

The Power Transition Theory and the Sino-American Contention for Power

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***Abstract:** China's military and economic power on the Asian continent has grown to a formidable level in recent decades, and mutually exclusive international ambitions with the United States has actuated a modern-day great power rivalry. This work demonstrates how the Sino-American competition for power aligns closely with Organski's power transition theory, particularly the transition's third stage. A theoretical background on the power transition theory is given, as is a description of the real-world geopolitical competition between the US and China. This work then explains how the theoretical approach is applicable to the real-world phenomenon. The purpose of these findings is to demonstrate that one can expect a heightened risk of conflict with no avenue to peaceful resolution should power ambitions of both parties remain unchanged.*

Key Words: Power Transition Theory, Sino-American, China, United States, South China Sea

Introduction

Today, the world is witnessing a kind of shift that has only been seen sixteen times in the last five-hundred years as a revisionist power confronts an existing status-quo leader. In recent years, China has rapidly grown its economic, military and diplomatic capabilities both domestically and internationally as it marches toward power parity with the United States. Accompanying this expansion is the challenge to existing American order and leadership, which has stimulated a confrontation the US has not seen since that with the Soviet Union.¹ Naturally, this geopolitical standoff has stimulated much dialogue within the international relations sphere regarding the nature, interpretation and potential outcomes of the conflict. The power transition theory is a theoretical approach that divides the process of great power geopolitical competition into five stages, which describes the expected behavioral dynamics during each stage. Out of these five stages, stage three is the most hotly-contested between competing powers. This work finds that the Sino-American power contention, taking place in the Asian power sphere spanning from Eurasia to Southeast Asia, is entering stage three of the power transition theory. This indicates that the world can expect to see increasing levels of confrontation, mutual deterrence, and no viable path toward coexistence. The purpose of these findings is to offer insight into the future course of the power rivalry, drawing attention to the growing risk of conflict as China continues to expand its influence.

The power transition theory offers valuable insight into the current power competition in that China is a great power, dissatisfied with the American-led status quo, with the ambition and demonstrated ability to alter regional and global power balances in its favor. The US naturally resists, given the threat that Chinese revisionist ambitions pose to previously unchallenged American leadership, and the implications for American geopolitical and geoeconomic interests in Europe and Asia. A power rivalry has ensued, and China's rapid expansion on a multitude of levels places it on track for parity with the United States. China does not yet match American power, but the existing phenomena of low-level confrontations and deterrence demonstrates that the rivalry has entered stage three of power transition theory--the most hotly contested stage of

¹ Graham T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), p. vii & 188

the power rivalry.² It should be noted that although China's power expansion has been concentrated in Eastern and Central Asia, projects and partnerships have also been taking place in Europe as a means of gaining capacity and influence needed for its geopolitical ambitions.³ To better understand the Sino-American power contention within the lens of the power transition theory, it is first necessary to understand the basic tenets of this theory.

Power Transition Theory

Stages and Behavioral Dynamics

The power transition theory was initially posited in 1958 by A. F. K. Organski. He outlined the dynamics of a rising world power dissatisfied with the international status-quo, which challenges the dominant state upon nearing power parity. Internationally, states are ordered into a hierarchical structure based on power. At the top is the dominant world power, and under the dominant state are great powers. These great powers cannot challenge the dominant power alone, but have the potential to or are on track to challenge the dominant state for their seat at the top. Below the great powers are middle powers, followed by small powers.⁴ The power transition theory is organized into five stages. Stages one and two are characterized by stable leadership by the status-quo leader. Stage three occurs when a challenging power has grown and reaches parity with the status quo leader. If the revisionist challenger achieves stable leadership and power dominance, the transition enters stage four and five. This system can remain peaceful so long as the dominant state maintains tight control over the international system.⁵ During this early stage, the international system is under stage one or two of power transition, where ample control by the dominant power creates stability through deterrence.

The stability of the status quo will only be disturbed when a great power, with revisionist ambitions to displace the dominant power, begins to threaten the latter's power dominance. As noted by Organski, "challengers are those powerful and dissatisfied great nations who have grown in power after the imposition of the existing international order."⁶ For this challenge to occur, the great power must possess the ability and the willingness to engage in a contention for dominance; the manifestation of power transition is dependent on the extent of dissatisfaction.⁷ To be willing, the revisionist power must determine that the benefits of challenging the status quo will outweigh the risks and be more beneficial than existing within the status quo international order.⁸ The confrontation between the challenger and the existing leader will substantially increase the chances of conflict should neither party concede peacefully.

Organski notes that the risk of conflict occurs primarily when the revisionist great power approaches relative parity with the dominant power.⁹ The conditions are ripe for war when the

² Shih-yueh Yang, "Power Transition, Balance of Power, and the Rise of China: A Theoretical Reflection about Rising Great Powers.," *China Review* 13, no. 2 (2013): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23611064>. p. 35

³ Jake Sullivan and Hal Brands, "China Has Two Paths to Global Domination," *Foreign Policy* (Foreign Policy, July 3, 2020), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/22/china-superpower-two-paths-global-domination-cold-war/>.

⁴ Manus I. Mildlarsky, Jacek Kugler, and A. F. K. Organski, "The Power Transition: A Retrospective and Prospective Evaluation," in *Handbook of War Studies* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), <https://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~fczagare/PSC%20346/Kugler%20and%20Organski.pdf>. p. 171-173

⁵ David Lai, "The Power Transition Theory," in *The United States and China in Power Transition* (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2011), p. 6

⁶ Mildlarsky, Kugler, and Organski, "The Power Transition," p. 174

⁷ Lai, "The Power Transition Theory," p. 18 ; Adrian Pop and Andreea Brinza, "Power Transition and Balance of Power: Comprehending the Power Dynamics of the 21st Century.," *Public Administration & Regional Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017): p. 66, <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=131958737&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁸ Mildlarsky, Kugler, and Organski, "The Power Transition," p. 175

⁹ Mildlarsky, Kugler, and Organski, "The Power Transition," p. 175

challenger attempts to change the international order to the resistance of the status-quo leader. The likely period of conflict in the confrontation is not at the point of equilibrium in world influence but the months and years preceding this period as the dominant power grows uneasy and protective.¹⁰ During this period, the world is at stage three of the power transition where power parity is achieved, or nearly achieved, and phenomena of mutual deterrence or confrontation from both sides may occur.¹¹

The first example of this was between the growing city-state of Athens and the existing dominant power of Sparta. War, in this case, occurred prior to power parity during stage three of the power transition.¹² The Peloponnesian War between the two powers, beginning in 431 B.C., was explained by the Athenian historian Thucydides as the result of the fear of the Spartans caused by the threat of the growing and rivaling Athenian city-state.¹³ More specifically, the fear is rooted in the assumptions that the revisionist power will not only exceed past power parity, but will challenge the dominant power's leadership and norms institutionalized in the international order.¹⁴ This can also be partially explained by the notion of loss aversion, which contends that states will be more unhappy losing something than they would be happy gaining something else of equal value, meaning that preventing loss is of greater interest than ensuring gain--even if the margins for both are the same. Loss aversion can explain the paranoia and fear a dominant state often feels when confronted with a rising competitor. The world order of institutions and norms it has built over the decades is threatened by the revisionist power which produces an aversion to the change proposed by the revisionist.¹⁵

The phenomenon of a rising revisionist power challenging a status-quo leader has occurred fifteen times in the last five centuries. In a dozen of these instances, the power transition resulted in war, mainly because of a similar paranoia once felt by the Spartans. The most recent among the dozen was World War Two. This exemplifies the danger this geopolitical scenario poses in a term called the Thucydides Trap.¹⁶ Should the revisionist succeed in displacing the status quo leader, the world will enter stage four and five of the power transition, where the revisionist achieves leadership and compels adherence to a new order.¹⁷

The Significance of Sociological Factors and Power

Naturally, power itself is a central priority to the competing rivals during a power rivalry, as it determines the ability for a state to exert its influence and compel adherence to the international order. Organski himself acknowledged that "power is a critical variable shaping the way in which the international order functions."¹⁸ The lack of a global governance system characteristic of the international anarchic structure will allow for mutually exclusive power ambitions to spiral into conflict. These behavioral and structural tendencies are realist in nature.

¹⁰ David Sobek and Jeremy Wells, "Dangerous Liaisons: Dyadic Power Transitions and the Risk of Militarized Disputes and Wars," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 1 (2013): <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0008423913000218>. p. 70

¹¹ Mildlarsky, Kugler, and Organski, "The Power Transition," p. 187

¹² Lai, "The Power Transition Theory," p. 8

¹³ Allison, *Destined for War*. p. xv

¹⁴ Mildlarsky, Kugler, and Organski, "The Power Transition," p. 175

¹⁵ Robert Jervis, "The Implications of Prospect Theory for Human Nature and Values," *Political Psychology* 25, no. 2 (2004): <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2004.00367.x>. p. 165-167

¹⁶ Allison, *Destined for War*. p. vii-viii

¹⁷ Mildlarsky, Kugler, and Organski, "The Power Transition," p. 187

¹⁸ Mildlarsky, Kugler, and Organski, "The Power Transition," p. 173

Unlike realism, however, Organski notes that the international structure in the power transition theory is hierarchic based on the influence afforded to states, which is determined by their power level. Though this work acknowledges Organski's hierarchy of power in the international system, it does not consider this a substitute for anarchy in any significant capacity. The international system still remains anarchical with no official form of government and states remain dependent on the self help theory for self-preservation.¹⁹ Disparities in power do give rise to unequal distributions of influence which grants the dominant power the most influential role, but these disparities do not eliminate international anarchy or its dynamics. Anarchy is key in actuating confrontational behaviors and deterrence-based aversion to conflict seen today, which is symptomatic of stage three of the power transition theory.

Sociological factors also play an important role in the power transition theory. Sociological factors affecting a decision-maker's interpretation of state power capabilities, and a leader's personal receptiveness to gambler-like overuse of power, or cautious underuse of power may produce behavioral outcomes contrary to rational predictions.²⁰ Sociological factors are also significant in that they determine whether revisionist states are content with the status-quo, which will then correspond to the extent of the revisionist ambitions of the challenging power.²¹ To build on this, international norms have been established and stability has thus been ensured. The norms by the dominant power have already achieved the three stages of evolution: emergence, acceptance and internalization. The normalcy has been perpetuated throughout decades of routine behavior, and the large majority of the world's less powerful states bandwagon for purposes of stability and conformity.²² Competitors for power dominance emerge when great powers are dissatisfied with these internalized norms and the existing status quo, and instances of overuse or underuse of power become most consequential during the third and most hotly-contested stage of the power transition theory.²³

Contemporary Considerations

The concept of power transition is tried and proven, yet there is discussion over its relevance to modern society and the actual risk for conflict propagated by those who have studied the Thucydides Trap.²⁴ The world sees an unprecedented extent of interdependence on an economic and social scale, with transnationalism and globalization creating an interconnecting web of interests. The beneficiaries and institutions of this interdependence would be very resistant to a conflict that would shock the challenging powers economically and politically. The unprecedented international institutionalism can offer channels to resolve the disputes and miscommunications that precede conflict. The post-WW2 world has internalized conflict-averse norms and operates with the risk aversion accompanying nuclear warfare.²⁵ These two

¹⁹ Manuela Spindler, "Neorealist Theory," in *International Relations: A Self-Study Guide to Theory* (Opladen; Berlin; Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2013). p. 128

²⁰ Inanna Hamati-Ataya, "Neorealism Reconsidered: Human Nature or State Behavior?," *International Studies Review* 14, no. 2 (2012): pp. 303-307, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2012.01106.x>. p. 303-304

²¹ Douglas Lemke, "The Continuation of History: Power Transition Theory and the End of the Cold War," *Journal of Peace Research* 34, no. 1 (1997): <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343397034001003>. p. 24

²² Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): pp. 887-917, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081898550789>. p. 895-905

²³ Miodlarsky, Kugler, and Organski, "The Power Transition," p. 174

²⁴ Lemke, "Power Transition Theory and the End of the Cold War," p. 29

²⁵ Allison, *Destined for War*. p. viii, 194, 207

phenomena will also disincentivize war to an extent that the behavioral responses to contemporary power transition may be contrary to theoretical expectations.

This work contends that one cannot rule out with certainty the possibility of a revisionist power becoming dissatisfied enough with the status-quo to be willing to challenge it. Furthermore, power transitions can take place peacefully, making war not synonymous with the theory. Conflicts also may arise unintentionally between competing powers from miscommunications or the autonomous form that military bureaucracies can take, circumventing notions of rationality. The near-catastrophic Cuban Missile Crisis is an example of this, as both of those factors greatly augmented the risk of, but fortunately did not cause, a war-inducing flashpoint. The risk for these unintentional causes are highest during stage three of the power transition because of the tendency for confrontation in this stage and because the third stage is the most hotly contested. Even when considering these, the existing rivalry between the US and China has failed to instill confidence that it is on track toward a peaceful resolution as it enters the third stage.²⁶ To understand the role of the power transition theory in the Chinese-American competition for power, it is necessary to first understand the nature of this competition.

Chinese-American Geopolitical Competition

The State of China and the United States

China has consistently proven itself to be a rising contender for world power, expanding in a variety of spheres necessary to project itself internationally. China has experienced consistently rapid rates of economic growth over the last forty years. Today, it is the US' largest trading partner, and is the world's largest manufacturer, exporter, and importer. With these titles, China has firmly embedded itself in the world economy and wields significant influence on international market dynamics. Militarily, though China has not expanded to the extent of the Soviets in the Cold War, China's military is being selectively modernized in areas with the most strategic benefit in modern warfare against a near-peer foe. Emphasis is placed on cyber warfare, long range missile operations, and naval technology. China's military spending in 2016 was eight times that of their 1996 budget. Though China primarily relies on hard power, it has expanded its educational, religious, and cultural influences abroad into its regional sphere of South East Asia as a means of spreading soft power.²⁷

Traditionally, US policy toward China was aimed at mutually beneficial integration into the world markets. However, China's growing influence and power led to a shift in policy under the Obama administration to a pivot to Asia as a means of containing expanding Chinese influence in the region. President Trump's administration took an even stronger role, transforming US foreign policy to see China as the US' chief competitor, and declaring China a "revisionist power," a term right out of the power transition theory vocabulary. The Trump administration's transition to realist-oriented thought was a response toward China's opposition to American ideological, strategic, and economic interests internationally. President Trump issued a government-wide approach to containing Chinese influence, and has launched trade war out of declared efforts to counter Chinese predatory international market practices. This trade

²⁶ Allison, *Destined for War*. p. 155-162

²⁷ Nguyen Thi Thuy Hang, "The Rise of China: Challenges, Implications, and Options for the United States," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 30 (2017), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26465816>. p. 48-53

war has put one of the only significant cornerstones of US-Chinese peace and cooperation into jeopardy: economic partnership.²⁸

The South China Sea

One of the most apparent areas of contention has been in the South China Sea. The South China Sea is a passageway for one third of global sea commerce and holds significant oil and natural gas reserves.²⁹ Competition is rife in the South China Sea, with China and the US competing for influence and power in the region that both consider geostrategically important. China has daringly claimed 310,000 square miles of the South China Sea as part of its territorial waters, extending to the borders of almost every state in the region.³⁰ Its territorial claims reach as far south as Malaysia, in a vaguely defined sphere called the Nine-Dash Line.³¹ China has not acknowledged the 2016 UN ruling that has rendered its claims invalid under international law, going so far as artificially expanding contested islands in the region on which to build military establishments.³² China's actions, coupled with the US' declared commitment to international law and freedom of movement, which it views China as violating, has caused standoffs with the US Navy and other states within the South China Sea region.³³

These actions are a direct manifestation of the increasing threat that China poses to US hegemony in the region, causing considerable concern for Americans. China's military expansion in the region is of notable concern considering that it has seven thousand more tanks and three hundred more naval assets than the United States.³⁴ Alfred Mahan's work *The Influence of Seapower Upon History* (1890) still "beguiles many Chinese strategists."³⁵ In this work, Mahan stated that greater dependence on sea trade will warrant "the revival of the war fleet," and that naval power is directly proportional to the strategic standing of a nation.³⁶ Mahan also declared that the sea power of a nation is dependent notably on the geographical positions and territorial extent of a state's naval forces.³⁷ China is the world's largest exporter and over one third of global sea trade passes through the South China Sea--notably the oil from the Middle East, on which it is dependent.³⁸ Mahan's findings would help to explain China's contemporary naval ambitions.

The reason why China puts such strategic focus into the South China Sea, notably against the United States' influence, is because China perceives the American military presence in the

²⁸ Weixing Hu, "The United States, China, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy: The Rise and Return of Strategic Competition," *China Review* 20, no. 3, accessed 2020, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26928114>. p. 129-132

²⁹ Uptin Saiidi, "Here's Why the South China Sea Is Highly Contested," CNBC (CNBC, February 7, 2018), <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/07/heres-why-the-south-china-sea-is-highly-contested.html>.

³⁰ Richard W. Mansbach and Kirsten L. Taylor, *Contemporary American Foreign Policy: Influences, Challenges, and Opportunities* (Los Angeles: SAGE Reference/CQ Press, 2017). p. 377

³¹ Bernard D. Cole, "Conflict in the South China Sea," *Great Decisions*, 2017, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/44215462.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Aae06231f3b1e6f7b14c2fc0d49b7b825>. p. 43

³² Uptin Saiidi, "Here's Why the South China Sea Is Highly Contested,"

³³ Cole, "Conflict in the South China Sea," p. 43-44

³⁴ Manon Dark, "South China Sea: Beijing and US Face off at Asian Summit as Pompeo Lashes out at 'Bullies'," *Express.co.uk* (Express.co.uk, September 10, 2020), <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1333644/south-china-sea-news-us-world-war-3-summit-latest-military-mike-pompeo-latest>.

³⁵ Allison, *Destined for War*. p. 131

³⁶ Alfred Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower Upon History, 1660-1783* (Little, Brown and Co., 1890). p. 15; Allison, *Destined for War*. p. 69

³⁷ Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower Upon History, 1660-1783*. p. 16

³⁸ A V Rajwade, "China's Global Economic Power: Yuan as a Future Reserve Currency," *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 50 (2014), https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/24481168.pdf?ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_SYC-5187_SYC-5188%2F5187&refreqid=fastly-default%3Abf9d01dfb17df58b6fa03e96c7cfa06f. p. 14; Uptin Saiidi, "Here's Why the South China Sea Is Highly Contested,"; Mansbach and Taylor, *Contemporary American Foreign Policy: Influences, Challenges, and Opportunities*. p. 377

region as a means to intimidate and constrain China's growth as a competing power and to maintain the status quo of US hegemony in the region.³⁹ China is inherently distrustful of the liberalism and democracy that the US promotes in the region, which China perceives as a counterweight to its own influence.⁴⁰ These issues posed by the US are obstacles to Chinese ambitions of achieving the equivalent of a modern version of the Monroe Doctrine in South East Asia.⁴¹ China pursues these goals because establishing a sphere of influence will allow President Xi Jinping to achieve his long term objectives of extending China's control through Tibet, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, ensuring China receives the reverence and respect deserving of a great power, and ultimately restoring China's predominant role in Asia that it enjoyed before Westernization.⁴²

Meanwhile, the US sees the waters as international and rejects China's extensive claims. The US sees China's actions as a disregard of international law and, thus, as revisionist opposition to the norms and order led by the United States.⁴³ The US perceives China's behavior as a "dangerous precedent" and indicative that it is acceptable to disregard international law, and thus the status-quo, when convenient for a revisionist power.⁴⁴ Strategically, the South China Sea is the air and sea avenue for US forces maneuvering in between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The US therefore contends that Chinese forces in the region undermine the freedom of movement that facilitate the trade and diplomacy between the US and its allies in the South China Sea. The \$160 billion in US investments within Southeast Asia is largely dependent on freedom of movement in the region.⁴⁵

Counterbalancing and Regional Influence

The US and China have also competed for regional influence as a means of counterbalancing each other. The UK recently sent one of its two aircraft carriers into the region, while Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force deployed three vessels to the South China Sea.⁴⁶ Both states are strong allies of the US in the regional power contention. The US regularly deploys its aircraft carriers into the South China Sea in freedom of movement exercises and controversially deploys spy planes disguised as Malaysian civilian aircraft as a means of gaining intelligence on Chinese activities.⁴⁷ Chinese state-owned media contends that the US promotes the notion of Chinese provocation in the region as a means of justifying its hegemonic claims

³⁹ Dylan Donnelly, "South China Sea Dispute Spreads to Mekong River amid Fears US Will Dominate Territory," *Express.co.uk* (Express.co.uk, September 18, 2020), <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1336051/south-china-sea-us-world-war-3-Mekong-river-xi-jinping-donald-trump-news>.

⁴⁰ Trudy Kuehner, "China's Encounter with the West: A History Institute for Teachers," Foreign Policy Research Institute (Foreign Policy Research Institute, August 11, 2016), <https://www.fpri.org/article/2008/04/chinas-encounter-with-the-west-a-history-institute-for-teachers/>.

⁴¹ Mansbach and Taylor, *Contemporary American Foreign Policy: Influences, Challenges, and Opportunities*. p. 361

⁴² Allison, *Destined for War*. p. 109

⁴³ Madeline McLaughlin, "U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea," *American Security Project*, 2020, https://www.jst.org/stable/pdf/resrep26608.pdf?ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_SYC-5187_SYC-5188%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3Aeb8fe3d0137d1044bae6dbf89daaeab6. p. 2

⁴⁴ McLaughlin, "U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea," p. 2

⁴⁵ Bronson Percival, "U.S. Perspectives on the South China Sea," *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, 2014, https://www.jst.org/stable/pdf/resrep05903.9.pdf?ab_segments=0%252Fbasic_SYC-5187_SYC-5188%252Fcontrol&refreqid=excelsior%3Aa4a19fd944ad056bedce9d25e345cece. p. 48-49

⁴⁶ Brian McGleeson, "South China Sea: US Praises UK as Allies Prepare to Take Action against Beijing," *Express.co.uk* (Express.co.uk, September 22, 2020), <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1338733/south-china-sea-us-uk-royal-navy-hms-queen-elizabeth-world-war-3>.

⁴⁷ Liu Zhen, "China Says US Spy Planes Posing as Airliners Are a 'Serious Threat' in the South China Sea," *Business Insider* (Business Insider, September 22, 2020), <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-says-us-spy-planes-posing-as-airliners-serious-threat-2020-9>.

and that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's tough words against China are aimed at harming Chinese relations with regional allies.⁴⁸

In September 2020, the US initiated a \$150 million project to help Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand contend with the environmental effects of China's multiple dams on the Mekong River.⁴⁹ Vietnam has voiced support for the US' role in the South China Sea situation, around the time that an Indonesian vessel engaged in a standoff with the Chinese Coast Guard in what Indonesia contended to be its territorial waters.⁵⁰ Malaysia has been quiet, notably because of the dependency it has on China--its biggest export destination.⁵¹ Though the Philippines has indicated a pivot toward China in recent years out of a stated desire to become less dependent on the US, many suggest this is characteristic of its President Duterte, and that upon leaving office, the Philippines will revert to its traditional pro-American stance.⁵²

China has recently transitioned its foreign policy outlook from a quiet and defensive response caused by the 'century of humiliation', a period from 1849-1949 of subjugation and control, to a warrior-diplomacy which insists on the respect of a world power that is willing to confront its adversaries.⁵³ China has consistently demonstrated its willingness to forgo existing institutions when they are not within its interests. China has also established the Belt and Road Initiative to export \$150 billion in infrastructural capacity for a modern-day silk road throughout the Asian and some of the European continents, transforming the existing world economy to make these regions more dependent on Chinese investment. China has also established the Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank to rival the World Bank, with competitive loans as a means of expanding its economic influence and counterbalancing Western banking power.⁵⁴ The US has attempted to rival the Belt and Road Initiative by cooperating with sixteen other countries, notably Taiwan, to offer more transparent and reliable infrastructural funding programs across Asia and Latin America, though the total value of this project is notably less than that of China's.⁵⁵ As China rises to world power status and increasingly confronts the existing American-led order, the prevalence of power dynamics consistent with the power transition theory make this theoretical approach important to study in the context of China's rise.

The Applicability of the Power Transition Theory to the US-China Power Rivalry

China's Dissatisfaction with the Status Quo

The power transition theory is a necessary approach to understanding the Chinese rise to power because the rise of China is fundamentally a confrontation of a revisionist state with the

⁴⁸ Does China Seek Global Hegemony?," Chinadaily.com.cn (China Daily, August 25, 2020), <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202008/25/WS5f44b554a310675eafc55658.html>.

⁴⁹ Donnelly, "South China Sea Dispute SPREADS to Mekong River"

⁵⁰ "Vietnam Backs US Role in South China Sea, Rebuffing Beijing at Asean Meeting," The Straits Times (The Straits Times, September 10, 2020), <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/vietnam-backs-us-role-in-south-china-sea-rebuffing-beijing-at-asean-meeting>; McGleenon, "US Praises UK as Allies Prepare to Take Action against Beijing."

⁵¹ Bhavan Jaipragas, "South China Sea: Malaysia to Stick with 'Quiet Diplomacy' towards Beijing in Dispute, Analysts Say," MSN (South China Morning Post, October 8, 2020), <https://www.msn.com/en-xl/news/other/south-china-sea-malaysia-to-stick-with-quiet-diplomacy-towards-beijing-in-dispute-analysts-say/ar-BB19PgQq>

⁵² Laura Zhou, "US-China Rivalry in South China Sea Has Philippines at Its Core, Observers Say," South China Morning Post (South China Morning Post, September 20, 2020)

⁵³ Kuehner, "China's Encounter with the West,"; Hu, "The United States, China, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy," p. 133

⁵⁴ Allison, *Destined for War*. p. 22-23

⁵⁵ "A New Belt and Road? US, Taiwan Hook up to Counter China's Effort," Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera, November 27, 2020), <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/11/27/a-new-belt-and-road-us-taiwan-hook-up-to-counter-chinas-effort>.

American led status-quo order. The basic principles of this status-quo order can be seen in the mission statements and objectives of the UN and WTO. These include upholding international law, protecting human rights, competitive and transparent markets, and nondiscriminatory market practices.⁵⁶ China has historically been skeptical of capitalism since the Opium Wars, and even more so since the communist rule of Mao Ze Dong. Having been wary of foreign imperialism after its subjugation to the control of outside powers before Mao's rule in 1949, it views democracy as an inherently Western value and is therefore not receptive to democratic ideals domestically or internationally.⁵⁷ Differences in the values of human rights, sovereignty, and territorial disputes continue to emanate onto the world stage from China. Examples include the outcry over the Muslim Uighurs imprisoned in labor and re-education camps, the imprisonment of dissident world-renowned journalists and artists, and the seizure of a port in Sri Lanka after the local government failed to pay the predatory loans owed to China on time. Its dissatisfaction with the US-led order, its disputes in trade, and its demand for the respect and recognition entitled to a world power sowed the seeds for revisionist ambitions. China's rapid expansion into the world stage makes these topics areas of confrontation between China's revisionism and the American-led established norms.⁵⁸

China's Revisionism

Some reject the notion that China is a revisionist power, because China's rapid expansion and growth has been based on its integration into the existing order, and it desires to become more dominant in said order.⁵⁹ However, even if China has benefited from the existing system, this system has been largely built by and is primarily dependent on American leadership.⁶⁰ China's contention for power against the leader of the current status-quo is revisionist in its ambitions to disrupt the existing power balance. This notably includes its desire "to become [in Southeast Asia] what America became in the Western Hemisphere after the Monroe Doctrine."⁶¹ It is also revisionist in its aforementioned aversion to internalized international norms.

Domestically, China has abolished term limits and Xi Jinping has arrested political rivals. Uighur minorities in Western China are being put into detention and a new era of authoritarian social control through technological means and social credit systems are all the antithesis of the freedom and democratic norms internalized internationally. These instances exemplify China's revisionist behavior, especially as its antidemocratic sentiments manifest on the world stage in backing autocratic strongmen like North Korea. China's disregard of the backlash entailing these affairs from primarily Western nations shows a fundamental rejection of the established Western norms. Internationally, as China violated its promise to President Obama by militarizing its islands in the South China Sea and disregarded the 2016 UN ruling against Chinese territorial claims in the sea, it has further displayed its willingness to act against the rules and guidelines promoted by the American-led order regarding territorial sovereignty.⁶² China's revisionist

⁵⁶ "What Is the WTO? - What We Stand For," World Trade Organization (World Trade Organization), accessed March 17, 2021, https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/what_stand_for_e.htm. ; "What We Do," United Nations (United Nations), accessed March 17, 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/sections/what-we-do/>.

⁵⁷ Kuehner, "China's Encounter with the West,"

⁵⁸ Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*. p. 175-179

⁵⁹ Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "China's Rise: Offensive or Defensive Realism," *Strategic Studies* 39, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/doi:10.2307/48544287>. p. 49

⁶⁰ Charlene Barshefsky, William E. Brock, and Frederick W. Smith, "Affirming American Leadership: A Call to Action," *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.2307/resrep26013>. p. 2

⁶¹ Mansbach and Taylor, *Contemporary American Foreign Policy: Influences, Challenges, and Opportunities*. p. 361

⁶² Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*. p. 176, 180, 187

policies have “exacerbated regional tensions,” subjugating America’s partners in its neighborhood to the strongman behavior it has displayed in the South China Sea and worsening the unease that the US feels as a threatened status-quo leader in the third stage of power transition.⁶³

China Using Power to Act on its Revisionist Sentiments

One of China’s primary acts of international revisionism is through changing the global power balance. China aims to make large portions of Asia dependent on its investment with its new Belt and Road Initiative and has established ports and naval bases extending to Djibouti in the Horn of Africa.⁶⁴ These actions show a greater expansion of Chinese influence that cannot coexist with, and thus displaces, existing American influence. China’s dissatisfaction with the World Bank, and the subsequent establishment of the competing Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank (AIIB), exacerbates the uprooting of traditional American-led international institutions.⁶⁵ China has established Confucius schools, many of which concentrate in Southeast Asia, as a means of promoting Chinese culture and influence. They are funded by the state and geared towards disrupting Western criticisms of China.⁶⁶ China’s manufacturing of man made military islands in the South China Sea, its confrontations with neighbors, and close calls with the US Navy are all China’s ways of asserting itself in these waters and consequently upsetting the region’s historic US influence.⁶⁷ China’s ability to expand its influence and challenge global institutions in these manners are indicative of a capacity and power level which effectively challenges American power dominance. The ability to challenge American dominance is a characteristic of the third stage of the power transition theory, where power levels between the competing states are close enough to rival each other.

Although China’s exertions of power are important in demonstrating China’s willingness to use its power for its revisionist ambitions, a defining characteristic of the power transition theory is the relative power between the revisionist and the status quo state.⁶⁸ In 1980, China’s GDP was seven percent to that of the US, compared to sixty-one as of 2015. In that same time frame, its exports have risen from eight percent to 151 percent, and economic reserves from sixteen percent to 3,140 percent.⁶⁹ China’s economy was a quarter the size of America’s in 2007, but by 2012, it grew to be half the size of the US economy.⁷⁰ China’s economy has, on average, doubled every seven years with a sustained ten-percent average growth rate.⁷¹ However, the US growth rate has fluctuated around three percent in recent years.⁷² Militarily, China’s defense budget increased by 175 percent from 2003-2012 while the US’ increased by thirty-two percent

⁶³ Mansbach and Taylor, *Contemporary American Foreign Policy: Influences, Challenges, and Opportunities*. p. 369

⁶⁴ Allison, *Destined for War*. p. 125

⁶⁵ Allison, *Destined for War*. p. 22

⁶⁶ Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*. p. 178

⁶⁷ “Studying the South China Sea: The Chinese Perspective,” *Center for a New American Security*, 2012, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep06255.pdf?ab_segments=0%252Fbasic_SYC-5188%252F5187&refreqid=excelsior%3Afd4e8101a6de7778f4cf032f7a709a3. p. 1

⁶⁸ Milderlarsky, Kugler, and Organski, “The Power Transition,” p. 175

⁶⁹ Allison, *Destined for War*. p. 6

⁷⁰ Mansbach and Taylor, *Contemporary American Foreign Policy: Influences, Challenges, and Opportunities*. p. 371

⁷¹ Allison, *Destined for War*. p. 7

⁷² Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*. p. 199

in the same time frame.⁷³ Projections have shown that China's navy is slated to be the strongest by 2035.⁷⁴ Trump's Secretary of Defense has warned that the United States Navy needs 500 more vessels by 2045 to be able to counterbalance the Chinese Navy.⁷⁵ The state of the world, according to Organski's timeline of power transition, can be seen as falling into stage three of the power transition, where the revisionist great power is nearing parity with the dominant state.⁷⁶ The world is, therefore, approaching the stage most ripe for conflict.

The Confrontation of the Old and the New

The geostrategic competition between the US and China has been exacerbated by the mutually exclusive goals of both parties. China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, which is at the forefront of the US-China competition and the most risky stage for a conflict inducing flashpoint, has been deemed non-negotiable by the Chinese government. Chinese foreign policy experts see China's rise towards becoming a world power, as well as the return to multipolarity, as indisputable.⁷⁷ This may explain why Xi has demonstrated increasing confidence in his ability to exert Chinese interests and power internationally. The United States' presence in the Pacific and its pivot into the region as a means of protecting American leadership, is viewed by China as the main obstacle to Chinese prominence.⁷⁸ This makes the region a potential location for a flashpoint as stage three of power transition heightens the risk of conflict.

The Trump administration, notable for its tough stance against contemporary China, held sentiments regarding China that fell in line with the distrustful, protective sentiments of a status-quo leader when confronted with a revisionist rival. These are insightful since the official US stance against Chinese power ambitions are largely bipartisan. In calling China a revisionist power, the Trump administration operated under the assumption that China wants to alter the American-led, liberal order.⁷⁹ Acknowledging the ideological differences concerning liberty, capitalism, and sovereignty between the US and China indicates the assumption that China possesses revisionist sentiments toward the norms of the international order on a cultural, economic, and diplomatic level. The Trump administration also recognized that China's revisionism extends past the ideological level into the realm of power and influence--based on Beijing's stated commitments to obtain global leadership promoting "socialism with Chinese characteristics." China's provocations, as well as its military and economic expansion were evidence to the Trump administration that China will act on its revisionist sentiments to undermine American leadership.⁸⁰

The rise of China and its challenge to the existing American-led order is thus characteristic of rhetoric within the power transition theory. As elaborated on above, China has demonstrated its discontent with the existing order given its antidemocratic, anti-free market

⁷³ Klaus Heinrich Raditio, "China's Shifting Behaviour in the South China Sea: A Defensive Realist Perspective," *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 22, no. 2 (October 2015), https://www.jstor-org.proxy-tu.researchport.umd.edu/stable/pdf/44289102.pdf?ab_segments=0%252Fbasic_SYC-5187_SYC-5188%252F5187&refreqid=excelsior%3A819c583c2d51d18f96564b6128767b67. p. 311

⁷⁴ Bill McLoughlin, "World War 3 Warning: China Risks 'All out War' with US over Taiwan – 'Very Worried'," July 21, 2020.

⁷⁵ Ryan Pickrell, "Trump's Secretary of Defense Says the US Navy Needs 500 Ships by 2045 to Counter China," MSN (Business Insider, October 7, 2020), <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/trumps-secretary-of-defense-says-the-us-navy-needs-500-ships-by-2045-to-counter-china/ar-BB19N6gN>.

⁷⁶ Mildlarsky, Kugler, and Organski, "The Power Transition," p. 187

⁷⁷ Mansbach and Taylor, *Contemporary American Foreign Policy: Influences, Challenges, and Opportunities*. p. 368, 377; Nau, *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers*. p. 43

⁷⁸ Raditio, "China's Shifting Behaviour in the South China Sea," p. 312

⁷⁹ Hu, "The United States, China, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy," p. 130

⁸⁰ "US Strategic Approach to China," p. 5-14

sentiments.⁸¹ It has shown its willingness to act on these inclinations by establishing rival international institutions, testing territorial sovereignty, and militarily confronting the dominant power of the US. It has shown its ability to approach parity by maintaining consistent double digit economic growth, rapidly industrializing, and modernizing its economy and military.⁸² As parity approaches and the two competing powers remain firm in their commitment to mutually exclusive goals, the volatility of the contention increases. Given the scale of the contention, it is important to understand the geographic extent of the power transition.

Regional or Global Competition?

Whether China seeks regional or global power dominance is still debated, though most agree that it currently seeks regional dominance. This work contends that China's primary goal is to establish an uncontested sphere of influence in Southeast Asia. China's efforts at increasing its influence and power in Eurasia and Europe can be explained by the geostrategic importance of these regions. The size of the economies of these regions will necessitate Chinese attention--should China wish to reach the power and influence necessary to protect its immediate sphere of influence. Given Southeast Asia's economic and strategic importance to the US, a world power, China will need a globally formidable level of influence and power to contest America's presence in the region. This can explain China's rival global institutions such as the AIIB, which challenges previously uncontested American hegemony and grants China greater economic influence.⁸³ Despite Chinese efforts to increase power on an international scale, which serve as a means to an end, the global power balance still decisively remains in the US' favor, and therefore within stages one or two of power transition. Within China's Asian neighborhood, from Eurasia and through Southeast Asia, the competition for power is much more contested. The power concentrations and the behavior of the US and China in this region are symptomatic of stage three of the power transition.

Why Stage Three?

A primary indicator that the Sino-American power contention is in the third stage of power transition is the narrowing gap in economic and military power levels of the two states, as well as the rivaling international institutions created by China to counterbalance US influence. Stage three of the power transition theory will also see provocations from both competing powers, as well as mutual deterrence to conflict.⁸⁴ The US' freedom of movement exercises into territory that China claims has become routine and characteristic of the geopolitical competition in the South China Sea theater. China's willingness to confront the US in a game of chicken by forcing the latter's ships, on occasion, to swerve to avoid collision has also become a notable obstacle for American ships in the area, as has the concerningly close proximity between passing Chinese ships and the US Navy. The American freedom of movement exercises and Chinese assertiveness with their vessels indicate provocation on both ends. Meanwhile, the nuclear arsenals, as well as the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and second-strike capabilities of the US and China, have effectively censured mutually assured destruction. The destructive consequences of cyber attacks, considering the advanced cyber warfare programs of both states,

⁸¹ Kuehner, "China's Encounter with the West,"

⁸² Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*. p. 175

⁸³ Sullivan and Brands, "China Has Two Paths to Global Domination"

⁸⁴ Mildlarsky, Kugler, and Organski, "The Power Transition," p. 187

also instill a sense of deterrence to conflict that is characteristic of stage three of power transition.⁸⁵ As China continues its propulsion into the global stage, it can be said with confidence that stage three has been reached. One can expect to see an increasingly uneasy US, continued provocation, and worsening tensions with no visible path toward coexistence.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of China's rise to power is a fundamental challenge to the American-led order, which has been institutionalized, normalized and internalized internationally, since its emergence at the end of World War Two.⁸⁶ The challenge manifests itself in the alteration of historical power balances primarily within the Asian continent, prompting a confrontation of ideals and values. China's rise has been marked by its rapid economic expansion, the growth of its military, and rise in international influence.⁸⁷ As China has demonstrated its dissatisfaction with the existing world order, it possesses both the massive resources and will necessary to approach power parity with the United States. It has also proven willing to use its newly acquired economic might to challenge the status-quo with which it is dissatisfied with.⁸⁸

When looking at power levels and the behavior of the contesting states, it becomes apparent that the regional power transition is in the third stage: Parity is not far off, military expansion and modernization incentivizes deterrence, and mutually exclusive goals in the South China Sea prompt provocation from both sides. Stage three is the most contested stage, as the unease of the status-quo leader tangles with the growing ambitions of the revisionist challenger, ultimately creating a hotly-contested environment.⁸⁹ Current provocations and adversary-oriented rhetoric do not indicate that a peaceful resolution is on the way. Should China's economic juggernaut continue to expand, one can expect to see current hostilities and competition persist. As parity approaches, the question of whether China and the US will learn to coexist, or whether one will triumph over the other, is yet to be determined. In understanding the current stage of the power transition, however, a better understanding of the future course of the power contention can be offered.

⁸⁵ Allison, *Destined for War*. p. 159, 207-208

⁸⁶ Finnemore and Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," p. 904

⁸⁷ Allison, *Destined for War*. p. 11-19

⁸⁸ Kuehner, "China's Encounter with the West,"

⁸⁹ Miallarsky, Kugler, and Organski, "The Power Transition," p. 175

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