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## **The Rise of China as a Hegemonic Power: The Case for a Partial Peaceful Rise**

MOHAMED BIN HUWAIDIN\*

*Department of Government and Society,  
United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain, UAE*

OSMAN ANTWI-BOATENG\*\*

*Department of Government and Society,  
United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain, UAE*

**Abstract:** China's rise is a significant concern for international security. It is essential to understand the trajectory of China's rise in order to determine world safety and prosperity measures in a period of great uncertainty. This study provides an overview of the two main possible security consequences of China's rise, that is, a peaceful rise and a warlike rise, by surveying arguments found in literature regarding both aspects. The research extends beyond the often-made binary argument of "peaceful rise versus non-peaceful rise" since aspects of both arguments can explain the country's rise. This research offers a nuanced assessment of China's rise by positing a partial peaceful rise explanation whereby China seeks a non-confrontational way of asserting itself globally vis-a-vis the United States, while at the same time, modernizing and expanding its military capabilities in preparation for any eventualities.

**Keywords:** power transition theory, China's rise, partial peaceful rise, Sino-US relations, international security

\* *mohd.hwaiden@uaeu.ac.ae; binhuwaidin@hotmail.com*

\*\* *o.boateng@uaeu.ac.ae; antwiboateng@gmail.com*

## Introduction

Zheng Bijian, former Vice President of the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China, first introduced the notion of China's peaceful rise in November 2003. This idea was then adopted by the Chinese Government as a new way of thinking in China's foreign policy, thereby allowing China to thrive economically by taking advantage of the peaceful international environment. In other words, if China wants to be a great power, it requires a peaceful international environment that can help it to achieve sustainable development.<sup>1</sup> The issue of China's rise has resulted in a large number of studies about the country's future, as well as its role in the international system. Scholarly research on various aspects of China's rise has explored this issue and its implications for the future, for both China and the world. This debate involves two types of prominent arguments: the pessimistic and the optimistic. In accordance with the power transition theory and realist precepts, the pessimistic argument assumes that the rise of China will not be peaceful, but will, instead, result in intensely competitive security arrangements that would ultimately lead to war. In contrast, the basis of the optimistic argument, led by liberal proponents of international relations is that China's rise would be peaceful and benign. This study seeks to extend beyond the aforementioned binary debate about how China's economic and military ascendancy will impact world politics. This study analyzes both arguments and acknowledges that a better scenario of a "partial peaceful rise" is likely, based on a combination of pragmatic factors. China will continue to advance its assertive stance while tempering it with great caution and an inclination to avoid war with the United States (US).

## Power Transition Theory

China's spectacular economic achievements over the past three decades have heightened security anxieties, mostly in the Western world, about its rise as a malignant world power that will ultimately seek to violently challenge the current order of the international system – dominated by the US in order to establish itself as the new global hegemon. Most scholars who subscribe to this world view, often base their argument on the power transition theory that was originally propounded by Organski in his 1958 seminal book entitled *World Politics*. In this, he predicted the emergence of China as a potential world power and the implications on global security. The power transition theory was described by Organski as a situation in which "an even distribution of political, economic, and military capabilities between contending groups of states is likely to increase the probability of war. Peace is preserved best when there is an imbalance of national capabilities between disadvantaged and advantaged nations. The aggressor will come from a small group of dissatisfied strong countries, and it is the weaker, rather than the stronger power that is most likely to be the aggressor."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, according to this theory, the most violent and prolonged wars will emerge when a rising power, such as China with approximate

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1 Guo 2006, 1–3.

2 Organski and Kugler 1958, 19.

power to the leadership represented by the US, challenges the latter through war out of discontent with its position in the international arena.<sup>3</sup> Instability arises from declining and rising power dynamics which lead to restructuring the order of the international system in favor of the rising power.

Organski's (1968) power transition theory is anchored upon two major factors. First, the power of countries depends on their internal development. As the rate of development of countries occurs at different levels, each country rises and falls at different times. Secondly, the power transition theory argues that the international system is definitely shaped by the dominant power serving as the hegemon. Therefore, when a rising power overtakes the hegemon in this regard, power transition occurs. However, these types of transitions can be peaceful – as when the US surpassed the United Kingdom with no resistance from the latter – or violent, as when a dissatisfied rising Germany violently decided to challenge the status quo led by the British.<sup>4</sup> Most Sino-skeptics and pessimists anchored in the arguments of Organski believe that China's rise vis-a-vis the US-dominated status quo would be similar to the violent confrontation that Germany had with Britain. They hold Organski's world view that "the power of China ought to eventually become greater" and that "Western powers will find that the most serious threat to their supremacy comes from China."<sup>5</sup>

It is indisputable that since the end of World War II (WWII), the US has been the most dominant power on the international arena. Additionally, its dominance was further enhanced by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This ended the struggle for power, and the US became the ultimate superpower. However, nowadays many studies point to China as the rising power in the international system that is vowing to replace the former Soviet Union as the new superpower. Scholars who conducted these studies argue that if China continues to rapidly ascend economically, militarily and geopolitically, there will be an enormous global redistribution of power in favor of China, but to the disadvantage of the US. China is recognized as an ambitious and newly-powerful state. It is not "just another big player," but it is "the biggest player in the history of man."<sup>6</sup> According to the power transition theory, China is assuming the position of the rising power that will challenge the US position as the established power. Therefore, there has been fears over China's rise.

## The War Argument

The pessimistic argument suggests that conditions of uncertainty force or trap rival states into conflicts that in turn lead to direct confrontation. The term "trap" is used by political scientists to describe certain political phenomena. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines

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3 Organski 1968, 338–376.

4 Kim and Gates 2016, 220.

5 Organski 1968, 361.

6 Kristof and WuDunn 1995, 369.

trap as “a dangerous or unpleasant situation which you have got into and from which it is difficult or impossible to escape.” In politics, states or governments willingly or do find themselves in situations from which they are unable to extricate themselves. Many scholars have used the trap angle to evaluate some political situations including policy making, poverty, corruption, violence, inequality, development and debt.

Yet the most noticeable use of the term “trap” in international relations is linked to the security perspective described by realists. The security dilemma concept and the Thucydides trap are the two most prominent traps in the field of international relations. The security dilemma concept was advanced by Jervis who argued that anarchism is the ultimate source of security dilemmas.<sup>7</sup> States tend to accumulate power – including unnecessary offensive and defensive capabilities – to match other perceived powers. Consequently, states are entrapped in a situation in which anarchy creates uncertainty and uncertainty brings about fears and fears lead to competition for power. In addition, power competition creates security dilemmas, and activated security dilemmas leads to conflicts and war. Consequently, states are in a vicious cycle of uncertainty, fear, competition, conflict and wars. Snyder expanded on the security dilemma to explain alliance politics. He argued that in an alliance situation, the weaker state is trapped between the opposing fears of entrapment and abandonment. Entrapment exposes the weaker state to the risk of “being dragged into a conflict over an ally’s interests that one shares or shares only partially,” and abandonment exposes a weaker state, since a stronger state may choose to defect by failing “to make good on its explicit commitments,” or “to provide support in contingences where support is expected.”<sup>8</sup> The Thucydides trap is another security trap that has recently been gaining attention and related to the power transition dynamic. The term was coined by Allison in reference to a situation in which a rising power agitates an already established power. This, in turn leaves the latter power little choice but to respond vigorously to prevent the rising power from challenging the established power.<sup>9</sup> These types of interactions could ultimately result in war.

China’s political future and its interactions in the international system is now being evaluated by many observers from the perspectives offered by this analogy. China’s impressive developmental achievements during a remarkably brief period of time have drawn the attention of political scientists. A large body of literature has analyzed various aspects of Chinese politics. Many – and particularly those who hold pessimistic views of China’s rise – have applied the trap analogy to China’s politics. The Thucydides trap is often used to analyze China’s rise as it relates to international relations.

Allison first used the term Thucydides trap in a 2013 interview with the political *National Interest* magazine. He later expanded on the term in an article and subsequently, in a book entitled: *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap?*

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7 Jervis 1978.

8 Snyder 1984, 466–467.

9 Allison 2015.

His argument uses Thucydides' famous interpretation of the real cause of the fifth-century BC Peloponnesian war to explain the ongoing tensions between China and the US. Thucydides stated that "the growth of power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon (Sparta), made war inevitable."<sup>10</sup> Sparta was at that time an established power with strong military power. Athens was a rising power owing to its advancements in the fields of science, education, art, and democracy. While Sparta was proud of its military strength, Athens was proud of its way of life. Consequently, Athens began to disseminate its values to other city states and played the role of protector, particularly after it established a strong navy in response to the Persian Wars. Sparta was unhappy about the rise of Athens' power. Consequently, it did not hesitate to declare war against Athens. Sparta behaved in that manner because "it was afraid of further growth of Athenian power."<sup>11</sup> Athens wanted to protect its empire, but Sparta wanted to stop further Athenian expansion and to prevent power transition from the established power to the rising power. The war lasted 30 years and ended with Athens' collapse and the re-emergence of Sparta as the sole dominant power or the hegemon in Greece. Sparta successfully destroyed Athens' rising power. Therefore, if the Thucydides' trap analogy is applied, it can be stated that development led to the Peloponnesian war. This analysis can be used to explain the current rivalry between China and the US. China is considered a rising power that is challenging the status of an established power, the US. China would be analogous to Athens and the United States to Sparta. Sixteen historical cases of rivalry between an ascendant power and an established power over the past 500 years were analyzed by Allison and his team. They found strong evidence to support the Thucydides trap argument. Twelve of the sixteen cases experienced resultant wars.<sup>12</sup> In accordance with this historical record, Allison predicts a looming war between China and the US.

Allison is not the only one to predict war between China and the US within the power transition dynamics. Others including Mosher (2000), Glaser (2011), Friedberg (2011), Mearsheimer (2014), Kim and Gates (2015), Bernstein and Munro (2015) have also argued that power transition war between the rising China and the declining US will eventually occur. In his book, *The Tragedy of Great-Power Politics*, Mearsheimer predicted a conflict between the US and China. He debated that China could not rise peacefully. In its pursuit of regional hegemony, China will try to drive the US out of Asia, just as the US did to the European great powers in the Western Hemisphere. However, because of its determination to maintain its status as preeminent regional hegemon in the world, the US in turn, will not tolerate China's attempts to dominate Asia.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the US as an established regional power will not accept China's challenge to its hegemony. Consequently, the US and China are heading toward an entrapment that will lead to a military conflict. The importance of Mearsheimer's argument is reflected in the 16 cases presented

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10 Thucydides n.d.

11 Thucydides 1972, 87.

12 Allison 2015.

13 Mearsheimer 2014, 360–411.

by Allison.<sup>14</sup> Mearsheimer highlights that regional rivalries are greater sources of tension between China and the US than global rivalries.<sup>15</sup> Of the twelve cases that ended in wars, only one was not based on a regional contest. This supports the argument that regional rivalry provokes war between powers. As of now, according to the war argument, China and the US are locked in a regional rivalry with the possibility of direct confrontation. The US has a strong presence and it is the established power in the Asia Pacific Region. Meanwhile, China – considered the rising power in that same region – could challenge the established power's primacy.

This concern was expressed by Bernstein and Munro in *The Coming Conflict with China*. They wrote that the continuation of tensions and rivalries between China and the US over Asia could lead to a military confrontation. Allison's argument regarding the trap was echoed.<sup>16</sup> It was observed that the US had been engaged in three major wars in Asia during the past half century with the purpose of preventing a single power from gaining ascendancy there. Bernstein and Munro believe that China will become the major power in the Pacific. As such, tensions and rivalries between an ascending China and the US, as an established power, are likely to escalate.<sup>17</sup> Friedberg suggests that China's ultimate goal is to displace the US as the leading power in Asia. He warns that if the US does not respond more vigorously to China's efforts, the military balance in the Western Pacific will tilt sharply in China's favor.<sup>18</sup> Glaser argues that China's growing strength will lead to hegemonic war.<sup>19</sup> Mosher has also argued that China's "unwillingness to concede dominance to any foreign power is deeply rooted in China's imperial past as the dominant power of Asia."<sup>20</sup> Advocates of this argument assume that China's growing strength will ultimately change the global political landscape. In accordance with what previously occurred in Germany and Japan, China's rising power may lead to clashes with the established power. According to power transition theory, power parity leads to war among great powers, while power preponderance by the hegemon prevents war.<sup>21</sup> China and the US are living in an environment of power transition between rising China and established US.

The analogy of power transition theory helps us recognize that a war between China and the US is conceivable. Due to this dreadful forecast, scholars argue that both powers must work together to avoid becoming entrapped in such a warlike situation. Allison believes that "more radical changes in attitudes and actions, by leaders and public alike" are need-

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14 Allison 2015.

15 Mearsheimer 2014.

16 Allison 2015.

17 Bernstein and Munro 1998.

18 Friedberg 2011.

19 Glaser 2011.

20 Mosher 2000, 1.

21 Kim and Gates 2015.

ed to avoid this trap.<sup>22</sup> Kissinger has called on the two powers to develop strategic trust to overcome the otherwise unavoidable conflict. Kissinger posits that: “the argument that China and the United States are condemned to collision assumes that they deal with each other as competing blocs across the Pacific. But this is the road to disaster for both sides.”<sup>23</sup>

## The Peace Argument

The peace argument attempts to refute the war argument, especially regarding further development of the China-threat theory articulated mainly by advocates of offensive realism. Sensing the danger, supporters of this argument counter the Thucydides trap analogy by emphasizing China’s peaceful rise. “China sees itself as a member of the global community of common destiny. It does not seek alliances or expansion. There is no cause for fear as China has neither the interest, nor the need, to challenge the United States for leadership by launching a war.”<sup>24</sup> This argument regards China as a responsible state committed to achieving its own development without harming other states. It assumes that economic interdependence will restrain China – the rising power – from confronting the US, the established power. Liberals argue that interdependence is one of the main pillars of peaceful international relations. They also argue that perpetual peace can be partially achieved by creating interdependence. Liberals believe that the more interdependent states are, the more peaceful they will become.<sup>25</sup> As such, economic interdependence will compel China to become sensitive to the costs of alienating its economic partners, and to the small benefits afforded by aggressive military postures relative to the larger benefits associated with trade and financial interdependence.

This argument has been posited by a number of scholars. Ikenberry argues that China’s rise will be peaceful because China is benefiting from the current international system, as it is rising by working inside the international institutions such as the UN, WTO, IMF and World Bank,<sup>26</sup> and it is greatly benefiting from the current liberal international order.<sup>27</sup> Bijian argues that China’s rise to great-power status will not result from following “the path of Germany leading up to World War I or those [paths] of Germany and Japan leading up to WWII, when these countries violently plundered resources and pursued hegemony. China will also not follow the path of the great powers vying for global domination during the Cold War. China will instead, transcend ideological differences to strive for peace, development, and cooperation with all countries of the world.”<sup>28</sup> Gill similarly argued in his book, *Rising Star*, that China is applying a new security concept that stresses coopera-

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22 Allison 2015.

23 Kissinger 2011, 528.

24 Zhihui 2015.

25 Keohane and Nye 2001.

26 Ikenberry 2014a.

27 Ikenberry 2014b.

28 Bijian 2005, 18–24.



tion among states in their pursuit of common objectives. China will rise peacefully and play a positive role in building a harmonious region and world.<sup>29</sup> In accordance with this argument, China will help to stabilize the region. Bingguo also stressed that China will “stick to the path of peaceful development” and “will not engage in invasion, plundering, war, or expansion.” It is by making others feel safe that China’s security can be achieved.<sup>30</sup>

The capitalist peace theory argues that trade, investments and financial openness reduce the risk of war.<sup>31</sup> Countries are less likely to have military disputes if there is a greater degree of economic cooperation among them. Weede favored this theory in explaining China’s rise. He discovered that “China’s positive response to the opportunity of exploiting its comparative advantages within a global market ... demonstrate[s] that a capitalist peace between China and the West is feasible.”<sup>32</sup> The deepening economic relations between the US and China have increased the interdependency level among the two powers further minimizing the possibility of a violent confrontation. Bilateral trade reached \$560 billion in 2020, in which China enjoys a huge trade surplus of about \$311 billion.<sup>33</sup> More than \$60 billion in direct investment flowed between the two states in 2016.<sup>34</sup>

Additionally, China holds over \$1.1 trillion in US treasury bonds.<sup>35</sup> This makes China the US’s largest foreign creditor. American investments and technologies are crucial to China’s development, and the American market is very important for Chinese goods. In other words, the two economies complement each other’s needs. While the US produces high-tech products, China mostly produces products that meet the needs of average consumers such as electrical machinery, furniture, toys, sport equipment and food products. Therefore, in this sense, the relationship is not one of competitors but of counterparts. Thus, any decision to move toward a military confrontation would undermine the economies of both countries. This would cause great economic and political pain to China, whose political regime depends on its capacity to provide better economic and social conditions for its massive population. Building a wealthy, strong, and civilized social country with Chinese characteristics, is the main theme of Deng Xiaoping’s theory of development, and Xi Jinping’s idea of development.<sup>36</sup> To achieve this objective, China will need peaceful and cooperative international relationships, principally with the US. China is benefiting from the existing international system in building a vibrant economy that has lifted millions of its citizens out of poverty and legitimized the ruling Chinese Communist Party in a post-Communist world. There is no reason for China to destroy this system. Instead, it

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29 Gill 2007.

30 Bingguo 2010.

31 Gartzke 2007, 166–191.

32 Weede 2010, 210.

33 Statista 2021.

34 Hanemann, Rosen, and Gao 2017.

35 Brettell and Pierog 2021.

36 Hu, Yan, and Tang 2018.



must capitalize on the existing international system of trade, investment, technology, and security. That does not mean that China will not work to adjust some existing norms to advance its development. This is particularly evidenced by China's efforts to establish the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to advance its Belt and Road Initiative and properly to counter the US-led World Bank and the US/Japan-led Asian Development Bank. The same motivation of challenging the US-led status quo has led China to launch the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, which aims at creating a new system based on Chinese principles while working in parallel with the US-dominated system.

Similarly, the 2013 Carnegie Foundation Report that assessed US-Japan-China relations argued against a full-scale military confrontation by China intent upon expelling the US from that region. Instead, the report concluded that the economic interdependence among the three countries would motivate them to resolve their disputes peacefully.<sup>37</sup> Jerden and Hagstrom noted that China's rise has been accommodated, rather than balanced against it, by Japan.<sup>38</sup> Steinfeld has argued that China's rise does not constitute a threat to the West because it is deeply involved in international economic systems that have been created and defined by the West.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the tensions are manageable. Yang opposes the war argument and asserts that it is overruled by nuclear deterrence and geographical constraints. He believes that mutual nuclear deterrence makes "China's rise different from previous examples of violent rising of great powers and this difference explains the peacefulness of China as a rising great power."<sup>40</sup> Dellios and Ferguson argue that China has good intentions to achieve harmonious world by becoming a responsible state.<sup>41</sup>

Another major factor contributing to China's peaceful rise is that the US faces many global challenges that necessitate cooperation with many leading powers, including China. Terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, trade and pandemics are issues of significant importance to both powers, thereby providing additional impetus to maintaining cordial relations. China may not provide full cooperation on these issues, but its non-collaboration could make things more difficult. Meanwhile, China understands that global problems cannot be resolved without US involvement since it is the only power capable of providing global public goods. For example, China realizes that it is in its own interest to cooperate with the US on the war on terror in order to secure its oil supply and deny support for Muslim extremist groups in China.

Furthermore, China is not yet a military superpower, thereby favoring its peaceful rise. Its omnidirectional capabilities will not allow it to win a military confrontation against the US. Globally, the balance of power still tilts in favor of the US, which has about 800

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37 Swaine *et al.* 2013.

38 Jerden and Hagstrom 2012, 215–250.

39 Steinfeld 2010.

40 Yang 2013, 35–66.

41 Dellios and Ferguson 2013.

military bases around the world, including two major bases in Japan and South Korea. Additionally, China has only one officially recognized overseas military base that was opened in Djibouti in 2017. It has a space station manned by the People's Liberation Army in Argentina, and unconfirmed military presence in Tajikistan and Cambodia. China's capacity to project power effectively in places far away from its territory is therefore limited.

Some even think that China does not have the capability to conquer Taiwan because of Taiwan's advanced military capabilities and a possible US intervention, which could inflict political, economic and military damage on China.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, East Asian states have not submitted to China and have shown the resolve to resist if threatened by China.<sup>43</sup> Shambaugh described China as a partial power, or one that lacks real global hard and soft powers compared to the US, although this is changing. According to him, China is no match for the US' comprehensive global influence and power as evident in its unmatched hard and soft power.<sup>44</sup> China is unlikely to confront the US militarily until its military power overtakes the latter. This is manifested in China's improvements in its military-to-military ties with the US, undertaken to reduce the risk of US misconceptions about China's strategic military and security intentions.<sup>45</sup> However, this does not mean that China will not continue to enhance its military capabilities and challenge the US politically. This attitude is evidenced by its ongoing assertive policies in East Asia with regard to its territorial claims, and its efforts to establish a security presence in places along the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly in Central and South Asia.

Although, there are several of contentious issues between China and the US that borders on their respective national security interests, none seem so unamendable to diplomatic or peaceful resolution to trigger a rising China to wage war against the United States. Although Fearon acknowledges "issue indivisibilities," whereby certain national security interests are so paramount that that they are not easily amendable to bargaining, war is not always inevitable.<sup>46</sup> Fearon argues that due to the complexities of issues that States bargain over in international relations, side payments and issue linkages are possible in averting war. Fearon adds that "War-prone international issues may often be effectively indivisible, but the cause of this indivisibility lies in domestic political and other mechanisms rather than in the nature of the issues themselves."<sup>47</sup>

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42 O'Hanlon 2000, 51–86.

43 Kang 2015, 186–205.

44 Shambaugh 2013.

45 Johnson 2014, 20.

46 Fearon 1995.

47 *Ibid.*, 382.

## **China's Partial Peaceful Rise**

The foregoing arguments posit logical possible outcomes of China's continuing rise. The future US-China relationship could follow either course. However, this study argues that China's rise will be mostly, but not completely, peaceful, as aspects of both arguments explain China's rise. This conclusion is drawn using Buzan's model that divides a state's peaceful rise into warlike, cold and warm rise. In a warlike rise, war is inevitable, whereas in a cold rise (or negative peaceful rise), an environment of threat and suspicion prevails instead of a war, and in a warm rise there is a friendly environment with no sense of threat or suspicion.<sup>48</sup> China's peaceful rise encompasses the idea of the cold rise model, which is labelled here as a partial peaceful rise. China's partial peaceful rise encompasses the idea of the cold rise model, whereby China seeks non-confrontational ways of asserting itself globally vis-a-vis the US while modernizing and expanding its military capabilities in preparation for any eventualities. China has demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with the US as long as it is necessary and in its national security interest. It does also not feel inhibited regarding pursuing nonviolent avenues of power, or militarily projecting its influence as evidenced by its increasing regional militarism.

China's attitude toward its neighbors and the US is akin to neither warlike nor warm rises. It is more of a cold or partial peaceful rise. Tensions and rivalries that preclude a warm, peaceful rise still exist on both sides. Continuing apprehensions about trade, security and human rights issues remain the main drivers of the tensions between China and the US. Meanwhile, China's tensions with neighboring countries are fueled by territorial disputes in the Southern and Eastern China Seas. Despite such impediments in their relations with the rising power, engagement has been the prominent strategy of both the established power and its allies in East Asia. This is evident in their pursuit of policies and activities to advance their interests rather than to directly counter each other. They are working through engagements to maximize their benefits even at a time of trade tensions between the US and China. A survey report of Southeast Asian States conducted by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in 2020, shows that 73.2% of people of the region are concerned about becoming an arena for major power competition; and about 64% of the respondents believe that their countries have been negatively impacted by the trade war between the US and China. This indicate that the people of the region prefer more stable relations with both China and the US.<sup>49</sup> This qualifies China's rise as a partial peaceful rise as it works to enhance its attractiveness to its neighboring countries. No great war but an environment of suspicion looms largely over the relationship between the two sides. Consider the relationship between Israel and Egypt. The rise of Israel in the Middle East caused tension and suspicion in Egypt. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two powers has been very stable since the Yom Kippur War in October 1973. Their relationship is neither fully friendly nor completely hostile. It is more like a peaceful mode, in which both states exercise cautious behavior when dealing with each other. Despite the protracted tensions and

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48 Buzan and Cox 2013, 112.

49 Tang *et al.* 2020.

rivalries in US-China relations, and China's relations with its neighbors, all countries have managed to achieve a peaceful coexistence.<sup>50</sup>

The plausibility of China's partial peaceful rise rests on a number of factors; of which the first is the improbability of a warlike rise in China. When he described the situation in Sparta and Athens, Thucydides showed that neither Sparta nor Athens wanted to go to war against each other. However, their respective allies persuaded them that war was inevitable and this led both powers to try to seize a decisive early advantage.<sup>51</sup> With regards to China's rise, neither China nor the US seeks direct military confrontation. Likewise, allies of both countries are less likely to push the two powers into a direct confrontation. Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and most of Southeast Asian states are on the American side, while North Korea, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar are on the Chinese side. With the exception of North Korea, all these states will most likely apply rational judgment before arguing in favor of a direct confrontation between China and the US; for the simple reason that, they understand that they will be directly affected in such confrontation. This explains why most of these countries apply hedging strategy in their relations with the two major powers.

Rationality is premised on the expectation that a state's leadership will make decisions based on a set of preferences in a rational manner, aiming to maximize gains while minimizing losses. Therefore, these states might be reluctant to confront each other out of fear of unforeseeable consequences of any changes in the current balance of power. It is certainly not in the best interests of Taiwan, South Korea, or Japan to pull/push their patron into conflict with China. The same can be said of China i.e., it is not in its best interests to appear threatening to its neighbors and thereby forcing them to try to destabilize the current balance of power. Given China's historically-rooted distrust of Japan, China would fear either a breakdown of the US–Japan alliance or a significant rise in Japan's power.<sup>52</sup> This explains why China is not tempted to drive the US out of the region.<sup>53</sup> It is important for states not to ignore Thucydides' warning, and for that reason, China is emphasizing the significance of viewing its rise as a peaceful beneficiary for humanity in all its discourses. China's president, Xi Jinping, responded to the trap in public during his 2015 visit to the US. He said, "there is no such thing as the so-called Thucydides trap in the world. But should major countries time and again make the mistakes of strategic miscalculations, they might create such traps for themselves."<sup>54</sup> Both Chinese and American top leaders do not think their countries would fall into such a trap.<sup>55</sup> The last major war in this region was in 1979 when China invaded Vietnam with the objective of forcing the Vietnamese out

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50 Shambaugh 2021.

51 Kagan 2005, 14–16.

52 Whiting 1989.

53 Hachigian 2014, 215.

54 Zhihui 2015.

55 Shengli and Huiyi 2018.

of Cambodia. Since then, the new Chinese leadership of Deng Xiaoping has focused on shifting China's policy toward development and modernization. Meanwhile, states in the region have sought to manage relations with China in a manner that emphasizes political and economic solutions rather than military solutions. China has become arguably the biggest trading partner of almost every East and Southeast Asian country.

Nevertheless, China wants to assert itself as a regional power and it is neither backing away from its territorial claims in the region nor reducing its efforts to modernize all branches of its military. This is evidenced by China asserting hegemony over its neighbors with its unilateral declaration of an air defense identification zone in the East China Sea. This zone covers the Diaoyu (Senkaku) islands, an uninhabited territory controlled by Japan but claimed by both China and Japan. The zone extends China's normal airspace to Japan, resulting in the possibility of a backlash from Japan if China tried to enforce it. Reports have also indicated that China is studying the possibility of establishing an air defense identification zone in the South China Sea. This could trigger tensions with Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines. These countries already have disputes with China over islands and reefs in the area.<sup>56</sup> Thus, as China rises, it will begin to apply more assertive great-power strategies, thereby indicating that China's rise cannot be entirely peaceful.

The second factor in China's partially peaceful rise is that its strategy of establishing partnerships with regimes that are unfriendly to the US – such as North Korea, Russia, and Iran – is not meant to initiate a confrontation with the US. Instead, these partnerships demonstrate Chinese intentions to pursue the dual goals of balanced relations with the US and economic development. For example, China is not working to undermine US hegemony in the Middle East by, for example, backing Iran's policy of assertiveness in the region. Indeed, as China has become increasingly dependent on Middle Eastern oil, they have become reliant on US security architecture to ensure free navigation across the Hormuz Strait and the free flow of oil from the region to China. The Chinese stance on the Iranian nuclear issue exemplifies this position. Despite its good political and economic relations with Iran, China supported the four US-led United Nations (UN) sanctions against that country. China is an important factor in the effectiveness of sanctions regime on Iran. China reduced its imports of Iranian oil and stopped investment in Iran's South Pars gas field in order to avoid US sanctions. The logic behind this decision was protecting China's interests in the broader Middle East. While studying Chinese literature on US – Iran relations, Garver concluded that Chinese writers generally emphasize the need for ties with Iran, but without undermining China's relations with the US.<sup>57</sup> The same can be said of China's policy on Asia. This policy is not designed to undermine China–US relations. Both powers are generally working to advance their own positions without directly trying to undermine the other's. Nevertheless, China will continue to maintain its relations with those states that are hostile toward the US in order to hedge one against the other.

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56 Chan 2016.

57 Garver 2016, 180–205.

In terms of the third factor, although China has the second largest military budget in the world and trails only after the US – as evidenced by a 2018 military budget allocation of \$175 billion to all branches of the People’s Liberation Army<sup>58</sup> – China has also discovered the utility of soft power as a foreign policy tool. Joseph Nye defines soft power as the “ability to affect others to obtain outcomes you want. One can affect other’s behavior in three main ways: threats of coercion (sticks), inducements and payments (“carrots”), and attraction that makes others want what you want.”<sup>59</sup> While the exact soft power budget of China is not known because of Chinese government secrecy, experts such as David Shambaugh put the figure at approximately \$10 billion per year. Part of this amount has been spent on the setting up of an international media network, cultural centers around the world and the offering of thousands of scholarships to international students from the global south.<sup>60</sup> All these are concerted attempts by the Chinese government to gain influence around the world via the power of attraction. The latest addition to the Chinese stable of soft power tools is the Belt and Road Initiative that seek to bring together the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road through a vast network of Chinese-funded infrastructural projects, such as railways, roads, pipelines, ports and telecommunications. The goal is to foster economic integration between China and its Asian neighbors, the Middle East, Africa and Europe up to Latin America. According to the World Bank, overall, this initiative involves about 65 countries which represent 62% of the global population, over 30% of global gross domestic product, as well as 75% (which collectively represents 30% and 75% of known energy reserves).<sup>61</sup> This initiative is part of President Xi Jinping’s strategy to restore China as a great power. The initiative seeks to build and expand China’s financial reach beyond its immediate borders in order to assert itself in the world economic system. The success of such a plan will require a more stable international system, particularly along the states of the initiative.

The fourth factor that is likely to lead to China’s partial peaceful rise is the fact that its rise is occurring in an international political arena governed by norms and international organizations that have largely been successful at serving as buffers against hegemonic wars. Indeed, the aforementioned avenues have created an enabling environment for potential antagonists to fraternize and cooperate on a plethora of mutually beneficial issues, thereby diminishing the prospects of violent confrontations. Politically and economically, China has shown the proclivity toward participating and working within international organizations dominated by the US in order to achieve its interests. It is instructive to know that China, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is a major beneficiary of a hegemonic arrangement that confers veto power on itself and four other great powers. In a peaceful rise, the rising power accommodates itself to the rules and structures of international society, while at the same time, other great powers accommodate some changes in those rules and structures by way of adjusting to the new disposition of power

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58 Lendon 2018.

59 Nye 2008, 94.

60 Albert 2018.

61 World Bank 2018.



and status. But if this is not happening, then the rising power moves to a partial peaceful rise where an environment of suspicion starts to build up. Consequently, the rising power will not hesitate to use its capabilities to challenge some aspects of the established international system, particularly on issues that it deems inimical to its strategic interests and foreign policy priorities, but without getting itself in great war. This is evidenced by China's vetoing of US-backed UN resolutions calling for sanctions against Bashar Assad for Chemical Weapons usage, and also in their shielding of the Burmese regime from any accountability for its human rights abuses against the Rohyngya people. In the economic arena, China's willingness to undertake a long list of reforms as a condition of admission into the US-led World Trade Organization in 2011 is a testament to China's recognition of the importance of international organizations to its foreign policy goals. Besides China demonstrating a willingness to work in US-dominated international organizations for its benefits, it has not departed from initiating its own Chinese-dominated international organizations. This is evidenced by its role in the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2015 to which it provided \$50 billion of the bank's \$100 billion seed money. Similarly, China was a major advocate of the establishment of the New Development Bank in 2015, which involves the BRICS States made up of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. China contributed \$41 billion toward its initial capitalization. Such multilateral economic initiatives, coupled with Chinese massive bilateral trade arrangements, financial assistance and infrastructure funding around the world, has given rise to what experts now refer to as the "Beijing Consensus." The latter has now become a competing alternative to the US-led neoliberal economic ideology dubbed the "Washington Consensus."

The fifth major reason why China's rise is likely to be partially peaceful is because of the paramountcy of political stability at home and the desire of the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party to remain in power. To attain this, the Chinese government recognizes that it must avoid any potentially costly and disruptive international wars, especially one against a super power such as the US. This is because such wars could expose the home front to possible rebellion and weaken the Chinese Communist Party's security grip on the country. Additionally, the economic cost of any potential hegemonic war could halt the economic momentum currently underway and cause massive citizen disaffection toward the government, thereby threatening the political reign of the Chinese Communist Party. Thus, for the purpose of political survival, China's political leadership is unlikely to threaten the US in a military confrontation. Nevertheless, China is readying itself militarily for defensive purposes against external threats, as well as asserting itself in the region as evidenced by its aggressive posture in South China Sea. This is in contrast to Germany before WWII in which the ruling elites, led by Hitler, saw enormous domestic political dividends in rallying the nation toward a hegemonic war.

The sixth reason in support of China's partial peaceful rise is its moderate reaction to American unilateral tariff imposition during the Trump Administration, which triggered the ongoing Chinese-American trade war. In response, the Chinese were measured and reiterated that they had "no intention" of challenging or replacing the United States on the



world stage. Nevertheless, the Chinese vowed not to accept any attempt to halt its economic advancement and were not keen on succumbing to American pressure and what they believed were unreasonable demands.<sup>62</sup>

In spite of this, China sought and pursued a diplomatic resolution to end the tariff war with the US albeit with limited success via the signing of the phase one agreement on January 15, 2020.<sup>63</sup> The Chinese government even went as far as to pass a law in March 2020 that explicitly banned the forceful transfer of intellectual property of foreign companies. The law also offered enhanced legal safeguards for the intellectual property rights and trade secrets of foreign companies operating in China.<sup>64</sup> This was the Chinese attempt to placate the US although the latter felt the law did not go far enough. All these practical steps show that the Chinese are not impervious to American criticisms or tariffs. However, they are willing to disagree with the US without further escalation into a full-blown economic conflict which would have dire economic consequences. Thus, China's nuanced approach in dealing with its trade war with the US is a testament to the former's pragmatism and a signal of intent to rise on its own terms without hindrance from any power.

Seventh, Chinese partial peaceful rise can be adduced from recent Chinese diplomatic communication which is viewed in the West as increasingly bellicose or belligerent and representing a shift away from the traditional non-confrontational Chinese diplomatic communication. To the Chinese, this new approach represents a fine balance between demanding respect from the West and threatening the West. Consequently, China has embraced a diplomatic communication strategy dubbed, "Wolf warrior diplomacy," named after the patriotic Rambo-style Chinese film, *Wolf Warrior 2*, whereby the Wolf Warrior 2's mantra is, "Whoever attacks China will be killed no matter how far the target is."<sup>65</sup> Thus, Wolf warrior diplomacy is a deliberate foreign policy strategy whereby Chinese diplomats are increasingly emboldened and encouraged to take to social media to aggressively respond or rebut any unfavorable statement against the Chinese government or Communist party. This diplomatic communication strategy is very assertive and sometimes confrontational but not as incendiary as the undiplomatic communication strategies of the North Korean and Iranian regimes.

According to Foreign Minister Wang Yi, China will "never pick a fight or bully others. But we have principles and guts. We will push back against any deliberate insult, resolutely defend our national honor and dignity, and we will refute all groundless slander with facts."<sup>66</sup> Wolf warrior diplomacy has gained currency throughout the COVID-19 pandemic where the Chinese government has been very proactive and aggressive on social media in challenging any suggestion that they originated the COVID-19 virus or were negligent in han-

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62 Lo 2019.

63 McDonald and Wiseman 2021.

64 Wang 2020.

65 Huang 2017.

66 Westcott and Jiang 2020.

dling their outbreak of the virus. Indeed, the Chinese felt such an aggressive response and rhetoric was necessary to rebut what they increasingly viewed as ethnic slander by President Trump, who repeatedly referred to the COVID-19 virus as “China Virus” and “Kung flu.”

In addition, China has utilized Wolf warrior diplomacy to harshly ward off any attempted US or Western interference in its domestic affairs on matters such as its treatment of the Uighurs, Taiwan or pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong. Buttressing this point, foreign vice-minister Le Yucheng argues that that foreign countries “are coming to our doorstep, interfering in our family affairs, constantly nagging at us, insulting and discrediting us, [so] we have no choice but to firmly defend our national interests and dignity.”<sup>67</sup>

## **Conclusion**

China is rising peacefully, but this does not mean that it will not be assertive in advancing its interests, particularly with regards to its domestic security and sovereignty claims in East Asia, particularly on Taiwan. Tensions and rivalries among China, the US and other major powers will continue, and fear from entrapping in a power transition dynamic will continue to loom over the international politics of both powers. Apprehensions about China’s expanding influence will remain strong in the US and in countries neighboring China. Notwithstanding the strong US–China convergence of interests in many parts of the world, China’s need to achieve further development and its rise, serve to assure that rational judgments will counter possible pressures to initiate a direct military confrontation. China will continue to be assertive, but in a way that does not push the US or China’s neighbors into adopting hostile reactions toward it. China is rising in a very different world from that of previous rising states. The nuclear revolution has made war among great powers less likely, and a full-scale war between the United States and China is unthinkable today. Therefore, China’s rise will continue to be largely peaceful, partially to avoid antagonizing the US. Nevertheless, China will not hesitate to wield hard power against any domestic or international threats that seeks to undermine the authority of the Chinese Communist Party.

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67 Zhou 2020.

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