

“International politics is a nasty and dangerous business, and no amount of goodwill can ameliorate the intense security competition that sets in when an aspiring hegemon appears in Eurasia.”

China's Unpeaceful Rise

JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER

Can China rise peacefully? My answer is no. If China continues its impressive economic growth over the next few decades, the United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war. Most of China's neighbors—including India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, and Vietnam—will join with the United States to contain China's power.

To predict the future in Asia, one needs a theory of international politics that explains how rising great powers are likely to act and how other states in the system will react to them. That theory must be logically sound and it must account for the past behavior of rising great powers.

My theory of international politics says that the mightiest states attempt to establish hegemony in their region of the world while making sure that no rival great power dominates another region. This theory, which helps explain US foreign policy since the country's founding, also has implications for future relations between China and the United States.

THE CONTEST FOR POWER

According to my understanding of international politics, survival is a state's most important goal, because a state cannot pursue any other goals if it does not survive. The basic structure of the international system forces states concerned about their security to compete with each other for power. The ultimate goal of every great power is to maximize its share of world power and eventually dominate the system.

The international system has three defining characteristics. First, the main actors are states that operate in anarchy, which simply means that there

is no higher authority above them. Second, all great powers have some offensive military capability, which means that they have the wherewithal to hurt each other. Third, no state can know the intentions of other states with certainty, especially their future intentions. It is simply impossible, for example, to know what Germany or Japan's intentions will be toward their neighbors in 2025.

In a world where other states might have malign intentions as well as significant offensive capabilities, states tend to fear each other. That fear is compounded by the fact that in an anarchic system there is no night watchman for states to call if trouble comes knocking at their door. Therefore, states recognize that the best way to survive in such a system is to be as powerful as possible relative to potential rivals. The mightier a state is, the less likely it is that another state will attack it. No Americans, for example, worry that Canada or Mexico will attack the United States, because neither of those countries is powerful enough to contemplate a fight with Washington. But great powers do not merely strive to be the strongest great power, although that is a welcome outcome. Their ultimate aim is to be the hegemon—that is, the only great power in the system.

What exactly does it mean to be a hegemon in the modern world? It is almost impossible for any state to achieve global hegemony, because it is too hard to project and sustain power around the globe and onto the territory of distant great powers. The best outcome that a state can hope for is to be a regional hegemon, and thus dominate one's own geographical area. The United States has been a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere since the late 1800s. Although the United States is clearly the most powerful state on the planet today, it is not a global hegemon.

States that gain regional hegemony have a further aim: they seek to prevent great powers in other regions from duplicating their feat. Regional hege-

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mons do not want peers. Instead, they want to keep other regions divided among several great powers, so that these states will compete with each other and be unable to focus on them. In sum, my theory says that the ideal situation for any great power is to be the only regional hegemon in the world.

THE AMERICAN HEGEMON

A brief look at the history of American foreign policy illustrates the explanatory power of this theory. When the United States won its independence from Britain in 1783, it was a small and weak country comprised of 13 states strung along the Atlantic seaboard. The new country was surrounded by the British and Spanish empires and much of the territory between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River was controlled by hostile Native American tribes. It was a dangerous, threat-filled environment.

Over the course of the next 115 years, American policy makers of all stripes worked assiduously to turn the United States into a regional hegemon. They expanded America's boundaries from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans as part of a policy commonly referred to as "Manifest Destiny." The United States fought wars against Mexico and various Native American tribes and took huge chunks of land from them. The nation became an expansionist power of the first order. As Senator Henry Cabot Lodge put it, the United States had a "record of conquest, colonization, and territorial expansion unequalled by any people in the nineteenth century."

American policy makers in that century were not just concerned with turning the United States into a powerful territorial state. They were also determined to push the European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere and make it clear to them that they were not welcome back. This policy, known as the Monroe Doctrine, was laid out for the first time in 1823 by President James Monroe in his annual message to Congress. By 1898, the last European empire in the Americas had collapsed and the United States had become the first regional hegemon in modern history.

However, a great power's work is not done once it achieves regional hegemony. It then must make sure that no other great power follows suit and dominates its area of the world. During the twentieth century, there were four great powers that had

the capability to make a run at regional hegemony: Imperial Germany (1900–1918), Imperial Japan (1931–1945), Nazi Germany (1933–1945), and the Soviet Union during the cold war (1945–1989). Not surprisingly, each tried to match what the United States had achieved in the Western Hemisphere in the nineteenth century.

How did the United States react? In each case, it played a key role in defeating and dismantling those aspiring hegemonies. The United States entered World War I in April 1917 when Imperial Germany looked like it would win the war and rule Europe. American troops played a critical role in tipping the balance against the Kaiserreich, which collapsed in November 1918. In the early 1940s, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt went to great lengths to maneuver the United States into World War II to thwart Japan's ambitions in Asia and especially Germany's ambitions in Europe. During the war, the United States helped destroy both Axis powers.

And after 1945, American policy makers made certain that Germany and Japan remained militarily weak. Finally, during the cold war, the United States steadfastly worked to prevent the

Soviet Union from dominating Eurasia, and in the late 1980s helped relegate its empire to the scrap heap of history.

Shortly after the cold war ended, the first Bush administration's "Defense Guidance" of 1992, which was leaked to the press, boldly stated that the United States was now the most powerful state in the world by far and it planned to remain in that exalted position. In other words, the United States would not tolerate a peer competitor.

That same message was repeated in the famous "National Security Strategy" issued by the second Bush administration in October 2002. There was much criticism of this document, especially its claims about "preemptive war." But hardly a word of protest was raised about the assertion that the United States should check rising powers and maintain its commanding position in the global balance of power.

The bottom line is that the United States—for sound strategic reasons—worked hard for more than a century to gain hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. After achieving regional dominance, it has gone to great lengths to prevent other great powers from controlling either Asia or Europe.

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What are the implications of America's past behavior for the rise of China? In short, how is China likely to behave as it grows more powerful? And how are the United States and the other states in Asia likely to react to a mighty China?

PREDICTING CHINA'S FUTURE

China is likely to try to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. Specifically, China will seek to maximize the power gap between itself and its neighbors, especially Japan and Russia. China will want to make sure that it is so powerful that no state in Asia has the wherewithal to threaten it. It is unlikely that China will pursue military superiority so that it can go on a rampage and conquer other Asian countries, although that is always possible. Instead, it is more likely that China will want to dictate the boundaries of acceptable behavior to neighboring countries, much the way the United States makes it clear to other states in the Americas that it is the boss. Gaining regional hegemony, I might add, is probably the only way that China will get Taiwan back.

An increasingly powerful China is also likely to try to push the United States out of Asia, much the way the United States pushed the European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere. We should expect China to come up with its own version of the Monroe Doctrine, as Japan did in the 1930s.

These policy goals make good strategic sense for China. Beijing should want a militarily weak Japan and Russia as its neighbors, just as the United States prefers a militarily weak Canada and Mexico on its borders. What state in its right mind would want other powerful states located in its region? Most Chinese surely remember what happened in the past century when Japan was powerful and China was weak. In the anarchic world of international politics, it is better to be Godzilla than Bambi.

Furthermore, why would a powerful China accept US military forces operating in its backyard? American policy makers, after all, become apoplectic when other great powers send military forces into the Western Hemisphere. Those foreign forces are invariably seen as a potential threat to American security. The same logic should apply to China. Why would China feel safe with US forces deployed on its doorstep? Following the logic of the Monroe Doctrine, would not China's security be better served by pushing the American military out of Asia?

Why should we expect China to act any differently from how the United States did? Is Beijing more principled than Washington? More ethical? Less nationalistic? Less concerned about survival? China is none of these things, of course, which is why it is likely to imitate the United States and attempt to become a regional hegemon.

TROUBLE AHEAD

It is clear from the historical record how American policy makers will react if China attempts to dominate Asia. The United States does not tolerate peer competitors. As it demonstrated in the twentieth century, it is determined to remain the world's only regional hegemon. Therefore, the United States can be expected to go to great lengths to contain China and ultimately weaken it to the point where it is no longer capable of ruling the roost in Asia. In essence, America is likely to behave toward China much the way it behaved toward the Soviet Union during the cold war.

China's neighbors are certain to fear its rise as well, and they too will do whatever they can to prevent the Chinese from achieving regional hegemony. Indeed, there is already substantial evidence that countries like India, Japan, and Russia, as well as smaller powers like Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam, are worried about China's ascendancy and are looking for ways to contain it. In the end, they will join an American-led balancing coalition to check China's rise, much the way Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and even China joined forces with the United States to contain the Soviet Union during the cold war.

Finally, given Taiwan's strategic importance for controlling the sea lanes in East Asia, it is hard to imagine the United States, as well as Japan, allowing China to control that large island. In fact, Taiwan is likely to be an important player in the anti-China balancing coalition, which is certain to infuriate China and fuel the security competition between Beijing and Washington.

The picture I have painted of what is likely to happen if China continues its rise is not a pretty one. I actually find it categorically depressing and wish that I could tell a more optimistic story about the future. But the fact is that international politics is a nasty and dangerous business, and no amount of goodwill can ameliorate the intense security competition that sets in when an aspiring hegemon appears in Eurasia. That is the tragedy of great power politics. ■