

## So What About a Power Shift? Caveat Emptor

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*In this article I consider the general idea of power shifts, with specific reference to the discourse on “China’s rise.” I raise theoretical and policy concerns about the nature, sources, and consequences of China’s reemergence as a regional power, and call attention to some analytic tendencies and implicit assumptions featured in this discourse. KEYWORDS: power shift, power transition, China’s rise.*

EVEN A CASUAL CONSUMER OF INTERNATIONAL NEWS AND ACADEMIC discourse has almost certainly encountered references to power shifts affecting the United States and China. Recent issues of *Foreign Affairs*, a journal that aspires to policy relevance and communicates to participants in US policy processes, has featured competing prognoses of China’s economic status, with one analyst forecasting that by the year 2030, a “near-unipolar world dominated by China” will have come to pass (Subramanian 2011) while another analyst stresses the challenges facing China’s economy (e.g., aging population and slowing urbanization) and dismisses much of the attention directed to its “rise” as “hype” (Barbones 2011). Disagreement exists about China’s economic prospects relative to its own past record, and also relative to other countries’ likely performance.

What does national power—or *strength*, used here as a synonym—mean? While some observers point to trade, currency reserves, and especially the size of gross domestic product as indicators, others turn their attention to military capabilities. Still others stress intangible qualities such as a state’s capacity to mobilize its available resources, to motivate its people’s dedication and sacrifices, and to attract foreigners with its soft power—the appealing qualities of its culture and political institutions (Nye 1990). Clearly, power is a multidimensional concept. Moreover, and as I elaborate upon later, power depends on a combination of

raw resources (such as land and people) and human efforts (such as a government's capacity to develop and implement sound policies). That is, efficacious mobilization is required to convert (or translate) raw resources into a source of actual power. Finally, power (hard or soft) is a matter of perception and a question of degree. It requires counterfactual reasoning: How much has *B* altered its behavior as a result of its recognition of *A*'s power?

On the issues so far, I think most analysts would agree. Beyond these generalizations, however, power has been an elusive and thorny idea for analysts to measure and apply in actual research (March 1966; Hagström 2005; Baldwin 2013). I don't undertake this challenge here. I simply note the many prior efforts that have struggled with the meaning and operationalization of the concept.

Since different analysts hold different views about the ingredients of power and about states' intentions to use it, they naturally reach different empirical and policy conclusions. Some see US military capabilities as far ahead of China's (Glaser 2011; Ross 2012), urging conciliatory policies and even disengagement from Taiwan in order to avoid a confrontation (Gilley 2010; Glaser 2011). Others take a much dimmer view of China's capabilities and intentions, advocating "balancing" against a perceived China threat (Mearsheimer 2006; Friedberg 2012). Such divergent views also characterize reactions to the Barack Obama administration's announced intention to "pivot" (later renamed "rebalance") to Asia (Ross 2012; Brimley and Ratner 2013) and Chinese perceptions of such a US reallocation of its military resources (Nathan 2012).

The relationship between the possession of power and its exercise is not always clear. China's soft power, for example, is supposed to be manifested by and accrued from its "charm offensive," especially in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa (Kurlantzick 2007; Rotberg 2008). In this perspective, increased economic resources have enabled Beijing to pursue influence abroad through a more active public diplomacy or larger foreign aid programs. At the same time, many commentators have suggested that as a result of recent (hard) power shifts in its favor, Beijing has become more "abrasive," "assertive," and even

“aggressive” in its maritime disputes in the East China and South China Seas. This interpretation, however, has been balanced by yet other, more nuanced analyses of these disputes, questioning any simple and direct relationship between increased national power and more bellicose foreign policy (Ba 2011; Christensen 2011; Fravel 2011).

This brief introduction suggests that the extent and nature of ongoing and likely future power shifts in East Asia are matters of debate. Moreover, the manner in which different states will respond to or utilize actual or expected relative power gains or losses is a matter of continuing discussion (Schroeder 1994; Goldstein 2005; Thayer 2011; Jerdén and Hagström 2012). Finally, analysts often have different opinions about the efficacy and prudence of various strategies intended to sustain or reverse trends in power shifts.

I present below several concerns about the current dominant discourse on power shifts, especially as it relates to China’s rise. I also confront important theoretical and policy questions about “so what”? For example, why and how should an ostensible power shift between China and the United States matter for international peace and stability? These concerns refer to general analytic tendencies and implicit assumptions. To the extent that analysts usually subscribe to these tenets, they tend to share the same paradigm and reach similar conclusions. My intent here is to introduce some caution against an uncritical acceptance of these tenets. Naturally, I refer to general proclivities; discernible differences exist between, say, US and European views (differentiating, for example, US neorealists from those who belong to the so-called English School and Copenhagen School). Nevertheless, Western commentaries tend to reflect dominant US discourse (which is in turn dominated by realists of different stripes), a dominance that is itself indicative of US soft power.

As already stated, I adopt a broad-stroke approach here and thus overlook important differences among observers and analysts, differences that reflect a lack of consensus about what the concept of power means. Conceptual disagreement and imprecision impede empirical measurement; one cannot begin to measure things until one knows what to measure. Measurement is in turn

complicated by the methodological challenges of assessing perceptions and taking on counterfactual analysis as just noted.

### **Tangible Stocks vs. Policy Capacity**

Analysts have a long tradition of trying to measure national power, employing conventional indicators of quantitative size such as population, territory, steel production, energy consumption, and military expenditure. The well-known Composite Index of National Capabilities (CINC) (Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1968; Singer 1987) is based on such indicators and has been the main data source for quantitative international relations (IR) scholars interested in incorporating relative national power in their analysis. This practice continues despite widespread awareness that in an information era, the emphasis on physical size and aggregate “bulk” is increasingly irrelevant and even misleading. National strength depends on—and indeed, has always depended on—a society’s capacity to initiate and sustain economic expansion and vitality (Modelski and Thompson 1996; Rapkin and Thompson 2003). Analysts are well aware of the fact that Britain became the premier world power not because it had the largest population, military force, or even economy. Rather, its political and social institutions were successful in promoting technological innovations and forging leading industrial sectors.

The implications of these remarks for China’s rise should be self-evident. To the extent that conventional measures of national power favor quantitative rather than qualitative dimensions—such as the size of a country’s population, territory, or economy, and the number of engineers or armed personnel—they tend to elevate China’s relative ranking (Chan 2005). Moreover, these measures necessarily overlook the possibility that size can be a double-edged sword; a large population (with low productivity) can be a burden rather than an asset for a country. Similarly, *ceteris paribus*, a large country is less governable than a small one (imagine the different challenges of governing China and Singapore).

Even in terms of a country’s economic size, its gross national product does not tell us about the average productivity of its citi-

zens. Surely, with a much smaller aggregate economy and a much larger population, this average productivity is far lower for China than for the United States. Moreover, aggregate national wealth per se is less informative than *surplus wealth*, the latter concept referring to what is left after people's consumption has been taken into account (Knorr 1956, in Beckley 2011/12). A large number of peasants can combine to produce a large output, but their individual meager incomes can be quickly consumed to sustain their daily existence without much left for social or economic investment. According to some very optimistic estimates, China's gross domestic product will exceed that of the United States by 2016 (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, in Cronin 2012). China's population, however, is four times larger than that of the United States, meaning that individual income will continue to lag far behind that of the United States and other advanced countries.

Thus, sheer bulk is hardly a good indicator of a country's relative power. When commentators dwell on figures of aggregate size while disregarding more pertinent and critical information, their analyses can be highly misleading. Historically, many gazelles (small, nimble countries) manage to run circles around elephants (larger countries that are not nearly as adept in mobilizing their resources). The Portuguese, Dutch, and English managed to reach the pinnacle of international political economy, even though their larger neighbors dwarfed them physically (Rosecrance 1986). If physical size were the only or even just the most important determinant of national power, China, the Soviet Union/Russia, and India should have always been at the top of the interstate hierarchy. Evidently, some countries are able to punch above their weight, whereas others underperform relative to their physical assets.

### **National Capabilities vs. Incentives**

Popular concerns about power shifts are almost always tied to concerns about international stability. But what is the causal connection between these two variables? Just because people have

the resources or capabilities to act in certain ways does not necessarily mean that they will actually do so. Thus, knowing that a person can financially afford a house or a car hardly predicts that she will actually make this purchase. Counting a country's battle-ships or measuring its economy is relatively easy, but discerning how its leaders will use these resources is much harder. Therefore, power shifts as reflected by a state's possession of various physical items tell us little about its policy intentions and thus the propensity for war. Why, then, should one be concerned that China's rise could destabilize interstate relations just because it has acquired more capability? Power shifts may be correlated with the occurrence of war without causing it. As John Vasquez observed, "The inference that, just because there is a capability for war, there will be motivation for war is much too facile" (2009, 99–100).

Germany's reunification and the Soviet Union's demise point to large power shifts. One does not, however, often hear the claim that international relations face more turmoil with the arrival of a more powerful Germany or, for that matter, a preponderant United States after the USSR's disintegration. If so, what makes the "rise" of Germany or the United States different from that of China? Presumably, the different attributions of their intentions drive analysts' causal inferences.

Popular discourse on power shifts seeks to influence public and elite opinion by constructing particular narratives and framing interpretations. The logic behind much of this discourse argues that a rising latecomer like China is likely to challenge the existing international order and displace the existing hegemon. Historically, however, declining states have also often instigated conflict and even waged preventive wars (Paul 1994; Copeland 2000; Chan 2010; 2012). The insinuation that wars are started by rising latecomers illustrates the hegemony of ideas (Gramsci 1971).

Countries can cause problems for each other without major power shifts or even in the face of adverse power shifts. Iran's and North Korea's security positions have deteriorated rather than improved, but this deterioration has not inclined their leaders to be more accommodating. It appears to have had the opposite effect of bolstering their intransigence. Thomas Christensen

(2001) has argued that Beijing can adopt a variety of policies to hamper the United States and increase its difficulties and costs without having to match or even approach US capabilities.

Whereas discourse on power shifts tends to focus on a tally of two countries' raw capabilities, their respective willingness to accept privations is also pertinent. The United States was clearly capable of inflicting more casualties on the Viet Cong and North Vietnam, but the latter had a higher tolerance for enduring punishment and persevered despite all the human and other costs of fighting the United States. Hanoi did not have to physically defeat the United States; it just had to impose enough costs for the US people and government to reconsider whether the game was worth the candle. These remarks point to an example of policy capacity, one that pertains to mobilizing popular effort and sustaining dedication to a cause.

Prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) contends that when people find themselves in the domain of loss, they are more likely to engage in risky actions, which in foreign relations can mean provoking a crisis or starting a war. According to this proposition, countries suffering a relative decline are the more likely ones to precipitate conflicts. At least one interpretation of the two world wars suggests that German leaders' concerns about their country's impending decline disposed them to initiate these conflicts (Copeland 2000). German chancellor Theobald von Bethman-Hollweg reportedly said, "Our military men were fully convinced that now [July 1914] they could *still* come out of a war victorious; but in a few years, i.e., 1916, after the completion of the Russian railroads, [this] would no longer be so" (Lebow 1981, 229). His successor, Adolf Hitler, similarly concluded in 1939 that "favorable circumstances will no longer prevail in two or three years' time" and that Germany would face "certain annihilation sooner or later" if it did not launch a preventive war at a moment most propitious to it (Van Evera 1999, 77–78, 96–97). Thus, wars can be started by leaders who worry that their country is suffering decline, and not by their counterparts whose country is gaining. Indeed, the latter officials should become more vested in the international order that has facilitated their ascent and become more inclined to defend it.

**Endogenous vs. Exogenous Sources of Power Shifts**

Power shifts are by definition a relative matter. That *A* has gained more power means *B* has suffered a relative loss, yet it still behooves one to ask whether *A*'s rising stature is due to its own accomplishments or is a result of *B*'s failures, or most likely, a combination of both. Thus, for example, the rise of the United States to the historically unprecedented status of global preponderance can be due to its more competitive institutions and wiser policies, but this achievement can also be due to the incompetence, inefficiency, and illegitimacy of Soviet institutions and the Kremlin's self-defeating policies. One can win a race because one's competitors have made more serious mistakes. The United States gained its status as the world's only superpower in part because the USSR inflicted injuries on itself, such as by imperial overstretch, domestic economic decay, and a legitimacy crisis for its regime (Kennedy 1987; Wohlforth 2003).

By implication, China's rise may be only partly due to what Beijing has done right. It can also stem from what other states have not done right. The recent economic plight of Europe and the United States, with high unemployment, falling wages, declining economic competitiveness, and rising national debt, cannot be entirely blamed on other states. This setback has much more to do with their own long-term policies on taxes, public welfare, economic investment, and so on that reflect their domestic politics more than their foreign relations. These policies became entrenched long before China's rise or the economic challenge coming from East Asia. Popular discourse on power shifts often deflects attention from the necessity of engaging in domestic reform or policy adjustment, while aiming rhetorically at "getting tough" with foreign competitors or, even more ominously, undertaking Realpolitik measures such as ramping up one's armament and building countervailing alliances to respond to other countries' ascendance.

The increasing capability and affluence gaps separating North Korea and South Korea offer another example. Although starting from roughly comparable economic positions in the early 1960s, Seoul has subsequently pulled ahead with policy reforms that



emphasize an export-led model of industrialization. Most other East Asian countries share this turn to an internationalist outlook emphasizing economic interdependence and openness (Solingen 2007). North Korea's destitution results largely from its own counterproductive policies, even though foreign pressure has also played a role. Its predicament demonstrates, too, the hollowness of national power indicated by a large standing army and even a small nuclear arsenal when citizens are literally starving.

The collapse of the USSR is but the most recent example of the dramatic fate of a declining empire. The Habsburgs, the Ottomans, the Romans, and various Chinese dynasties provide other examples. A common theme for all these cases is internal decay as a fundamental cause whose effects were compounded subsequently by foreign encroachments and invasions. States may be able to do little to impede the growth trajectories of others. Even foreign defeat and occupation do not have a lasting impact in halting or bending the prewar pattern of economic growth for those vanquished in wars—the so-called Phoenix factor (Organski and Kugler 1980). States are, however, in a better position to influence their own economic growth, which is, after all, the primary driver behind interstate power shifts. This reasoning argues for bringing domestic politics back in to the discussion. It invites one to ponder about those institutions and vested interests that can perpetuate stagnation and block reform. Current discourse on power shifts tends to focus on the international consequences of these changes. It overlooks the need to treat power shifts not just as an independent variable (or as an analytic given) but rather also as a dependent variable (or as a subject worthy of serious study).

A nation can undertake self-strengthening policies to enhance prospects to gain power internationally, or a nation can adopt self-defeating policies that weaken these prospects. In her study of ancient China during the Warring States period, Victoria Hui (2005) stressed that the eventual victor (the state of Qin) pursued policies that improved its capacity for administration, taxation, and war. In contrast, its opponents were weakened by self-inflicted inefficiencies and even counterproductive policies such as official venality, tax farming, proclivity to fiscal extravagance, and reliance on mercenaries. In short, although power

shifts among states happen all the time, they do not happen out of the blue.

### **Static vs. Dynamic Factors for Growth**

Power shifts are occurring all the time. Some states grow faster than others. Political economists have pointed to a variety of reasons for such uneven growth among states. For instance, some countries may have the “advantage of being backward” in the sense that they can benefit from the leading states’ experiences (including past mistakes) to raise their learning curve and shorten their development stage. Another plausible reason is that advanced countries are more likely to succumb to institutional rigidity and coalition politics, which would diminish their capacity to adapt to changing circumstances (Olson 1982). Still another factor may simply be demographics. Postindustrial societies tend to have older populations whose retirees will have to be supported by fewer workers, whereas developing countries have a more youthful age structure. As a society goes through the demographic transition, it will eventually end up with an aging population with more consumers and fewer producers. Japan and many European countries have already reached this stage, and China (due to its one-child policy starting in the 1970s) will soon face having a smaller workforce that will need to support a larger number of retirees. Finally, as a society transitions to the postmaterial stage, its citizens will increasingly favor the values of self-expression and prefer leisure to work, and they will give decreasing emphasis to survival concerns, that is, the need to attend to their basic material needs for physical existence (Inglehart 1990).

A variety of factors can influence a country’s growth pattern. Some are beyond a government’s ability to influence. Others are more within its purview, such as tax policies on income and investment, and fiscal policies to support public education, research initiatives, and the military. The individual impact of these factors may be minor, but in combination they can have a large effect. Moreover, the deleterious effects of harmful policies can take years to accumulate and may culminate in a sharp inflec-

tion point in a political economy. Conversely, it can take a long time before policy reforms produce their desired effects. Thus, current power shifts are not an overnight phenomenon; the conditions responsible for these changes have been in gestation and building momentum over a considerable period of time.

China's economic expansion thus far—indeed, the general driver behind much of the economic expansion of all of East Asia's newly industrializing countries—has been the increasing scale of inputs to production (Krugman 1994). That is, increased output has been achieved mainly through increasing labor and capital inputs rather than by raising productivity levels as in the advanced industrial societies. Return on China's capital investments lags substantially behind the level prevailing in the West. Similarly, even though China produces a large number of engineers, their average level of competency and efficiency is significantly below that of their Western counterparts. China's information technologies and human capital are still quite low compared to Western standards. The same observation applies to the quality of Chinese research institutions and universities. Moreover, although China's exports to the rest of the world have surged, these products are mostly assembled in China using imported components and foreign designs, and they are also often manufactured by subsidiaries of multinational conglomerates domiciled in other countries. Therefore, in order for the Chinese economy to make further advances, it cannot continue on its recent path. It must upgrade its human capital and innovative capacity in order to join the top tier of economic powerhouses.

These remarks suggest that economic growth and, by implication, power shifts among states are nonlinear and driven by dynamic factors. They remind one of a statement reportedly made by a Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry official to the effect that economic competition is like riding a bicycle uphill: The moment one stops pedaling, one falls behind—and falls down. This observation in turn argues that it is dangerous to simply extrapolate from the past. If for none other than mathematical reasons, it is much easier for a country to attain a high rate of growth when it is starting from a small base. As China's economy grows bigger, it becomes inevitably more challenging to

sustain the same high rate of growth as before. Naturally, China can hardly sustain this growth by focusing on the production and export of goods with a high labor content and low technology content. Other countries, such as Bangladesh and Indonesia, can outcompete it on labor costs. Already we have seen a relative slowdown of China's economic growth, one deliberately brought about by its own policies.

Although China has doubtlessly increased the rate of military spending and its investment in civilian research and development, it still lags far behind the United States in actual achievements. As already mentioned, China's relative rise has also been accentuated by the relative decline of the United States. But extrapolating from recent trends into the future is dangerous. The United States could repeat Britain's experience of launching a second growth spurt, thereby retaining its international dominance (Lieber 2012; Joffe 2014). The challenge facing China in the future will not be so much the quantitative size of its growth but rather its quality.

### **Dyadic vs. N-adic Views**

States are rarely engaged in a bilateral contest. One of the problems with much of the extant discourse on power shifts is that it dwells almost exclusively on Sino-US relations. Such a dyadic view is simplistic and misleading. One has merely to recall that in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Britain faced multiple rising powers. London was experiencing a relative decline with respect to several upcoming countries, such as Japan, Russia, Germany, and the United States. It chose to join an alliance with Japan in East Asia; conciliate with Russia and France in Central Asia and Africa, respectively; and accommodate the United States in the Western Hemisphere in order to concentrate its diminishing resources on confronting the more proximate threat coming from Germany (Bourne 1967; Friedberg 1988; Vasquez 1996; Rock 2000). This series of decisions is not self-evident, which is to say that history could have turned out differently. Naturally, when faced with challenges from multiple fronts, a country could decide to "take on all comers"—as the Habsburgs did in fighting

the Dutch, the English, the Ottomans, and today's Italy. This posture in the end exhausted their military and financial capacity, and had the deleterious effect of accelerating Spain's decline (Treisman 2004). Madrid's fiscal extravagances and imperial overstretch did not help matters.

The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that although power shifts shape the policy environment in which officials have to operate, statecraft and diplomacy can still make a huge difference in how states come out of these changes. Furthermore, officials are rarely so constrained by this policy environment that they are denied any discretion or freedom in making policy choices. How they reach these choices and what these choices are again not a foregone conclusion. The extent of domestic consensus and the nature of popular sentiments are among the pertinent factors affecting policy choice (Schweller 2006). Thus, people can react differently to ongoing or impending power shifts. How they decide to manage power shifts demands our analysis. Meiji Japan made a decisive and coherent push to launch a modernization program, whereas officials of the latter-day Ottoman Empire, China's Qing dynasty, and the Soviet Union failed to reverse their national decline.

China's geographic location is such that it lives in a congested neighborhood with several contiguous or nearby major powers plus the United States, which is almost a "resident" country given the forward deployment of its military bases and personnel. China's security situation is similar to that of Germany before 1945, which was fearful of being hemmed in by France and the USSR on two fronts, in addition to having to face the threat of being blockaded by the British Navy. China cannot throw its weight around without risking having its neighbors join hands to contain it, a consideration that should moderate its behavior. To put matters somewhat differently, the United States can count on the natural instinct of China's neighbors to oppose Beijing's ambitions.

In contrast to China's geographic situation, the United States has only two weak but friendly neighbors and is separated from Europe and Asia by oceans. The countries in the Western Hemisphere are not capable of blocking US ambitions, either individually or jointly. These contrasting situations favor Washington's

defense of its prerogatives in its home region and facilitate its efforts to contain or block Chinese influence in East Asia. The point about the nature of power balances is a reminder that the United States can count on nearly all the consequential states in China's neighborhood—Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, India, and Australia—as formal or tacit allies. Russia, North Korea, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia may align with China on some issues, but the power disparities separating the countries in this lineup should be quite evident.

A concern for multilateral relations introduces further nuances and subtleties in analysis and policy formulation. Charles Doran's (1991) power-cycle theory attends explicitly to the multiplicative implications that result from the interactions of several great powers' concurrent upward and downward trajectories. Prior to 1914, Russia's rapid rise—albeit from a small base—introduced inflection points for Germany and Austria-Hungary, jeopardizing these states' future growth prospects and indeed putting them in a position of relative decline. In the recent past, China's rapid economic growth has not only narrowed the gap separating it from the United States but has also caused an erosion of Japan's, Russia's, and Britain's relative positions. One can expect that China will experience a similar fate when India, Brazil, and Indonesia accelerate their growth in the future (Tammen et al. 2000).

In a multilateral context, that a power shift to one's relative detriment is always an adverse development is not obvious. These shifts may redound to one's advantage if one's allies are gaining strength and one's adversaries are losing strength. Thus, as it turned out, a stronger United States (which overtook Britain in the 1880s) was actually beneficial to Britain, which would have had a worse experience in World Wars I and II if it did not have the United States as an ally (or, for that matter, if it did not have Russia/the USSR also fighting on its side). It also bears repeating that whether another country turns out to be one's ally or adversary has something to do with the policies one has adopted toward it. As already noted, Britain's own policies had something to do with turning the United States (and Russia and France) into an ally and Germany into an enemy. Power shifts per se do not preordain the

identity of these friends and foes. British policies made the difference. As a corollary, by treating another country as an enemy in efforts designed to contain or “balance” against it, one runs the risk of launching a self-fulfilling prophecy.

### Global vs. Regional Influence

The power-transition theory originates from a concern about contestation for global hegemony between the world’s two most powerful countries (Organski and Kugler 1980). Whether in terms of military dominance of the global commons—that is, control of the earth’s oceans, airspace, and outer space—or in terms of far-reaching soft power, the United States is peerless (Posen 2003). Commenting on US global preponderance, historian Paul Kennedy remarked in 2002 that “nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power, nothing. . . . I have returned to all of the comparative defense spending and military personnel statistics over the past 500 years that I compiled for *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, and no other nation comes close” (Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth 2009, 10).

In comparison, China is at best a regional power whose ability to project its influence abroad is severely limited. Its export-dependent economy is highly vulnerable to choke points where the United States and its allies can easily interdict its commerce (especially its energy imports), including the Panama and Suez Canals; the Straits of Dardanelles, Gibraltar, Hormuz, and Magellan; and especially the Straits of Malacca and Tsushima, which provide passage for an overwhelming portion of the shipping headed for and departing from China. Even though it has improved its capabilities, the Chinese military is clearly no match for the US armed forces—though we should recall that capabilities do not speak to resolve, morale, and strategy, which can enable a weaker party to prevail over a less committed but stronger party. China has “short arms and slow legs.” Beijing has mainly sought to hamper or deny unimpeded US access to areas bordering China, and it lacks the ability to wage a sustained military campaign even at a short distance beyond China’s borders. Despite much discussion about improving Chinese military capabilities in the US media, the

United States continues to outspend nearly the entire rest of the world on its military. President Obama acknowledged in his third presidential debate with Mitt Romney (on October 22, 2012) that US military spending exceeds the next ten countries' *combined* military expenditures (including China's).

The United States is a global hegemon as well as a regional hegemon. Even before World War I, Washington had secured its preeminence in the Western Hemisphere (Mearsheimer 2001). It has sought to prevent the other great powers from attaining this position. World Wars I and II were fought to deny German and Japanese bids to control Europe and East Asia, respectively, and during the Cold War, Washington also tried to thwart Soviet influence in Europe and the Middle East. Since the Cold War's end, the United States was able to establish an unrivaled presence in the latter regions and managed also to extend its influence to Eastern Europe and Central Asia. It became history's first and thus far only truly "unipolar power" (Layne 2006; Brooks and Wohlforth 2008). Although China has managed to narrow the capability gap between itself and the United States, a huge disparity remains between them, and Beijing is still only capable of projecting its military forces within a short distance of its borders.

China's recent rise reflects more its commercial successes than its military capabilities, and its commercial successes are highly dependent on economic interdependence with the rest of the world. To the extent that its improved military capabilities have had a tangible impact, it is limited to its immediate neighborhood, such as in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. Unlike the United States, China has only limited military reach and has historically pivoted its defense posture to secure its borderlands rather than to project its overseas influence. It has only one formal ally (North Korea) and hardly any military presence abroad (other than participating in UN peacekeeping missions), in contrast with the vast network of US military bases and offshore presence spanning the globe. China's force deployment is intended more for the defensive purposes of trying to obstruct US military intervention and to hamper the operation of US military forces that have been deployed around its borders.



The United States has extended its influence to regions that have heretofore been to varying extents subject to Moscow's influence. The collapse of East European communist regimes and their subsequent membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the extension of the US military presence to Central Asia (including former republics of the Soviet Union), and the almost complete eviction of Russian influence from the Middle East and the Horn of Africa all point to a power shift to Washington's advantage. To the extent that popular discourse in the United States focuses just on Sino-US relations while overlooking these other developments, they present a very incomplete and therefore misleading picture of recent and ongoing power shifts. Such a partial view is tantamount to attending to only particular local or regional developments while failing to take into account larger global trends.

This discussion calls attention to one final consideration. Unlike the USSR, China has heretofore refrained from challenging the United States or competing with it in Europe, the Middle East, and the Western Hemisphere (Art 2010). Beijing has not sought military alliances or overseas bases as Moscow did in supporting friendly or client states in these regions (e.g., the Warsaw Pact members, Iraq, Syria, Cuba, and Nicaragua). China has refrained from undermining Washington's geostrategic position in these regions. If anything, it is Washington that has built a network of alliances and military bases on China's periphery. To the extent that analysts overlook such basic differences between Soviet and Chinese policies and between US and Chinese policies, they are likely to make the mistake of assuming that all three of these states are motivated by similar geostrategic incentives. Rather, unlike the USSR and the United States—whose agendas have approximated the vision of a “strategic state” (with its emphasis on a traditional conception of national power as reflected by military strength, territorial expanse, and alliance networking)—China (and others such as Germany and Japan) appears to be more disposed to follow the approach of a “trading state” (Rosecrance 1986; 2010). The difference between these two policy orientations has historical precedent in the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the English on the one hand, and their counterparts, the Spaniards, the French, and the Russians, on the other.

Naturally, the concepts of strategic states and trading states are ideal types. The general point of this discussion is that by projecting onto the Chinese motivations that are typically associated with a strategic state, popular discourse in the United States may fundamentally misconstrue the nature of Beijing's challenge to US hegemony. Far from mounting a direct frontal assault on US global or even regional hegemony in East Asia, Beijing's strategy heretofore can be best summarized by Deng Xiaoping's often-cited advice, *Tao guang yang hui*, which is usually translated to mean concealing one's brilliance and biding one's time. He enjoined Chinese leaders to "observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs dispassionately, hide our capacities, and bide our time; be good at manipulating a low profile; never claim leadership." He admonished his successors that economic development should be China's overriding national priority and that "except in the situation of an all-out war, China should always firmly adhere to this central task" (Horowitz and Ye 2007, 36).

Avery Goldstein captured Beijing's grand strategy by saying that it

aims to engineer China's rise to great power status within the constraints of a unipolar international system that the United States dominates. It is designed to sustain the conditions necessary for continuing China's program of economic and military modernization, as well as to minimize the risk that others, most importantly the peerless United States, will view the ongoing increases in China's capabilities as an unacceptably dangerous threat that must be parried or perhaps even forestalled. China's grand strategy, in short, aims to increase the country's international clout without triggering a counterbalancing reaction. (2005, 12)

As another scholar of Chinese foreign policy has put matters succinctly, Beijing's foreign policy has sought to stay out of Washington's "strategic headlight" (Pollack 2005, 330).

## Conclusion

It is relatively easy to count national stockpiles of tangible and quantifiable factors such as population, territory, defense spend-

ing, economic output, and export volume. Popular commentaries on interstate power shifts, including Sino-US relations, tend to dwell on these attributes. They often do not provide an adequate account of the reasons behind the relative performance of states, the capacities of governments to mobilize and deploy available resources, or the visions and strategies that guide their policies to improve their international standing. As a consequence, narratives on power shifts often turn out to be incomplete at best and misleading at worst. They often produce more heat than light with the seeming intent to frame agendas and mobilize support rather than to illuminate a policy conundrum or empirical puzzle.

I have sought to draw attention to a number of lacunae or missing links in extant discussions on power shifts, especially as they pertain to evolving Sino-US relations. We can certainly improve our understanding about those relations by examining them in a broader historical context, as well as by integrating country-specific knowledge with theoretically informed perspectives. Although analysts may disagree about many specific issues, they are almost certain to agree that such progress should contribute both to good scholarship and wise policy. Of all people, US citizens should be most attuned to the view that it is not how much power a country has that defines its character or determines its success. Rather, national greatness and effectiveness depend on the manner in which a country uses its power. That other countries have thus far not attempted to balance against overwhelming US preponderance has been largely due to their perceptions of US intentions and practices. How East Asia and indeed the world react to a rising China will similarly be influenced by how Beijing exercises its increasing capabilities and not just by whether its capabilities have increased.

## Note

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