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China's Rise in Historical Context: Prospects for Peaceful Integration

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China's rapid economic growth over the past three decades has sparked speculation concerning its prospective challenge to American global hegemony. Debate regarding China's effect on international power dynamics has been intensified over the past decade, with the United States' loss in 'soft power' after the unilateral invasion and costly occupation of Iraq,^[1] and the erosion of international confidence in the Washington Consensus caused by the 2008-09 financial crisis.^[2] China's increasingly independent and assertive foreign policy of 2009-10 –departure from the six party talks in favor of independent support of North Korea; refusal to cooperate with international censure of Iran's nuclear program, and increased forcefulness in territorial disputes in the South China Sea– has intensified concerns that, behind the talk of a 'peaceful rise' lies a strategy for global geopolitical hegemony.^[3] This paper seeks to locate China's rise in the context of historic hegemonic contestation and offer constructive policy suggestions that may reduce the probability of hegemonic conflict, whether proxy or direct.

To conceptualize China's rise in the historical context of hegemonic challenge, a theoretical treatment and historical review of power transition is first necessary. Hegemonic contestation historically transpires after 'challenger states' experience significant increased international power following rapid economic growth. The challenger's threat to the established hegemon, and its role in global power structures, has historically been decided by hegemonic war. Thus, rising English shipping power enabled it to challenge Dutch hegemony with its 1651 trade war. This sparked a series of conflicts that continued until Dutch submission with the Anglo-Dutch alliance of 1688.^[4] Then followed a brief period of contested hegemony between England and France, in which England eventually proved victorious by containing French continental ambitions in the War of Spanish Succession (1701-14) and later eviscerating French global naval capacity in the Seven Years War (1756-63).^[5] After six decades of global domination, British fended off a second French challenge in the Napoleonic Wars (1805-15), after which it enjoyed nearly a century of uncontested hegemony.^[6]

A second tidal wave of hegemonic contestation arose in the latter quarter of the 19th century, as the centralization and rapid economic growth of Germany spurred the prolonged hegemonic conflict of 1914-45.^[7] The Anglo-American alliance only triumphed after Germany was soundly defeated both economically (the corrosive inflation of the 1920s and unemployment of the 1930s) and militarily (Hitler's failed counter-offensive in the Ardennes representing the last desperate attempt in Germany's four-decade attempt to assert continental military superiority). German-British conflict ultimately culminated in the hegemonic ascent of the United States, which had achieved economic prowess in the previous half century of European conflict through a superior industrial base and its status as the world's leading financial lender.^[8] In the following half-century, the United States fended off the U.S.S.R, whose challenge was empowered by both world historical industrialization in the 1930s and successful geo-politicking in the 1940s. Now, in the seventh decade of U.S. global domination, American military, political and economic influence is noticeably less than it once was.^[9]

The dominant question in international political theory today is how China's rise fits into the historic pattern of hegemonic challenge and power transition. China's rise is complicated by its economic integration with the west, the unique security relationship between the two powers and the unprecedented institutionalization of American power. Each of these dimensions makes it difficult to locate Chinese hegemonic ascent in the context of historical power

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transition processes, and requires independent analytic attention.

Thus far, China's rise is better understood as integration in –rather than challenge to– global economic organization. The notion that China is a 'peacefully rising' power is underpinned by the interdependent nature of American-Sino economic relations. Gilley argues that a "capitalist peace" is emerging, in which "the liberal economic networks and interests that have arisen from China's economic globalization" serve as "economic peace lobbies" against aggressive military escalation. In this view, far from challenging the global order with its heterodox economic system, China has rather joined –and, in so doing, strengthened– economic institutions such as the WTO and IMF.^[10] Moreover, China has tethered itself to the economic powerhouse at the center of the global economy. In an economic interdependence that Niall Ferguson has termed 'Chimerica,' China holds 11.5% of American Treasury bonds, and sent 20% of its total exports, accounting for a staggering 8.5% of China's GDP, to the U.S. in 2008. Robert Art terms this debt-consumption relationship "mutually assured economic destruction"^[11] that guarantees long-term peaceful relations.

Nonetheless, while the economic interdependence between China and the United States cannot be underestimated, it is no safeguard against military conflict. The interconnection between the English and German economies in the years before World War I –Germany was England's second-largest importer, and England was Germany's first– did not prevent war. Neither did English-Dutch codependence in the years before the extended conflicts of 1651-88. Similarly, France and England engaged in mutual trade –with exceptions such as the Continental Blockade of 1806-14– throughout the period of their hegemonic contestation. Economic interdependence is thus clearly no guarantee against hegemonic warfare. That said, as Art demonstrates, economic interdependence is a "helping variable" that can reduce the probability of conflict. By encouraging free trade in the Asia-Pacific region –which has now surpassed North America as the region with the greatest volume of combined American exports and imports^[12]– the U.S. can encourage interdependence amongst South East Asian economies that may dissuade conflict concerning contested South China Sea territory (discussed below).

The more impactful policies in terms of avoiding hegemonic conflict, however, relate to security. As Art argues, the degree of security enjoyed by global powers vis-à-vis each other is the variable most directly linked with probability of war. The First World War was caused by the continental security dilemma in which Germany felt encircled by England's unwillingness to step out of continental politics, and Britain felt threatened by the resources Germany would gain if it attained continental hegemony. A similar security dilemma –in which Nazi Germany felt it needed extended continental reach to prevent Versailles-like subjugation, and Great Britain felt existentially threatened by the Nazi marshaling of continental resources– significantly contributed to the Second World War. This analysis can also be extended to English-French relations throughout much of the 18th and early 19th century. English attempts to prevent French continental hegemony were seen by the English as necessary to secure territorial autonomy, and by the French as encirclement.

No structural geopolitical tragedy befalls the Sino-American relationship. The Pacific Ocean and mutual nuclear capabilities offer buffers against possible threats to national security. However, following the aged adage that, in politics, perception is reality, it is imperative to the preservation of peace between the United States and China that each state recognize that the other poses no national security threat. On the U.S. side, this means recognizing that increasing Chinese influence on the Korean Peninsula and on continental Southeast Asia does not pose a hegemonic challenge to the United States, so long as Japan remains in the U.S. camp and a number of American naval bases sufficient to guarantee alliance credibility remains in the region.^[13] It also means tolerance for Chinese development of second-strike nuclear capability to square the M.A.D. circle and take the nuclear option definitively off the table in Sino-American relations. On the Chinese side, recognizing that the U.S. does not pose a threat to the Chinese mainland means accepting that American naval capacities in Southeast Asia are necessary to defend Taiwanese autonomy, and, thereby, demonstrate the credibility of American partnership to the rest of its East Asian allies.^[14]

So long as China and the United States do not perceive routine security policy –most importantly, U.S. naval presence in the South China Sea and Chinese nuclear modernization– as security threats, there is a strong chance of peace between the two nations. The status quo can be held in Taiwan without offending Chinese nationalism, de facto Taiwanese independence, or American credibility. Disputes over South China Sea islands with Vietnam,

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Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Japan can be peacefully resolved through bilateral negotiations and international institutions, especially if U.S.-led intensification of free trade creates disincentives for regional conflict.

However, should either side perceive a security threat where none in fact exists, and exaggerate the threat to national interests and autonomy, conflict will become more likely. This is particularly a concern in the United States, where changing domestic ethnic demographics and a general sense of declination has fueled status anxiety and popularized 'China-bashing.' This is a dangerous phenomenon because, as Art argues, "The popular belief that a rising China will severely threaten U.S. security could become a self-fulfilling prophecy...Actions that appear to look like premature containment, political and military encirclement, economic warfare and the like should be avoided...unprovoked US punitive actions will only strengthen the hard-liners in Beijing and fail to garner support from America's allies and other states in the region."^[15] The vigorous response of the Obama Administration to Southeast Asian allies' request for increased military presence, met earlier this month by the announced development at Darwin, in northern Australia, of the first military base in that country since the Second World War, suggests that American policy makers are not as sensitive as need be to the dangerously aggressive nationalist sentiments that such aggressive policies are likely to provoke in Beijing. To maintain peaceful relations moving forward, the United States will have to project a less militarily aggressive policy in the region.

The area where U.S. understanding will be most necessary is nuclear capabilities. Art argues that it is essential to peaceful relations that the U.S. allows China to develop second-strike nuclear capability. This dynamic will eliminate the nuclear dimension from policy negotiation and reduce the possibility of American deployment of nuclear might.^[16] Glaser feels this preferable security dynamic has already been achieved: "No foreseeable increase in China's power would be large enough to overcome these twin advantages –the Pacific Ocean and nuclear weaponry– for the United States. The same defensive strategies apply to China as well."^[17] This confidence in national security is a vital distinction between Sino-American relations and those that plagued Europe's belligerent Great Powers throughout so much of modern history.

Because the security against domestic attack offered by both the Pacific Ocean and, more vitally, nuclear weaponry, renders less likely the prospect of armed conflict, soft power will play a larger role in U.S.-China power dynamics than it historically has in Great Power relations. This means that the trajectory of China's rise will likely depend on international institutions that at present are highly influenced by the United States. This, too, represents a significant difference between Sino-American power relations and historical European power transitions. The United States is clearly more institutionalized than any previous hegemonic regime. The United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, North Atlantic Treaty Organization and a variety of lesser international institutions project American power, priorities and ideology across the globe. Ikenberry has written that the international order is today "harder to overturn and easier to join" than ever before.^[18]

Thus far, China has a mixed record in international institutions. Between 2005-7, China worked with the U.N. Security Council to craft economic sanctions against North Korean nuclear proliferation, backed the U.N.'s plan for stability in Darfur in 2006, and cooperated in international anti-piracy efforts in late 2008. Unfortunately, China soon departed from its previous course of international cooperation, rebuilding its economic and political alliance with North Korea over the past two years, objecting to Security Council sanctions against Iran in 2010, and Syria and Lybia in 2011-12, and expressing unusual aversion to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and President Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama in 2010.^[19]

This turbulence in part reflects internal debates within the Communist Party of China (CCP). The best strategy to incorporate China peacefully into the global polity is for the United States to confirm the narrative of the moderate integrationist faction within the CCP that sees the possibility for cooperation. This means continually offering China opportunities for constructive international participation. As Christenson argues, the U.S. is negotiating from a position of strength, because China is outnumbered on central international issues–North Korean and Iranian proliferation, for example– and can thus choose to either remain sidelined or participate constructively within international institutions.

For China to countenance a serious challenge to the international power structure, it must build its own set of

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international alliances with which it can seek to alter the power dynamics within international institutions. Already, China seems to be moving in this direction, building alliances in Africa through large-scale investment and aid projects.^[20] China's African trade has offered both the opportunity to acquire the natural resources –especially in oil and minerals– necessary for continued economic growth and the political alliances necessary for projection of political power. Because, as Cooke reports, “China has never sought to subjugate, colonize or enslave...has a record of support for African liberation movements and the common interest of the developing world in creating a just, equitable global economy,” China's positive approvals are between 10% and 30% higher than that of the United States.^[21] If China's strategy is to gain the allegiance of developing nations so as to exert greater influence in international institutions, it has a long road ahead, but, nonetheless, has made significant progress toward this end in African.

This analysis has sought to locate China's rise in the history of hegemonic power transition, and develop policy suggestions through which the probability of war can be reduced. China and the United States are well positioned to avoid hegemonic war. Nuclear capabilities and the Pacific buffer mean that neither government should fear encroachment on domestic sovereignty, a concern that was at the heart of the arms races and the development of elaborate alliance systems that precipitated the European hegemonic wars of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Moreover, economic integration creates significant disincentives both for direct conflict between China and the United States, and regional conflict in Southeast Asia into which the United States could easily be pulled. The development of further free trade arrangements in the region can further institutionalize this dynamic. The territorial conflicts that do exist –concerning Taiwan, as well as the three contested islands in the South China Sea– can be resolved through peaceful negotiation or harmless perpetuation of the status quo. The only serious threat to peace is the potential for reactionary escalation in response to routine security policy –such as China's nuclear modernization– or a general sense that a rising China is necessarily a dangerous China. This is the perilous self-fulfilling prophecy of which Art writes: aggressive and uncalled for military, political or economic encirclement will merely empower hardline CCP nationalist who are more likely to adopt a belligerent posture toward the west. The United States and the international community must recognize that the question at stake is not the fact of China's rise, but rather how the global community can avoid short-sighted defensiveness that could potentially precipitate disastrous hegemonic conflict, and instead facilitate China's continued peaceful integration into the global polity.

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