

Is China a Revisionist Power: An Analysis

Haseeb Bin Aziz*

Abstract

This paper argues that it is too early to conclude that China is a revisionist power despite clear evidence of increased “assertiveness” in recent Chinese behaviour. China is still grappling with a cohesive “grand strategy” that would address its fundamental insecurities, which have tested China’s policymakers throughout history, and deserve the attention of any international analyst trying to understand China. The muddled thinking of two of China’s leading international theorists, Wang Jisi and Yan Xuetong, on this subject is proof of this dilemma. If China can resolve these contradictions and accumulate enough power to upstage the United States (US) at some point in the future, it would be in a position to challenge the US-led global order. Since containment would probably be impractical at that stage, the US would have to strike a “grand bargain” with China.

Keywords: China, United States (US), Great Power Transitions, China’s Rise, Sino-US Rivalry, Grand Strategy.

Introduction

In the summer of 1991, a “24-character strategy” was circulated to top officials and cadres of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on the orders of the Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping. This strategy was born out of the sense of a deep crisis and uncertainty that had engulfed the CCP in the wake of the student-led protests in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. The violent endgame to the nearly two-month-long protests, which had threatened to loosen the CCP’s grip on power, had been a shock for the Party. Still trying to make sense of the events at Tiananmen Square, the CCP was stunned by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in Europe later that year.

*The author is an officer of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, who has served in Beijing.

These developments posed a personal challenge to Deng's authority. Deng was the founder, in a sense, of "modern" China because of his role in instituting sweeping reforms in 1978, and dumping the Maoist economics that had held back the People's Republic since its birth in 1949. He was now under pressure from the conservatives within his party to roll back economic reforms and return China to orthodox communist doctrines, lest Deng's reforms lead China to the place that *Perestroika* had landed the Soviet Union: on the verge of collapse.¹ The 24-character strategy² was the fruit of this introspection. It was also a statement of defiance from Deng: there would be no reversal of course. China would continue on the path of "Reform and Opening Up" it had pursued since the historic "Third Party Plenum" in 1978.

The most important takeaway from this strategy and the secret in-house post-mortem³ of the Soviet Union's eventual downfall that occupied the CCP's leadership in the following years, was the need for China to *deflect* the US. The former Soviet Union's biggest mistake, the CCP concluded, was getting bogged down in a destructive confrontation with the US. This had lured the Soviet Union into its power overstretch, which was ultimately unsustainable. China would, therefore, be cautious and avoid international conflict, especially with the US – an approach summed up neatly in the most frequently quoted guideline of the 24-character strategy: "hide your capabilities and bide your time." This was widely interpreted as China's declaration of a moratorium on pursuing its long-term *hegemonic* plans. However, Chinese international relations theorists, like Peking University's Wang Jisi, have pushed back against this interpretation, arguing that Deng's dictum has been "mistranslated" in the West as a cynical ploy on China's part to feign "temporary moderation until [it] has enough material power and confidence to promote its *hidden agenda* [emphasis added]."⁴ China merely intended to

¹ Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 143.

² Roughly translated as: "Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide your capacities and bide your time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership."

³ David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008).

⁴ Wang Jisi, "China's Search for a Grand Strategy: A Rising Great Power Finds Its Way," *Foreign Affairs*, February 20, 2011,

concentrate on economic development, without being distracted by any geopolitical struggle with the US. Whatever China's real intention are, Deng's saying became an axiom that defined Chinese foreign policy for most of the next two decades.

And it was a policy that served China well, as the country enjoyed the greatest surge of economic growth in modern history. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) estimates that China would surpass the US as the world's foremost economy by 2026. In terms of purchasing power parity (PPP), it has already surpassed the United States. This century, therefore, may well witness a non-Western economy leading the world for the first time since at least the Industrial Revolution. Not surprisingly then, China's rise has fed speculation about its likely impact on the existing world order.

Realists and power-transition theorists believe that the days of China being content to maintain a "low profile" are over. They point to China's "assertiveness" since 2009 exemplified by Beijing's increasing boldness in staking its claim to disputed islands in the South China Sea; its adoption of a more confrontational stance with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands; announcement of the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea in November 2013 — as confirmation of their worst fears. China, the pretender to the throne, the realists claim, is on a collision course with the US.

China's Search for a Grand Strategy

Deng's admonition to "bide your time" was not his only pithy contribution to Chinese policymaking. Among other aphorisms and proverbs, Deng is also credited with coining the phrase, "cross the river by feeling the stones," to suggest the manner in which China should undertake economic reform — it should be gradual, cautious, adaptable, and, where necessary, reversible.

It is sometimes overlooked that this axiom has been equally applicable to China's conduct of foreign policy. China is still "feeling the

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2011-02-20/chinas-search-grand-strategy>

stones” in determining its role in the world. It is a country on the lookout for a “grand strategy.”⁵ Talk of China being a “revisionist” power or otherwise is, therefore, premature.

This ambivalence is reflected in the thinking of its leading international relations theorists. For example, Wang Jisi (who has been described as both “a defensive realist and a liberalist”⁶) has argued that “improvement of the Chinese people’s living standards, welfare, and happiness through social justice” should be the organizing principle of China’s grand strategy. China should pursue these objectives while acting within the framework of the present international institutional framework. China will “serve its interest better,” according to Wang, “if it can provide more common goods to the international community and share more values with other states.”⁷ However, he also warns that China’s “internal development and *external* behaviour [emphasis added]” would depend on how “other countries respond to the emergence of China as a global power.” Wang then adds rather ominously that, “if the international community appears not to understand China’s aspirations, its anxieties, and its difficulties in feeding itself and modernising, the Chinese people may ask themselves why China should be bound by the rules that were essentially established by the Western powers.”⁸

Certain points are striking about Wang’s thinking. One is the direct link he draws between China’s domestic situation (“internal development”) and its foreign policy (“external behaviour”). Outside observers tend to forget how closely China’s domestic and foreign policies are interlinked. This is all the more remarkable given that China is an autocratic state; its government should, in theory, be less encumbered by domestic pressures and expectations compared to its Western counterparts.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Feng Zhang “Chinese Exceptionalism in the Intellectual World of China’s Foreign Policy,” in, *China across the divide: the domestic and global in politics and society*, ed. Rosemary Foot (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013), 63.

⁷ Wang, “China’s Search for a Grand Strategy.”

⁸ Ibid.

Second, Wang does not rule out China's integration into the global order but he makes it contingent on the international community's "understand[ing]." The implication is clear: China would settle for some form of "accommodation" with the US-led international order, if it is given the respect that Beijing feels it is due on account of its recent accomplishments as well as its glorious *history*. Thinkers arriving at the problem from theoretical frameworks as far apart as the arch realist Henry Kissinger and the more constructivist Martin Jacques⁹ have made the same point about China's rise – that China does not see itself as having so much *risen* as *reclaimed* its rightful place in the world. Therefore, China's history – and its interpretation of that history – would influence the trajectory of its future ascent.

It is also instructive to compare Wang's vaguely liberal institutional leanings with the self-described "hawkish" or "offensive realist" Yan Xuetong's thinking on the subject. In an op-ed for *The New York Times*, provocatively titled "How China can defeat America," Yan made no apologies for being a "political realist" and described competition between China and the United States as "inevitable."¹⁰ Curiously, Yan then pivoted the argument away from the two countries' relative hard power – signified by their economic and military strength – and toward something resembling "soft power." Situating the struggle between China and the US in his understanding of the ancient Chinese classics, Yan called on China to win the "people's hearts and minds" by providing more "moral" and "humane" leadership than the United States. Joseph Nye would instantly recognize Yan's definition of "humane authority" as "a desirable model at home that inspires people abroad."

Yan goes on to refine his ideas about "*moral* realism." He enthusiastically endorses China's actions in East Asia, attributing them to the country's new "striving for achievement (SFA)" strategy, as opposed to the previous "keeping a low profile (KLP)" strategy that had

⁹ Henry A. Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011); and Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World* (New York: Allen Lane, 2010).

¹⁰ Yan Xuetong, "How China Can Defeat America," *New York Times*, November 20, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/21/opinion/how-china-can-defeat-america.html>

outlived its usefulness.¹¹ However, it is Yan's contextualization of the shift in this strategy that is revealing the *Rashomon-Effect*¹² visible in difference in how China and the US perceive the same events.

Yan loosely dates China's adoption of the SFA strategy – what Western analysts called China's "assertiveness" – to the assumption of office by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 as a *response* to three factors: one, the international community's "ever increasing pressure ... to take up more responsibility over security issues;" two, the Obama administration's announcement of the so-called "Pivot to Asia," which had proved that Deng's "low profile" strategy had failed to prevent the US "from targeting China as a strategic competitor;" and, three, the "reoccurrence" of the maritime disputes with Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam in 2009.

In contrast, American thinkers, like Aaron Friedberg, saw evidence of the Chinese government's "intent on establishing their country as the preponderant power in East Asia, and perhaps in Asia writ large"¹³ at least as early as 2010-11. Moreover, they would characterize President Obama's "Pivot to Asia" (or "rebalancing" as it was later renamed) as a *response* to, rather than a cause of, China's increasingly aggressive behaviour.

Just to underline the point about the importance of the differing perspectives, Yan quotes the realist John Mearsheimer as advising the Chinese government to adhere to the KLP (i.e. "low profile") strategy, because, otherwise, China's rise would compel its neighbours to challenge it. At the same time, Mearsheimer argued that China "cannot have better relations with other countries as long as it gets stronger, no matter what it does."¹⁴ Yan sees Mearsheimer's advice as typical of foreign scholars' contradictory arguments. "On the one hand, they

¹¹ Yan Xuetong, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Summer (2014): 154.

¹² From *Rashomon*, the 1950 classic Japanese film in which the same event (a murder in the case of the film) is given wildly different interpretations by the protagonists involved.

¹³ Aaron L. Friedberg, "Hegemony with Chinese Characteristics," *The National Interest*, July/August (2011): 19.

¹⁴ Yan (2014), 158.

[Western scholars] accuse the KLP strategy [of being] a conspiracy designed by the Chinese government to hide its capability. On the other hand, they blame China for replacing the KLP strategy with an assertive policy.”

Fleshing out his ideas about “moral realism,” Yan argues that President Xi’s foreign policy should be centred on “morality and interests.”¹⁵ He interprets it to imply that “morality” or principle, rather than “economic profits,”¹⁶ should now guide China’s foreign policy. Beijing should calibrate its policy toward a given country “according to the character of China’s relations with that country.”¹⁷ Interestingly, Yan divides China’s foreign relations under the SFA strategy into four categories – “strategic pillars” (Russia and Pakistan); “normal states” (Germany and India); “hostile countries” (Japan and the Philippines); and, finally, the “global competitor” (the United States).

Notwithstanding the frank reference to the United States as China’s sole “global competitor,” Yan is upbeat about the Sino-US relationship, hailing China’s establishment of a “new type of major power relations” with the US that is predicated not on close friendship, but “healthy competition, or at least *peaceful* competition [emphasis added].”¹⁸ Indeed, Yan speaks of “competition” between the US and China almost entirely in terms of “morality” and influence. There is almost no mention of either economic or military strength, but a surprisingly strong, if implicit, emphasis on “soft power.” This is defined in terms of exercising “political leadership based on humane authority” that will “benefit a rising power [China] in establishing a favourable environment,” since “international credibility is not only a prerequisite for a rising power to establish a world leading power status, but also a necessary condition *to attract more allies than the existing hegemon* [emphasis added].”¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid., 170.

¹⁶ Ibid., 170.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 171.

¹⁹ Ibid., 180-181.

It says something for the yawning disparity, in terms of power, between the US and China that it even forces the “proud”²⁰ Yan to pin the success of any hegemonic designs China may entertain in the future on winning more *friends* — opposed to acquiring more power — than the “existing hegemon.”

The sharp contradiction between Yan’s lofty vision for China, and his low-key and — for a realist — wishy-washy advice to achieve it, speaks to the basic insecurities that vex Chinese analysts and decision makers. One of these is China’s persistent weakness vis-à-vis the US. Notwithstanding the differences in their recommendations — which, on examination, are less stark than they first appear — for how China should manage the next phase of its rise, both Wang and Yan candidly acknowledge the US’ absolute superiority in economic and military terms. For Wang, this makes the pursuit of any “grand strategy” that puts China’s rivalry with the US at its centre inherently “impractical and risky.” Acknowledging the interdependent nature of the two countries’ relationship as well as the United States’ overwhelming superiority in every metric of international power, Wang says it would be a mistake on China’s part to “antagonize the country’s largest trading partner and the world’s strongest economic and military power.”²¹

For Yan, this disparity necessitates, as we have seen, the exercise of “humane authority” by China in order to compete with the US, which “remains the world’s pre-eminent hegemonic power.” While he believes President Obama made “strategic mistakes in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya,” Yan has grudging admiration for the US’ capacity for waging three wars simultaneously. In contrast, he notes, “China’s army has not been involved in any war since 1984, with Vietnam, and very few of its high-ranking officers, let alone its soldiers, have any battlefield experience.”²² Nor does it have the US’ luxury of being able to call on military bases and alliances around the world.

²⁰ Refer, for example, to Friedberg (2011), 158, quoting Yan: “The Chinese people are proud of their country’s glorious past and believe its fall from preeminence to be a ‘historical mistake, which they should correct.’”

²¹ Wang (2011).

²² Yan (2011).

This inferiority complex about the US' supremacy in power is not the only concern that worries Wang and Yan; it is not even the most important. The principal problem confronting Chinese policymakers remains the dilemma that has confronted their predecessors right through history: the problem of maintaining stability and unity in a continent-sized state. Domestic unrest and instability is the *bête noire* of the Chinese state. Preoccupation with the state's internal cohesion is an ever-present subtext to the Chinese writing on foreign policy and strategy. Wang and Yan's writings are no exception. Chinese historians draw a direct link between periods of state fragmentation and erosion in the writ of the central government, and decline in China's external power and prestige. This explains the Chinese's continued adoration of Mao Zedong for his role in unifying China and ending a "century of humiliation" — despite his disastrous economic policies, which resulted in the deaths of millions of Chinese people and actually retarded China's development. It is this insecurity at the heart of the Chinese state that makes China's foreign policy so introverted. Far from being driven by the typical rising power's desire to project power abroad — consider, for instance, the expansionist tendencies of post-Meiji Restoration Japan or Wilhelmine Germany at the turn of the 20th century — China's foreign policy remains hostage to domestic pressures and their propensity to erupt into potentially destabilising nationalism. Thus real or perceived "affronts to China's national honour" have the tendency to "quickly turn into criticism of the Chinese government's failure to defend the country's interests."²³

China is, therefore, an unusual state. It is, simultaneously, powerful and weak — a "fragile superpower,"²⁴ to quote former US Deputy Secretary of State Susan Shirk. This is the contradiction at the heart of the debate about Communist-ruled China. In the fevered imaginations of some analysts in the West, it is a would-be superpower, about to upend the Western liberal order;²⁵ according to others, China's very survival is in doubt.²⁶

²³ Zhu Zhiqun, "Chinese Foreign Policy: External and Internal Factors," *China: An International Journal* 9(2) (2011): 190.

²⁴ Susan L. Shirk, *China – Fragile Superpower* (New York: University of Oxford, 2007).

²⁵ See Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World* (2010).

Whatever the case, China is a powerful state abroad that remains genuinely vulnerable at home because of the magnitude of its domestic challenges. The Communist Party has to manage the largest population in the world, including a growing and increasingly *demanding* middle class. It has to reform a lopsided economic growth model that may be running out of steam (consider the recent chaos in Chinese markets). It has to counter low-level separatist movements in Xinjiang and Tibet. It has to address rising inequality and the threat this may cause to the social stability so prized by the party. It has to counter popular perceptions of the Party's corruption, which can threaten its legitimacy. And it has to deal with the effects of the large-scale environmental devastation wrought by China's slapdash economic growth, which have emerged as a domestic political issue in recent times.

It is doubtful if history can provide another example of a "revisionist" state that was still struggling to answer fundamental questions about its internal cohesion, political system, and economic model. The argument that recent displays of China's "assertiveness" mark a decisive break from the "low profile" phase is, therefore, unpersuasive. In essential respects, China's behaviour — which remains reactive and defensive — is informed by the same compulsions that have driven its foreign policy since the end of the Cold War: pacifying its domestic population by continuing to deliver robust economic growth; consolidating on existing gains; and, above all, avoiding confrontation with the US. China may become a "revisionist" power yet, but it has neither the will nor the wherewithal to act as one right now.

How Should the United States React

Despite this paper's contention that Deng's exhortation to "keep a low profile" remains relevant to understanding contemporary Chinese foreign

²⁶ David Shambaugh, "The Coming Chinese Crackup," *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-coming-chinese-crack-up-1425659198>; and the heated academic debate Shambaugh's article triggered: Ho-fung Hung et al., "When Will China's Government Collapse? A Look at Whether or Not the Chinese Communist Party is doomed," *Foreign Policy*, March 13, 2015, https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/13/china_communist_party_collapse_downfall/

policy, it is undeniable that China has recently acted more assertively in the South and East China Seas, which fall within what Beijing considers its natural sphere of influence. However, China's actions are unsurprising. They are historically consistent with the behaviour of any country "on the make" in economic and military terms. Consider the US' own projection of power in the Americas beginning in the late-nineteenth century.²⁷

If there is a qualitative difference to China's actions, it is an outcome of the weight of history — i.e. China's nostalgia for the time when East Asia paid "tribute" to the Middle Kingdom²⁸ — and pressure from a domestic constituency "for not being tough enough to stand up against foreign governments."²⁹ In any event, Beijing has taken care not to overplay its hand and, in particular, not to antagonise the US. It did not react, for instance, when American B-52s deliberately violated the ADIZ in November 2013.³⁰

Therefore, pronouncing judgment on China's ambitions, revisionist or otherwise, would be premature and risky. China is years away from achieving parity — a necessary precondition for the application of power-transition theory³¹ — with the US. It has no incentive to provoke conflict with the US in the foreseeable future.

But what about the long run? Whatever its present strength is, China appears to have time on its side and could eventually overtake the US in terms of economy and military. Would it then seek to remake the current order in its own image?

It is hard to see China wanting to overturn a Western order that it has used to its own advantage, and which, as John Ikenberry points out, is

²⁷ Peter Harris, "The Imminent US Strategic Adjustment to China," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 8 (2015): 231, <http://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pov007>

²⁸ Jacques, *When China Rules the World*, 418.

²⁹ Zhu Zhiqun (2011), 190-191.

³⁰ Julian E. Barnes and Jeremy Page, "U.S. Sends B-52s on Mission to Challenge Chinese Claims," *Wall Street Journal*, November 27, 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303281504579221993719005178>

³¹ Scott L. Kastner, "The Global Implications of China's Rise," *International Studies Review*, 10 (2008): 788.

“hard to overturn and easy to join.”³² China would, of course, like more space for itself within that order. As Ikenberry recommends, the US should further strengthen the global order by giving incentives to China for integration rather than egging it on opposition.³³ I would argue that Beijing’s decision to create the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was caused partly by the Western order’s failure to provide any such incentives. Moreover, analyzed in this context, the US’ panicked reaction to establishment of AIIB and lobbying against it was particularly unfortunate. It only confirmed China’s fears that the US remains implacably hostile to even benign leadership initiatives by Beijing.³⁴

Contrary to liberal theory, however, China’s participation in the Western order has not made it more like the West. China is not any closer to becoming a Western-style democracy. In fact, the evidence points in the opposite direction. Since coming into power, President Xi has placed more restrictions on the media and cracked down harder on political dissent than his predecessor.

Meanwhile, aggressive containment would be a realist’s recommendation for the US. But containment is both unnecessary and impractical, even assuming that China enters into a direct geopolitical competition with the US at some point in the future. It is unnecessary because, in the unlikely event of China achieving a decisive supremacy over the US, the possession of nuclear weapons on both sides would sustain the peace. Besides, China’s apparent commitment to free-market economics and its post-Mao renunciation of global revolution “make the case for containment much weaker than the case for containing the Soviet Union.”³⁵ The ideological divide, in other words, between China and the US-led West is not so stark.

³² John G. Ikenberry, “The Rise of China and the Future of the West,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol 87, no. 1, February 2008: 24

³³ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁴ “U.S. urges allies to think twice before joining China-led bank,” *Reuters*, March 18, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-asia-bank-idUSKBN0MD0B320150318>

³⁵ Harris, “The Imminent US Strategic Adjustment to China,” 246.

Containment is impractical also because “there is no appetite for a full-blown rivalry. Aside from bigger defence budgets and less trade and investment, a shift toward containment would provoke fears of war ... [and] its [America’s] principal strategic partners in Asia are simply not ready to abandon engagement and sign on to a policy of containment.”³⁶ Instead, Friedberg has proposed what he calls “better balancing” that would combine “continued attempts at engagement with expanded and intensified balancing.” But it is hard to distinguish “better balancing” from the policy of “conengagement”³⁷ already being pursued by the US.

Elsewhere, Friedberg and Andrew Nathan³⁸ have identified the inherent clash between the political systems of China and the US as the real cause of rivalry between the two antagonists. Nathan’s anxiety about China exporting and encouraging authoritarianism by the “power of its example” seems to be overblown. For a start, as Nathan himself acknowledges, “China has not been able *even* to prevent a democratic transition in its close neighbour Burma or to persuade its only formal ally, North Korea, to adopt liberalising reforms [emphasis added].”³⁹ He also makes too much of China’s willingness to do business with authoritarian governments but forgets that the US does much the same in the Middle East. China’s approach to dealing with foreign governments is founded on the principles of pragmatism and mutual interest. Beijing’s “all-weather” ties with both military and democratic governments in Pakistan are a case in point.

Friedberg’s viewpoint is more nuanced. He believes that a democratic China would find it easier to get along with its neighbours and more likely to enter into a “democratic peace” with the US. However, Friedberg is willing to concede the argument, made by Jacques (2010) and others⁴⁰, that a democratic China would be even more vulnerable to the nationalist passions of its people. Yet “in the long run,

³⁶ Aaron L. Friedberg, “The Debate Over US China Strategy,” *Survival*, 57:3 (2015): 107.

³⁷ Term popularized by Friedberg connoting America’s policy of simultaneously containing and engaging with China.

³⁸ Andrew J. Nathan, “The Authoritarian Resurgence,” *Journal of Democracy* vol 26, no.1 (2015): 156-170.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁴⁰ Denny Roy, “China’s Democratised Foreign Policy,” *Survival*, vol. 51, no.2 (April-May 2009): 25-40.

the US can learn to live with a democratic China as the preponderant power in East Asia, much as the Great Britain came to accept America as the dominant power in the Western hemisphere...Having kept the peace, encouraged the transition of all the major regional players from authoritarianism to democracy, and overseen the re-emergence of Asia as a leading centre of world wealth and peace, Washington will be free to call home its legions.”⁴¹

Friedberg’s willingness to countenance the US striking some version of a “grand bargain” with a *democratic* China in East Asia is striking. In my view, however, some form of accommodation with China — whether it becomes democratic or not — would become unavoidable, should China achieve overwhelming superiority over the US. Such an accommodation would presumably involve the US recognising China’s leadership in the region in return for certain guarantees.⁴²

Until then, the US would do well to continue its policy of “conengagement.” It should not give up on building “strategic trust” with China, which Wang Jisi and the former Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, have called for. This would only be possible if the US develops a more sympathetic appreciation for the peculiar pressures placed on Chinese decision-makers by their people, their sense of history (and China’s place in it), and their expectations for the future.

Conclusion

This paper argues that fears — expressed most vociferously by the US policymakers and analysts — of China representing an existential threat to the international global order are premature, if not wholly unfounded. China neither has any history of imperial ambitions, nor has it so far betrayed any aspirations beyond the region; it regards as its “near abroad.” China’s newfound “assertiveness” in the Asia Pacific is not, in fact, *newfound* from Beijing’s point of view. It is merely a manifestation of China regaining its rightful place in the neighbourhood where countries — Japan among others — once paid tribute to Beijing as the

⁴¹ Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, 251-252.

⁴² One example of a grand bargain can be found at Charles L Glaser, “A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice between Competition and Accommodation,” *International Security*, vol. 39, no. 4, (2015): 49-90.

fount of their language, culture and civilisation. To extrapolate global ambitions from China's more modest and parochial aims would thus be unwise.

For all the astounding progress China has made in the past 30 years, Chinese policymakers remain acutely aware of the country's continued vulnerabilities. Chinese leaders are not being falsely modest when they insist their country remains the "world's largest developing country." They worry that slowing economic growth, rising inequality, and persistent allegations of corruption in high places could undermine the legitimacy of the Communist Party. These concerns also occupy the minds, as we have seen, of mainstream Chinese thinkers and strategists, who continually prize consolidation over expansion, *deflection* over confrontation with the US. At the expense of repetition, a country still struggling to address such basic political questions at home is unlikely to rush into any mad dash for world domination.

For the moment, the so-called "Sino-US rivalry" seems to be fuelled by one side. It is instructive that it is not China but the US that frequently plays the *provocateur* in the relationship. It is the US that lambastes China in the State Department's annual human rights records (prompting a tit-for-tat reaction from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in recent years). It is the US that flies surveillance sorties close to the Chinese coastline and sends underwater drones to the South China Sea. It is the US president-elect, Donald Trump, who talks blithely of launching trade wars against China and casts doubt on the "One China Policy." It is, finally, the US that talks of the Washington and Beijing being destined to fall into the so-called "Thucydides' Trap."⁴³ Conversely, it is China that returns American spy planes and drones to the US, whenever they venture into or close to Chinese territory. It is China that has re-valued its currency under US pressure. And, ultimately, it is China that dismisses all talk of the Thucydides' Trap as a "fallacy."⁴⁴

This would, after all, not be the first time that the US would have exaggerated the threat posed by a potential competitor. In the Cold War,

⁴³ Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?," *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015.

⁴⁴ Cai Cuihong, "The 'Thucydides Trap' Discourse in China-U.S. Relations," *China International Studies*, July/August 2016, 40-61

the US fretted about its “missile gap” vis-à-vis the Soviet Union; it turned out later that it was the Soviet nuclear arsenal, which had been at a disadvantage in relation to America’s. Throughout the 1980s, it was a rising Japan that worried American policymakers, before the Japanese fell into a low-growth cycle that continues to this day. It would thus be entirely in character for the United States to now overstate the challenge posed by China for a variety of economic and geopolitical reasons that are beyond the scope of this issue.

Suffice it to say that Chinese protestations about China’s “peaceful development” sound, on the basis of the evidence before us, less disingenuous than American fear mongering about the “China threat.” The United States would perhaps do well to pay heed to Graham Allison, who proposed the Thucydides Trap analogy for the looming Sino-U.S. rivalry. Allison noted that in 12 of 16 cases over the past 500 years, when a rising power has encountered an established one, “the result was war.”⁴⁵ However, when war was avoided, “it required huge, painful adjustments in attitudes and actions on the part not just of the challenger but *also the challenged* [emphasis added].”⁴⁶ In other words, even Allison, for all his alarm over China’s rise, agrees that the United States would have to accommodate China at some point in the future.

For now, the United States, by treating China as a threat before it has become one, seems intent on making the Thucydides Trap a self-fulfilling prophecy. China, for its part, is still “crossing the river by feeling for the stones.”

⁴⁵ Allison, “The Thucydides Trap,” 2015.

⁴⁶ Ibid.