

'Rising China': A Threat to International Security?

Written by Neil Renic

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NEIL RENIC, APR 13 2012

Does a 'rising China' pose a threat to international security?

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the conclusion of a bipolar political order that had defined the world since 1945. In its place emerged a global framework, largely characterised by the hegemonic ascendance of the United States of America (U.S.). The primacy of the U.S. in this unipolar system has led theorists such as Waltz to claim, 'never since Rome has one country so nearly dominated its world' (2002: 350). Assertions such as this, however, have been problematised by the rapid rise of China as a global power. Increasingly, contemporary China is being re-conceptualised as a realistic economic, political and military counterbalance to U.S. hegemony. For much of the world, this perception has led to growing anxiety that the rise of China poses a significant threat to international security. This essay, however, will dispute this claim, arguing that China's potential as a threat to international security is consistently exaggerated and a relatively benign rise is entirely possible. This will be done by first establishing the ways in which the current rise of China is viewed as a threat to international security by many states and individuals. The inevitability of China 'rising' to achieve hegemon status will next be critiqued, as well as current perceptions regarding emerging Chinese foreign policy. Next, the importance of China's economic integration with the rest of the world will be highlighted. Lastly, the likelihood of a more powerful China leading to regional insecurity, particularly surrounding relations with Taiwan, will be examined.

For numerous states, the sustained military, political and economic ascension of China is increasingly viewed as a likely threat to international security. The rapid pace in which China has managed its societal transformation is arguably without historical comparison. China's subsequent increase in military spending, as well as its commitment to modernising its military capabilities, is cited by many, including the U.S., as clear evidence of its growing potential to threaten international security. This concern was evident in the 2006 Quadrennial Defence Review, which cited China, of all major and emerging powers, as having the 'greatest potential to compete militarily' with the U.S. and highlighted China's ability to field military technology 'that could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages' (2006: 29). As well as China's general military capacity, the U.S. has grown increasingly concerned over Chinese nuclear ambitions. This was highlighted in the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review Report (NPRR) which cited China's 'qualitative and quantitative modernisation' of its nuclear arsenal, as well as its relative lack of transparency, as significant factors in growing regional and international anxiety (U.S. Department of Defence 2010: V). China's strengthening military, coupled with a perceived increase in regional antagonism, has generated additional concern for international security. Regarding Chinese regional aspirations, it is the claim of many that China ultimately wished to assert a "Monroe Doctrine", throughout East Asia, excluding non-regional powers (Bowring 2010: 2). Given the continued U.S. involvement in much of East Asia, if this assessment proves accurate, the ramifications for international security would indeed be severe.

As well as China's military advancements, its economic growth has continued at an unrivalled pace. The meteoric ascent of China's economy over the last twenty-five years has transformed regional and international power dynamics (Blij 2005: 129). This very phenomena, however, has been cited as a likely cause of future international insecurity. Realists such as Mearsheimer argue that if the rapid economic growth of China continues over the coming decades, an intense security competition between the U.S. and China is likely to result, with a significant potential for war (2006:160). In order to more accurately assess China's capability to disrupt international security, a more reasoned analysis of China's current and potential strength as a state must be undertaken.

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Threats to international security generated by China's challenge to U.S. hegemony must be viewed more soberly, particularly given the uncertainty of China's 'rise'. While China's economic growth and surge in GDP has been dramatic, its long-term continuation has been challenged by some. One study suggests that by 2015, the odds of China experiencing a significant slowdown in GDP growth rates were over 70% (The Economist 2011: 2). This makes assertions on the inevitability of war, generated by an economic rivalry between the U.S. and China, increasingly problematic. Additionally, while China has indeed experienced an unprecedented surge in national GDP, wealth disparity continues to impede the state's development. The decision of Chinese leadership to identify inequality as one of the greatest political challenges currently facing its society (Klein 2008: 07:33), clearly demonstrates the continued uncertainty surrounding China's rise. Similarly, growing anxiety surrounding China's military spending must also be properly contextualised, particularly given the continued dominance of the U.S. military. In 2009 the U.S. military spent over USD \$738 billion, whereas estimates of China's annual military budget range from USD \$69.5 billion to USD \$150 billion (Thomson 2010: 87). Additionally, China's potential nuclear threat, while growing, is still comparatively small and vulnerable when viewed alongside that of the U.S. China's nuclear stockpile is currently between a tenth and a hundredth the size of the U.S. arsenal (Glaser 2011: 91). These figures suggest that, despite China's military modernisation attempts, any military exchange between the two states would be hugely asymmetrical. The continued pre-eminence of the U.S. military will be a significant factor in the potential of a growing China to disrupt international security. China, fully aware that an increase in bellicosity can be challenged by the U.S., with overwhelming force, will attempt a peaceful transition to great power status. This is further apparent through an examination of China's current foreign policy.

An analysis of China's foreign policy suggests that its growth in power and influence will present a minimal threat to international security. Among those who claim that a rising China constitutes a significant risk to international stability, comparisons are often drawn between current U.S./China friction and the Cold-War relationship between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. This, however is misleading. The Cold-War was essentially a conflict of incompatible ideologies. While the capitalist U.S. model advocated individual freedoms, the free market, and political and civil rights; communism sought to promote class equality and an emancipation of the working class (Brady and Said 1993: 591). Crucially, both models were expansionist in nature, ensuring tensions between the two superpowers would escalate in the post-WWII years. This ensuing conflict would play a dominant role in world politics, with both superpowers transforming global security into a zero-sum game (Bisley 2007: 233). The relationship between contemporary China and the U.S. is vastly different, with a far greater likelihood of non-zero-sum solutions arising to emerging problems. Jisi argues that China currently has little interest in transforming itself into a hegemon, viewing its core interests as security, sovereignty, and development, as well as the elevation of its people's living standards (2011: 5).

This challenges the assertions of offensive realists, who claim that achieving hegemon status within the global system is a state's ultimate goal (Mearscheimer 2001, cited in Snyder 2002:152). Concern over the rise of China often stems from fears that an increase in parity between China and the U.S. will trigger an accelerated security dilemma between the two states. Hertz contends that the security dilemma is an unavoidable condition that results from the anarchical nature of the international system, whereby the defensive security measures of a state can cause a perception of hostile intent by other states (1950, cited in Burke 2007: 148). This can lead to a military build-up in response, resulting in an overall loss of security and increase in anxiety for all states. Given China's primarily domestic focus, as opposed to the expansionist grand strategy of the Soviet Union, predictions of international insecurity resulting from an emerging security dilemma seems exaggerated. This is made further apparent with an examination of the economic interconnectedness that exists between China and the rest of the world.

The continued economic benefits of a rising China for the rest of the world, will largely mitigate any potential threat it poses to international security. A key determinant in the likelihood of international hostilities resulting from a growth in China's status, is China's current position in the world economy. Unlike the rise of the Soviet Union, which was characterised by confrontation and autarky, China has opted for global integration through its own form of capitalism (Jacques 2005: 1). China's entry into global economic institutions, such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), represents an encouraging development in international security. Liberal theory suggests that the creation of institutions and regimes, such as the WTO, are crucial in blunting the more destructive features of international anarchy and ensuring the prevention of the security dilemma (Booth and Wheeler 2008: 139), which as previously

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established, is a crucial component in the increase of international insecurity. The economic inter-dependence that exists between China and the rest of the world has hugely increased the potential costs of war, while decreasing its probable gains. This is apparent by observing growing trade between China and other states. Between 2000 and 2005, Chinese imports from the U.S. climbed from USD\$16 billion to USD\$42 billion, while Chinese exports to the U.S. rose from USD\$100 billion to USD\$243 billion (Hufbauer, Wong and Sheth 2006: 4). As well as the U.S., China has economically integrated itself with large areas of the globe. States that have recently forged closer bonds with China include Australia, which currently experiences unprecedented and growing economic ties with the rising power (Taylor 2005: 193), and the European Union (EU), which has considered lifting its twenty year arms embargo of China in the hopes of guaranteeing more lucrative trade deals (Cendrowicz 2010: 2). Despite global economic integration contributing to a more benign rise of China, some fear that China's demand for resources may trigger conflict with other great powers. Bijan suggests that this is unlikely, as China, through efficiency, alternative energies, and conservation, hopes to develop non-zero sum measures to transcend resource scarcity (2005: 22). Even if this is possible, however, many contend that the true threat to international security lies in China's dealings with other regional powers.

Despite alarmist claims to the contrary, the growth of China is unlikely to jeopardise the security of other regional states. When describing the rise of continental powers, Napoleon famously said, 'the policies of such states are inherent in their geography' (cited in Kaplan 2010: 23). This is certainly true regarding the rise of contemporary China. Whatever China's true regional ambitions are, an observation of the East Asian alliance system indicates the improbability of a Chinese "Monroe Doctrine" in the near future. With direct economic and political contestation from both India and Japan, both key allies to the U.S. (Power 2006: 32), any attempt to supplant the U.S. as a regional hegemon, seems increasingly unlikely. Nye states that a more probable scenario for East Asia is one in which the U.S., Japan, Australia, India, and others, from a position of strength, engage China and incentivise it to engage more responsibly with the regional community. By again contrasting the rise of China with that of the Soviet Union, likely regional developments are better able to be ascertained. While the Soviet Union was believed to be a 'highly revisionist state bent on radically overturning the status quo' (Glaser 2011: 85), virtually no evidence suggests China shares these qualities. This highlights the reasonable probability of avoiding war within East Asia, as China continues to rise.

Finally, the maintenance of the regional status quo seems increasingly likely, given the direct advantage to China of a significant U.S. naval presence in East Asia. Strategic analyst Khalid R. Al-Rodhan argues that the U.S. naval dominance of East Asia serves China strategically by providing security against terrorism and smuggling, maintaining the balance of power by preventing Japanese militarisation, and contributing to general stability (2007: 52). The fact that the U.S. East Asian naval presence allows China to better focus on domestic matters, strongly suggests that peace can be maintained regionally, as China continues to strengthen. Despite these positive developments, virtual unanimity can be found among those concerned with China's rise, when focus is placed on the volatility that exists between China and Taiwan.

Despite the severe risk to international security presented by China and Taiwan's fractious relationship, the chances of a peaceful resolution are greater than the alternative of war. Tensions between China and Taiwan, resulting from Taiwan's uncertain international status, have been regularly identified as having the potential to cause massive international instability, and until this point have been dealt with by a combination of legal manipulation, complex diplomacy and a detachment from political realities (DeLisle 2000: 35). Despite the situation's current failure to escalate into internecine conflict, fears are growing that the rapid rise of China may manifest into revisionism of Taiwan's status, triggering hostilities. Given its potential to entangle the U.S. and China in large scale war, the Taiwan Strait is viewed by many as one of the most dangerous areas on Earth. (Mandelbaum 1998/99: 31). Some contend, however, that while potentially grave, the Taiwan situation shows signs of stability. Johnston identifies potential processes between China and Taiwan such as noncooperation and conflictual actions, as well as an escalation of 'malign reciprocation' (2003: 50), as indicators of an emerging security dilemma. The failure of this situation to so far occur should be grounds for guarded optimism. Currently the vast majority of Taiwanese citizens favour either unification with the Chinese mainland, or maintenance of the present status-quo (Chang and Wang 2005: 42). This, combined with an improvement in cross-strait relations and institutional cooperation since the 2008 electoral victory of the Kuomintang Party in Taiwan (Bitzinger and Desker 2008: pg106), should provide

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additional hope among proponents of peace. Lastly, given that Taiwan's naval power is still technologically superior to China's, it is predicted that even without direct U.S. assistance, were diplomacy to collapse, China would be unable to invade Taiwan for at least ten years, *if not considerably longer* (O'Hanlon 2000: 53, my emphasis). These factors, when viewed in concert, suggest a high probability for future peaceful negotiations of the Taiwan situation, despite the strengthening of China.

This essay has sought to challenge the claim that a rising China poses a significant threat to international security. The relatively sudden propulsion of China to great power status, through the exponential growth of both its military and economy, has generated considerable anxiety among numerous states. Some contend that as China grows, its contestation with the U.S. for hegemon status may escalate into large-scale warfare. These concerns, however, seem less credible when a realistic comparison of China and the U.S. is undertaken. While the accelerated growth of China's GDP is indeed enviable, current problems concerning its wealth disparity has the potential to cripple further developments. Additionally, while China and the U.S. are approaching overall economic parity, a huge military asymmetry remains. This will almost certainly inhibit more severe forms of bellicosity from China as it continues to strengthen. Those who fear an emerging Cold War between the U.S. and China consistently fail to comprehend how vastly different the structure of the Chinese state is to that of the former Soviet Union. While the U.S.S.R was largely defined by its confrontational foreign policy and economic isolationism, contemporary China presents an inversion of this grand strategy. By prioritising domestic issues over expansionist foreign policy, as well as a direct economic engagement with the global community, China has forged strong and lasting financial links with other powerful states, which should prevent an escalation of any emerging hostilities. Despite continued concerns over China's regional ambitions, the strength of the U.S.'s alliance system within East Asia, seems likely to pressure China's acceptance of the regional status-quo for some time to come. Lastly, given the potential for a rapid and irreversible acceleration into a large-scale conflict, the situation involving Taiwan's status does constitute a credible threat to international security. However, given the apparent lack of will from either China, Taiwan, or the U.S. to disrupt the political equilibrium, coupled with indicators that suggest China is not seeking overall regional revisionism, the risk to international security seems manageable. While uncertainties regarding the future of China are legion, the peaceful integration into the international order of a strengthening and influential China is entirely possible. Through interaction and increased inter-dependence, the peaceful rise of China can be assured.

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Written by: Neil Renic

Written at: University of Queensland

Written for: Dr Matt McDonald

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