

# 1

## *Theorizing with the Present*

### *Past, Present, and Future in International Politics*

Theories provide a way of packaging patterns from the past in such a way as to make them usable in the present as guides to the future.<sup>1</sup>

—John Lewis Gaddis

#### **Introduction**

International Relations (IR) is stuck in the past. Scholars of IR admit it – “history matters for international politics. Everyone who studies the subject knows this. The institutions and attitudes inherited from the past always affect present-day decisions, and most of the time change is incremental; so the impact of the past is strong.”<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, the field of IR faces a recurring identity crisis whenever it encounters the inevitable shifts of an evolving world. The changes of the contemporary moment cause us to constantly reconsider the utility of our work in light of new information and events. While the field is unavoidably shaped by the present and its apparent novelty, it refuses to directly engage it, placing IR in a constant loop of crisis. International relations needs to ask itself: When is IR? When does IR take place and when is it valuable? When is it not? How can we better relate and respond to the political times we inhabit?

Following the end of the Cold War, John Lewis Gaddis characterized the crisis this way. Given the inability of scholars to anticipate the end of the Cold War, “no approach to the study of international relations claiming both foresight and competence should have failed to see it coming. None actually did so, though, and that fact ought to raise questions about the methods we have developed for trying to understand world politics.”<sup>3</sup> More recently, observers of politics have spilled a great deal of ink trying to understand how they could miss the rise of the right in Europe and the United States. For many, the election

<sup>1</sup> Gaddis 1992, 6.    <sup>2</sup> Keohane and Fioretos 2017, 322.    <sup>3</sup> Gaddis 1992, 6.

of Donald Trump, Brexit, and the success of other right-wing groups in electoral democracies worldwide signal a sea change in Europe and America's role in the world, a devolution of major liberal democracies into "authoritarian populism," and a rise in global instability.<sup>4</sup> Scholars of IR wonder whether these developments have upended the international order and thrown everything we think we know about alliances, norms, and institutions into disarray. To many, both in and out of academia, the failure to accurately predict these events represents yet another disciplinary crisis. And because these events were largely unanticipated, it calls into question whether we can still rely on our existing theories of the past to explain present reality. In short, our present – yet again – appears to be at odds with what we thought we knew.

Whenever we try to make sense of global politics in the moment, historians warn us against "presentism" – reading the past only through the light of the present, disconnecting it from antecedent events or historical analogues. They especially warn against overstating the apparent novelty of the contemporary moment. And as Keohane shows, this is a fear nearly all observers and scholars of global politics have internalized. Qualitative researchers, foreign policy experts, and even critical scholars all emphasize the role of history in shaping our present. While these groups may make for strange bedfellows, each shares the belief that the present is simply the tip of the iceberg and an extension of the past. More mainstream and "scientific" scholars also seek to divorce themselves from the presentist trap, but in a slightly different way. The turn to positivist approaches and science is an attempt to excise entirely the apparent novelty of the present by generating knowledge that transcends context. Scientific claims seek "time-less mechanisms" that govern behavior regardless of where they occur on the timeline. Wherever one locates these mechanisms on the timeline – past, present, or future – if they are robust, these claims should hold, removing the novelty of our contemporary moment and rendering it nothing more than an ever-vanishing point on the timeline. Regardless of theoretical commitments or scholarly positioning, the present remains largely an afterthought.

If we take a step back for a moment, this is deeply counterintuitive because global politics is inexorably tied to the *present*. Media cover

<sup>4</sup> Inglehart and Norris 2018.

issues of the day, experts opine on current foreign policy dilemmas, and scholars write books and articles in order to better understand contemporary concerns – such as today’s wars, climate change, current economic inequality, and the like. Whether we are talking about foreign policy pundits, government officials, or scholars analyzing these decisions, the issues of the day – or issues of the time – dominate. Virtually no one is interested in theorizing topics such as seventeenth-century land battles that predate air power or economic interactions absent modern telecommunication in and of themselves. When they are, it is only because those explorations have some sort of theoretical payoff and shed light on a contemporary concern.

For many observers, recent events such as the rise of right-wing groups with authoritarian ambitions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the increasing rate of disasters caused by human-induced climate change all contribute to a sense that the political present we inhabit is not just deeply troubling but a world-historic moment. From this perspective, everything has changed, even if some concerns appear similar. International relations theorists trained in Euro-American traditions emphasize the tensions between new and old great powers and the return of aggression within Europe. Others wonder about the rise of China and the effect of the pandemic on its future trajectory. The international economic order is supposedly facing dramatic change but also finds itself impacted by new issues like climate change and ever-present concerns about systemic inequality.

This appearance of change is particularly acute in the United States, where the government’s failed response to COVID-19 has resulted in hundreds of thousands of preventable deaths. On top of that ongoing failure, there is a renewed and growing awareness of systemic racism and the violent enforcement of white supremacy, generating widespread uprisings and a repressive state response, all of which are likely to continue. With the unprecedented actions and excesses of the Trump administration, the possibility of his re-election in 2024, and the continued viability of Trumpism within American political institutions, some are calling into question the future of the United States as a world leader as well as the order it claims to lead.<sup>5</sup>

For many, these represent the type of shifts that Gaddis saw at the end of the Cold War. From this perspective, the globe has been cursed

<sup>5</sup> Haass 2020.

to live in “interesting times” and actors, scholars, and observers of politics need to proceed accordingly.<sup>6</sup> Yet, for many others, these developments barely register and represent nothing more than a continuation of the structural and political dynamics that enabled European and American interests to masquerade as the totality of “world politics” and IR for centuries. While some might characterize the contemporary moment as yet another failure to anticipate the challenges of the present, others see it as exactly the opposite. For them, the supposed divergence of the present from the past reflects an idealized account of the past that was never really true in the first place. The existing desire to position recent events as wild deviations from an orderly international system ignores the realities, histories, and experiences of much of the globe and reflects an urge to normalize the continuation of American and European dominance. From this vantage point, it is – and always has been – shocking that an academic discipline claiming to explain world politics would base their claims largely on the past, present, and future of Europe and the United States.

While we appear to be in the midst of a temporally complex situation, what we are experiencing is not particularly unique. Contemporary international politics always possesses an ambivalent relationship with the past. Many argue that cyberoperations, AI, autonomous weapons, and hybrid warfare call into question ideas about warfare that currently dominate the field of IR and national security, just as the longbow did centuries ago.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, others insist that what is new and different is just the most recent manifestation of old problems. Climate change may indeed be new and meaningful for international politics but only insofar as it affects military planning or international economics. Structural violence, racial and/or gender inequality, or settler colonialism may be politically important, but material concerns such as territorial sovereignty are

<sup>6</sup> “May you live in interesting times” is largely understood in the American context as an “ancient Chinese curse” and this social understanding provides a good example of the heterogeneity of pasts, presents, and futures. The phrase is not actually ancient, but a twentieth-century invention that appears ancient to later generations that have forgotten this fact only because it is absent from their past. And it isn’t even of Chinese origin, but largely recognized as an American development playing on American (and white supremacist) understandings of China as a society still shaped by its antiquity.

<sup>7</sup> Goldsmith 2013, Grut 2013, Junio 2013, Altmann and Sauer 2017, Scharre 2018.

paramount to the security of peoples. Nuclear weapons remain central to global politics as does the threat of great power war.<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, IR is so settled a field that scholars can comfortably (mis)cite Athens and Sparta when debating the future of the United States and China nearly 2,500 years later.<sup>9</sup> Not only *can* one cite examples from antiquity and beyond as a means of explaining current great power relations, one *must*, lest we fall into the dreaded trap of viewing global politics with a presentist bias.

Such criticisms are unavoidably shaped by the present. How we answer questions about the future does not rely exclusively on our analysis of the past but also on assumptions about the continuity of political practice across time. Whether we are interested in how to interpret the rise of lethal autonomous weapons or looking to explain the impact of climate change, the ways that we relate past, present, and future are vital and unavoidable issues.<sup>10</sup> Temporality – specifically, the temporal imaginary of international politics – determines how we even begin to formulate these questions, let alone attempt to answer them. One cannot articulate the potential causes of World War II, for example, without first periodizing the conflict, because we cannot even imagine the universe of possible answers to that question until we know which conditions constitute the time “before” – rather than during, or after – the war.

The fear of ignoring the lessons of the past runs so deep within IR that the present drops out nearly entirely. This book argues that this is a problem not only for those interested in time and temporality but across the field because of the centrality of time in all of our work. It is one of the central factors in our recurring crisis over the “point” of IR; after all, IR is the study of a particular type of political *relations*, and relations unfold over time. It is also a problem because the present is so deeply embedded throughout our work. The central move of this book is to foreground the category of the present as a conceptual resource and analytical category for thinking about IR. The present – particularly when understood as relationally bounded, heterogeneous, and contingent – places an orientation toward difference and a

<sup>8</sup> It is for this reason that the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize recognized international measures taken toward a legal ban on nuclear weapons (see, e.g., Fihn 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Allison 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Agathangelou and Killian 2021, Marquardt and Delina 2021, Altmann and Sauer 2017, and Scharre 2018.

recognition of the human limits of understanding alongside an emphasis on process and change. It also represents a significant shift in our ontological understanding of temporality, time, and timing, with profound implications for substantive, epistemological, and ontological orientations within IR. When the present is theorized – rather than ignored – it provides a theoretical platform and set of tools for thinking about the big question that consistently animates the field – what is the “point” of studying IR, anyways?<sup>11</sup> Until we look directly at this lacuna – this donut hole at the center of IR – we will remain unable to accurately see ourselves, our relationship to what we study, or the global politics that motivate our interventions.<sup>12</sup>

International relations is always already motivated, shaped, and constrained by the present – it is the site of our scholarly knowledge production and at the center of the political practices we seek to explain, understand, and/or critique. Yet, even as we use the present to frame the past and future, we ultimately fail to theorize our own starting point – the frame itself. Recognizing the importance of the present as a motivating force, spatiotemporal position and theoretical concept reformulates core theoretical claims, conceptions of prediction, our positionality as scholars, and our interactions with contemporary politics. This does not require jettisoning the past as the historians’ fear, since those seeking to understand the present always have to take it into account. What the emphasis on the present accomplishes here is a refusal to diminish the present’s role or to treat it as a single, inarguable, universal experience. It instead uses the present to build a better appreciation of the political dynamics we focus on as well as the role of observers in understanding and producing them.

What this book offers is nothing less than a new way of approaching the study of global politics, one that refuses to be intimidated by the potential “end of IR” and confronts the question of what the “point” of our work is by focusing on and unpacking the missing middle of IR’s analytical focus – the present. It rejects Gaddis’ belief that work is “incompetent” if it does not possess the “foresight” to deterministically predict the future.<sup>13</sup> But it also refuses to concede that the past is all there is when it comes to theorizing, testing, or understanding

<sup>11</sup> Dyvik, Selby, and Wilkinson 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Thanks to Andrew Hom for this specific turn of phrase.

<sup>13</sup> Gaddis 1992, 6, Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013, Grayson, Coward, and Oprisko 2016.

global politics. The goal of this book is to offer a new way of thinking about IR as an area of knowledge production. Rather than remaining beholden to the spatial imaginary of the discipline's past, we should orient ourselves within a specific present and actively theorize time's role – explicitly, intentionally, and ontologically. Confronting the implications of this directly displaces this binary of either rejecting IR entirely or continuing on while uncritically accepting its faults – we cannot escape our disciplinary or world-historical present, but that only makes a systematic and resolute confrontation with “the present,” in all its analytical valences, more vital to IR. This allows us to build upon work from both ends of this spectrum, without losing sight of the profound challenges that exist. Like most revolutions, IR's temporal revolution is already underway – this book seeks to acknowledge it, build upon it, and employ it as a resource for thinking about IR.<sup>14</sup>

Adopting a different temporal imaginary is not merely a metatheoretical question; it has distinct implications for how we view and practice IR. At the structural level, it can reshape ontological and epistemological commitments, but equally, it can also open up new areas of analysis and research for those theorizing the relationships that constitute global politics – regardless of methodological and/or critical commitments. Similarly, at the level of interstate relations, it has the potential to open up new ways of understanding key concepts such as war and political violence, better enabling us to explain and understand them as an outcome and event in global politics. Finally, at the unit level, an alternative temporal imaginary can help better explain foreign policy decision making, the political dynamics that shape what opportunities are available, as well as what decisions are likely to be made.<sup>15</sup> In short, in addition to the theoretical work, this book concretizes the value of this turn back to the present in everything from war to climate change to high theory to foreign policy. Each are shaped by the temporal imaginaries that enable them to exist as an intelligible political issue.

This chapter will proceed in four parts. To some, questions of time and politics may appear extraneous. Temporality may be a valid issue

<sup>14</sup> I draw the understanding of revolution here from Arendt's (2006) essay “On Revolution” which I see as emphasizing the circularity of the concept – revolutions are not only an overturning of the status quo, but a return of sorts, even as it never can finally return from where it came.

<sup>15</sup> Hom and Beasley 2021.

to study but not a central concern for contemporary IR, much less a necessary one. For them, it is just another area of study and deciding whether to pursue it is a matter of personal choice, as if one were choosing between theorizing nuclear arms control or currency manipulation. The first section shows how international politics and time are already intertwined and argues that time impacts the main issues of concern for IR. The second shows how IR is “stuck in the past” – even as it furiously gestures toward the future – because it theorizes temporality and time as universal and linear, privileging the past, all while resisting thinking about the present. The third section briefly introduces what I call presentism, an alternative temporal imaginary for IR that explicitly values the present, thinks in time, and resists naturalizing the contemporary political dominance of universal, linear time. The final section outlines the rest of the book, identifying theoretical and conceptual implications, concretizing both by showing how it enables a different perspective on war, American foreign policy during the Trump administration, and IR’s primary theoretical architectures. A political imaginary centering the present has implications for both positivists and postpositivists, which is demonstrated through the concepts of prediction and positionality, respectively. In short, turning our attention to the present as a concept, resource, and methodology gives anyone who wishes to better explain and understand international politics a new set of tools with which to explore.

### **The Politics of Time: How Temporality Matters for International Relations and Global Politics**

Time is not only conceptually relevant for scholars and practitioners but also a critical element of substantive politics. The politics of time are already apparent, if we only stop to take a look. Time is “hiding in plain sight” in everything from “World War I [and] the thermonuclear revolution . . . [to] the peaceful end of the Cold War.”<sup>16</sup> It is a central feature of IR’s basic building block – the state. In order to function as a meaningful collective, the contemporary nation-state has to elevate certain histories and narrate its identity in a coherent fashion. “The rhetorically fixed national identity is” only made visible “by manipulating the variety of coexisting temporalities” into a dominant

<sup>16</sup> Hom 2020, 111.



narrative of unity.<sup>17</sup> These states constitute modern centers of surveillance where the time and position of nearly everything are tracked and recorded. In everything from policing to warfighting to border control to economic activity, we are increasingly tracked and governed by algorithms that create a world where “time and space, similarity and difference morph into each other.”<sup>18</sup> In order to fully understand cyberspace and cybersecurity, attention must be paid to its “chronopolitical dimensions” and the “human and nonhuman temporalities” that are “enmeshed in vast sociotechnical assemblages like the internet” and its contours determined.<sup>19</sup> Postconflict reconstruction requires theorizing past and future due to “its liminality in distinct periods of political change” and logically, “as its very name would suggest, transitional justice (TJ) is inherently defined by its temporality.”<sup>20</sup> To even conceptualize migration and borders, we need to theorize the “temporality of control” constitutive of the “techniques and modes of migration governmentality.”<sup>21</sup> International institutions are not born fully formed but develop, establish themselves, and disappear – their “logic . . . is highly constrained by temporal dimensions like the ordering of previously adopted solutions.”<sup>22</sup>

The discipline of IR imagines itself arising in the aftermath of World War I with a focus on the “factors precipitating war and the measures to prevent its recurrence.”<sup>23</sup> Unsurprisingly, given the influence of diplomatic history on these origins, the narratives we study – whether quantitative, qualitative, or interpretive – possess temporal dimensions that are never far from view. Even the markers by which we demarcate time periods – events – are fundamentally temporal. A meaningful political event only comes into view once we establish a time scale and settle upon the pasts and futures with which the event differs.<sup>24</sup> For instance, Al Qaeda’s 2001 attacks on the United States echoed Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, something American officials continually emphasized – even utilizing a similar

<sup>17</sup> Väyrynen 2016, 589.      <sup>18</sup> Aradau and Blanke 2017, 386.

<sup>19</sup> Stevens 2015, 45.

<sup>20</sup> McCauliffe 2021, 2. See also McLeod 2013, Muller-Hirth 2018, MacGinty 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Tazzioli 2018, 14. See also Cohen 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Fioretos 2017, 17 and Fioretos 2019.

<sup>23</sup> This is a point of contention, and not the position of the author. Halliday 1994, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Sewell 1996.

shorthand to December 7, “9/11.”<sup>25</sup> While both ultimately resulted in global conflict, the comparison relies on a shared sense of narrative continuity for its affective force. The two events – separated by almost fifty years – only appear analogous if the United States as a concept and institution, as well as the meaning of warfare, attack, and enemy, all remain constant.

Absent these careful constructions of continuity and relative stasis, comparisons become increasingly difficult as time goes by. The more time transpires between events, the harder it is to claim sufficient similarity to draw meaningful conclusions. While Clausewitz is often revered as possessing “timeless” wisdom, he explicitly warned about the passage of time and the dangers of drawing on analogies from the distant past.<sup>26</sup> Military strategists who drew lessons from wars long concluded were making a mistake because “military history . . . is bound with a passage of time to lose a mass of minor elements and details that were once clear . . . what remains in the end, more or less at random, are large masses and isolated features, which are thereby given undue weight.”<sup>27</sup> He even provided a periodization for his own work, declaring that strategists of his time should resist comparisons that predate the War of Austrian Succession – less than a hundred years prior to the publication of the “timeless,” *On War*, strategists still turn to today, almost 200 years later.<sup>28</sup> When viewed this way, the march of time represents something lurking in the background, ever-present, but rarely explicit – it is a problem to be solved. This “problem of time,” Hom argues, represents the dominant temporal imaginary for IR.<sup>29</sup> Time is an external force that “operates of its own accord” and impacts everything within the known political universe.<sup>30</sup> According to this view, it is beyond anyone’s control, impervious to human influence, and distinctly not neutral, resulting in “dissolution, discord, and death.”<sup>31</sup>

World War I soldiers, for instance, hated their government-issued wristwatches because they brought their time of death just that much closer.<sup>32</sup> They were not wrong. As the war drew to an end, soldiers were needlessly sacrificed by postponing the armistice until 11:11 on

<sup>25</sup> Hoogland-Noon 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Handel (2001, 1) argues from the outset that strategy should be like “physics or chemistry” with the same governing laws regardless of spatiotemporal location.

<sup>27</sup> Clausewitz 2003, 173. <sup>28</sup> Clausewitz 2003, 173. <sup>29</sup> Hom 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Hom 2020, 4. <sup>31</sup> Hom 2020, 4. <sup>32</sup> Hom 2020, 4.

11/11.<sup>33</sup> The Biden administration adopted a similar position and initially claimed that it would postpone the end of the war in Afghanistan until September 11, 2021 to mark the twenty-year anniversary of the 2001 attacks on Washington and New York.<sup>34</sup> In the Vietnam war, the North Vietnamese foreshadowed a tactic of Al Qaeda and other insurgent groups by martialing “slow time” as an asset to sap the enemies’ momentum and ability to fight.<sup>35</sup> Time and timing are of obvious importance in warfighting, but they also shape the “wartime paradigms” that “emerge at the intersection between socio-technological and security-political imaginaries.”<sup>36</sup> The post-Cold War, “wartime paradigm” of NATO and its partners, for instance, “is geared toward optimizing for speed and treating war as risk management.”<sup>37</sup> Attrition warfare, information operations, and other strategies are left for others with a different temporal orientation.

The politics of time is perhaps most clearly crystallized in the beginning and end dates of wars.<sup>38</sup> Wars define national histories and state development, but they also operate as a timing mechanism to demarcate different eras, stages, and periods. Within IR and for Euro-American actors, wars are times of violence bracketed by times of peace. They begin, are fought, and eventually progress to a conclusion – satisfactory or otherwise.<sup>39</sup> Accounts of war then use the timeline to measure its duration and rate of speed and identify the moments where they are “won” or “lost.” Yet, these accounts are incomplete as time can also be a point of contention. The War of 1812’s Battle of New Orleans famously occurred after the war had already been ended by mutual agreement in Ghent because the news had yet to reach military leaders in the field.<sup>40</sup> Worse, British officers were under secret order to continue fighting even if they heard words of such an agreement for

<sup>33</sup> Hom (2020, 4–5) uses this example, as well, and I similarly employ it here as it provides such a tangible demonstration of the role time – even as currently conceptualized – can play in war, but others point out the futility and incomprehensibility of the decision; see, for example, Persico 2007, who wrote an entire book outlining a narrative history of the last day of the war.

<sup>34</sup> Ryan and DeYoung 2021. <sup>35</sup> Hom 2018b; Hom 2020, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Schmitt 2020, 404. <sup>37</sup> Schmitt 2020, 404.

<sup>38</sup> Dudziak 2012, Barkawi 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Hom, O’Driscoll, and Mills 2017, see esp. 235–236. See also Hom 2018b.

<sup>40</sup> I take this characterization from Carr 1979, Hickey (2016, 15–17) characterizes this as a “myth” that ignores the need for Senate ratification of such a treaty, citing previous instances of signed treaties that did not result in the agreement’s ratification and conclusion.

fears that it could be an American trap.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, submarine commanders in the Cold War wrestled with what to do should they lose contact with their respective governments.<sup>42</sup> Would it represent the beginning (or end) of hostilities – that is, a nuclear exchange had already leveled the country – or did it represent a mere glitch in the system?<sup>43</sup> Thankfully, in the case of the Cold War, this scenario never fully materialized, but the British in 1812 were not so lucky. Because of bad timing, thousands of British soldiers were killed in a battle that could not change the outcome.<sup>44</sup>

Time itself still remains a point of political contestation. In 1949, China imposed a single official time zone because the leadership at the time believed it would “emphasize China’s (then aspirational) unity and the power of the central government, a desire made especially urgent by the fact that fighting did not cease until the 1950s and social unrest even later.”<sup>45</sup> What this means today is that setting one’s wristwatch to the time of one’s province – for example, Xinjiang – can be deemed sufficient evidence that one is a separatist and thus should be treated as a “terrorist.”<sup>46</sup> For similar reasons, ISIS employs a distinct temporal register that produces a false past where medieval ideologies flow uncontested into the present alongside a distinctly modern approach to spatiality via internet communities. Linked together, they operate as a means of attracting support and creating a sense of inevitable victory.<sup>47</sup> Even the United States’ war on terrorism is littered with temporal contestation.<sup>48</sup> The beginning of the war itself – usually dated to 2001 – reflects only the perspective of one side of the conflict as the war began for Al Qaeda years earlier.<sup>49</sup> The end of

<sup>41</sup> Lorusso 2019.

<sup>42</sup> This scenario nearly came to pass in the Cuban Missile Crisis, but a single officer prevented a Soviet submarine from firing a nuclear torpedo at US vessels, refusing to believe that the lack of communication was due to the outbreak of war. The decision to use nuclear weapons required all 3 executive officers to agree. Vasilij Arkhipov arguably saved the world with his actions, which came at some cost to him as he was deemed to have deviated from protocol, Wilson 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Nuclear strategy and culture, as well as its materiality – the “sociotechnical assemblages” it constitutes – create new temporalities and temporal linkages, see Shapiro 2016, 32–60.

<sup>44</sup> Carr 1979. <sup>45</sup> Hassid and Watson 2014, 180–181.

<sup>46</sup> *The Independent* 2018. <sup>47</sup> Bashir 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Jarvis 2008, Jarvis 2009b, Campbell 2001, Lundborg 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Shultz and Vogt 2010.

the war remains out of reach at least partially because the war has come to represent an “eternal present” and no longer exists as a means to an end, let alone a demarcating line between war and peace.<sup>50</sup> No one has a clear idea what the end of this war would be like – President Obama’s 2013 NDU speech remains the most detailed public statement on the subject, and it references a feeling of “safety” and terrorist groups being “destroyed” as when the war will fully be over.<sup>51</sup> Unsurprisingly, the war’s durational quality – the time it occupies – is now “growing older than those enlisting to fight it.”<sup>52</sup> And even as the Biden administration claims it “will not” engage in “forever wars,” this seems to only apply to Afghanistan as the Biden administration’s national security strategy emphasizes that the United States will “right-size our military presence” so that it can continue to “disrupt international terrorist networks.”<sup>53</sup>

Before the temporal break that was 2001, the United States’ conceptual understanding of national security was very different. The Bush administration initially declared China a “competitor” and placed the management of its “rise” as a vital national security interest.<sup>54</sup> Eventual national security adviser Condoleezza Rice wrote that managing the rise of China was a “key priority” of any “Republican foreign policy,” along with a desire to end nation-building and “deal decisively with the threat of rogue regimes and hostile powers.”<sup>55</sup> After the 2001 attacks, the administration returned to the mean for contemporary administrations, “moderating” its tone, decentering China as a concern, and alternating between calling it a “partner” and calling it a “competitor” depending on the issue.<sup>56</sup> Twenty years later, as the war on terrorism has receded in prominence for foreign policy makers, concerns about China have risen back to the top.<sup>57</sup> This discourse creates the impression that China is only “rising” when the United States is looking and remains static when they are not a concern. One thing that unites the American understanding of China as a security issue is an “assumption” that “China’s rise is a problem in search of

<sup>50</sup> Rao 2020. <sup>51</sup> Obama 2013. <sup>52</sup> Hom 2020, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Biden 2021, 15. I do not capitalize “national security strategy” here, because it is technically an “interim national security guidance document,” but in practice this document has been received similarly to National Security Strategies issued by previous administrations.

<sup>54</sup> Xiang 2001, DeLisle 2011. <sup>55</sup> Rice 2000, 47. <sup>56</sup> Qingguo 2006, 24.

<sup>57</sup> McCourt 2021, 655–656, see also Edelstein 2020.

the correct US response.”<sup>58</sup> As always seems to be the case, much of the debate turns on the role of past analogies and selecting which ones should guide the American approach.<sup>59</sup> Stripped to its theoretical essence, the “rise of China” discussion effectively illustrates the temporality of the primary analytical frame for IR and its practitioners: What situation in the past is this situation most like? What type of mechanism is at work and how has that functioned in the past? More directly, what does our understanding of the past events of global politics reveal about China’s so-called rise?

When timed from the perspective of US national security, the “rise of China” inevitably necessitates present day action, not only because it is a problem in need of a “correct US response” but also because if the United States refuses to act in the present, they could find themselves in a worse off position in the future. From a temporal perspective, it raises the question: When will this process be over? When will China cease to be a state “on the rise” and become one that has “risen” and established itself as a great power?<sup>60</sup> This is not only a question for academics but also one that American governments seem to ask and answer all the time. It is operated for so long now that it has even been adopted and deployed in Chinese state and political discourse. This is only likely to continue because within China itself, “the mainstream discourse on the question of whether China has risen is that it has a long way to go.”<sup>61</sup> In theory and in practice, this frame rarely changes, regardless of year.<sup>62</sup>

From Nixon on, each administration has positioned the rise of China as both a present-day problem and future concern, while having radically different ideas about what this actually meant.<sup>63</sup> During the second Bush administration, the US military needed to be so strong that it would be “inconceivable” for China to consider using force against American interests, thus keeping them in a perpetual state of “rising power.”<sup>64</sup> While the Obama administration resisted language that direct, its “pivot to Asia” and “rebalancing” of its forces in the Pacific left no doubt as to the importance of the issue or what they were prepared to do to “solve” it.<sup>65</sup> Trump positioned China as a constant punching bag on the campaign trail and enacted trade restrictions in

<sup>58</sup> McCourt 2021, 655.

<sup>59</sup> Morgenthau 1972, Hoogland-Noon 2004, and Siniver and Collins 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Wang 2017. <sup>61</sup> Wang 2017, 32. <sup>62</sup> McCourt 2021. <sup>63</sup> Nye 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Rice 2000. <sup>65</sup> Manyin et al 2012.

office yet did all this while offering concessions designed to advance family business interests.<sup>66</sup> And finally, part and parcel of America being “back” on the world stage post-Trump means recognizing China as a rising threat.<sup>67</sup> The NSC director for Chinese affairs in the Biden administration authored a book that could have been written at nearly any point in the last half century: *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*.<sup>68</sup> This is a recurring dynamic – American scholars in the 1990s predicted China’s arrival as a peer and threat to the United States in 2025.<sup>69</sup> Now the claim is that China has a “secret strategy” that will conclude in the year 2049 to coincide with the 100 year anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic.<sup>70</sup>

What happens when – or if – the power balance changes permanently, where China is no longer rising but actually surpasses the United States? International relations answers this by pointing to theoretical knowledge about power transitions.

Questions like which states are likely to act revisionist?,<sup>71</sup> under what circumstances?, and how can the established power effectively respond?<sup>72</sup> are answered by looking to the past and using theory to transcend the context of the time and distill the actual mechanisms that recur. What are the dynamics of an order disrupted by a “transition” and the “rise” of a new power?<sup>73</sup> How do the differing time horizons of leaders/leaderships shape the likelihood of conflict or cooperation?<sup>74</sup> At its core, revisionism itself operates as a temporal concept as it turns on which states are willing to accept, reject, or revise the status quo. In other words, how will states respond to the present? More worryingly, would contemporaneous scholars even know that it had happened or would they continue to frame the “rise of China” as a central question long after the issue had been settled?

Analytically centering temporality casts a different theoretical light upon these questions. How temporally continuous are world politics? Is there sufficient continuity to usefully compare situations fifty, 100,

<sup>66</sup> Cohn 2017 and Helmore 2018. <sup>67</sup> Madhani 2021. <sup>68</sup> Doshi 2021.

<sup>69</sup> Nye 1997; Scholars also enjoyed using 2015 as a benchmark date, see e.g., Khalilzad et al 1998, 59–62 and Shambaugh 1997.

<sup>70</sup> Pillsbury 2016 and Doshi 2021.

<sup>71</sup> Johnston 2003, Fravel 2010, Edelstein 2017, Murray 2018, Chan et al 2019. Johnston 2019.

<sup>72</sup> Lebow and Valentino 2009, Lai 2011, Kim and Gates 2015, Huang et al 2020.

<sup>73</sup> Edelstein 2017, Edelstein 2020.

or 200 years ago – let alone 2500? Are comparisons like these valuable or have politics changed such that what we think of as the past no longer matches up with reality, as Clausewitz warns? International relations asks these questions all the time, but the temporal position from which we ask these questions is largely untheorized. Even with the establishment of the importance of narrative in IR, we rarely ask which temporal frame makes one narrative of political time powerful – and thus usable in adjudicating claims about the past – while others are dismissed and left aside.<sup>75</sup>

Beyond questions like the rise of China, the “emergence” and increasing importance of climate change also call into question much of what IR thinks it knows about global politics and time. The dominant narrative frame of IR begins with the signing of the treaty of Westphalia in 1648. This has to come to constitute one of the so-called “benchmark dates” of IR along with 1919, 1945, and 1989.<sup>76</sup> For IR, the treaty represents a sort of “big bang” where space *and* time began.<sup>77</sup> Spatially, the “world” of IR becomes enclosed, dominated, and controlled by states. Temporally, it represents the beginning of time – any evidence from before is potentially unusable and in some ways literally prehistoric. Climate change, however, reveals that this periodization is no longer sustainable because the ontology that this timing mechanism undergirds cannot be both time-bound and timeless. If climate change becomes accepted as a primary international security threat, these dates and the periodization it represents are caught in a dilemma. Either politics has always been constituted by ecology and the nonhuman – meaning that dating the international to the emergence of the state misses something important that has always been there – or it means that climate change, like the development of nuclear weapons, represents an ontological shift in political reality that requires a radical break with past knowledge and theory to fully understand.<sup>78</sup> The emergence of climate change challenges our collective understanding of the past as well as the future because it shows how relationships that transcend existing periodizations are centrally important to global politics and IR. At a minimum, as climate change

<sup>75</sup> This is not to discount discussions of history, rather it is to emphasize that typically these questions are only understood in historical terms, rather than temporal.

<sup>76</sup> Buzan and Lawson 2014, 438.      <sup>77</sup> De Carvalho, Leira, and Hobson 2011.

<sup>78</sup> Doyle 2010, 278.



progresses, it will create global interactions that devolve power to new actors and/or structures that are no longer – if they ever were – solely determined by humans.<sup>79</sup> The very idea of the Anthropocene, for instance, requires a vastly different temporal lens that invokes geologic time scales, rendering most of what we know about IR a mere blip.<sup>80</sup> Equally so, it challenges us to think more carefully about temporal locality and temporal difference as the Anthropocene is not an event or institution or actor but a set of relations and processes that disrupt and do violence to humans and nonhuman entities in time. If we fully accept the challenge of climate change and ecological damage, IR will need to reconceptualize key concepts, including the way it understands time.<sup>81</sup>

Climate dynamics also reinforce the heterogeneity of collective and individual temporal experience – human and nonhuman.<sup>82</sup> While climate change is occurring at a staggeringly quick rate, from the perspectives more familiar to IR – for example, the temporal scale of human bodies or the lifespan of a particular politician – it appears much less immediate, which calls into question its existence as “change.”<sup>83</sup> Even wrapping our collective minds around the problem is difficult because global climate as a concept cannot easily map onto IR’s current understandings of the world. This is because “IR’s whole focus has been on territories and sovereignty, self-interest and attachments; it has thus failed to take a stance on the world, consistently and systematically refusing to grapple with environmental issues, and possible mass extinction.”<sup>84</sup> The universality of climate as “world” is both bigger and different than anything IR has attempted to theorize.<sup>85</sup> It requires us to jettison the flattening effect of universality, temporal directionality, and the reliance on fixed borders if we are to have any hope of contributing knowledge to the crisis.

### **International Relations’ Approach to Time and Temporality: The Universal Time of the Clock**

Despite being everywhere in world politics, temporality is largely ignored in the study of IR. This is not unique to IR as “the relationship

<sup>79</sup> Busby 2019. <sup>80</sup> Neumann 2018. <sup>81</sup> Burke et al 2016.

<sup>82</sup> Amoureux and Reddy 2021. <sup>83</sup> Neumann 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Agathangelou and Killian 2016, 322. <sup>85</sup> Youatt 2020.

between temporality and production of knowledge is something that has been given relatively little attention in cultural or social theory” because the multiple temporalities at work in our lives “have suffered displacement or sublimation due to the overpowering domination of clock-time.”<sup>86</sup> Along with much of the rest of the world, IR scholarship accepts the conception of time that animates traditional scientific and social scientific inquiry – clock-time. Clock-time is simply the common-sense notion of time we use in our everyday lives. Time is seen as “present everywhere, the same everywhere, independent of anything we do. It carries no descriptive label and has no need to advertise or to repudiate that label. When seen as this uniform background, time is quantifiable. Its measurable segments are exactly the same length, one segment coming after another in a single direction.”<sup>87</sup> This classical, scientific understanding of time derives primarily from classical physics and remains influential in terms of both our “common-sense understanding of the world” and the “assumptions of social scientists.”<sup>88</sup> Time is measurable and natural and operates independent of human experience. According to Adam, the representation of time as “clock-time . . . incorporates recurring cycles as well as the linear, unidirectional flow of time; duration as well as instants” and constitutes “a spatiotemporal representation of time.”<sup>89</sup>

Clock-time imagines time as a linear progression occurring at a universal rate, but it also views time as “unitary” and “neutral” – concepts that significantly implicate assumptions at work in IR. In combination, this empties the past and future of meaning, devaluing the importance of temporal context and replacing it with history or culture. This is because if time is unitary, then there is nothing to analyze, let alone dispute. While the names attached to points on the timeline can be debated, the actual time to which it attaches cannot. When represented in this manner, clock-time produces a single temporality that lacks the need for interpretation – it simply *is* regardless of one’s position, context, or (mis)understanding.<sup>90</sup>

The classical view of time also holds that time is neutral, producing a temporality where time has no independent explanatory power on its own. If time itself is neutral, theoretical pronouncements can – and in

<sup>86</sup> Hassan 2003.      <sup>87</sup> Dimock 2002, 911.

<sup>88</sup> Adam 1990, 48; This continues, despite the fact that Newtonian mechanics, at least at the subatomic level, have been superseded by quantum theory.

<sup>89</sup> Adam 1990, 54.      <sup>90</sup> McIntosh 2015.

fact ideally should – be time-invariant. This is as true for time as it is for space, something that continues through the predominant utilization of the nation-state as “a container, representing a unified spatio-temporality.”<sup>91</sup> It is this characteristic that allows theory to apply to any imaginable location in the international sphere, even if it is only based on events in Europe and North America from the past two centuries. Theoretically, identical events can occur three days, three years, or even three centuries apart. Nothing is intrinsic to the passing of time that prevents future events from replicating what happened in the past. If IR produces a “law” that trade flows above a certain percentage preclude conflict, then that law should govern behavior whether it occurs in the future or the past, like the law of gravity. A classical view of time creates reality in a way that encourages theorists to strive for laws, theories, and hypotheses that apply across time and are thus generalizable. Theory should explain behavior regardless of time – taken to its ideal, it should be *time-less*. When it inevitably falls short, deference is given to the theory that applies to the largest section of time.

For scholars who identify as positivist, this notion of time fairly explicitly governs their work. Most conceptions of time presume that time *is* clock-time (rather than *represented* as clock-time) and therefore is linear, neutral, and beyond human influence or construction. This is not to say that time is completely absent from consideration – there is indeed much work that addresses the subject. Quantitative work – which occupies the center of the discipline in the United States – is becoming more and more sensitive to the role of change over time.<sup>92</sup> Ideas like “changepoints” and recursive analysis offer directional and nonlinear approaches via Bayesian work utilizing computational approaches.<sup>93</sup> Institutionalists currently – and historically – address path dependency and institutional development over time.<sup>94</sup> Regardless of method or substantive area of inquiry time may be present, but not something to be analyzed. To paraphrase feminist theory, these approaches may take on a more sophisticated approach to the topic, but they ultimately just “add time and stir.” Time itself remains outside the analytical frame and unquestioned. Events occur

<sup>91</sup> Which is the point of departure for the article, not a claim actually advocated by Sassen 2000, 215.

<sup>92</sup> Park 2010, Nieman 2015.

<sup>93</sup> See e.g., Western and Kleykamp 2004, Park 2010.      <sup>94</sup> Checkel 2015.

against the backdrop of an empty timeline, even though the continuities, trends, and entities under investigation are all inextricably constituted by temporal relationships. If we take seriously the idea that the present is a “locus of reality,” then treating time as an external marker still ignores a vital element of politics, regardless of how sophisticated the methodology gets. It reifies political phenomena – time and temporality – as something natural, essential, and unchangeable.<sup>95</sup>

In short, these approaches leave the ontological question of time largely unexamined. IR either accepts conceptions of time as commonly represented or folds it into critical expositions of history. Strangely, these scholars, who are among the *least* acceptant of time’s ontological complexity, appear *most* willing to employ complicated measures to try and incorporate it better. Time-series data, sequencing, and changepoints are all attempts to better take time into account – even as they remain silent on what the concept actually entails. Alternatively, the more attuned one is to temporal complexity and its role in sociopolitical life, the less emphasis there is on building an affirmative conception of time and temporal relationships. In short, those who accept time “as is” use it to creatively build better models, while those aware of its politicality identify particular construction(s) of temporality in practice but resist formulating an alternative for reflexive use.<sup>96</sup>

### **Making Space for the Present: A Presentist Approach to Politics**

This book is admittedly ambitious – it seeks to demonstrate that a novel approach to time, temporality, and global politics is both needed and advantageous. It does so in the belief that turning to the present offers an innovative and analytically compelling approach that distinguishes itself from other aspects of IR through reading the present as something other than historically determined or a point continually vanishing from our view. The present represents a concept we need to engage relationally, intentionally, contingently, critically, and with humility to use effectively.<sup>97</sup> The wager this book makes is that by moving away from clock-time and an emphasis on the reality of the past, IR scholarship can better explain, understand, and critique

<sup>95</sup> Abbott 1992, Abbott 2001a, Abbott 2001b. <sup>96</sup> Fisher and McIntosh 2021.

<sup>97</sup> Thanks again to Andrew Hom for this insight

international political practice. Presentism, as represented here, challenges the current temporal imaginary constituting IR by taking the position that “from the point of view of the present, there is no objective past in the history of individuals, institutions, or societies. There is no past to be captured, understood and described in its pure essence. There is only a past – or a plurality of pasts – constructed from the point of view of an ever-changing present. The ‘what it was’ is always established through the ‘what it is’.”<sup>98</sup> The value of such an imaginary lies in its ability to better theorize events, recognize emergent qualities in the present, and better understand the dynamic processes of which IR is most interested.

[T]his is a dynamic, processual phenomenon: ‘the picture this offers is that of presents sliding into each other, each with a past that is preferable to itself, each past taking up into itself those back of it, and in some degree reconstructing them from its own standpoint.’ The intersecting of many such perspectives is the basis of sociality and, as seen above, perspectives themselves only exist because of sociality<sup>99</sup>

Objectivist scholars, positivists, and critical theorists have all made a turn toward processes and events, necessitating new thinking about the temporality of relationality.<sup>100</sup> From this perspective, politics is about the “interpenetration of continuity and change” in the present.<sup>101</sup>

Presentism, then, makes plain something crucial about IR’s understanding of political reality. If IR is about processes and relations, then continuing to treat time as natural and outside the frame of inquiry reflects positivist, sovereign, and uncritical norms of reality itself. Butler writes:

To understand this, we have to think for a moment about what it is to be formed and, in particular, to be formed by norms ... Such norms act productively to establish (or disestablish) certain kinds of subjects, not only in the past but also in a way that is reiterated through *time* [emphasis added]. Norms do not act only once ... they are ones that establish the temporality of our lives as bound up with the continuing action of norms, the continuing action of the past in the present ... the normative production of the subject is an iterable process.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Edkins 2003, Jarvinen 2004, 47.      <sup>99</sup> Tillman 1970.

<sup>100</sup> Jackson and Nexon 1999, Abbott 2001a, Jackson 2010.

<sup>101</sup> Adam 1990, 40.      <sup>102</sup> Butler 2009, 166–167.

Much work in IR already accepts the state, international institutions, and political actors as the product of intersubjective relations. What Butler reminds us, however, is that those productions are “iterable” and only come into being across time. They are constituted by, and constitutive of, temporal relationships reified under the universalizing metaphor of “time.” Temporal relations – including what we understand “time” to be – are intersubjectively formed. Turning to the present as a basis for a temporal imaginary, then, is not a move without precedent, but it is a radical one because it actively theorizes the present, rather than solely focusing on time. It foregrounds an issue already central to the ongoing adoption of ontologies that are relational, processual, and constructed.<sup>103</sup> Temporal assumptions will be – and already are – critical to this shift. Presentism offers a way of unifying these together because it can be both physicalist and social. How we see past and future relating and how we understand their ontological existence are just as important for a positivist exploring capital flows as they are for a critical scholar exploring the coeval emergence of sovereignty and Western practices of “timing.”<sup>104</sup>

At its root, the present is about change – events of the moment are constituted by a break with the past in some manner, even if that slippage is only in terms of temporal position. This is, after all, how we know something is happening. The border between past and present is one of the ways that the new becomes visible.<sup>105</sup> Because change is an inevitable feature of politics, IR should shift toward articulating change and discontinuity as the baseline of political practice, rather than exceptional behavior to be linked back to its antecedent past.<sup>106</sup> Instead of contingency, crisis, and change operating as exceptions, a presentist IR would move toward centralizing these concepts in our epistemological and ontological commitments. They are part and parcel of the present itself, not something to be incorporated after the fact. While this represents a distinct way of knowing, it more closely replicates issues IR is most concerned with like explaining the “break-out” of a war, the emergence of a refugee crisis, or the collapse of an international structure that extends deep into the past. Complexity theory, self-organization, and quantum theory are all offering

<sup>103</sup> McCourt 2016.      <sup>104</sup> Hom 2010.      <sup>105</sup> Mead 2002.

<sup>106</sup> See “Understanding Change in World Politics,” *International Studies Association’s 58th Annual Convention*, February 22–25, 2017; Peltner 2017.

profound challenges to physical understandings of the world upon which mainstream social science is based.<sup>107</sup> A presentist ontology is one way to enable these developments to be read alongside each other rather than forcing us to pick a side – science or sociality. A choice which, as should be clear given the positions outlined here, represents a false dichotomy.

While no one can anticipate the implications a shift in temporal imaginary would have for all areas of as vibrant and diverse a field as IR, the book sketches out some of the ways in which this might work. It offers a toolkit for studying and theorizing the present. Taking the present seriously as a conceptual frame has implications in a variety of areas, but particularly for how we understand war, a current center and originary concern of the field. It also provides an opportunity to think differently about how we taxonomize and construct IR theory. At the unit level, it provides a distinct lens for looking at foreign policy decision-making that accounts for the political manipulation of past, present, and future and the temporal experience of those involved. Finally, the book offers potential insights for positivist *and* postpositivist approaches by theorizing prediction – a defining feature of scientific research – and the postpositivist emphasis on positionality through the lens of the present, offering conceptual apparatuses that better incorporate temporal difference and contingency.

A presentist approach also has advantages for studying and intervening in contemporary politics because logically enough, the present and its politics become a site for inquiry rather than only the breaking point between past and future to be ignored when developing “good” theory.<sup>108</sup> IR’s research is always already motivated and constrained by contemporary concerns, and these issues inescapably implicate the present of IR scholars. While issues like terrorism and insurgency, as well as power transitions, may dominate “our” present, that begs the question of whose temporality “we” inhabit. This is unsurprising from a presentist perspective because:

What determines or selects the meaning of the past for me (a particular emergent event) is the particular present within which I find myself. In other words, my present perspective actually creates, reconstructs, my

<sup>107</sup> See e.g., Wendt 2015 and Cederman 2002 “Project Q: Peace and Security in a Quantum Age,” <https://projectqsydney.com/>.

<sup>108</sup> See Revsbaek and Tanggard 2015 and Lundborg 2016.

past. The past has meaning and value only through my present. The past ‘can reach us only through our own frames of reference or perspectives.’ Emergence, then, implies perspectives.<sup>109</sup>

Present-day problems always orient our thinking, despite our scientific and historical pretensions. No one, for instance, is currently interested in theorizing arm races in bladed weaponry. Predictions are oriented toward the future (broadly conceived), while critical engagements with the present typically refuse to directly intervene with recommendations for how we could do politics otherwise. Obviously, this is a sweeping statement, and it is not meant to demean those who do not fit this description as there are important exceptions. Instead, the observation is meant to celebrate this work as exceptions to an otherwise widespread norm. As well, IR *scholars* are indeed doing a great deal of work to apply their research to contemporary problems – some could argue that we are in a “golden age” of scholars applying their insights to politics – but scholarship itself does not do this and largely disincentivizes it by treating it as something other than “robust” scholarship. In Chapter 8, I argue that this is at least partially due to the epistemological and ontological commitments that produce IR scholarship as scholarship.

Presentism’s reorientation toward change and the emergent identifies the lack of intentional engagement with the contemporary as a facet of the dominant way we imagine time to be, where the novelty of the present is continually washed out – “once it has occurred, we start on the arduous task of reconstructing the past in terms of it . . . with the new perspective on the past, continuity is re-established. The emergent loses its status as emergent and becomes an event naturally following from its causes and conditions.”<sup>110</sup> Ultimately, this accounts for our collective obsession with “how we got here” rather than the politics of “now,” the consequences of which are far-reaching.<sup>111</sup>

Locating ourselves and our work in the present makes positionality central. Scholarship is many things, but it is always an intervention into a particular present. One has to ask the question which present do these ideas engage? Historical, cross-temporal research may be valuable but not in and of itself. At an ontological level, the Correlates of War project and the history of the Peloponnesian War are just as

<sup>109</sup> Tillman 1970, 537.    <sup>110</sup> Jarvinen 2004, 49.    <sup>111</sup> Der Derian 2016.



conditioned by the present as a policy paper on the current status of US–China relations. This different importance of pasts in the present is why, for instance, some argue that to understand global politics as currently practiced, one must recognize that the world is disproportionately shaped by European developments in the late 1800s, while others see events that transcend this border as continuations of “world politics” and part of a single global timeline.<sup>112</sup> All of these can be weighted equally in developing their patterns that explain the world.

Adopting a temporal imaginary of the present forces difference and positionality to the front and center of any investigation of global politics. It necessitates inquiry into the politics and ethics of knowledge production. Denaturalizing our understanding of the past as irrevocable demands an openness that requires acknowledgement and theorization of positionality and difference. If “the” past does not exist but is instead produced by the present, then we must confront the overlapping political (as well as societal, economic, gendered, racialized, etc.) presents “sliding into each other” and provide an account for how our scholarship relates to it. From this perspective, this is no longer an option but analytically required. If timeless truth claims are incommensurate with reality, it forces IR scholars to ask what exactly it is we are doing when we produce knowledge as an IR scholar.<sup>113</sup>

Accepting that timeless knowledge claims are unattainable may seem intuitive to those outside the field, but fully embracing this idea changes things dramatically for the IR scholar.<sup>114</sup> If scholars are “writing” knowledge within the field of practice they claim to be separate from, it raises a host of questions, many of which have been asked and answered. Adopting a temporal lens, however, makes some new ones visible. What effect will that knowledge and those interpretations have on *present* political life? Whose present will this knowledge impact? What role does the contours of my present – and its attendant pasts and futures – play in its production? While this may limit IR scholarship in some ways, it also opens up the possibility of new questions and currently unimaginable futures.<sup>115</sup> It affirms scholarly

<sup>112</sup> Buzan and Lawson 2012, Musgrave and Nexon 2013, 639.

<sup>113</sup> Revsbaek and Tanggard 2015. This is a question that is continually asked and answered within IR (Guzzini 2020), the move I’m emphasizing that is novel is the linkage to collective understandings of temporality.

<sup>114</sup> See e.g., Boldizzoni 2015.

<sup>115</sup> See Butler 2004, Butler 2009, Ahlqvist and Rhiart 2015.

agency because “the possibility for agency lies in this very presentist openness and temporal movement,” where the transformative potential is “in the midst of the now of discursive political sites,” where “one needs to throw oneself in . . . and rework oneself, to rework the pastness one is constituted by.”<sup>116</sup> In other words, once one accepts the “heterotemporality” of international politics, ideas that seem radical and impossible because of extant structures, trends, and institutions become more thinkable.<sup>117</sup> They become not just possible but necessary and something to which we have a responsibility.<sup>118</sup> The critical urge to resist directing new ways of ordering the world becomes less tenable when there is no inevitable shared future that we can presume our scholarly interventions will positively impact or universal past we stand astride. More optimistically, if the future is not merely an outgrowth of a fixed and deeply embedded past, the possibility of radical change becomes increasingly thinkable and realizable.

### **Outline of the Book**

The book makes the case for centering time and the present in nine chapters. Chapter 1 has illustrated the centrality of time to global politics and introduced the concept of the present as an analytical approach to political life. Chapter 2, “The Temporal Imaginary of International Relations,” expands on the previous sections by identifying specific characteristics of the way IR conceptualizes time and temporality, along with the way it understands past, present, and future. It outlines the dominant representations of time and temporality within the discipline and shows how they produce a specific understanding of international politics as well as shape IR’s epistemological and ontological commitments. Trying to develop claims that travel from the past to the present/future reproduces a metaphysics of time privileging the past as the “reality” out of which the present and future grow. This chapter then outlines the drawbacks and negative implications of this representation, such as its difficulty with emergent phenomena and the emphasis on continuity in politics, theory, and

<sup>116</sup> Honkanen 2007, 10, Söderbäck 2018.

<sup>117</sup> Thinkable, but not necessarily realizable in practice. These are separate, but related, characteristics. Hutchings 2008.

<sup>118</sup> Hutchings 2008.

ontology.<sup>119</sup> This understanding of time makes theory more conservative and less able to deal with the entities, properties, and/or structures that break with the past.<sup>120</sup> Epistemologically, new events only grudgingly disrupt previous orthodoxies because durational applicability is privileged. Finally, the chapter concludes by briefly mapping the field of IR via temporal commitments, providing a taxonomy for thinking about the temporal assumptions and implications of current theory, with a more detailed and concrete engagement with IR theory in the following chapters.

Chapter 3, “A Presentist Approach to International Relations: A Toolkit for Political Analysis,” outlines aspects of a theoretical architecture for theorizing IR from a presentist perspective. Theorizing politics as a collection of ongoing “presents” is a profound shift. Systems and ideas may appear to possess stickiness across time, but this is not because of the reality of some objective, “real” past inserting itself into the contemporary moment. It is the interplay of specific pasts and futures in a specific present. This chapter lays out the central attributes of a conceptual orientation and ultimately offers a presentist “toolkit” for approaching international and global politics. This toolkit includes conceptual apparatuses emphasizing change, emergence, nonfixity, amplification, and heterotemporality. These tools offer a way to cast the political present as emergent, sociality as composed of interactions and events, and position entities as the product of relations in temporal contexts, rather than entities existing across time.<sup>121</sup>

The next three chapters shift away from a theoretical discussion of politics and time toward concretizing the value of the present for IR specifically. It does this by using the conceptual tools and orientations developed in Chapters 1 through 3 and shows how they can create new understandings and approaches toward global politics at three levels – system, interstate, and unit. Chapter 4 articulates the stakes involved for mainstream scholars and those interested in traditional

<sup>119</sup> Interestingly, the metaphor of “growing” out of the past is one that builds upon a biological process which is much more complicated and creative than acknowledged by most political scientists. Given the importance of this representation of the relationship between past and future it could be fruitful to engage this literature to employ those techniques be they self-organization or the like. See Wendt 2003, Wendt 2004, and Bell 2006.

<sup>120</sup> Hutchings 2008. <sup>121</sup> Marks 1998.

international political concerns by using a presentist approach to critique the “theoretical programmes” that historically have dominated IR – realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism.<sup>122</sup> Doing so provides a widely intelligible example that others can use to guide their own work, even if they have no interest in the particular theoretical architectures used here. Employing these tools makes new things visible, exposes different questions to ask and answer, and enables different ways of understanding what we believe we already know. Each of these examples illustrates how presentism’s approach is not an external critique but one that – if taken seriously – alters key assumptions and conclusions for concepts already considered central to IR’s systemic understanding of global politics.<sup>123</sup> The chapter also draws out implications at the epistemological and ontological levels, defending ideas like temporally contingent epistemologies, ontological nonconsecutivity, and an ontology that fully embraces the present

Chapter 5, “The Time of War,” shifts the level of analysis from the system to interstate relations, focusing on the issue that arguably produced the discipline itself – war. It establishes that war is an intrinsically temporal concept, an event, and requires a number of contestable ideas to be resolved in a specific way in order to cohere in its contemporary form. It shows how ideas like heterotemporal coherence, temporal fluidity, and the production of temporal borders are constitutive elements of war that must be theorized. War requires a collective imaginary to even exist; otherwise, it is just a group of individuals engaged in lethal force. Attending to the temporal levels of analysis within and among these imaginaries as well as resisting the epistemological privileging of generalizability is vital to a better understanding of it. Our understanding of war is largely dependent on which presents are being analyzed, rather than the produce of timeless, objective mechanisms or objectively analogous situations.

The level of analysis shifts to the unit in Chapter 6 – state foreign policy. “Making America Great Again, Again, and Again” focuses on a recent example of state behavior – US foreign policy during the Trump administration – to illustrate how these tools and concepts

<sup>122</sup> Or more accurately, this present understands them as having dominated IR historically. Intellectual history is never as unitary or smooth as a discipline articulates and this is especially the case for IR, Bell 2003.

<sup>123</sup> Bennett 2013, 461.

can enrich our understanding of the present moment. The Trump administration was viewed by many as historically novel and one whose actions might radically reorder the world, while others saw it as merely an extension of deep historical processes. How one positioned this present largely turned on their conception of past and future. By placing emergence and change as ontological constants and centering this heterotemporality and discontinuity, we can better identify the temporal dynamics that characterized the Trump administration's – and thus American – foreign policy. This chapter identifies four temporal dynamics that characterized the Trump administration – temporal othering, the production of simultaneity in a heterotemporal political environment, the accelerated pace and tempo of political action, and the (re)production of an indefinite present. Together, these dynamics encouraged three outcomes for American foreign policy – an explicit lack of restraint, transactionalism, and decisions dictated by personalist motivation. In short, this chapter shows how presentism is more than a conceptual and theoretical apparatus but a framework for theorizing recognizable outcomes in foreign policy. It illustrates value for more “traditional” areas of concern as well as demonstrating the advantages of a more temporally flexible epistemology. In short, it enables us to better contextualize the present and recent past without waiting for it to become settled history.<sup>124</sup>

The next two chapters move away from levels of analysis and focus on showing the value of the present for positivist and postpositivist approaches, respectively. Chapter 7 does this by drawing out implications for a defining element of a positivist approach – prediction. Prediction is the primary way positivist scholarship engages the future as well as one of the elements of analysis that define it as “scientific” rather than historical or critical.<sup>125</sup> Moving away from the idea that practices travel unproblematically across time significantly complicates this understanding of prediction. Presentism demonstrates that while

<sup>124</sup> “Traditional” is in quotes, because, as should be clear, this is a position and characterization that is meaningful, but not quite in the way that many accept. “Tradition” operates as a way of continually insisting upon one past, present, and future as universal for a field, abrogating the responsibility one has to a particular present. In other words, each of us participate in the maintenance of these fictions by accepting the idea of what is – or is not – traditional. One lesson of presentism is that at any moment, it could be otherwise.

<sup>125</sup> Ray and Russett 1996, Jackson 2010, Ward 2016.

those who do not study history may be doomed to repeat it, those who *do* study the past are not guaranteed to predict it. Chapter 7, “Beyond Disciplinary Prediction: Alternative Futures,” lays out how the presentist move implicates what I call “Disciplinary Prediction,” the predominant way that IR approaches and imagines the future.<sup>126</sup> This chapter evaluates what happens if we divorce the concept of prediction from temporal assumptions that presume continuity and regularity. Once prediction’s temporal scope is allowed to be more limited, contingent, and indeterminate, projects that de-emphasize linearity, actively theorize temporal recurrences, incorporate cycles, and allow for contingency, emergence, and flexibility become increasingly viable. Predictions based on critically informed scholarship also become much more imaginable, enabling a better theorization of the politics of critique as action.

Shifting away from positivist approaches and toward the postpositivist, Chapter 8 focuses on a central concern for postpositivist work – subjectivity and the role of the scholar/scholarship. If our collective temporal position can no longer be assumed as universal, then we must reflexively theorize when our IR claims are from, when they apply, and when our knowledge intervenes. Chapter 8, “Theorizing Responsibly: Temporality, Positionality, and Difference,” places the scholar and their scholarship in time, exploring their temporal positionality and political relevance. If the past is a construct of the present, the position of the scholar shifts from that of an actor engaged in a value neutral, transhistorical process of knowledge accumulation to that of an actor intervening in a particular present. Thinking about this positionality from a temporal perspective centers scholarly reflexivity, elevating questions of intellectual responsibility alongside analytical concerns.<sup>127</sup> Finally, the conclusion, “Toward an Intellectual Ethos for Time Scholarship in International Politics,” concretizes the present as an ethos and sketches out elements of a future research agenda. It further develops the idea of the present as an analytical orientation, a conceptual approach, and a set of assumptions and offers a glimpse of a future where we take the present seriously when theorizing global politics.

<sup>126</sup> Weber 2016a.      <sup>127</sup> Hom 2018a.

## Conclusion

Whether or not they realize it, all scholars engage the issue of time. This is true regardless of where they locate themselves in the discipline. Thinking from the present provides a shared intellectual ethos and axis of inquiry that links together work from varying perspectives without requiring debates to be resolved one way or the other. Just as some scholars use gender as a “lens” and “look at gender to see where it leads,” the present provides a lens for engaging political practices while accounting for temporal multiplicity.<sup>128</sup> Taking the present seriously represents a conceptual focus but also represents a “method of analysis” and analytical orientation.<sup>129</sup>

Foregrounding temporality necessitates an inter-/multidisciplinary agenda.<sup>130</sup> Hassan notes that “temporality and knowledge are not singular, universal ‘things’, but instead are processes, techniques, understandings and experiences that are marked by diversity and multiplicity that suffuse and help shape our being-in-the-world.”<sup>131</sup> When focused on questions of temporality, hard science and philosophy find themselves in inevitable conversation. Time itself straddles these boundaries. The conception of the present developed here emphasizes the ontological heterotemporality of “the present” requiring attention to difference, reflexive analysis of scholarly positionality in time and space, and a resistance toward totalizing narratives.<sup>132</sup> A “heterotemporal orientation” denies universality because it “decentres the position of the...theorist” and resists “the assumption of a fusion between his or her particular present and ‘the’ present of world politics.”<sup>133</sup> IR is already quite good at “thinking the present” in the critical sense but only as the top of a sedimented past and not as a dynamic space framed and reframed by widely varying sociopolitical context(s) and their attendant pasts, presents, and futures.<sup>134</sup> Taking the present seriously as a dynamic, diffusely bordered space where past and future combine in unexpected, contextual, and emergent ways enables an approach more appropriate to the contemporary global environment.

<sup>128</sup> Sjöberg 2013, 45.      <sup>129</sup> Hoy 2012.

<sup>130</sup> Weber 2016a and Sjöberg 2017, 159.      <sup>131</sup> Hassan 2003, 227.

<sup>132</sup> Hutchings 2008, Hutchings 2011.      <sup>133</sup> Hutchings 2016, 10.

<sup>134</sup> Jameson 1991, ix; Hutchings 2008.

IR concerns itself with questions of difference at the highest levels of politics yet continues to insist that the one area where politics and difference remain absent is time and temporality. Without a temporally dynamic approach to international politics that recognizes the heterogeneity of past, present, and future, the radical contingency of political life, and the opportunities afforded by the emergent qualities of socially shared presents, IR is unlikely to remain flexible and attentive enough to respond to the problems that threaten the planet. The knowledge produced by the field that articulates itself as “international relations” can be deeply valuable and normatively desirable and provide insight into some of the largest and most dangerous problems facing humankind. Equally so, it can replicate and reproduce some of the most dangerous pathologies the world has seen in the form of political violence but also ecologically, racially, and in terms of gender, colonialist, and anti-indigenous politics. To ethically study IR is to engage in an act of faith that one’s actions could somehow be beneficial – no one studies IR to make the world *worse*. But as is the case with all such matters, a radical humility must also attach. Even our most certain claims will inevitably be found incomplete and impermanent. At any moment, our understanding of the world could radically and permanently shift. Focusing our work conceptually, analytically, and theoretically on the present can never be the only choice, but it is a vital and necessary way to restore the sense of humility needed to accurately and effectively engage such an enormously complex, rapidly shifting, and powerful assemblage like the one we know as global politics.