Great Power Relations and East Asia: A Realist Perspective*

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Abstract

This article examines great power relations in East Asia from a realist perspective. By focusing on anarchy and the imperatives of power, realism anticipates states to pursue power until they have achieved regional hegemony; a rising state will develop power projection capabilities to protect their expanding interests abroad; an increasingly powerful state will develop a version of the Monroe Doctrine to keep extra-regional powers from meddling in its backyard; the reigning hegemon will take measures to contain the power of the rising competitor; and relatively weaker states will band together to balance the power of the stronger state. I argue that these realist predictions are being borne out in the context of US-China relations, the most consequential of great power relations in East Asia today. Since the US policy of engaging and accommodating China has not produced the intended outcomes, we are seeing indications that Washington is returning to the realist approach of great power politics.

Key Words: Realism, great power politics, balance of power, liberal hegemony, engagement

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The international system became unipolar at the end of the Cold War, with the United States sitting at the pinnacle of power. Washington, virtually free of systemic constraints, chose a grand strategy of liberal hegemony to reshape the world in its own image and a policy of engagement to integrate China into the liberal international order.\(^1\) Three decades later, China’s rise is significantly shifting the balance of power in its favor and changing the nature of its relationship with the United States. Consequently, US-China security competition is heating up, making East Asia a key arena of great power politics.

China’s challenge to the United States is uniquely different from the previous ones. In terms of scale, China has far more power potentials than any of the peer competitors the United States confronted in the past, including Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union. In the economic realm, unlike the US-Soviet rivalry in the Cold War, the economies of China and the United States are much more intertwined. The differences in scale and interdependence make the China challenge especially daunting for the United States. The fundamental issue in the US-China competition is not about the superiority of their political system or the incompatibilities of their culture and civilization; it is about global governance—who gets to dominate the system and set the rules.

This article employs a realist perspective to examine great power relations in East Asia. To understand great power relations, the best starting point is to examine the balance of power. How power is distributed in the system can provide valuable information about the trajectory of great power relations. In the following sections, I begin by examining five realist predictions about great power behaviors-regional hegemony, power projection, Monroe Doctrine, containment, and balance-of-power politics—and apply them to East Asia. I show that these predictions are being borne out in the context of US-China relations, the most consequential of great power relations in East Asia today. Finally, I argue for the return of realism in guiding great power relations in light of the failings of engaging China.

**Realism and East Asia**

Realism is a time-honored paradigm of international relations.\(^2\) Although

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realism is divided into a family of disparate theories that make opposing claims, they are united by a central theme: the imperatives of power. Realists view power as the currency of international politics and the key to survival in anarchy. In an anarchic system without a central authority above states to maintain order and enforce agreements, the pursuit of power often trump concerns over institutional or normative principles. Great powers pay close attention to the distribution of military and economic capabilities in the system. It is imperative to secure a substantial amount of power relative to others, while making sure that no other state alters the balance of power too much in its favor. In essence, international politics is a struggle for power. One cannot properly understand great power relations without considering the distribution of power in the international system.

In anarchy, great powers are competitive in nature and there is scant trust among them. The root of the problem is uncertainty about intentions. The intentions of other states are difficult to fathom with accuracy and, even if known, intentions can still change in the future as circumstances shift. Uncertainty about intentions, combined with anarchy, triggers the security dilemma: one state’s action to arm itself for security will be deemed threatening by other states. Great powers therefore cannot rest their security on the goodwill of others and must rely on self-help. They arm themselves to prepare for war and put their own interests ahead of others. To be sure, they cooperate when they share mutual interests and make alliances when they face a common adversary. But these arrangements are expedient in nature and tend to unravel when state interests diverge. Today’s friend could become tomorrow’s enemy, or vice versa. In anarchy, self-help, by having more power relative to others, is the best way to secure a state’s interests. Power is the ultima ratio in deciding who prevails in international politics. The ideal situation is to be the hegemon in one’s region of the world and prevent other great powers from accomplishing the same feat in their geographical region.

US history exemplifies realism. Since independence, American leaders have sought to build the most powerful country in the Western Hemisphere. John Quincy Adams put it well in 1811: The US should be “a nation, coextensive with the North American continent, destined by God and nature to be the most populous and most powerful people ever combined under one social compact.” 3) Through a series of westward expansion in the nineteenth century, the United States became the regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere. It then worked hard to contain potential peer competitors such as Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union. 4)

Realism makes five predictions about great power behaviors. 5) First, states will

5) My discussion here is informed by offensive realism. See Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great
pursue power until they have achieved regional hegemony. Second, a rising great power will develop power projection capabilities to protect their growing interests around the globe. Third, a rising great power will devise its version of the Monroe Doctrine to push extra-regional powers out of its neighborhood. Fourth, the existing regional hegemon will contain the rise of a peer competitor. Finally, relatively weaker states will join forces to balance the power of the stronger state. I examine these five predictions in the context of US-China relations below.

**Regional Hegemony**

In East Asia, China is the single country with the most potential for regional hegemony, thanks to its vast territory and large population. Regional hegemony is not alien to China, as several Chinese dynasties such as Qin, Han, Tang, and Ming were regional hegemons. Although the word “realism” is relatively new to the Chinese, its practice is not. In fact, China has been a practitioner of realpolitik for centuries.  

China’s ancient Legalist school of thought bears much resemblance to modern realism. The Legalist adage of “enriching the country and strengthening the military” (富國強兵 fuguo qiangbin) is quintessential realism. Historically, the pursuit of power has been central to Chinese grand strategy, which aims to maximize its power gap with neighbors. China’s strategic choice correlates with relative power, adopting a defensive posture at times of weakness and shifting to an offensive one at times of strength. For instance, the Great Wall that we see today was built by Ming China not at the height of its power but when it was in relative decline vis-à-vis the Mongols in the late fifteenth century. The powerful early Ming preferred offensive wars and found no need for the wall.  

The realist argument that power is crucial to the survival of the state is buttressed by China’s “century of humiliation.” As the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) declined in

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*Power Politics.* Another strand of structural realism is defensive realism. See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics;* Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics.* Both offensive realism and defensive realism agree that states want to maximize their security, but disagree over the best means to achieve it. Defensive realism argues that states should aim for a moderate amount of power because too much power will cause counterbalancing and because the offense-defense balance usually favors the defense. In contrast, offensive realism contends that the best way to be secure is to maximize relative power because the international system creates powerful incentives for states to gain power at the expense of others. I adopt offensive realism because it is more persuasive and has stronger empirical support. See Yuan-kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 220-21.

6) On Imperial China’s realist behavior, see Wang, *Harmony and War.*

the nineteenth century, China fell victim to imperialist aggression. The lesson has long been remembered: Weakness invites aggression, strength begets security. Today, the term “strong country” (強國 qiangguo) features prominently in official announcements and popular folklore. China’s official newspaper People’s Daily website hosts a “strong country forum.” The present mission of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) calls for “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (中華民族偉大復興 zhonghua minzu weida fuxing). President Xi Jinping’s sloganeering of the Chinese Dream is publicly touted as a “strong military dream” (強軍夢 qiang jun meng). Notably, China has set a goal of transforming the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) into “world-class forces” by the mid-21st century.

China’s pursuit of power, however, takes place under the constraint of U.S. supremacy. As the U.S. is the single country most capable of obstructing China’s rise, it occupies a central place in Chinese grand strategy. To minimize concerns over China’s rising power, Beijing has shrewdly adopted a strategy of “peaceful development” that aims to create a stable external environment that is most amenable to the development of China’s comprehensive national power. This strategy is best captured in Deng Xiaoping’s maxim of “keeping a low profile and thriving in the shadow” (韜光養晦taoguang yanghui). On the one hand, Beijing welcomes foreign direct investment and encourages exports to stimulate economic growth. On the other hand, it forges strategic partnerships with friendly countries and joins multilateral institutions to reshape their rules to better serve Chinese interests.8) Over the decades, the strategy of peaceful rise has successfully transformed China from an economic backwater to the world’s second largest economy and the world’s second largest military spender, both after the United States.

Realism expects China to continue pursuing power until it has achieved the predominant position in Asia. China’s official position proclaims that the country will “never seek hegemony” and that its military policy is “purely defensive in nature.” But that is beside the point. Neighboring states will rarely find those statements reassuring because declared intentions can always change in the future. What matters in international politics is the military capabilities a country possesses, not its professed intentions. Despite Beijing’s assertion to the contrary, Washington sees Chinese strategic objective as seeking regional hegemony. The 2018 US National Defense Strategy flatly states that China “seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.”9) When Chinese military power surpasses that of its neighbors combined, it would be a regional hegemon by definition. When the day

comes, China might have developed new preferences and new capabilities that could alter its prior intentions and warrant a different set of policy.

**Power Projection Capabilities**

There is widespread agreement among international relations scholars that rising states will expand their political, economic, and security interests abroad. When a state grows powerful, its newly acquired capabilities enable it to pursue new interests that heretofore were beyond reach. “As the power of a state increases,” writes Robert Gilpin, “it seeks to extend its territorial control, its political influence, and/or its domination of the international economy.” ¹⁰ In his study of the rise of the United States, Fareed Zakaria concludes that a state’s “definition of security, of the interests that require protection, usually expands in tandem with a nation’s material resources.” ¹¹ Likewise, Christopher Layne notes, “great powers harbor external ambitions, which expand as they become more powerful.” ¹² Equipped with newfound capabilities, rising states aggressively pursue external interests and become more assertive in their foreign relations. China’s rising economic and military capabilities give the Chinese leadership a new level of confidence to play an increasingly leading role in international affairs. In his important work report to the 19th CCP Party Congress in 2017, Xi Jinping proudly proclaims a New Era, “an era that sees China moving closer to the center stage of the world.” ¹³

As the rising state expands, its external interests necessitate having the military capabilities to protect. Today, China has a growing repertoire of security and economic interests across the globe. One can readily find footprints of Chinese investment in Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and elsewhere. The Belt and Road Initiative, a massive infrastructure project, further extends Chinese interests around the world. China’s energy imports and international trade are heavily dependent on the sea traffic in the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Persian Gulf. Therefore, Beijing has made it a top priority to develop power projection capabilities in line with its expanding interests abroad, including

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constructing a powerful blue-water navy equipped with aircraft carriers.

In 2012, Chinese leader Hu Jintao first laid out the goal of turning China into a “maritime great power” (海洋強國 haiyang qiangguo) in his work report to the 18th CCP Party Congress. Upon assuming power, President Xi Jinping leaves no doubt that developing sea power is critical to China’s national strength. In an internal speech to the top military organ Central Military Commission in 2013, Xi emphasizes the importance of sea power:

“History and experience tell us that a country will rise if it commands the oceans well and will fall if it surrenders them. A powerful state possesses durable sea rights, and a weak state has vulnerable sea rights… Whether we are able to solve successfully problems of the oceans is related to the existence and development of our nation, the rise or fall of our country… We must adhere to a development path of becoming a rich and powerful state by making use of the sea.”

Control over the South China Sea, a gateway to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, becomes an essential element of Chinese naval strategy. China has long claimed “indisputable sovereignty” over all of the land features in the South China Sea within the “nine-dash line.” Now that China has the military capabilities to enforce its claims, starting in 2013, China embarked on massive island-building efforts in the South China Sea, reclaiming nearly 3,000 acres of land in an 18-month period. In contrast, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam reclaimed only a combined total of less than 150 acres over the previous decades. Most importantly, China is transforming the reclaimed lands into military bases equipped with airfields, runways, hangars, radar stations, ports, and anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems. This militarization of the South China Seas contradicts a statement Xi made to President Obama at the White House in 2015: “Relevant construction activities that China are undertaking in the Nansha (Spratly) Islands do not target or impact any country, and China does not intend to pursue militarization.”

China has reportedly deployed anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missile systems on Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef and Mischief Reef in the Spratly

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Islands. For Beijing, these military facilities are “necessary defensive capabilities,” a view not held by neighboring states.

China’s maritime expansion in the South China Sea follows the pattern of the salami tactics. By making incremental gains short of outright aggression, China is creating facts on the ground that other states find increasingly difficult to reverse. China has also engaged in “gray-zone” activities by using nonmilitary assets such as maritime militias to intercept US vessels and keep other claimants away from the area without crossing the threshold into war. This incremental tactic has helped China establish a foothold in the South China Sea without triggering a fierce response. US Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) have been ineffective in halting China’s island reclamation efforts. As Andrew Scobell writes, China’s gradualist approach has “contributed to disarming other claimants and the United States.”

PLA strategists have adopted a Mahanian view of the ocean, aiming to secure command of the sea to protect China’s growing overseas interests. China has constructed a modern naval base on Hainan Island that could house nuclear-powered, ballistic missile-carrying submarines (SSBNs). Controlling the South China Sea is a logical step in extending Chinese naval power from Hainan. The PLA has professed its aims to beef up power projection capabilities by building a blue-water navy and constructing a preliminary network of overseas bases. The 2015 Defense White Paper publicly introduced the concept of “open seas protection” (近海防御 jinhai fangyu) as an additional element to China’s naval strategy of “offshore waters defense” (近海防禦 jinhai feiyou), thus signaling its intent to ramp up power projection capabilities. The 2019 Defense White Paper emphasizes acceleration of this effort to extend farther: “In line with the strategic requirements of near seas defense [offshore waters defense] and far seas protection [open seas protection], the PLAN is speeding up the transition of its tasks from defense on the near seas to protection missions on the far seas.” In 2017, China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti and is expected to acquire more in the future.

The conditions are aligned for developing Chinese naval power. Rising
economic capabilities has lessened the resource constraints on China’s defense planners, while new military demands are emerging in the seacoast. In contrast to the Cold War era when most of China’s flash points were on the Asian continent, today they have shifted to the maritime frontiers: the Taiwan Strait, East China Sea, and the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{23} With China’s land borders largely secure, Beijing can now afford to devote more resources to developing its naval power, which strengthens China’s position in its security competition with the United States. Militarization of the reclaimed islands helps to reshape the regional security order that better serves Chinese interests.

**The Monroe Doctrine**

The third realist prediction about great power relations is that a rising state will attempt to push extra-regional powers out of its region. No great powers welcome the idea of an extra-regional power operating at its doorstep and causing trouble in its backyard. The United States declared the Monroe Doctrine in the nineteenth century precisely to keep European powers from meddling in the affairs of the Western Hemisphere. Likewise, Russia has made it clear, often through military interception, that it does not like the presence of American forces operating close to its borders. China is no exception. As early as 1950, Chinese leaders have put forward their version of the Monroe Doctrine. Premier Zhou Enlai proclaimed on March 19, 1950: “The affairs of the Asian people should be left alone to the Asian people themselves, and in no time should they be interfered by the American imperialists across the Pacific Ocean….”\textsuperscript{24} Mao Zedong, on June 28, 1950, a day after the US decision to dispatch the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait at the outbreak of the Korean War, declared: “Asian affairs should be left alone to the Asian people, not the United States.”\textsuperscript{25} Back then, China did not have the military capabilities to enforce its Monroe Doctrine. The powerful US navy dominated the areas off China’s seacoast.

Fast forward to the present, Chinese power has grown exponentially, giving Beijing the material wherewithal to exert more influence on international affairs. A confluence of events after the 2008 global financial crisis gave the Chinese leadership newfound confidence that the time has come for China to become more assertive in protecting its interests. Beijing gradually moved away from its strategy of keeping a low profile and went on to “do something.” On May 21, 2014 at the

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24) “Asian Affairs Should be Left Alone to the Asian People,” *Zhou Enlai waijiao wenxuan* (Selected diplomatic works of Zhou Enlai) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1990), pp. 8-10.
Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), Xi Jinping boldly laid out the Chinese version of the Monroe Doctrine: “In the final analysis, it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia.” 26) The goal of excluding outside powers from meddling in Asian affairs cannot be clearer.

The Chinese naval concept of the “island chains” reflects the thinking of the Monroe Doctrine. China seeks to pry control of the waters from the US navy within the first island chain that runs from Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, to the Indonesian archipelago. Once the Chinese navy can operate at will among these islands, US navy would have difficulties assisting its allies. The next step is to push the US navy further outward toward the second island chain that stretches from the Aleutians, Guam, to Papua New Guinea. Finally, Chinese naval strategists hope to push the US navy further toward the third island chain that centers around the Hawaiian Island.

Washington has taken note of China’s Monroe Doctrine. As Vice President Mike Pence stated in 2018, “China wants nothing less than to push the United States of America from the Western Pacific and attempt to prevent us from coming to the aid of our allies.” 28) At present, China’s Monroe Doctrine is mostly aspirational; it does not yet have the military capabilities to enforce it. The US Navy remains the dominant force in the Indo-Pacific region. If Chinese power continues to grow, we can expect Beijing to adopt an increasingly firm and aggressive stance to exclude extra-regional powers from its neighborhood.

### Containment

Hegemons obviously do not want a peer competitor. They have a deep-seated interest in making sure that no other states achieve regional hegemony. American foreign policy seeks to preserve its regional hegemony and to prevent any country from dominating Europe and Asia. The White House’s National Security Strategy of


2002 explicitly states: “Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”  

29) Joseph S. Nye, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, argues that maintaining regional stability and “detering the rise of hegemonic forces” constitutes the rationale for stationing American troops in East Asia.  

30) Henry Kissinger concurs: “it is in the American national interest to resist the effort of any power to dominate Asia.”  

31) It is worth noting that various versions of the quadrennial US National Security Strategy highlight the imperatives of maintaining American preeminence and emphasize the need to maintain a balance of power that favors the United States. On the issue of preserving US primacy in the world, there is broad consensus among the American public, elites, and policymakers. 

Realism expects the existing hegemon to take measures to contain the rise of a potential peer competitor.  

32) There are two ways to contain the rising challenger. First, the reigning hegemon can slow down the growth of the opponent’s economy through economic sanctions, tariffs, and non-tariff barriers. But given the nature of economic interdependence, this strategy may end up damaging the hegemon’s economy as well. Moreover, if the challenger can find alternative markets, economic containment would be untenable. Second, the hegemon can construct a balancing coalition with the neighbors of the rising challenger and “build an alliance structure along the lines of NATO.”  

33) Compared to economic warfare, this strategy of military containment is the optimal strategy. 

Although Washington shrewdly avoids using the term “containment,” one can easily identify elements of containment in its Asia strategy. The Obama administration sought to “pivot” (“rebalance”) to Asia by strengthening ties with existing allies and partners including Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia on the one hand, and moves to bolster trade and investment relations through the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) on the other. Unsurprisingly, Beijing saw the pivot strategy as a thinly veiled attempt at containing China.  

34) The Trump administration’s “free and open” Indo-Pacific Strategy follows a similar logic of...

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31) Henry Kissinger, Does American Need a Foreign Policy?: Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 135. [emphasis original]


containment, even though it unwisely abandoned the TPP and used indiscriminate tariffs to alienate allies. China views the Indo-Pacific Strategy as a more forceful iteration of containment. As the official China Daily editorializes, “The US Indo-Pacific strategy seeks to use political (emphasizing democratic values), economic (exclusive institutional economic and trade arrangements), diplomatic (strengthening bilateral alliances and sowing discord between China and other countries), military (joint military exercises and arms sales) and other means to co-opt China's neighboring countries to undermine China, contain China's rise, and ultimately maintain US hegemony.”\(^{35}\) Both the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the current trade war with China are preventive measures that, at their core, reflect America’s fear of being overtaken by China.

Most states would likely join Washington in a balancing coalition against China. Although many prefer not to choose sides in the US-China rivalry, if China continues to rise, their options would be increasingly constrained. No East Asian states alone can match the power of China, which makes the United States the indispensable balancing partner. Bandwagoning is not a good option because it would put the state at the mercy of Beijing. States are more likely to bandwagon when they are relative weak or when there is no powerful ally that can be relied upon as a counterweight.\(^{36}\) Although most East Asian states are weaker and proximate to China, the presence of the United States as an offshore balancer makes bandwagoning an unappealing option. A few states might bandwagon with China due to domestic considerations, but most would find balancing a superior option.

**Balance of Power: China-Russia Alignment**

Although the United States and China are the two consequential great powers in East Asia, Russia is another great power with the potential to influence the balance of power. China and Russia/Soviet Union shared a complicated history as allies and rivals. Both were treaty allies during the early years of the Cold War but soon split over political differences, descending into a series of open border skirmishes in 1969. The Sino-Soviet split paved the way for the Sino-American rapprochement in the 1970s. Normal bilateral relations were restored between China and Russia at Cold War’s end. In 2001, both signed a 20-year friendship treaty to facilitate strategic cooperation and resolve disputes. The relationship has since evolved into a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination” that is likely to strengthen in the future. Moscow was the first foreign destination President Xi Jinping visited


upon assuming office in 2013. In the span of only six years, Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin have met 31 times, likely more than any other pair of world leaders.\footnote{Xinhua, “Hello, old friend!” (June 7, 2019), available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/2019-06/07/c_1210153372.htm.} In 2019 on the eve of a 3-day visit to Russia, Xi made the unusual move of publicly calling Putin “my best bosom friend.” As Xi explains of their friendship, “we share similar views about the main trends of the current world, our ideas about governing the country are compatible, and we both shoulder the historical responsibility of developing and revitalizing our country.”\footnote{Xinhua, “Xi Jinping accepts joint interview by mainstream Russian media” (June 5, 2019), available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2019-06/05/c_1124583530.htm.}

At its root, the China-Russia alignment is an outcome of balance of power politics. The two countries are joining forces to balance the power of the United States. Both chafe at US unipolarity, both prefer a multipolar world, and both fear a “color revolution” fomented by Washington. In Europe, a series of NATO expansion threaten Russia’s security interests; US democracy promotion around the globe incites fear of a color revolution inside Russia, fueled by the large-scale demonstrations in Moscow in 2012; Western sanctions imposed in the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 further pushed Moscow toward Beijing. In Asia, China has long chafed at US military activities in the East and South China Seas as well as its support of Taiwan. Like Moscow, Beijing has been suspicious of US efforts at promoting a “peaceful evolution” inside China. The turning point in Moscow’s pivot to China was the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, which left Russia isolated from the West.\footnote{Dimitri Alexander Simes, "Is Russia Worried About China’s Military Rise?," The National Interest (July 30, 2019), available at https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/russia-worried-about-china’s-military-rise-70201. See also Robert Sutter, China-Russia Relations: Strategic Implications and U.S. Policy Options, NBR Special Report #73, (Seattle: NBR, September 2018), pp. 6-7.} The China-Russia strategic partnership is grounded in a shared interest in checking American power. As Evan Medeiros and Michael Chase point out, “Russian and Chinese interests converge most prominently on the desire to serve as a counterweight to perceived U.S. preponderant influence— to constrain U.S. power (broadly defined).”\footnote{Evan S. Medeiros and Michael S. Chase, "Chinese Perspectives on the Sino-Russian Relationship," in Russia-China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines, ed. Michael S. Chase et al. (Seattle, WA: NBR, July 2017), p. 5.} Although there is no sign of a formal alliance yet, former Chinese diplomat Fu Ying writes, “The Chinese-Russian relationship is a stable strategic partnership and by no means a marriage of convenience: it is complex, sturdy, and deeply rooted. Changes in international relations since the end of the Cold War have only brought the two countries closer together.”\footnote{Fu Ying, "How China Sees Russia: Beijing and Moscow Are Close, but Not Allies," Foreign Affairs 95, no. 1 (January/February 2016), p. 96.}
Evidence of China-Russian coordination abounds. There is an increased level of bilateral military cooperation. In September 2018, Beijing dispatched 3,200 Chinese troops to Russia to participate in a massive military exercise (300,000 troops) Vostok under “joint” Russian-Chinese command, a move that could enhance the interoperability of their forces. In July 2019, Chinese and Russian air forces conducted its first ever joint air patrol in East Asia and chose to fly over the disputed islands of Dokdo/Takeshima, prompting both South Korea and Japan to scramble jets. 42) Moscow agreed to sell some of Russia’s most advanced weaponry including S-400 surface-to-air missiles and SU-35 fighter jets. In the economic realm, the complementarity of the Chinese and Russian economies makes them ideal trading partners. Moscow has signed on to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, despite its initial hesitation. In the wake of Western sanctions on Russia following the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, China provides an alternative market for Russian exports. Russia is now a major supplier of energy and oil to China. Beijing has in turn invested extensively in Russia, including the Yamal liquefied natural gas project in the Artic. Moscow and Beijing also coordinate on diplomatic issues. Their positions on the Arab Spring, Syria, and Iran are aligned. At the United Nations, both have supported each other and cast joint vetoes at the Security Council.

The budding China-Russia strategic partnership is not without problems. Russia has long feared the influx of Chinese migrants in the thinly populated Russian Far East; Moscow has been concerned with China’s reverse engineering of purchased Russian military systems (China’s J-11 fight jets were copies of Russian Su-27 jets); Beijing and Moscow are competing for influence in Central Asia, a Russian sphere of influence; and Russia is dissatisfied with its junior partner status in the relationship. 43) Many of these concerns, however, appeared overblown. After the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Kremlin conducted an internal study on the pros and cons of deepening cooperation with China and found that the benefits outweighed the costs. The number of Chinese migrants in Siberia were exaggerated; China’s indigenous military technology has significantly improved and would soon have no need for Russian-made systems; and Moscow and Beijing could have a kind of division of labor in Central Asia, with Russia as the security provider and China as the economic engine. 44)

Needless to say, Washington has strong incentives to drive a wedge between


Beijing and Moscow, but that is unlikely to succeed, at least in the short run. The China-Russia alignment is grounded in geopolitical reality as both countries fear the power of the United States. President Trump’s embrace of Putin, regardless of his motivation, is unlikely to bring Moscow closer to the United States and, to quote Medeiros and Chase again, “is very likely doomed to failure.” Instead, “Beijing and Moscow will very likely become even closer.”45) The recent version of the US National Security Strategy specifically lumped China and Russia together as America’s primary adversaries. If anything, US sanctions on Russia and US trade war with China are helping to solidify the Beijing-Moscow ties. In sum, the China-Russia alignment is a mutually beneficial strategic partnership based on a common geopolitical cause against the United States.

There is, however, a possibility that Russia might reorient itself to the US if, and only if, China grows even more powerful. China and Russia are geographically contiguous, while the US is a less threatening offshore power. All else being equal, geographic proximity could make China and Russia potential adversaries, as it did during the Cold War. The key variable in this scenario is China’s relative power vis-à-vis the United States. If China continues to make advances in economic and military capabilities and become domineering in the relationship, Moscow might be compelled to reevaluate its strategy and join Washington to balance Chinese power. Recall that China realigned with the US in the 1970s to balance its former ally the Soviet Union. If Chinese power continues to grow, it might trigger a realignment of Moscow with Washington.

The Return of Realism

At Cold War’s end, the international system became unipolar. The Russian economy was in disarray and China still lagged far behind the United States in economic and military capabilities. American preponderance of power effectively removed the systemic constraints of great power competition and gave Washington plenty of leeway in deciding what to do. It chose to remake the world in its own image by spreading liberal values and institutions. The US grand strategy of liberal hegemony seeks to promote democracy across the globe, foster greater economic interdependence among states, and build effective institutions to facilitate interstate cooperation.46) Applied to East Asia, Washington adopted the policy of engagement, seeking to moderate Chinese behavior by increasing political, economic, and military contacts and enmeshing China in a complex web of international

46) For a forceful critique of liberal hegemony, see Walt, The Hell of Good Intentions; Mearsheimer, The Great Delusion.
institutions. Engagement aimed to alter the revisionist aspirations of a rising power by giving it a stake in the existing rules and norms of the system.\(^{47}\) Engaging China, the thinking went, would turn the country into a responsible stakeholder within the liberal order by deepening economic ties with the US, sowing the seeds of democracy inside China, and socializing China into accepting international rules and norms favored by the West. Following this logic, the U.S. went on to reduce trade barriers with China, assisted its entry to the World Trade Organization, promoted exchanges in military personnel, and held periodic strategic and economic dialogues with Chinese leaders.

In essence, engagement is a liberal strategy aimed at ameliorating the harmful effects of anarchy. Proponents argue that growth in Chinese power does not have to come at the expense of the United States. As US President Clinton said to Chinese President Jiang Zemin in 1995, “a stable, open and prosperous China—in other words, a stronger China—is in our interest.”\(^{48}\) The view that a rising China was good for the United States predominated the policy circle for decades. The Bush administration proclaimed in the 2002 National Security Strategy: “We welcome the emergence of a strong, peaceful, and prosperous China.”\(^{49}\) Likewise, the Obama administration declared in 2015: “The United States welcomes the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China.”\(^{50}\) A powerful China, contrary to realist predictions, can be in US interest if Washington chooses the policy of engagement.

More than two decades after this social experiment, there is a growing number of commentators who consider the US policy of engagement a failure.\(^{51}\) Thanks to both US engagement and China’s state-led mercantilism, China has risen to become the world’s second largest economy and second largest military spender. China’s international behavior, however, has not turned out the way Washington had hoped for. Although China cooperated with the US on issues such as climate change, the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, and the North Korea nuclear weapons, China’s massive island-building efforts in the disputed South China Sea as well as recurrent

\(^{47}\) Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross, eds., *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power* (New York: Routledge, 1999). The authors define engagement as “The use of non-coercive methods to ameliorate the non-status-quo elements of a rising major power’s behavior. The goal is to ensure that this growing power is used in ways that are consistent with peaceful change in regional and global order.” (p. xiv)


\(^{50}\) The White House, “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” (February 2015), p. 24. Note the word “strong” was dropped.

\(^{51}\) See, for example, Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, "The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (March/April 2018).
challenges to Japan’s administration of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands triggered alarm in Washington. Moreover, China has embarked on a naval buildup program to transform the country into a maritime great power, thereby challenging US naval supremacy in East Asia. On international trade, Beijing has restricted market access and compelled American businesses into joint ventures and to transfer technology, while funneling preferential financing terms and subsidies to Chinese companies. Domestically, Beijing has harnessed surveillance technology to restrict civil and political liberties and has become more repressive of societal dissent. The Chinese Communist Party has become more authoritarian and more resilient to demands for political liberalization. The prospect of a democratic China remains as distant as ever.

Recent US policy statements openly acknowledge the failure of engagement. As the 2017 US National Security Strategy points out, “U.S. policy was rooted in the belief that support for China’s rise and for its integration into the post-war international order would liberalize China. Contrary to our hopes, China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others.” The US Trade Representative goes so far as declaring that “the United States erred in supporting China’s entry into the WTO…”

Defenders of engagement argue that the policy is at least partially successful in shaping China’s international behavior: China is now a “strong supporter” of the UN order centered on sovereignty and territorial integrity and is “moderately supportive” of the global trade order that reduces barriers to trade; the real policy goal of engagement was not democratization of China but liberalization of Chinese society, which is occurring; the absence of engagement would have produced far worse outcomes, such as “a hostile, nuclear-armed China” that is alienated from the rest of the world. This line of argument, however, sets the bar too low and cherry-picks evidence. Crucial aspects of China’s international behavior—state-led mercantilism that disadvantages foreign firms operating in China, forced technology

55) For instance, Johnston argues that engagers did not suggest that a democratic China was “inevitable” or “inevitable” (Johnston, "The Failures of the ‘Failure of Engagement’ with China," 103-09.), but one can find evidence that suggests otherwise. For example, President George H.W. Bush, who argued for engagement with China after the Tiananmen crackdown, notes that “I believed that the commercial contacts between our countries had helped lead to the quest for more freedom. If people have commercial incentives, whether it’s in China or in other totalitarian systems, the move to democracy becomes inexorable.” Quoted in Jon Meacham, Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush (New York: Random House, 2015), p. 374. [emphasis added]
transfer, expansion in the South China Sea, to name a few—are difficult to square with the promises of engagement. Compared to a China that was economically backward and militarily inferior decades ago, engagement has helped foster a China with much more economic capabilities, stronger military might, and advanced technology that could make a serious run at regional hegemony.\(^{56}\)

Instead of buying into what James Mann presciently calls “The China Fantasy” more than a decade ago,\(^{57}\) one could benefit from a healthy dose of realism when it comes to great power behavior. According to realist logic, great powers pay close attention to how much power they have relative to each other; they make sure that no other state markedly changes the balance of power in its favor. A policy of engagement that helps a potential adversary grow in power violates this logic. Regardless of engagement, the anarchic system would still compel China to compete for power with the United States with an eye to regional hegemony in East Asia. This competition for power is fraught with pitfalls that cannot be removed by engagement. Additionally, rising powers often have different conceptions of international order and the rights and rules embodied therein. Increasing capabilities enable them to recast the rules in ways that advance their interests.\(^{58}\) China has its own path of development and political preferences. It is unrealistic to think that Washington can readily mold China to its liking.

Consider international order. Most of the rules of the existing order were constructed without China at the table and when China was weak. China’s rise is changing the distribution of power underlying the current order and is reorienting states toward a China-preferred order. China has long bristled at the US-led order, which it views as unfairly stacked in Washington’s favor. Now that China has become powerful, Beijing has expressed its willingness to take on a more proactive role in “guiding” and reforming the current international order to make it “fair and equitable.”\(^{59}\) Already, China is playing a larger role in the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. When the existing institutions failed to serve Chinese


interests, Beijing took the initiative in creating new institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serves the geopolitical purpose of tying countries closer into China’s economic orbit.

At present, we are witnessing a hardening of American policy toward China. American businesses have soured on the promises of the vast Chinese market, which is structurally stacked against foreign firms. American policymakers and elites have gradually come around to the idea that China will be the peer competitor that threatens the primacy of the United States in world affairs. The seeds of such a hardening predate President Trump—it is structurally driven. Washington has been recalibrating its policy since the Obama Administration, as evidenced in the “pivot to Asia” (rebalancing) strategy and the creation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. For realists, security concerns often trump economic ties. Despite the benefits from trade and investment, economic interdependence creates mutual vulnerabilities that great powers seek to avoid. At present, there appears to be a sort of “de-coupling” of the US-China economies, giving rise to concerns over what former Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson called an “economic iron curtain” between the world’s two largest economies.\(^{60}\)

Fearing dependence on US technology, China now emphasizes “indigenous innovation.” As the security competition heats up, we can expect advocates of continuing engagement with China to be increasingly marginalized in the policy debates.

In the US-China security competition, Washington enjoys an unsurpassed advantage in the number of allies and partners. The United States has about 60 alliances; China virtually none. Despite President Trump’s uncanny talent for alienating almost every ally, these alliances remain an extremely valuable asset that a more skillful leader can employ to strengthen deterrence and boost US strategic position. For China and Russia, it would certainly be in their interest to exploit the rift between Washington and its allies, sow discord among them, and employ a strategy of divide-and-rule to weaken this extensive network of US alliances. Such is the nature of great power competition.

### Conclusion

Realism provides a parsimonious yet powerful guide to great power relations in East Asia. By focusing on anarchy and the imperatives of power, realism anticipates states to pursue power until they have achieved regional hegemony; a rising state will develop power projection capabilities to protect their expanding security

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interests abroad; an increasingly powerful state will develop a version of the Monroe Doctrine to keep extra-regional powers from meddling in its backyard; the reigning hegemon will take measures to contain the power of the rising competitor; and the balance-of-power logic is bringing China and Russia closer together. From the realist perspective, changes in the balance of power will bring about changes in great power relations, a process that is currently manifesting in the deteriorating US-China relations.

China’s pursuit of power and the US objective of maintaining a balance of power in East Asia are fundamentally incompatible. In the Chinese parlance, a “structural contradiction” exists between the two countries, turning them into geopolitical rivals. Looking ahead, great power relations in East Asia, and elsewhere, would unfold according to the realist logic centered on power. Gone are the days when Washington faced virtually no systemic constraints and were free to pursue liberal hegemony. The reality of power politics has returned. It’s time to get real.

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