovich stands as a ready example. At the farthest end, dissatisfied states that opt for system exit have launched hegemonic wars in a bid to attain mastery over their regions (and/or the world system itself). States such as Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan are recent historical examples. Here again, though, the costs of attempting to revise the international system through force of arms is practically doomed to failure as a consequence of continued US predominance of power over the short- to moderate-term, and due to general support for the liberal institutional order by states more broadly. If Kenneth Waltz (2010) is correct in his argument that a state's principal interest is for its own survival, any attempt to employ hegemonic violence to forcibly change the liberal international order would be tantamount to willful self-destruction. The devastation that could result from a general war is so great that even deeply dissatisfied states are unlikely to risk the annihilation of their societies in an attempt to amend the liberal international order.

2.2 The problem of change under contemporary structural conditions

The above discussion has served to illustrate a crucial point. The structural constraints placed on states by the contemporary liberal international order mean that even highly dissatisfied states are unlikely to attempt direct challenges to the extant liberal international order. While alternative avenues for securing change are technically possible, in her article "Embedded Revisionism: Networks, Institutions, and Challenges to World Order," Stacie Goddard (2018a) contends that dissatisfied states' calculus and strategies for pursuing changes to the international system are mediated both by institutional constraints, and by the dissatisfied state's network position in relation to other states. Put more simply, the specific network of a revisionist state's relations with other states, along with the institutions and organizations in which it is a member, constrain what kind of strategies the revisionist is likely to deploy in its attempts to modify the status quo. As Goddard argues:

institutional orders have powerful, independent effects on revisionism. They shift the costs and benefits of revisionist behavior, making some types of revisionism more attractive than others. They alter the opportunities and constraints revisionists face in pursuit of their aims. Under some conditions, institutional position can even transform a state's interests and identity. (ibid., 767)

A state's network position is also important, as "[n]etworks provide states with power and influence within the institutional order... affect how revisionists mobilize alliances... [and] augment or constrain economic resources" while also providing or denying "revisionists the cultural resources to justify the transformation of the institutional order" (ibid., 768). By assessing a state's position based on (1) the degree to which it is embedded in existing institutions (low versus high), and (2) the type of "brokerage position"⁸ that it occupies (low versus high), Goddard obtains a two-by-two table that differentiates between integrated revisionists, bridging revisionists,

⁸ In Goddard's (2018a, 764, 771-772) account, brokerage refers to the degree to which a state acts as a bridge between different networks of states.

isolated revisionists, and rogue revisionists. The degree of institutional embeddedness and the state's linkages with other states constrain the kind of strategies that dissatisfied states will employ in their attempts to change the existing system—or if the state will try to change the system at all.

According to Goddard's framework, integrated revisionists (states that have high institutional access but low brokerage) attempt to achieve change through institutional engagement and an internal process of reform (*ibid.*, 772-773). The process of institutional engagement is slow, and the reforms that are implemented often fall short of the desires of even powerful dissatisfied states. Bridging revisionists (states that have high institutional access and high brokerage) have greater flexibility in pursuing outside options even while attempting to achieve changes through institutional engagement, and “pull states toward ‘rule-based revolution’” (*ibid.*, 773-774). In the current international system China most closely resembles this ideal type. Again, however, there are significant problems with actually pursuing such a strategy. Even with its growing power and capabilities China has only had limited success in achieving desired reforms in international institutions, and as Lipsey (2015; 2018) has highlighted, it is considerably more difficult to achieve desired reforms in institutions that are cornerstones of the existing international order.

Isolated revisionists (states with low institutional access and high brokerage) have few institutional resources at their disposal and are unlikely to pursue institutional engagement as a strategy for change. Isolated revisionists will therefore pursue system exit, seeking the establishment of a sphere of influence (Russia) outside the liberal institutional order (Goddard 2018a, 774-775). In practice, though, system exit remains costly. While Russia has successfully increased its influence in its immediate vicinity through low-level, clandestine military action—the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Russia's involvement in eastern Ukraine since 2014—economic sanctions have damaged the Russian economy, and its local sphere of influence hardly qualifies as exclusive. The wider use of the Russian military to expand or tighten Russia's influence in the region runs the risk of further escalation. The US and its allies are already supplying Ukrainian forces with advanced weaponry, and a wider military operation would cost Russia more men and material for an outcome whose benefits are uncertain at best, even in spite of its deep dissatisfaction.

Rogue revisionists (states with low institutional access and low brokerage) lack the ability to achieve changes through institutional engagement and might lack the resources to establish their own sphere of influence (North Korea) (*ibid.*, 775). In the case of materially weak rogue revisionists, the dissatisfied state turns inward, opting to shore up its position internally while lacking the resources to impose its will beyond its borders. For powerful rogue revisionists, the turn inward to autarky often requires a project of imperial conquest (*ibid.*). Imperial Japan is representative of a powerful rogue revisionist, as its attempts to become self-reliant required unfettered access to oil and other natural resources in east Asia and the Pacific. The military conquests of Imperial Japan were intended to secure the territory and resources necessary for self-sufficiency. For powerful rogue revisionists the last resort is ultimately hegemonic warfare. While the pursuit of autarky is certainly viable for states under these structural conditions, the costs of attempting an imperial expansion or of waging a hegemonic war would be exceptionally high under present conditions, even for powerful dissatisfied states. Not only would the aggressor have to contend with the existence of military alliances and a US military that remains world-class, but the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons would make the costs of such an action exceptionally high. Under current structural conditions, the only practical option that dissatisfied states in this position have is to turn inward and use the threat of military force to deter foreign states from attempting

to impose regime change. While this might shore up the government's position within the dissatisfied state it does astonishingly little to effect change in the international system itself.

It is clear that the structure of the international system places constraints on dissatisfied states, modifying if and how they might pursue changes to the international system. Goddard's framework is compelling, and while it offers logical pathways for dissatisfied states to pursue desired changes the current structure of the liberal international order makes even these pathways difficult to pursue in practice. Dissatisfied states might be able to achieve limited institutional reforms over time, though these are unlikely to resolve all outstanding issues. It is even possible to try to establish a limited sphere of influence as Russia has attempted. Yet even for a powerful state like Russia, such a sphere would hardly be exclusive, and the risks involved with attempting to create an imperial sphere are considerably higher. The fundamental problem for dissatisfied states today is that traditional strategies for pursuing changes in the international system simply do not work in the way that they need to. This is made all the more difficult because the very means that dissatisfied states have previously used to alter the structure of the international system are the very means which the present system makes impossible.

While Goddard's analysis is incisive and describes the predicaments faced by dissatisfied states with clarity, its primary detractor is also the precise problem faced by dissatisfied states today: given the overriding constraints of the existing international system Goddard's theory has no internal means for credibly describing how structural change can occur. As Goddard herself states:

While states have some control over their relations, they face significant limits on their power to determine their network positions. Most obviously, the construction of ties is always a two-way street: states may seek ties, but find their efforts to build relationships rebuffed. To make matters more complicated, states rarely build ties on virgin ground. Network ties, once formed, are sticky. Even when new ties are created, they 'do not replace the old but are layered atop prior patterns.' Where and how revisionists build ties thus will be highly path dependent. And while revisionists can control ties at the micro-level, *they cannot determine or even anticipate the systemic evolution of their network position.* (Goddard 2018a, 768, emphasis added)

The above passage is crucial for Goddard's argument, given that it presumes a strong degree of path dependency in the structure of the international order, which is partially what creates effective constraints on revisionist states in the first place (and as I will argue later, it is precisely this path dependency which the new digital strategies of revisionists can degrade). With current institutional and network constraints the strategies that dissatisfied states have historically used to instigate changes in the international system are either too costly to pursue, too lengthy, or produce only marginal improvements. Absent some other means of altering current structural conditions—either in international institutions or states' network positions—dissatisfied states will be unable to pursue changes in the international system.

Over the past two decades, however, the Digital Revolution has unfolded, bringing unprecedented changes to the nature and structure of political communication across the world. Harnessing new technologies and drawing insight from the way in which political communication occurs in the digital environment, dissatisfied states have developed and deployed new techniques which can credibly alter the international system. The new tools and techniques enabled by the Digital Revolution have altered the balance of costs and benefits in the pursuit of altering the international system. Moreover, these digital tools and techniques exploit transnational and decentralized communication networks, bypassing state mediation and allowing dissatisfied states

to actively shape the course of political deliberation in target states. By shaping the process of political deliberation, exploiting and encouraging political polarization, and influencing which policies and issue areas become politically salient, dissatisfied states can use new digital techniques to create or expand cleavages in international alliances, undermine public support for cooperative foreign policies, and encourage states to question the value of existing institutions. In short, the Digital Revolution has provided dissatisfied states wholly new mechanisms which can be used to alter levels of institutional support and the network positions of adversaries in ways that are advantageous to their interests, without having to rely on traditional revisionist strategies.

3. Revisionism in the Digital Age

The Digital Revolution is one of the most fundamental transformations that has occurred in human history, and full extent of its influence on the lives of everyday people only began to be felt relatively recently. While the development of digital technology stretches back to the Cold War, it was not until the mid to late 1990s that relatively larger numbers of private computers began to be connected to a budding World Wide Web (Ryan 2010).⁹ Even then, the emerging Internet was not user-friendly. It was not until the development of a “user-friendly” Web 2.0 in the early 2000s that widespread use among Internet users without much technical knowledge began to occur. The Web 2.0 was also unique in that, for the first time, it allowed everyday users to produce content without needing strong coding skills (Alexander 2017, 29-34). The most significant feature of the new Web 2.0 is noted by Bryan Alexander, in that it “allow[ed] multiple channels of communication between site visitors, site creators, and other parties” and which “encourage[d] such connections through wiki editing, comment threads, media embedding, tagging, Facebook Liking, Digg and Reddit services,” user comments, hashtags, and links to additional websites (ibid., 30-31). Meanwhile, many of the most widely-used and well-know technologies and social media platforms which helped to usher in the new age of digital mass engagement only emerged in the mid-2000s, and even then, only gained larger userbases in the early 2010s.¹⁰

The recentness of this transformation is striking, not only because it has altered the everyday lives of individuals so deeply in such a short period of time, but also because it is a massive change that has occurred *after* the development of the core international relations theory corpus. Perhaps the most recent, major theoretical contribution to the core of IR theory is Wendt’s *Social Theory of International Politics*, which was published in 1999 – well before the advent of social media and the extension of digital technology into the lives of everyday people. Consequently, the primary effects of the Digital Revolution have unfolded after the development of major components of IR theory, and yet the impact of the Digital Revolution has received relatively little systematic attention across political science in general and IR theory in particular. Given the significant impact that the Digital Revolution has had on the process of political communication, a theory which analyzes the effects of the Digital Revolution on social and political life is both badly needed and long overdue.

⁹ As an indication of just how much the Internet has changed in a relatively short period of time, commercial activity on the Internet was explicitly prohibited until early 1995, due to the National Science Foundation’s Acceptable Usage Policy (Ryan 2010, 120).

¹⁰ The first smartphone was developed by Apple and released in 2007. Though founded in 2004, Facebook was only made open to the general public since 2006, and first reached 500 million members in 2010 (Wauters 2010).

3.1 The effects of the Digital Revolution: A brief overview

The theory of the Digital Revolution that I develop centers on two moves. The first is a theory of how the Digital Revolution has altered the microfoundations of political communication across the world in three important ways: (1) private individuals are now producers of vast quantities of information, not just consumers of information; (2) the distinction between domestic and foreign activity in the digital environment is blurred; and (3) there is the dual condition of information overabundance and information ambiguity. The second theoretical move addresses how these changes have affected the course and conduct of politics in open societies and liberal democracies specifically.¹¹ In particular, I argue that the effects of the Digital Revolution have contributed to high levels of political polarization in liberal democracies, leading to more extreme policy positions from different political parties and more extreme changes in policies when the party in power changes.

The individual as producer and consumer of information

For the majority of human history private individuals have overwhelmingly been consumers of information, rather than producers of it. States, governments, and large organizations have traditionally had the resources necessary to create and store information, circulate publications, or transmit knowledge (Kovarik 2018). While previous revolutions in technology, such as the printing press, the mass production of paper, and the development of the radio contributed to the creation of mass media in the early 20th century, the financial and material resources needed to make widespread use of these advancements meant that governments and powerful organizations remained the most widespread producers and transmitters of information (Smil 2005). Meanwhile, much of the “information” that was produced by individuals was lost. Conversations held among friends about political matters were rarely recorded, while governments and media organizations functioned as gatekeepers regarding information that was deemed of public relevance.

The Digital Revolution has revolutionized the ability to produce, store, and transmit information. Crucially, private individuals now produce vast amounts of information in the form of emails, text messages, social media posts, along with audio-video and photographic information (van Dijck 2013). Much of this information makes its way onto digital media platforms, enabling private individuals to share information—especially political information—with a multitude of individuals (van Dijck 2013). Information of this sort is contributing to the construction of a vast and quickly growing digital public record, capturing discussions among and between everyday individuals, including and especially their political views. A primary consequence of this transition is that governments and states can no longer serve as effective gatekeepers of information with respect to their publics, and everyday individuals play a crucial part in shaping the content of digital public deliberation.

The blurring of the distinction between foreign and domestic

With the development of the “Web 2.0,” private individuals across the world began to act within this transnational digital ecosystem, creating and contributing to a wide variety of blogs and forums. By the mid-2000s several companies (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, MySpace) created platforms which allowed private individuals the capacity to create and contribute to user-generated content, and through mechanisms such as “friends” and “followers,” “likes” and “retweets,” allowed such content to be viewed and engaged with by a wide variety of others, both

¹¹ In this project I do not address how the Digital Revolution has affected non-democracies and autocracies.

foreign and domestic. Today, information created by private individuals through digital means not only reaches a substantially larger audience than in the past, but the ability of this information to be rapidly transmitted abroad has also increased. Events that are politically salient in one country can rapidly be taken up as an issue in foreign countries, and quickly attain political salience abroad.

Information overabundance and ambiguity

The Digital Revolution facilitated the creation of an immense digital public record, with platforms allowing individuals to create their own content, voice their political viewpoints, and engage in public deliberation with friends and strangers, fellow nationals and foreigners alike. The information contained and produced by these digital public ecosystems is immense. In a 2007 interview, Mark Zuckerberg argued that Facebook began to take on the role of a massive publisher, with individuals posting and sharing close to 300 million stories a day, with Facebook “publishing more in a day than most other publications have in the history of their existence” (Singer and Brooking 2018, 46). In 2007, Twitter users collectively sent roughly 5,000 tweets each day: by 2015 that number had grown to 500 million per day (*ibid.*, 48-49)—a five orders of magnitude difference in only eight years. While photographs once required film and a development process to generate images (Mayer-Schönberger 2011), digital photography has made the process of generating (and editing) high-quality images inexpensive, virtually instantaneous, and exceedingly common. By 2017, Instagram *alone* “was adding more than 60 million photographs to its archives each day” (Singer and Brooking 2018, 49). As P.W. Singer and Emerson Brooking summarize nicely:

The amount of data being gathered about the world around us and then put online is astounding. In a minute, Facebook sees the creation of 500,000 new comments, 293,000 new statuses, and 450,000 new photos; YouTube the uploading of more than 400 hours of video; and Twitter the posting of more than 300,000 tweets. And behind this lies billions more dots of added data and metadata, such as a friend tagging who appeared in a Facebook photo or the system marking what cellphone tower the message was transmitted through. In the United States, the size of the ‘digital universe’ doubles roughly every three years. (Singer and Brooking 2018, 58)

Much of this information is publicly available, and forms a vast public transcript that is (for the most part) publicly accessible and searchable.

The vast amount of information that is now available makes it extremely difficult for everyday individuals to know what information is true, accurate, or reliable, not even to mention discern the authenticity of those that provide information. The wide availability of information—much of which can be contradictory—can make assessing the credibility of information difficult, a condition that has led some to characterize the present era as the “misinformation age,” the age of “post-truth,” where “alternative facts” produce multiple contradictory political realities (Pomerantsev 2019; O’Connor and Weatherall 2019; Pond 2020; Kalpokas 2019; Jankowicz 2020, 151-152). Posts and statements made by digital actors can be difficult to assess for authenticity; and even then, information that is “factually true” can be presented in a way that reveals a political bias, or is designed to lead the consumer to a particular view or conclusion.¹² Digital technologies provide myriad ways for individuals, groups, and states to mask their activities (Jardine 2018;

¹² As will be discussed later, propaganda and influence campaigns used by Russia have been found to rely more heavily on the presentation of factual information in a slanted way, rather than cultivate or spread outright fabricated content.

Sardá 2019), or manufacture seemingly authentic users or purveyors of information. A Twitter user or a Facebook account can claim to be a person from a particular area, when, in fact, such an account could be automated and run by foreign nationals, organizations, or state-affiliated actors.

The Digital Revolution and political polarization

A growing number of political scientists and communications scholars have linked new media technologies to the growth and intensification of political polarization in many liberal democracies (Thuber and Yoshinaka 2015; Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017). While scholars have noted that political polarization has been on the rise since at least the 1980s (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018), political polarization has grown particularly severe and intense in the past decade. Affective polarization—the tendency to view opposing political opponents as adversaries rather than competitors—has become particularly acute (Enders and Armaly 2019; Iyengar, et al. 2019). In the US there has been a precipitous decline in the rates of cross-party voting, while “stable party divisions have extended to independents and the politically inattentive” (Smidt 2017), leading to a disappearance of moderate voters (Abramowitz 2010). Meanwhile there is mounting evidence that the electoral success of radical political parties leads to ideological polarization (Bischof and Wagner 2019).

As I elaborate in the project’s preceding chapters, the incentive structure of social media platforms and the emerging hybrid media system facilitate the growth and intensification in a number of ways.¹³ The incentive structure of many platforms privilege material that is “spreadable” (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2018), while algorithms promote content that is most likely to generate widespread engagement, including political content that is emotionally-charged, controversial, or polarizing (van Dijck 2013; Karpf 2016, 102-103; Serrano-Puche 2020). While the algorithms used by many different digital platforms curate search queries and offer information based on individuals’ typical search patterns, they also provide content controls that individuals can use to limit their exposure to things that they don’t wish to see (Sunstein 2017). This creates selective exposure effects, where individuals (particularly individuals that hold more extreme political views) limit the number of avenues through which they receive information. This can create information echo chambers where individuals are primarily exposed to viewpoints that agree with their predispositions,¹⁴ and which can drive politically like-minded individuals to hold even more extreme political views (Sunstein 2009). Crucially, the digital strategies used by revisionists leverage all the effects of the Digital Revolution listed above in their attempts to modify the extant liberal international order.

3.2 Digital technologies and the cost-benefit calculus of digital revisionism

A primary determinant of whether a dissatisfied state will attempt to revise the international system is the degree to which the expected benefits are weighed against the expected costs. As was previously argued, the structure of the liberal international system imposes tight constraints on states, and even extremely dissatisfied states face the prospect of extreme and unacceptable costs if they rely on traditional methods to attempt system change. However, the Digital Revolution has altered the cost-benefit calculus of pursuing system change by providing new avenues that revisionists can use in their attempts to achieve system change.

¹³ For more on the hybrid media system, see Andrew Chadwick (2017).

¹⁴ A recent experiment by Chen, et al. (2021) found that the social network structure and information environment on digital platforms can lead unbiased agents into echo chambers with strong political biases, while also noting the role that social bots play in producing such an information environment.

First, the costs associated with using digital technologies is low, even for states with relatively modest material means at their disposal. The cost of running even moderately sophisticated digital operations can run from the tens to hundreds of millions of dollars, depending on the size, scale, and centralization of the operation. In relative terms, level of investment necessary to conduct digital strategies is low compared to the costs of expanding conventional military capacity or investing in advanced military hardware. For example, the cost of an F-35A—the next-generation fighter developed by the US and Lockheed Martin—only recently fell to the price of \$80.2 million per aircraft in 2019 (Insinna 2019), and costs roughly \$36,000 per hour to operate with “projected lifetime cost of \$1.7 trillion” (Gould and Insinna 2021). The costs associated with such expenditures are difficult even for the US to sustain, let alone most of the dissatisfied states at the present time. In contrast, the budget for Russia Today (RT)—Russia’s state-sponsored news service—amounted to \$300 million in 2012, and claims to reach over 600 million people throughout 100 countries, including a weekly viewership of 11 million and a potential viewership of 85 million in the US (Carter and Carter 2021, 14). Here again, the relatively modest cost and expansive reach of digital strategies make them extremely attractive as tools to pursue revisionist activity, rather than incurring the high costs and high uncertainty of a direct military confrontation.

Second, the use of digital technologies as a tool of geopolitical competition is far less likely to cross any red lines which could result in military escalation (Mazzar 2015; Echevarria 2016). The use of digital technologies makes the problem of attribution more difficult, giving revisionist states more leeway to conduct their operations while maintaining a degree of plausible deniability (Segal 2017; Kello 2018; Mazarr 2015; Jackson 2017; Echevarria 2016). Third, traditional strategies for revising the extant order require a high degree of visibility and transparency, using methods that are institutionally or geographically bounded. Attempts to reform existing institutions make use of internal institutional mechanisms; the creation of new organizations requires formal announcements (it’s hard to have an alternative if nobody else knows about it); attempts to establish a sphere of influence require economic coercion, and/or the use of force, whereas the start of a hegemonic war is perhaps the most transparently visible act of all. The use of digital technologies is not only geographically unbounded—they can reach even the domestic populations of adversary countries in ways that can be difficult or impossible to detect—but digital techniques also help obfuscate the ultimate aims of such activity, making it more difficult for target states to devise effective or appropriate countermeasures.

The Digital Revolution has therefore changed the cost-benefit calculus for dissatisfied states regarding if or when to attempt to change the existing system. The new techniques that the Digital Revolution has enabled are low-cost, low-risk, difficult to detect, and difficult to deter. Given the profound structural constraints that the extant liberal international order places on dissatisfied states, the use of new digital strategies provides an attractive alternative to traditional strategies for achieving change, with comparatively low barriers to entry. In terms of strategy, the disparity in costs and risks that exist between undertaking traditional revisionist strategies as compared to digital revisionist strategies means that the digital variety will almost certainly become a core component of revisionists’ attempts to modify the international system moving forward.

Thus far my argument has established that the digital strategies available to dissatisfied states are attractive in terms of initiating attempts to change the existing order. What remains is to demonstrate that the digital strategies which dissatisfied states deploy stand a credible chance at producing systemic change over time. In the following section I first describe the digital tools used

by revisionists in their attempts to induce systemic change, after which I describe how these efforts can credibly lead to changes in the international system over time.

3.3 The digital tools of revisionist states

Revisionist states make use of a variety of digital techniques in concert, which form a cohesive strategy to shape the domestic political preferences of adversary states. First, dissatisfied states create outward-facing propaganda which produces political narratives that cast the dissatisfied state in a favorable way, or which provide fodder designed to exacerbate political tensions abroad. Second, dissatisfied states employ botnets—networks of computers infected with malware which allow for their remote control—to circulate information, building up particular political narratives while obfuscating their point of origin. Used in tandem, dissatisfied states mount continual influence campaigns, distorting the free marketplace of ideas in liberal states by amplifying controversial political narratives and promoting political viewpoints that are advantageous to the dissatisfied state’s interests. While my analysis deals first and foremost with Russian digital activity in particular, these techniques and capabilities are not Russia-specific and can be used just as easily by other dissatisfied states in the international system.¹⁵ Consequently, while Russia is particularly effective in its digital campaigns to influence domestic political preferences in adversary states, other dissatisfied states face few obstacles in adopting a similar strategy.

Outward-facing propaganda

Of the states that are the most dissatisfied with the extant liberal international order, the majority are autocracies, some form of non-democracy, or mixed-regimes (states that have both democratic and non-democratic features). Autocratic states in particular regularly censor media and the flow of information within their own borders, and state-sponsored media outlets routinely publish and circulate information that casts the state’s government in a favorable light. Beyond this, state-controlled media in autocratic states can serve as an official mouthpiece of the government, promoting news and political narratives that are beneficial to the aims and interests of the government. As one facet of their digital strategy, revisionist states use state-sponsored media outlets both domestically and abroad to create and circulate information that contains a political slant (Jankowicz 2020).

Crucially, the majority of the stories promoted by autocratic states are often based on factual information (Kalathil 2020). The outright fabrication of information would detract from its believability, and the use of slanted factual information is more useful because it is more difficult to combat—it is information that is *true*, after all. Mis- and disinformation that are based on fabrications can be more easily disproven by fact-checking, and the fact that such information can be disproven can discredit the outlets that dispense them. This could harm the credibility of outlets that are vital to the ability of autocratic states to disseminate and circulate their propaganda. Consequently, the use of factual information as the basis of most influence operation makes tactical sense. The factual basis of the information lends a degree of credibility to the politically-slanted claims in any dis- or misinformation that is dispensed. The slantedness of these sorts of information operations is critical. Arguments based on entirely fabricated information can be more reliably disproven, but interpretations that are based on politically-slanted information cannot be falsified

¹⁵ Shanthi Kalathil (2020) notes the digital strategies deployed by Russia are equally capable of being adopted by other authoritarian digital actors such as China and Iran. While these techniques are available to both China and Iran, the current focus of their digital strategies are reflections of their states’ “domestic experience with social media censorship and manipulation” leading to different aims in influence operations (ibid., 37).

in the same way. The aim here is to make whether or not you agree with the information a *political* question, not a question of fact versus fiction. In a polarized partisan environment, mis- and disinformation based on slanted information is useful not only because it cannot be directly disproven, but also because any attempt to do so can be labeled as an attempt to politicize an issue, thereby making the whole matter into a question of partisan opinion, and not a matter of fact.

The stories sponsored by state-affiliated news outlets are often initially released and circulated in the media ecosystems of developing countries, where robust journalistic practices and information vetting are often lacking (Global Engagement Center 2020). Once these promoted stories have entered the general media ecosystem, they are amplified on social media platforms, eventually garnering attention from mainstream media outlets in tertiary countries (*ibid.*), a process which often relies on the use of bots and botnets. From here, the propaganda attains an air of credibility as a consequence of its being picked up by mainstream media outlets, which also obscures the story's point of origin. Eventually, stories are picked up and integrated into the media cycles of liberal democracies. As will be emphasized later, this is striking not only because propaganda of this sort reaches a surprisingly large number of people in liberal democracies (and especially the US), but because it can also substantively and significantly shape the political views and policy preferences of those that are exposed to it.¹⁶ For now, though, it is crucial to illustrate how bots and botnets are used both to amplify the reach of such propaganda campaigns, as well as to distort the information environment on digital platforms so that specific lines of political discourse are elevated above others.

Bots and botnets

Bots are computer programs that are designed to automatically perform a given task, where botnets are networks of interconnected bots. Most often, bots are malware on infected computers and other networked devices throughout the world, and are designed to operate without the knowledge of the owners or users of infected machines (Global Commission on Internet Governance 2017).¹⁷ Bots can perform a wide variety of functions (Dubois and McKelevy 2019),¹⁸ but when employed by dissatisfied states they become a means of spreading disinformation, whereas botnets are used to coordinate influence campaigns in order to promote or distort particular lines of political discourse.

Bots and botnets are used both to amplify and spread disinformation from state-affiliated news outlets (Global Engagement Center 2020), but also to selectively promote and amplify political views within foreign publics which align with the interests of dissatisfied states (Wooley and Guilbeault 2019). In the former case, networks of bots masquerading as real individuals begin to circulate a news story containing disinformation on digital platforms. Real individuals then begin to repost and circulate the stories that were originally circulated by the botnet. As the story begins to gain prominence on digital platforms, mainstream media begins to take note and the circulation of the story on social media platforms becomes a story on mainstream media outlets,

¹⁶ See Carter and Carter (2021).

¹⁷ The proliferation of networked devices and the expansion of the “internet of things” has drastically increased the number of machines and devices that are susceptible to malware. In one particularly astounding example, hackers utilized an internet-connected fish tank to hack a North American casino, sending approximately 10 GB of data to a device in Finland (Schiffer 2017; Mathews 2017).

¹⁸ On Twitter, a particularly whimsical bot account with the handle @Deer_ebooks posts humorous deer- and animal-themed content, having made more than 47,500 tweets since joining Twitter in October 2014, and having gained more than 5,500 followers (as of October 2021). Though fanciful, quirky, and unusually candid this bot account represents one of the more innocuous and lighthearted ways that bots can be used on digital platforms.

often without citing the original source material (the news outlet sponsored by the revisionist state). At this point the story becomes a major issue, being picked up by large numbers of real people— at this point the original disinformation has become a part of mainstream political discourse. The second way that bots and botnets affect the course and conduct of political deliberation is through the amplification of political speech from the political margins and elevating it to the point of political salience.

Empirical analyses of bots and botnets have revealed not only an astounding presence on digital platforms more generally, but that botnets also play a substantial role in shaping what political issues gain salience and how political information is shared on digital platforms. Taking the US 2016 election as a case, researchers managed to identify roughly 400,000 bot accounts on Twitter alone, “two-thirds of them in favor of Donald Trump” (Singer and Brooking 2019, 143). As Singer and Brookings argue:

Twitter’s analysis found that bots under the control of the Internet Research Agency... generated 2.2 million ‘election-related tweets’ in just the final three months of the election. In the final month and a half before the election, Twitter concluded that Russian-generated propaganda had been delivered to users 474.7 million times. (ibid., 144)

Meanwhile, “Facebook’s internal analysis estimated that 126 million users saw Russian disinformation on its platform during the 2016 campaign... [and] Russian bots directly retweeted @realDonaldTrump 469,537 times” (ibid.). Finally, the conclusions drawn from Wooley and Douglas’s (2019) analysis of the 2016 election cycle were sobering:

The results of our quantitative analysis confirm that bots reached positions of measurable influence during the 2016 US election. Our k-core decomposition reveals that bots occupied both the periphery and the core of political discussion over Twitter. As members of the core, bots are in a position where they are capable of diffusing information that sets the agenda over Twitter. Betweenness centrality measures indicate that bots also reached positions where they were able to control the flow of information between users. We then showed how bots were, in fact, retweeted by humans, adding further evidence to the finding that bots influenced meaningful political discussion over Twitter... Bots infiltrated the core of the political discussion over Twitter, where they were capable of disseminating propaganda at mass scale. Bots also reached positions of high betweenness centrality, where they played a powerful role in determining the flow of information among users. (Wooley and Douglas 2019, 206-207).¹⁹

And these findings are by no means restricted to the United States. The use of these techniques has been detected in several liberal democratic states, including the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Poland, Ukraine, and Estonia (Singer and Brooking 2019; Kello 2018; Jankowicz 2020).

The capacity for bots and botnets to play such a profound role in the shaping of domestic political discourse is great. More troublingly, the use of these techniques is not limited solely to election seasons, but instead form part of a continuous campaign through which revisionist states directly shape not only the political processes²⁰ of their adversaries, but the very conditions in

¹⁹ It is not my intent to suggest that Donald Trump’s election in 2016 was illegitimate, or that “Russia put Trump in the White House.” Instead, my aim is to emphasize the full degree to which foreign actors—especially revisionist states—are able to use new digital technologies to affect the domestic political process in adversary countries.

²⁰ The processes that I refer to here intersect with the literature on democratic deliberation in the political theory literature, in addition to the “boundary problem” which involves itself with where and how democratic polities draw the border of the political unit. The boundary problem in particular is complicated by political discourse on digital

which political discussions take place on digital platforms. To put it slightly differently, the digital techniques deployed by revisionist states not only shape the ideas that individuals have in the digital deliberative sphere but they also substantively shape the conditions of the deliberative sphere *itself*. Doing so provides additional plausible deniability while also making it difficult for liberal states to devise countermeasures against this sort of influence (Polyakova 2020). States that are dissatisfied with the extant international system can, have, and will use such techniques to affect the domestic political discourse in their adversaries in ways that further their interests.

3.4 The aims and intent of digital revisionist activity: Polarization, the distortion of domestic political discourse, and the construction of alternative political narratives

Revisionist states that employ digital influence operations pursue a number of objectives. First, the digital techniques used by revisionists amplify the naturally polarizing tendencies of digital political communication within liberal democracies. Second, if possible, these strategies aim to promote specific lines of policy discourse which are amenable to the interests of revisionist states (i.e., policies that revisionists see as beneficial from foreign policy perspective). Third, the digital strategies seek to exploit and expand domestic cleavages in target states, with the intent of increasing political discord within the target and (if possible) among states in adversary alliance blocs. Fourth, and finally, the combined effects of these strategies can (whether intended or not) decrease support for multilateral international institutions, and to undermine the strength and coherence of the liberal international order more generally.

The general aim of digital and influence operations by revisionists are consistent with the concept of New Generation Warfare that was first advocated by Russian General Valery Gerasimov (Conley, et al. 2016; Jasper 2020). Also known as *gibridnaya voyna* (hybrid warfare), the Russian concept is distinctive from the US understanding of the term (Fridman 2018, 93). While the US has typically viewed hybrid warfare as a combination of irregular and regular military tactics within a given battlespace, the Russian understanding of hybrid warfare seeks to avoid direct battlefield engagements with adversaries altogether. As argued by Ofer Fridman:

[t]he aim underlying the theory of *gibridnaya voyna* is to destroy the political cohesion of an adversary from inside by employing a carefully crafted hybrid of non-military means and methods that amplify political, ideological, economic and other social polarisations within an adversary's society, thus leading to its internal collapse. (Ibid., 96)

The Gerasimov Doctrine, and *gibridnaya voyna*, therefore place emphasis on decidedly non-military means, relying instead on tactics of subversion in order to destabilize, polarize, and cripple their adversaries from within. The success of these tactics requires that any influence operations or campaigns of subversion explicitly target the domestic population of adversary states, creating or exploiting cleavages within to paralyze the adversary and inhibit its ability to conduct a clear and coherent foreign policy. The Gerasimov Doctrine and *gibridnaya voyna* are emblematic of a shift towards information warfare, influence operations, and political warfare, where the legitimate democratic processes of the target state are exploited in order to harness the “protest potential” of the domestic population (Klein 2018). If military force were to be used at all it would only be applied in the latter stages of this process, and even then, it would take the form of limited, covert operations as opposed to the deployment of large battlegroups (Fridman 2018; Jasper 2020).

platforms, as the decentralized and transnational features of digital platforms prevents democracies from establishing a coherent division between internal political discourse and external political interference.

At their most fundamental, attempts to subvert or destabilize adversary states are not a new phenomenon. Efforts geared toward subversion, propaganda campaigns, and political warfare have all been practiced in the past, and featured heavily in the tactics deployed by the Soviet Union in its Cold War contest with the US. The novelty (and danger) of the new digital strategies of revisionists does not extend from originality in their purpose – instead, it comes from the methods through which such campaigns are conducted, and how these methods allow revisionists to directly engage with, substantively influence, and intentionally shape the digital political discourse within target countries.²¹ As illustrated in the previous section, the botnets deployed by revisionist states succeeded in substantively shaping the way in which political information flowed among individuals on Twitter, enabling the botnet to selectively promote lines of political discourse favorable to the aims of revisionists (Wooley and Douglas 2019; Singer and Brooking 2019). The new digital strategies deployed by revisionist states are therefore different both in kind and degree than the “active measures” of the Soviet Union.²² Digital technologies have enabled revisionist states to conduct influence operations and engage in mis- and disinformation campaigns at a scale far beyond what radio or print could provide in previous decades – all while feeding troves of data back for analysis, allowing for continual operational refinement.

Recent empirical analyses have also begun to demonstrate that these digital strategies, influence operations, and propaganda campaigns have begun to bear fruit. A survey experiment conducted by Erin Baggot Carter and Brett L. Carter (2021) found that propaganda circulated by RT (formerly Russia Today) produced significant effects within US citizens that were substantively meaningful, and which held across party lines. Carter and Carter argue that through RT, the Russian government sought to “shape citizens’ voting preferences” to support candidates, movements, or policies that were either pro-Russian in character or which would otherwise further Russia’s foreign policy interests. Additionally, the propaganda and political messaging deployed by RT is also designed to lend credence to partisan political messaging in democratic states, thereby making overtly partisan political claims seem more factual and plausible (*ibid.*, 9) while simultaneously driving further political polarization (Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018). Carter and Carter’s survey experiment is one of the first studies that has sought to analyze the causal effect of foreign propaganda campaigns on voter preferences and agenda-setting. Carter and Carter found that exposure to RT’s political messaging made US citizens:

roughly 15 percentage points less likely to support an active [US] foreign policy, 20 percentage points more likely to believe the United States is doing too much to solve world problems, and 10 percentage points more likely to value national interests over the interests of allies. (*Ibid.*, 28)

Critically, these effects obtained across parties and persisted even after the researchers disclosed that RT received funding directly from the Russian government (*ibid.*). Carter and Carter’s survey experiment has therefore provided some of the first direct evidence that propaganda campaigns initiated by foreign adversaries can shape the preferences of everyday citizens, but it also suggests that it can play a role in agenda setting with respect to foreign policy in ways that favor the interests and preferences of revisionists.

²¹ From the Russian perspective, the Gerasimov Doctrine and *gibridnaya voyna* are not an invention of Russian origin. Instead, they see them as strategies that the US successfully deployed against the Soviet Union, and which were successfully used to instigate the various “Color Revolutions” that occurred throughout Eastern Europe (Fridman 2018; Jasper 2020). From this perspective, Russia has merely begun to employ the same tactics pioneered by the US.

²² For scholars that contest this assertion, see Fabian (2019).

The digital strategies of revisionists are also used to create and promote “strategic narratives,” shaping the manner in which the domestic population of the target state perceives international or political events, and promoting interpretations which are favorable to (or help further) the interests of revisionists (Boyte 2017). The strategic narratives that are developed and deployed by revisionists are often designed to induce the domestic population in the target state to question conventional foreign policy positions (Flaherty and Roselle 2018), and to exacerbate political polarization in target countries (Kalathil 2020; Asmolov 2018). Increased political polarization can induce states to turn their attention inward to domestic political fights, while a contentious disconsensus could make it more difficult for the target state to form a coherent and broadly-supported foreign policy orientation (Myrick 2021). Recent assessments of Russia’s Internet Research Agency (IRA) have highlighted how influence operations conducted over Twitter explicitly promoted, circulated, or generated content geared both to the far-right and the far-left in US political discourse (Linville and Warren 2020; Martin, Shapiro, and Nedashkovskaya 2019). Increased political polarization can also lead to more extreme and differentiated policy positions among political parties, meaning that a change in the party in power could lead to a large change in the foreign policy positions and objectives of the state. Such changes would be important because multilateralism (and more thoroughgoing forms of international cooperation) is dependent on the ability of a state to maintain agreed-upon policies over the long-term. The uncertainty produced by rapid or extreme fluctuation in foreign policy positions depending on which political party would increase uncertainty in international alliances and institutions (Myrick 2021), possibly diminishing the willingness of states to make strong commitments over the medium- to long-term.

Finally, revisionists strategies to foment increased political polarization throughout a large number of liberal democracies reveals a strategy that is aimed at inhibiting the ability of targets to formulate and enact a cohesive foreign policy strategy, but which are also used to exploit or create political cleavages among allies. The combined effects of their influence operations and their exacerbation of political polarization provides revisionists with opportunities to exploit or create cleavages within the domestic spheres of their targets, as well as cleavages in the alliance politics of their targets. Returning to the experiment by Carter and Carter (2021), Russian outward-facing propaganda and influence operations led to a decrease of support for an involved and active US foreign policy by roughly 20 percentage points, while also leading to an increase in support for national interests at the expense of allies’ interests by 10 percentage points. In a highly polarized political environment, and with close elections, these effects are substantive and can credibly lead to policy shifts that complicate foreign alliances and other international commitments.

3.5 The use of digital strategies to induce institutional and structural change

At this point it is beneficial to briefly pause and take stock of where we are. The previous section illustrated how the Digital Revolution has been leveraged by dissatisfied states throughout the world as a tool of interstate competition. In my discussion I have established how the digital strategies and tools developed by revisionists have been deployed, and illustrated how these strategies allow revisionists to covertly yet substantively engage in the process of political deliberation in target states. Through such tools revisionists have sought to shape the foreign policy preferences of their adversaries in a way that benefits the aims and interests of revisionists. Drawing on an emerging body of literature across political science and communications scholarship I have also demonstrated how these same strategies are deployed to exacerbate political polarization, to induce paralysis within target states, and to inhibit the ability of target states to form a consensus on domestic and foreign issues, while also exploiting or creating

cleavages among and between allies. Though each of these points might be compelling in their own right, how do they relate back to the question of international order? I argue that, taken together, the new digital strategies of revisionists represent a coherent, integrated, and continual strategy to challenge and gradually erode the foundations of the existing liberal international order, without challenging it directly through traditional means. Even more importantly, I argue that these new digital strategies stand a credible chance of success.

Returning to my earlier discussion, historically, states that have been dissatisfied with an existing international system have employed three strategies in their attempts to amend it – namely, the use of force, the modification of existing institutions and organizations, and/or system exit. Under present conditions, however, the structural constraints posed by US military strength, the deterrent effects of nuclear weapons, the opportunities for growth provided by integration in the global economy, and the strength of foundational international institutions create strong impediments for dissatisfied states to achieve systemic change through these traditional means. The potential costs and benefits of attempting serious attempts to revise the current liberal international order make traditional strategies of achieving system change unpalatable. In this way, the new strategies made possible by the Digital Revolution provide an alternative pathway for dissatisfied states to pursue changes to the status quo, and to instigate change in the liberal international order.

The use of digital strategies by revisionists for the purpose of modifying the existing international system makes tactical and strategic sense. As I have illustrated, the monetary costs associated with running sophisticated digital operations is marginal when compared to the costs associated with the procurement of advanced military hardware and weapons systems (which are capabilities that have only narrow uses, and which are unlikely to be able to challenge and defeat the US outright). The use of digital strategies by revisionists is also considerably less risky than traditional approaches of pursuing systemic change. Military responses to influence operations would be a vast over-reaction, and at present propaganda campaigns, mis- and disinformation efforts, and influence operations remain difficult to detect and difficult to deter. Such strategies are also effective at achieving revisionists' goals of fomenting political polarization, degrading the ability of adversaries to form coherent and consistent foreign policies, and promoting foreign policy agendas that are favorable to the interests of revisionists. While it may be tempting to label these digital strategies as weapons of the weak it is important to note that, in the emerging digital age, these strategies can nonetheless be powerful and effective weapons.

Returning to Stacie Goddard's (2018a) argument about the constraining factors that limit revisionist states' available strategies for pursuing system change, the network positions of revisionist states are often sticky, and are therefore strong constraining factors for revisionist states. Importantly, these institutions and diplomatic ties are themselves difficult to change – and when they *do* change, it is often in a way that is difficult to anticipate or predict. It is here that the digital strategies pursued by revisionists intervene by making it more likely that the liberal international order will evolve in a way that favors the interests of revisionist states. The digital strategies pursued by revisionist states are a systematic strategy adopted to degrade the foundations of the existing liberal international order without challenging them directly, through more traditional means. These strategies seek to erode the alliance strong alliance structures among their targets, undercutting the ability of target states to commit to long-term international commitments, while also making it more likely that such states will withdraw support from (or at the very least question the utility of) cornerstone international institutions.

The extant liberal international order is in many ways dependent on broad support among a plurality of states in the international system, especially and including liberal democracies. An increase in skepticism of thoroughgoing international cooperation among powerful liberal democracies—or in the value and benefits of strong international institutions—could do much to erode the credibility and efficacy of international institutions that help to maintain the liberal international system. In this way, the digital strategies adopted by revisionists target the very foundations that make the existing liberal international order possible, degrading not only the alliance systems of their adversaries, but also the ideational foundations that help make robust international institutions possible. The new digital strategies of revisionist states can therefore make certain foreign policy outcomes (and changes to the structure of the international system) more likely, especially changes that would erode the strength and coherence of the liberal international order. In short, the new digital strategies of revisionists can be used to instigate a change in the existing international system, without the need to challenge it directly.

4. Conclusion

The theory that I have presented here has profound implications, not only for the future of great power competition, but also for the future of the liberal-democratic international order. While scholars have recently paid renewed attention to revisionist states and the possible transition from a unipolar system to a multipolar system, much of this focus has been paid to traditional strategies that revisionists have deployed throughout history. In these accounts, the Digital Revolution—one of the most profound structural changes to the nature of political communication in history—is perceptibly absent. The Digital Revolution has provided dissatisfied states with powerful new tools that allow them to challenge the existing liberal international order without resorting to direct challenges through military force, the pursuit of reforms through international institutions, or through attempts to exit the system through the establishment of an exclusive sphere of influence. Moreover, the new digital strategies of revisionist states circumvent the strong constraints placed on them through continued US military primacy, as well as the strong international institutions which exist presently.

The digital strategies of revisionists are likely to remain primary features of interstate competition moving forward. The costs of running even sophisticated digital programs are modest when compared to the costs of advanced military hardware, while digital capabilities afford revisionists greater operational flexibility than can traditional military hardware. The risks associated with the use of digital strategies are far less extreme than if revisionists were to mount a direct challenge to the extant international system through traditional means. The use of large-scale military operations poses a considerable risk of military catastrophe, while also being inherently costly in terms of men, money, and material. The digital strategies developed and deployed by revisionists are therefore comparatively attractive – the risks associated with their use are fairly minimal, while the use of propaganda and botnets are difficult to deter and defend against.

Moreover, recent evidence has indicated that the digital strategies of revisionists can be effective, allowing revisionist states the ability to actively participate in (and directly shape) political discourse in their adversaries, helping to set the political agendas in such states while also exacerbating political polarization to induce paralysis. The use of digital strategies in this way stands a credible chance of inducing changes in the existing liberal international system, without requiring revisionist states to challenge it directly. This is critical, not only because these digital strategies represent a new mechanism through which states can credibly challenge the existing

status quo, but also because existing theories of great power competition and systemic change remain largely unaware of them. The successful use of digital strategies by revisionists can credibly erode the foundations of the liberal international order, thereby reducing constraints on what sort of foreign policy actions revisionists can pursue, while also degrading the ability of their adversaries (especially liberal democracies) to cooperate deeply over the long-term.

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