

Can China Continue to Rise Peacefully?

Written by Sam Welsh

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SAM WELSH, FEB 21 2019

To assess whether China can continue its economic and political rise peacefully, three key factors shall be analysed: the increasing assertiveness of Chinese foreign policy throughout the Obama administration; the Trump administration's current economic policy towards China; and lastly, the ever-changing balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. Finally, some of the key misconceptions surrounding Chinese foreign policy shall be examined and the argument shall be made that China's rise is unlikely to be peaceful given the increasingly aggressive nature of the Chinese regime, making coexistence with the US indefinitely harder, alongside the fact that the balance of power in East Asia continues to shift in Beijing's favour. Whilst a balance of power shift of this magnitude need not necessarily signify an escalation of conflict, the combination of these two key factors makes for a situation in East Asia which is becoming increasingly difficult to contain given the interests at stake.

The Obama administration entered office at a time of increasing Chinese assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region. The 2008 financial crisis, having originated in Washington, placed American hegemony into question and appeared to signify to China an opportunity for a more assertive defence of its own interests on the international stage.^[1] Xi Jinping's China has abandoned the Deng Xiaoping position of 'hide your strength, bide your time' in favor of a confident pursuit of the 'Chinese dream.' His promotion of a new 'Asia for the Asians' slogan constitutes a direct effort to de-legitimize America's presence in the region.^[2] Xi's message resembles a tide of nationalism that China's leaders attempt to wield politically.^[3] At the same time, the country has become repressive in a way that it has not been since Mao's Cultural Revolution.^[4] The nationalists within the Communist Party of China (CPC) are determined to punish China's neighbors such as Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines who they believe capitalized on Chinese weakness during the 20th centuries, seizing control of disputed islands in the South and East China Seas and territory along China's land border. They seek to resolve these territorial disputes, by force if necessary.^[5] In response, the Obama administration in 2012 began a 'pivot' to the East Asia region. China meanwhile, further altered the status-quo with measures just small enough to avoid provoking a military response from the US. In the South-China Sea, Beijing has used coast guard vessels, legal warfare, and economic threats to advance sovereignty claims. In some cases, it has simply seized contested territory. While Beijing has occasionally shown caution, its overall approach indicates a desire to gradually create a distinct sphere of influence.^[6]

After the purchase by the Japanese of some of the Diaoyu and Senkaku islands, Beijing expanded its forces surrounding the islands, declaring an air-defence identification zone with the US consequently dispatching B-52 bombers to the area in response.^[7] When China reacted angrily to the 2016 tribunal ruling that China's claims to territory in the Philippines were unsubstantiated, America similarly maintained a strong defense for international law, protecting against Chinese expansion.^[8] Whilst direct confrontation was minimal, Beijing's strategic changes during this period suggest a fundamental shift in ambition on the part of the CPC from one of economic engagement, towards territorial aspirations. Consequently, a report by the Brookings Institute claims that 'the senior leadership of the Chinese government increasingly views the competition between the US and China as a zero-sum game.'^[9] Indeed, China has land borders with more than a dozen countries, connected by the East and South-China Seas to half a dozen more. Currently, it has territorial disputes with many of those countries because of its recent 'island building' program and insistence on increased military, fishing, and mineral-exploitation rights in the region.^[10] Beijing has begun developing a variety of military capabilities such as a blue-water navy aimed at preventing Taiwanese independence and compelling Taiwan's unification with China, denying U.S. and allied forces unfettered access to the Western Pacific, and controlling sea lanes in the region.^[11] To counter China's growing influence in Southeast

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Asia, the US has also resumed its aid to the Indonesian military and sent a carrier battle group in a joint naval exercise with Vietnam, alongside joint military exercises with the South Koreans.^[12] By seeking to engage China constructively by encouraging greater responsibility in global governance and within multilateral institutions, while at the same time establishing a significant military presence in the region to encourage constructive Chinese behaviour, the pivot involved elements of both realist and liberal schools of thought.^[13] Ultimately though, the Obama era was a period in which Chinese ambitions shifted dramatically from economic prosperity to expansionist foreign policy goals, putting it in direct opposition with US strategic goals.

Almost two years following President Trump's inauguration and the reoccurring question threatening US-Chinese relations is the issue of economic relations, more specifically, the substantial trade deficit between the US and China. Trump, as an economic protectionist, sees an inherent problem with such a deficit. Consequently, Trump has enforced several substantial tariffs on trade with China.^[14] His justifications for doing so, however, are almost universally asinine. Trump may have been able to make the claim that he was using the threat of tariffs as a way of forcing action from China, as many Republicans have suggested, after the US and China committed to a temporary truce to pursue further trade negotiations over the next 90 days. However, Trump, in one of his infamous twitter outbursts, declared himself a 'tariff man', undermining the idea that he seeks to use economic warfare with China as a means of greater economic liberalization.^[15] Trump is in many ways a zero-sum game, anti-free trade protectionist. His withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and his trade disputes with key allies in the region Japan has shown as much. Meanwhile, across Asia, China has enhanced its influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, a massive regional infrastructure plan, for example.^[16] Trump's protectionism may have major foreign policy implications with Beijing in this way. The President has decided to attack the primary reason that US-Chinese relations remain somewhat manageable whilst missing considerable opportunities to strengthen key US-alliances in the region.

Having said, that, it is also worth recognizing that the US has attempted to encourage China into accepting the mantle of 'responsible stakeholder' on the international stage through economic engagement for over 30 years.^[17] This is the problem with the desire by the likes of Kevin Rudd to make China 'accept the challenge' of responsible statehood; it conflicts with key areas of Chinese foreign policy.^[18] Economic openness alone has not led to a more open Chinese government. Xi's recent clampdowns on inner-party dissent show an ever-increasing authoritarianism, not a regime willing to embrace political and social liberalization which more liberal theories of international relations often expect. China's rejection of reforms towards liberal democracy seen during the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union under the Gorbachev administration for example, far precedes Trump.^[19] In fact Xi has explicitly cited the Gorbachev administration's reforms as something to be avoided at all costs in order to maintain the internal stability of the CPC.^[20] Therefore, whilst Trump's trade wars further destabilize the US-China relationship, this should be understood in the larger context of Beijing's increasingly aggressive foreign policy strategy and seen as a secondary factor for making conflict with China more likely.

Whilst the US has maintained control in the Asian-Pacific for over 50 years, the balance of power has undoubtedly shifted significantly in favor of Beijing as economic power has, as realist theories of IR would suggest, begun the transition into military power. This has led certain realist thinkers to anguish over what has been termed the 'Thucydides trap' whereby the rise of China would instill a fear in the US which would result in an eventual escalation of tensions, leading to war.^[21] The most common and legitimate argument against this scenario is that the economic interdependence between the two countries is such that the costs of conflict would be so high that escalation could be avoided.^[22] Indeed, it cannot be underestimated the extent to which the two countries have benefitted from open trading relations. But John Mearsheimer is correct to point out that political and nationalist concerns often, although not universally, trump economic concerns, citing extensive trade between the Triple Entente powers and Germany prior to World War I. The CPC has made this abundantly clear in recent years. The regime knows that if Taiwan declared independence, the cost of preventing this would have huge economic cost to Beijing. Regardless, they have repeatedly declared that they would go to war with Taiwan, such is the importance of making Taiwan part of China in the medium to long term. Whereas the US remains the superior military force, Beijing recognizes this and has been pursuing an alternate strategy of what Thomas Hammes has called 'salami tactics'.^[23] This includes creating anti-access, area-denial capabilities whereby in the case of a military conflict with the US, key strategic points could be maintained. With such weapons, China can target virtually every air base and port in the western Pacific, whilst

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threatening to sink enemy surface vessels operating hundreds of miles from its coasts.^[24]

Nonetheless, despite the unprecedented rate at which China has managed to close the economic gap between itself and the US, the 'Thucydides trap' need not be inevitable. Indeed, whilst Graham Allison's findings show that in 12 of the last 16 cases where a rapid shift in the relative power of a rising nation occurred, threatening to displace a ruling state, war ensued, this does not make it inevitable.^[25] Clearly, the constructivist argument made by the likes of Alexander Wendt that 'anarchy is what states make of it' holds some truth.^[26] With current relations with China not defined by the same ideological constraints of much of the Soviet era, there is greater opportunity for diplomacy between the two countries. The neo-realists like Kenneth Waltz choose to largely ignore the role of internal political factors, instead focusing on the external influence of anarchical forces.^[27] Nonetheless, as the end of the Cold War showed, internal political factors like ideology are significant in the peace process. The likelihood of a Gorbachev-style internal reform however, is unlikely given the relative stability of the regime in comparison. A more legitimate constructivist argument highlights the importance of close dialogue whilst acknowledging that in relation to the persistence of the hostile images that Chinese and Korean observers have of Japan for example, there are clear limits as to the convergence of US-China attitudes and alliances. Similarly, the US increasingly views China as a considerable danger whilst China continues to see the US as an intrusive bully in its affairs. Repeated interaction can erode old identities and transform existing social structures, but it can also reinforce them.^[28]

Having said that, as previously mentioned, the economic interdependence between the two countries makes the cost of conflict even greater. The liberal-institutionalist argument made by the likes of Robert Keohane that greater interdependence through multinational institutions like the World Trade Organisations can help to establish better trading and political relations between countries should not be underestimated.^[29] Nonetheless, the argument by Mearsheimer still holds considerable weight. Economic interdependence, whilst a limiting factor, will not mean China's peaceful rise.^[30] Instead, the realist emphasis upon the uncertainty of intentions is crucial here. US security experts remain divided as to whether Chinese ambitions remain more defensive in the sense that they seek to use their increasing military strength primarily to defend their economic interests, or ultimately seek to become the dominant force in East Asia. Whilst the latter explanation seems to hold more evidence since 2010, either explanation maintains the core realist concern in relation to the danger of the Thucydides trap: that in an anarchical system, it is impossible to be certain about another state's intentions and therefore a 'security dilemma' emerges.^[31] As Barry Buzan outlines, a democratic China may, as liberal explanation would suggest, be accepted by the US, much like Britain did with the US' dominance in the Western Hemisphere during the 20th century.^[32] Unfortunately, the attempt to encourage China towards a liberal-democratic system of governance has failed. Whilst the realist argument about intentions holds less truth in relation to western democratic states like France, it certainly applies to China's intentions. The balance of power has shifted hugely in favour of Beijing with its economic power now transitioning into substantial military power and assertive behaviour internationally.

Finally, it is worth addressing some of the key misunderstandings about the Chinese state. Liberal-internationalist theorists often claim that China, rather than aggressively opposing western liberal democracy, has sought to stake its claim as a 'responsible stakeholder' in the new multilateral international order. Examples given often include China's willingness to play a leading role in the climate agreements of 2014 alongside its continued support for expanding trade deals to the rest of the Asia-Pacific. Whilst it is true that China has, in certain respects, attempted to claim such a role, when it comes to China's key foreign policy interests, Beijing is incredibly rigid in maintaining its strategic interests. The conflict surrounding the Diaoyu and Senkaku islands with Japan shows that China is unwilling to compromise on issues which it considers within its own sovereign territorial zone. It is what Paul Haenle refers to as the 'catch 22' in US-China relations: Beijing demands respect for its core security interests whilst, at the same time, invariably evolving what it sees as its core interests from Taiwan to the Diaoyu islands.^[33] When declaring US-Chinese national interests as compatible, the likes of Michael Auslin often cite the common goals of territorial integrity, national security and economic growth.^[34] But these arguments are weak and vague, easily applicable to almost any state.

Additionally, the kind of thinking posited by the likes of Charles Glazer, who advocates a bargain in which the US 'ends its commitment to defend Taiwan...' in exchange for a peaceful resolution of China's maritime and land disputes, is exactly the kind of dangerous naivety which could lead to escalation.^[35] Instead the last thing which the

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Trump administration should be seeking to do is remove its military forces from East Asia. If, as Trump has shown a willingness to do on the Korean Peninsula, US troops are removed under the guise of 'America First', all the evidence points to China seizing this opportunity and escalating from its current 'salami tactics'. Similarly, Robert Ross talks of a US policy which seeks to ease Chinese insecurities about US encirclement by drastically reducing US military presence in the region.^[36] Whilst unnecessary escalation is a legitimate concern, the pivot struck a necessary balance of engagement and enforcement of international law. Appeasement of Chinese demands on any of the core issues of the potential withdrawal of troops from South Korea, the removal of missile defense systems in Northeast Asia or reduced engagement with ASEAN, is unacceptable and more likely to lead to escalation with the undermining of regional security.

In conclusion, China's rise is unlikely to be peaceful in the medium to long-term of US-China relations. This is not to suggest that the Thucydides trap makes war inevitable; it does not. However, the evidence is clear that China has transitioned from merely an economic force to a military one whilst also, at the same time, pursuing an aggressive foreign policy which not only threatens US interests but also regional security. Whereas the extent of China's ambitions is still somewhat uncertain, Beijing utterly rejects internal political reform which the US has sought for decades as a strategy towards reconciliation. Whilst the Cold War showed the limits of realist theories of the balance of power, the Obama administration understood the shift which was taking place and, as realist theories would predict, pivoted to Asia to meet the challenge. The Trump administration's isolationist leanings may worsen the likelihood of either American decline in the region or an escalation of conflict between the two superpowers due to an increasingly assertive Chinese foreign policy. At the same time, an overly assertive US policy could have similar effects, escalating tensions unnecessarily and sparking conflict. Economic ties are likely to be insufficient to prevent US-China conflict in the medium to long-term. Consequently, increasing conflict between the US and China appears highly likely given the ever-increasing authoritarian nature of the regime; the resulting transition towards a more assertive foreign policy seeking to pick off individual states from the lure of the US, and finally the balance of power dynamics which continue to shape relations between the two countries.

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Written by: Sam Welsh
Written at: University of East Anglia
Written for: Andrew Patmore
Date written: December 2018

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Written by Sam Welsh