

# Can the United States and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?

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Recent reports, position papers, and findings contend that the United States will be surpassed by China or some combination of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) states in the coming decades.<sup>1</sup> These papers raise a number of important questions for American and Chinese scholars and policy-makers to consider when assessing China's power trends, the likelihood of future Sino-American enmities, and the prevalence of counterbalancing against shifts in the balance of power.<sup>2</sup> In the coming decades, is Sino-American great power competition, counterbalancing, and contestation likely through an unfortunate tragedy of great power politics as John Mearsheimer warns?<sup>3</sup> Is the "Thucydides Trap," or hegemonic war, inevitable between a rising China and a declining United States?<sup>4</sup> Are President Xi Jinping and some American officials correct that a New Model of Major Power Relations (NMMPR) is possible? Is the American pivot or rebalancing to Asia, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and the Air-Sea Battle (ASB) strategy a form of economic and military containment, as Chinese officials maintain?<sup>5</sup>

The United States is a Pacific great power. Beginning in 2009, President Barack Obama made the strategic choice to rebalance U.S. foreign policy priorities toward Asia and the Pacific. In 2011,

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the U.S. pivot policy was further outlined in a speech addressing the Australian Parliament, where President Obama announced that “the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future”<sup>6</sup> and in Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s *Foreign Policy* article on “America’s Pacific Century.”<sup>7</sup> In 2013, former National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon wrote that the rebalance policy is neither containing China nor simply a shift in military forces, but is rather “an effort that harnesses all elements of U.S. power – military, political, trade and investment, development and our values.”<sup>8</sup> Since 2013, the Obama administration has responded more forcefully to China’s territorial claims in the South and East China seas and even more so following Russia’s annexation of the Crimea.<sup>9</sup>

U.S.-Chinese territorial, military, and economic competition is on the rise. Territorial and maritime disputes include China’s nine-dashed map that comprises the U-shaped line (the so called nine-dash line), which claims the bulk of the South China Sea and Beijing’s unilaterally declared East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). Sino-American military contestation is also on the rise. Since the 1990s, rather than directly challenging the United States, China has advanced its anti-ship missiles, short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, stealth submarines, and cyber and space arms to challenge U.S. naval and air superiority, especially in China’s littoral waters. Finally, economically, Sino-American contestation has resulted in competing regional trade organizations.<sup>10</sup>

Though Sino-American relations have witnessed an uptick in competition, it is possible for the U.S. and China to avoid the “Thucydides Trap.”<sup>11</sup> The Thucydides Trap refers to the historical pattern of a rising state challenging the ruling power’s order — Sparta’s challenge to Athens’ or Germany’s challenge to Britain’s — which in both instances resulted in hegemonic and major war.<sup>12</sup> In February 2012, then Vice President Xi Jinping introduced the concept of a “new model of major power relations” (NMMPR).<sup>13</sup> U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton later stated that “together the United States and China are trying to do something that is historically unprecedented, to write a new answer to the age-old

question of what happens when an established power and a rising power meet?”<sup>14</sup> In recent testimony before Congress, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel stated that “there are those who argue that cold war-like rivalry is inevitable and that the United States and China are condemned to a zero-sum struggle for supremacy, if not conflict. I reject such mechanistic thinking.”<sup>15</sup> Of course, American officials are correct to warn that there are “serious sources of competition in the U.S.-China relationship and that these need to be managed.”<sup>16</sup>

I present a Realist New Model of Major Power Relations (RNMMPR). Though China is a rising power, Beijing’s aggregate material capability, overall military spending, or its composite index of power – measurements that are often cited and used to highlight that China will challenge America’s rule — are not good indicators for assessing China’s power trends, future Sino-American enmities, and the likelihood for counter-balancing. More important in assessing China’s power trends is which specific components of China’s national power are increasing and whether they challenge vital American interests; whether these specific components are appropriate and useful against the United States; and whether Washington will target its counter-balancing against these specific elements of power. Thus, an increase in China’s aggregate material capability alone and more broadly a shift in the balance of power does not mean that Sino-American great power competition, conflict, and hegemonic war is inevitable.

### **Deep Engagement and Offshore Balancing**

Deep engagement and offshore balancing, two alternative realist strategies for the United States, challenge the optimism of the New Model of Major Power Relations or the NMMPR and warn of rising Sino-American conflict, counter-balancing, and war.<sup>17</sup> Both strategies maintain that shifts in the aggregate material capability of the major states and changes in the distribution of power are dangerous.

*Deep engagement* calls for maintaining and possibly expanding America’s global hegemonic leadership. Proponents of deep engagement contend that America’s military preponderance

dissuades China from territorial expansion and from challenging U.S. leadership and reassures allies such as South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, and Japan.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, they contend that America's preponderance of military power is intended to convince China that it cannot compete militarily with the U.S. With no chance of catching up and the likelihood that the U.S. would outpace China in an arms race, Beijing would be dissuaded from competing.<sup>19</sup> Proponents maintain that any draw-down of U.S. commitments will contribute to doubts about the long-term prospects for the U.S. presence in the Pacific. In commenting on the American pivot to Asia, Kevin Rudd, the former Prime Minister of Australia, states that "without such a move, there was a danger that China, with its hard-line, realist view of international relations, would conclude that an economically exhausted United States was losing its staying power in the Pacific."<sup>20</sup>

An alternative realist strategy of *offshore balancing* calls for American retrenchment in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.<sup>21</sup> Proponents argue that the imbalance of American power including the pivot to Asia, the Air-Sea Battle (ASB), and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is self-defeating and provoking soft and even hard balancing by China.<sup>22</sup> For instance, the Congressional Research Service warns that with the pivot to Asia the "PLA [People's Liberation Army] will become more determined to strengthen China's anti-access capabilities and more assertive about defending China's territorial claims, rather than less."<sup>23</sup> Moreover, supporters of offshore balancing counter that a deep engagement strategy is expensive, contributes directly to American economic decline, and encourages both free riding by wealthy allies and their reckless behavior.<sup>24</sup>

### **A Realist New Model of Major Power Relations (RNMMPR)**

Neither the "Thucydides Trap" of major war between the rising and declining states or Mearsheimer's tragedy of great power politics is inevitable between the United States and China.<sup>25</sup> A Realist New Model of Major Power Relations (RNMMPR) is possible, but is under-developed in its current form. First, in assessing China's future power trends, what matters is which specific components or

elements of China's national power are increasing and whether they challenge vital American interests, rather than increases in China's aggregate power alone or shifts in the balance of power. Second, what matters in assessing China's power trends is whether these specific components of power are appropriate or usable against the United States. Third, if the United States does balance against China, Washington should target its counter-balancing against these specific elements of Beijing's power. Thus, an increase in China's aggregate material capability or shifts in the distribution of power alone does not mean that Sino-American great power competition, counter-balancing, and conflict is inevitable.

### **Disaggregate Power**

First, according to a Realist New Model of Major Power Relations, when American decision-makers assess China's power trends to forecast future enmities and alignment patterns they will ask themselves several questions. Which components or elements of China's national power are increasing, and will they peak above or below America's own components of national power? The four general categories of national power include: changes in political leadership or ideology; shifts in territory or population; growth in real assets including equipment, plant, knowledge, technology, and inventory; and increases in land-based military, naval, and air power.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, in assessing China's trends, American leaders should ask themselves whether specific components of China's power will peak above critical thresholds and red-lines of American power? Finally, state leaders should ask how interchangeable are resources intended for one task and used for another?<sup>27</sup>

The foundation of America's military security is its Command of the Global Commons. Command of the Commons allows Washington to extend its reach far beyond its waters edge and represents the United States' command over the globe's sea, space, and air. According to Barry Posen, this is supported by nuclear attack submarines, surface fleet and aircraft

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carriers, satellite communication and anti-satellite technology, fighters and bomber aircraft, air and sea lift capacity, and missile and anti-missile technology.<sup>28</sup> Command of the Commons is further supported by a deep and thick network of bases, landing and air rights, and combat centers. This includes defense treaties, strategic partnerships, major bases, and new arrangements with regional states.

In contrast to the expectations of offshore balancing and balance of power theory more generally, a Realist New Model of Major Power Relations can explain why there is no significant counter-balancing in Asia against the U.S. despite America's unprecedented strength. First, continental land-powers such as Russia do not assess America's Command of the Commons as a major challenge to their vital interests. Moreover, they will not allocate significant resources to target their balancing against this element of power.<sup>29</sup> For continental powers, counter-balancing against America's Command of the Commons is an inefficient use of resources that can better be directed toward interior border security and against internal threats.

Second, China's barrier to entry to build a navy capable of challenging America's Command of the Commons is high. The real assets for Command of the Commons include specific weapons and platforms that are expensive and require a huge scientific and industrial base. According to Posen's findings, in 2001, the research and development for the U.S. military was equivalent to the defense spending of France and Germany.<sup>30</sup> In addition to the large-scale industrial projects, Command of the Commons requires the development of new weapons platforms and tactics and skilled military personnel.

Third, China is a continental land-power and shares borders with fourteen neighboring states, some of whom have nuclear weapons and large land armies and whom Beijing has engaged in border disputes and wars. Moreover, China faces both interior border disputes on its northern and western frontiers and internal security challenges, including terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Historically, land powers including France, Germany, and Russia have failed to secure a maritime blue-navy. Instead, as continental



powers, they have pursued a maritime asymmetric strategy of anti-access and area denial capability to defend maritime approaches and shores. Moreover, China, like Germany and Russia, has limited geographical access to open seas, which can easily be blockaded and choked.

As a land power, the PLA's demand for interior and internal security will constrain the development of the real assets necessary to become a blue-water maritime power. According to Robert Ross, China allocates the bulk of its defense spending to the PLA, with about one-tenth going to the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).<sup>31</sup> By comparison, in 2006, as a maritime powerhouse, the U.S. Navy and Marines consisted of nearly 40 percent of total U.S. forces. Further demonstrating Washington's commitment to Command of the Commons, the United States requires three carriers to be assured of having one carrier on deployment.<sup>32</sup> China has one carrier and, as a scholar notes, "the construction of carrier[s], other ships in the strike force, their onboard equipment and technologies will all strain China's defense budget, especially given the multiple other missions assigned to the PLA."<sup>33</sup>

In disaggregating China's power trends, one element of concern for Washington is that Beijing is acquiring anti-access and area denial capability (A2AD).<sup>34</sup> Starting in the 1990s, China's investment in anti-ship missiles, short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, stealth submarines, and cyber and space arms began to challenge U.S. superiority, especially in China's littoral waters. China's intent is to keep U.S. forces at a distance and over the horizon. Specifically, for the U.S., China's A2AD capabilities means that operating in close proximity to Chinese territory during a conflict is more costly and complicates the deployment of carriers near China, thereby pushing them further off-shore. Also, China's A2AD strategy increases the vulnerability of American bases in Okinawa and Guam to attack by Chinese land-based missiles. It might also undermine the resolve of America's allies in the Pacific, encourage bandwagoning with China, and lead Beijing to believe that the U.S. will abandon its allies. Finally, this asymmetric strategy limits the ability of the U.S. to project power deep into China's territory.

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Concomitantly, though China is a continental land-power, Beijing does not need to become a peer or even a near-peer naval competitor with the U.S. and its allies to pose a major danger to America's vital interests. States are driven by windows of opportunity and vulnerability in terms of specific components of power. If American statesmen expect that a major Sino-American hegemonic war will not occur until the intersection of the aggregate power curves of a rising China and a declining United States, then

they will be too late in preparing for war. For this reason, Avery Goldstein is wrong to identify China as "one of a small handful of states that may have the necessary ingredients to emerge one day as a peer competitor..." The distance China must travel before it has the economic and military foundation of power comparable to those of the United States is great, however... While China's capabilities have grown impressively compared with its own past, the strides it is making in 'closing the gap' with the United States are so far rather small."<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Posen is mistaken to state that "the U.S. military advantage in the sea, in the air, and in space will be very difficult to challenge – let alone overcome."<sup>36</sup> China does not need to overcome the United States. Instead, as discussed in the next section, in disaggregating China's material capability, what matters is whether China has the appropriate elements of power to challenge the U.S. Thus, China might challenge the U.S. when it believes it has sufficient strength in a particular element of power and well before any transition in over-all power with the U.S. occurs.

### **Appropriate Elements of Power**

Second, according to a Realist New Model of Major Power Relations, in assessing China's future power trends, what matters is whether Beijing has the appropriate or necessary components of national power to pose a major danger to the United States. Less



important is China's aggregate defense spending, over-all military capability, or its composite index of material power. Specifically, aggregate material capability is not necessarily fungible or useful, and China must have the correct elements of power to pose a credible danger.

The U.S. Defense Department and IHS Jane's warn that China's military power is increasing relative to past levels and at a faster ratio, and in 2015 Beijing's defense will be about 10 percent larger than last year's budget.<sup>37</sup> However, China's aggregate material capability or total military spending alone does not necessarily translate into outcomes; China needs the appropriate elements of power to pose a credible threat to the United States. For instance, some scholars and policy-makers have identified the PLAN as a "limited blue water" navy that operates out to the second island chain, including all of the South China Sea down to Indonesia and East Timor (the first Island chain includes the Kurile Islands in the north down through Japan, the Diaoyu Islands and Ryuku Islands, Taiwan, and some of the South China Sea). A green water navy entails destroyers and frigates for regional tasks, and a blue water navy, which could operate throughout the Pacific, includes aircraft carriers and the supporting ships. In disaggregating China's national power and given that Beijing does not have a blue-water navy but just commissioned its first aircraft carrier, its first at-sea landings, and has no integrated carrier task group, Washington should not exaggerate China's challenge.

A number of scholars and policy-makers call for the U.S. to have sufficient military capability and alliances in East Asia to deter China, but U.S. military capability must also be appropriate. Washington should monitor China's naval power trends and specifically the supporting production, plant, skilled labor, and capacity to construct a green or a blue-water navy to determine whether Beijing is in fact challenging America's Command of the Commons.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, Washington should ask whether these specific components of power are increasing and whether they will peak above or below America's components of national power and above critical thresh-holds and red-lines.

### **Targeted Balancing**

Third, in disaggregating China's power, one element of concern for Washington is that Beijing is acquiring anti-access and area denial capability. According to a Realist Model of Major Power Relations, America's balancing against this element of China's power should entail targeted balancing rather than broad balancing or a hedging strategy. U.S. targeted balancing against China should include a combination of naval construction to maintain naval supremacy, technology such as anti-ballistic missile and anti-rocket defense, blinding cyber warfare capabilities, and stealth attacks to destroy its anti-ship missiles, submarines, destroyers, and fighters. Specifically, in 2009, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates initiated work on the AirSea Battle concept to address this asymmetrical danger. The idea is to "develop a joint air-sea battle concept... [to] address how air and naval forces will integrate capabilities across all operational domains — air, sea, land, space, and cyberspace — to counter growing challenges to U.S. freedom of action."<sup>39</sup> The campaign begins with a "blinding attack" against targets in the mainland of China to allow the U.S. to enter contested zones and allow the U.S. to bring to bear the full force of its material military advantage.

Reflecting targeted U.S. balancing and the greater priority to the U.S. Navy, the Department of Defense has minimized the cuts in the size of the Navy, with U.S. force reductions focused on Army and Marine ground forces. Other targeted balancing steps include the Navy deploying 60 percent of its fleet in the Pacific rather than 50 percent, more destroyers and amphibious ships ported in the Pacific, and littoral combat ships (LCS) rotated through Singapore.<sup>40</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The U.S. pivot or rebalancing represents an enhanced economic, military, and diplomatic presence in the Asia-Pacific. However, it does not mean that the United States and China are destined for strategic rivalry, confrontation, or hegemonic war.

I advance a Realist New Model of Major Power Relations, an alternative realist conceptualization that holds for both unipolar and multipolar orders. The import of this model for understanding

Sino-American competition in the Asia-Pacific region is several-fold. First, for Washington, if no components or elements of China's power pose a threat to the United States, then it should not provoke American counterbalancing or a preventive war, despite China's growing aggregate material capabilities. For now, much of China's defense spending remains focused on interior border security, internal security, and the People's Liberation Army, rather than on the People's Liberation Army Navy or the People's Liberation Army Air Force – all elements and power trends which do not challenge U.S. vital interests.

Second, when assessing threats, a weaker state with a lower military capability score might be more threatening to the United States than China, depending on the mix of its components of power. For instance, it is possible that a lesser power such as North Korea could prove to be more dangerous in the Asia-Pacific.

Third, in contrast to arguments that emphasize aggregate shifts in material capabilities alone, China does not need to become a peer or even a near-peer competitor to pose a major danger to the United States. In contrast to David Shambaugh's findings, China does not need to possess a comprehensive toolbox of capabilities.<sup>41</sup> Rather, as a partial power, what matters is whether China has the correct elements. The same holds for other BRICS, such as Russia.

Fourth, American leaders should assess power trends based on components or elements of national power rather than balancing against aggregate shifts and transitions in material capability. Specifically, relative American military or economic decline and even if the U.S. is surpassed in 2027 or 2035 by China does not mean that America is necessarily less secure.<sup>42</sup> Nor, does pouring more money into defense spending or boosting over-all military capability necessarily make the United States more secure, especially if it is directed against the wrong elements of China's power or if the U.S. engages in broad and inefficient counter-balancing.

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5 On the pivot to Asia, see President Obama's address to the Australian Parliament, November 17, 2011, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>; *Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's "Rebalancing" Toward Asia*, Congressional Research Service Report, March 29, 2012; "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, January 3, 2012; *2014 Quadrennial Defense Review*, United States Department of Defense, Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2014; David Shambaugh, "Assessing the U.S. 'Pivot' to Asia," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer 2013), pp. 10-18.

6 Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

7 Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011.

8 Benjamin H. Friedman, "What Asian Pivot?" *China-US Focus*, November 13, 2013, available at: <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/what-asian-pivot>.

9 Bonnie Glaser and Jacqueline Vitello, "US-China Relations: China's Maritime Disputes Top the Agenda," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (May 2014).

10 Other Sino-American disputes include China's currency manipulation and discriminatory trade policies and practices such as the WTO's case against China's policies on exports of rare earth elements.

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14 *Ibid*, p. 23.

15 Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, DC (June 25, 2014).

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37 See, Edward Wong and Chris Buckley, "China's Military Budget Increasing 10% for 2015, Official Says," *New York Times*, March 4, 2015, available at: [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2013\\_china\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2013_china_report_final.pdf) ; <http://press.ihs.com/press-release/defense-risk-security/china-exceed-combined-defence-budget-all-other-key-defence-marke>.

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39 *2014 Quadrennial Defense Review*, p. 32.

40 *Ibid.*

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