



Challenging Popular Narratives: The Course of Power Transition and Sino–US Relations

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Abstract

Despite intensive scholarly interest in power transition theory (PTT) and its relevance to contemporary Sino–US relations, this article addresses three aspects central to policy discussions that have been largely neglected or taken for granted in the existing scholarly works on PTT. This article first establishes an analytical framework to analyse the course of power transition, enabling an in-depth analysis of the strategic interactions between the rising power and the dominant power throughout this process. It then critically reviews the historical, theoretical, and empirical studies focusing on three key aspects: (1) the timing and regularity of most war-prone moments in the course of power transition; (2) the role of the established power in the rise of its challenger; and (3) the rising power and established power's incentives for strategic conflict avoidance. It challenges the prevailing narratives that depict a gradual trajectory toward conflict and confrontation as relative power dynamics shift, highlighting the complexity of strategic interactions between the two powers.

Introduction

Sino–US relations are at a critical juncture. Over the past decade, tensions between China and the USA have significantly deteriorated, raising concerns that power transition theory's (PTT) worst-case scenario—a militarized clash—is not a remote possibility but an immediate and profound concern. Both the Trump and Biden administrations have designated China as a revisionist power in their *National Security Strategy* reports. Washington emphasizes the importance of economic de-coupling, military deterrence, and multilateral collaborations in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond to counterbalance China's influence.¹

¹ Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, "Far Eastern Promises: Why Washington Should Focus on Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (2014), pp. 106–16; David Lampton, "The US and China: Sliding from Engagement to Coercive Diplomacy," *Pacific Forum CSIS*, Vol. 63 (2014); John J. Mearsheimer, "The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 6 (2021), pp. 48–59.

The rapid shifts in Sino–US relations garnered significant scholarly attention. Many analysts posit that the relative power change driven by China’s rise is a defining factor behind the heightened tensions. Some observers argue that the bipolar power structure is becoming more apparent, making Sino–US rivalry inevitably move on a collision course, although a great power war between both superpowers remains unlikely.² Professor Yan Xuetong predicts, “The coming bipolarity will be an era of uneasy peace between the two superpowers...Beijing and Washington will largely carry out their competition in the economic and technological realms.”³ Cliff Kupchan similarly asserts that a bipolar world will be “broadly peaceful but by no means warm” and the term “Cold War” best captures the current system.⁴ David Lake contends that a bipolarity competition is not inevitable. “The key question is whether both governments have the self-restraint to limit domestic rent-seeking interests who will undoubtedly demand protection at home and exclusivity in their spheres of influence abroad.”⁵ Considering the demise of great power wars in the 21st century, Xu Jin suggests that the great power competition between China and the USA in the long term depends on whether China can create a new set of values, development models, and international norms to reshape the world order accordingly. In his projection, the “race” between the two powers will be characterized by a combination of “power struggle + ideological competition.”⁶ Although “strategic competition” has been the key frame of the ongoing Sino–US relations and attracts much attention from scholars and policy practitioners, the meanings of the notion remain vague and may have different emphases at different times, while “not recognizing the historical evolution of the term and its many different variations is analytically poor and politically dangerous.”⁷

In addition to the effects of structural changes, domestic politics also contribute to the deteriorating Sino–US relations. Issues such as income inequality, stagnant real incomes, and outsourcing manufacturing jobs have fuelled popular dissent in the USA. This dissent has driven the adoption of policies aimed at limiting imports and reviving domestic manufacturing, primarily targeting China. Donald Trump, the President-elect in the 2024 presidential election of the USA, has emphasized the need to confront China across the entire security and economic spectrum. He threatened to slap tariffs of over 60% on imports from China and pledged to end China’s most-favoured-nation trading status.⁸ Graham Allison also underscores that these systemic risks are compounded by “civilizational incompatibility” between Americans and Chinese on fundamental conceptions of individual, state, economics, and the visions of world order. He asserts that “each sees itself as exceptional – indeed, without peer. But there can be only one number one.”⁹

Among various theoretical perspectives, PTT offers compelling and influential explanations. This article examines three aspects inherent in popular narratives that PTT has not adequately addressed. It first establishes an analytical framework for the course of power transition and examines the strategic interactions between a rising power and an established

² Yan Xuetong, “Bipolar Rivalry in the Early Digital Age,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2020), pp. 313–41; Suisheng Zhao, “The US-China Rivalry in the Emerging Bipolar World: Hostility, Alignment, and Power Balance,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 31, No.134 (2022), pp. 169–85.

³ Yan Xuetong, “The Age of Uneasy Peace: Chinese Power in a Divided World Who Will Run the World,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (2019), p. 40.

⁴ Cliff Kupchan, “Bipolarity Is Back: Why It Matters,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (2021), pp. 123–39.

⁵ David A. Lake, “Economic Openness and Great Power Competition: Lessons for China and the United States,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2018), pp. 237–70.

⁶ Jin Xu, “Linian jingzheng Zhixu goujian yu Quanli zhuan yi” (“The Idea Competition in International Order and Power Transition”), *Dangdai yatai (Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific)*, Vol. 4 (2019), pp. 4–25.

⁷ Stephanie Christine Winkler, “Strategic Competition and US–China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2023), pp. 333–56.

⁸ Costas Pitas, “Trump vows new Canada, Mexico, China tariffs that threaten global trade,” *Reuters*, 26 November 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-promises-25-tariff-products-mexico-canada-2024-11-25>.

⁹ Graham Allison, “China vs. America: Managing the Next Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 5 (2017), p. 82.

power throughout this process. This article then critically reviews the typical cases of power transition and the existing empirical studies with a focus on three aspects as follows: (1) the regularity of a critical moment in the course of power transition, when war is most likely to occur; (2) the role of the established power in the rise of its challenger; and (3) the rising power and established power's incentives for strategic conflict avoidance. It challenges the prevailing narratives that depict a gradual trajectory towards conflict and confrontation as relative power dynamics shift and highlights the complexity of the two power's strategic interactions.

This article proceeds as follows. The first section critically reviews the existing theoretical and policy discussions on PTT and its relevance to contemporary Sino-US relations. The second section establishes an analytical framework that centres on the course of power transition, examining the strategic interactions between the two powers throughout the process of power transition. It then examines three aspects widely discussed by pundits and analysts but not fully addressed by the theory. This article also explores the theoretical and policy implications of these findings.

PTT and Sino-US Relations

PTT stands out as a prominent theory in international studies that has been both supported and criticized in empirical studies, yet it continues to hold sway in policy discourses and media. This section provides a systemic and critical review of PTT and its relevance to contemporary Sino-US relations.

PTT: A Critical Review

Historical evidence consistently highlights the tensions and potential conflict during international power transitions between a rising power and an established power (the two powers).¹⁰ PTT, initially developed by A.F.K Organski in 1958,¹¹ provides a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics. Over time, interest in the theory has steadily increased, underscoring its continued relevance and significance in international relations.

The conventional framework of PTT posits that the status quo is upheld by the dominant power and its allies, whereas a rising state, dissatisfied and diverging in preferences from the dominant state, seeks to alter this status quo as it approaches parity in power. The extended discourse not only examines PTT within the contexts of systemic and regional hierarchies¹² but also explores the potential of relative power shifts as a general explanation for interstate conflict.¹³ The theory integrates both utilitarian and psychological motives behind states' strategic choices of war and stability. It suggests a confluence of factors—greed-driven redistribution of benefits, fear of existential or potential threats, and the pursuit of status—may escalate the probability of conflicts between a rising power and an established albeit declining power.

The existing scholarly works have conducted normative and empirical studies of the theory, yielding mixed evidence.¹⁴ The major weaknesses inherent in the theory are as follows.

¹⁰ In this article, “the two powers” refer to “the rising power and the established power.”

¹¹ A.F.K Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958).

¹² Jonathan M. Diccio and Jack S. Levy, “Power Shifts and Problem Shifts: The Evolution of the Power Transition Research Program,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (1999), pp. 675–704; Woosang Kim, “Power Transitions and Great Power War from Westphalia to Waterloo,” *World Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (1992), pp. 153–72.

¹³ Brian Efrid, Jacek Kugler, and Gaspare Genna, “From War to Integration: Generalizing Power Transition Theory,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2003), pp. 293–313; Henk Houweling and Jan G. Siccama, “Power Transitions as a Cause of War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (1988), pp. 87–102.

¹⁴ For examples of quantitative studies that support the theory, see Michelle A. Benson, “Dyadic Hostility and the Ties That Bind: State-to-State versus State-to-System Security and Economic Relationships,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 41, No. 6 (2004), pp. 659–76; Efrid, Kugler, and Genna, “From War to Integration”; Daniel S. Geller, “Power Transition

For instance, challenges in measuring the key variables of power and (dis)satisfaction within PTT necessitate further academic scrutiny.¹⁵ Additionally, the interrelation between the primary determinants—relative power shifts and dissatisfaction—raises concerns about the theory's falsifiability. Organski seemingly suggests that all rising powers are dissatisfied.¹⁶ De Soysa, Oneal, and Park's analysis exposes the overly simplistic and ambiguous nature of such assumptions due to the high correlation between these two explanatory variables. They also interrogate the rationale behind a rising power's dissatisfaction despite its rapid economic growth, which often surpasses that of the dominant power.¹⁷ Interpretations of major power competitions are at times oversimplified, biased, and thus misleading.¹⁸ The utilization of historical analogies, such as the Peloponnesian War or the US–USSR Cold War, to suggest imminent conflicts between China and the USA is often criticized as ahistorical and problematic. Such analogies should be approached with caution.¹⁹ The Eurocentric orientation of the theory has also sparked controversy over its relevance and applicability to non-Western contexts,²⁰ particularly in East Asia. Contrarily, Kim Woosang's empirical tests on historical conflicts in East Asia argue that the region's wars arise under broadly similar conditions as those in the wider international system, particularly when a dissatisfied challenger nears parity with a dominant power.²¹

This article contends the considerable discrepancies between the historical and quantitative studies on PTT do not undermine its fundamental contributions. PTT addresses a pivotal phenomenon in international studies—great power politics—by endeavouring to

and Conflict Initiation," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1992), pp. 1–16; Kim, "Power Transitions and Great Power War from Westphalia to Waterloo"; Woosang Kim and James D. Morrow, "When Do Power Shifts Lead to War?" *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (1992), pp. 896–922; Jacek Kugler and Young-Bae Hwang, "The Likelihood of Major Conflict in East Asia and the Korean Peninsula: A Power Parity Perspective," *World Affairs*, Vol. 161, No. 1 (1998), pp. 99–111; Jacek Kugler and A.F.K. Organski, "The Power Transition: A Retrospective and Prospective Evaluation," in Manus Midlarsky, ed., *Handbook of War Studies* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 171–94; Douglas Lemke and William Reed, "Regime Types and Status Quo Evaluations: Power Transition Theory and the Democratic Peace," *International Interactions*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1996), pp. 143–64; Douglas Lemke and William Reed, "Power Is Not Satisfaction: A Comment on de Soysa, Oneal, and Park," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (1998), pp. 511–6; Douglas Lemke and Suzanne Werner, "Power Parity, Commitment to Change, and War," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (1996), pp. 235–60; William Moul, "Power Parity, Preponderance, and War between Great Powers, 1816–1989," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (2003), pp. 468–89.

¹⁵ Michael Beckley, "The Power of Nations: Measuring What Matters," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2018), pp. 7–44; Carsten Rauch, "Challenging the Power Consensus: GDP, CINC, and Power Transition Theory," *Security Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2017), pp. 642–64; Indra De Soysa, John R. Oneal, and Yong-Hee Park, "Testing Power-Transition Theory Using Alternative Measures of National Capabilities," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (1997), pp. 509–28.

¹⁶ Organski, *World Politics*, pp. 323, 328.

¹⁷ Soysa et al., "Testing Power-Transition Theory Using Alternative Measures of National Capabilities," p. 512.

¹⁸ Steve Chan, "More Than One Trap: Problematic Interpretations and Overlooked Lessons from Thucydides," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2019), pp. 11–24; Jonathan Kirshner, "Handle Him with Care: The Importance of Getting Thucydides Right," *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2019), pp. 1–24; James Lee, "Did Thucydides Believe in Thucydides' Trap? The History of the Peloponnesian War and Its Relevance to U.S.–China Relations," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2019), pp. 67–86.

¹⁹ Peter Harris and Iren Marinova, "American Primacy and US–China Relations: The Cold War Analogy Reversed," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2022), pp. 335–51; Renée Jeffery, "Evaluating the 'China Threat': Power Transition Theory, the Successor-state Image and the Dangers of Historical Analogies," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (2009), pp. 309–24; Yuen Foong Khong, "How Not to Learn from History," *International Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 5 (2022), pp. 1737–62; Athanassios Platias and Vasilis Trigkas, "Unravelling the Thucydides' Trap: Inadvertent Escalation or War of Choice?" *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2021), pp. 219–55.

²⁰ David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks," *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2003), pp. 57–85; David C. Kang and Xinru Ma, "Power Transitions: Thucydides Didn't Live in East Asia," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2018), pp. 137–54.

²¹ Woosang Kim, "Power Parity, Alliance, Dissatisfaction, and Wars in East Asia, 1860–1993," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 46, No. 5 (2002), pp. 654–71.

offer generalizable insights applicable across various historical contexts. Despite its conditional explanatory power, contingent on specific situational factors, the theory remains a valuable framework for understanding global power dynamics over extended periods. Power transition theorists also tend to address and rationalize these criticisms, refining the theory to enhance its relevance and applicability to world politics in 21st-century world politics.²²

While the classical version of PTT highlights the war-proneness of power transitions, although it rejects the deterministic claims that war is inevitable in case of rapid power shifts, PTT 2.0 posits that the outcomes of power transition are context-dependent, influenced by factors such as regime type, economic structure, the presence (or lack of) territorial disputes, historical hatred and enduring rivalries, etc. This perspective also facilitates dialogues between PTT and other theories, which helps PTT integrate itself into the general studies of cooperation and conflict. For instance, Schweller examines whether PTT aligns with democracy peace theory.²³ Prospect theory offers valuable insights into the differing risk preferences of the two powers. The established power, seeking to restore its predominant status, often thus exhibits a higher willingness to accept risks, making preventive warfare an appealing and feasible option to counter the rising power's ascent.²⁴

Accordingly, PTT 2.0 highlights the complexity of states' strategic choices despite the imperatives of power transition. Contrary to popular narratives that suggest the two powers are gradually on a linear trajectory toward confrontation, states' choices are, in reality, more varied and sometimes counterintuitive.

Recent scholarly debates on retrenchment highlight the alternatives available to the declining power beyond inevitable decline or the initiation of preventive wars. The strategic effect of retrenchment remains contested. While retrenchment may weaken the declining power's commitment to allies and encourage the revisionists to further exploit its weaknesses, it also creates possibilities for recovery and the potential to restore its previous status within the international system.²⁵ David Edelstein's work explores the paradoxical cooperation between established powers and emerging threats through the lens of time horizon. He concludes that "state leaders tend to procrastinate when dealing with long-term threats, hoping instead to profit from short-term cooperation, and are reluctant to act precipitously in an uncertain environment," although the declining states may later regret having lost the opportunity to neutralize the danger early.²⁶ Goddard scrutinizes the justifications rising powers provide for their expansionist objectives. He posits that "when great powers viewed challengers as willing to play by the 'rules of the game,' they were more likely to pursue accommodation, even at the price of their relative power. In contrast, even weak rising

²² See, for example, Ronald Tammen, Jacek Kugler, and Douglas Lemke, *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century* (New York: Chatham House, 2000).

²³ Randall L. Schweller, "Domestic Structure and Preventive War: Are Democracies More Pacific?" *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1992), pp. 235–69.

²⁴ Steve Chan, *China, The U.S., and the Power Transition Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 122–3; Jack S. Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (1987), pp. 82–107; Jack S. Levy, "Prospect Theory and International Relations: Theoretical Applications and Analytical Problems," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1992), p. 303; Jack S. Levy, "Loss Aversion, Framing, and Bargaining: The Implications of Prospect Theory for International Conflict," *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1996), pp. 179–95; William C. Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War," *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 01 (2009), pp. 28–57.

²⁵ Stephen G. Brooks, John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2012), pp. 7–51; Colin Dueck, *The Strategy of Retrenchment and Its Consequences* (Washington, DC: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2015), p. 5; Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2011), pp. 7–44; Joseph M. Parent and Paul K. MacDonald, "The Wisdom of Retrenchment: America Must Cut Back to Move Forward," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 6 (2011), pp. 32–47.

²⁶ David M. Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

powers were treated as existential threats when their claims seemed illegitimate.”²⁷ Shiffrinson examines strategies employed by rising powers in three 20th-century cases, concluding that rising states engage in intensive and brutal predation only if “a rising state concludes that a declining state simultaneously (1) can give the riser little or no help in opposing other great power threats, and (2) lacks military options to keep the riser in check.”²⁸

PTT’s Applicability to Contemporary Sino–US Relations

The theory remains popular today, largely due to its obvious policy relevance. Analysts have increasingly turned to PTT to examine its applicability to the complex dynamics of contemporary Sino–American relations.²⁹ There are also scholarly works that question its relevance. For example, historians and international relations scholars have highlighted that the Peloponnesian War, often used as a historical case to illustrate PTT’s logic, may have been misinterpreted. Furthermore, the reasoning of historical analogies that “if two or more events separated in time agree in one respect, then they may also agree in another,”³⁰ is deemed problematic.³¹ David Kang, for instance, argues that “the empirical examples international relations scholars use to derive their theories are almost all European,” and that “the most consequential transition in Asia over 500 years looked nothing like Thucydides would predict.”³² Steve Chan and Michael Beckley discuss how flawed measurement of power has led to biased analysis of the Sino–US power transition. They argue that the USA still maintains advantages over China, particularly in terms of technological innovation and alliances.³³ Chan and Iain Johnston’s efforts to operationalize and assess China’s dissatisfaction with the status quo challenge the notion of China as a revisionist state,³⁴ whereas Lim’s research concludes that China is markedly dissatisfied.³⁵ Furthermore, analysts have also highlighted other factors that may mitigate Sino–US rivalry, including economic interdependence, the lack of fundamental ideological differences, and the pacifying effects of international institutions and norms.³⁶

²⁷ Stacie E. Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

²⁸ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 3.

²⁹ Graham Allison, *Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017); Steve Chan, “Is There a Power Transition between the U.S. and China? The Different Faces of National Power,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 45, No. 5 (2005), pp. 687–701; Chan, *China, The U.S., and the Power Transition Theory*; Jeffery, “Evaluating the ‘China Threat’”; Alastair Iain Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?” *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2003), pp. 5–56; William Ziyuan Wang, “Destined for Misperception? Status Dilemma and the Early Origin of US-China Antagonism,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2019), pp. 49–65.

³⁰ Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 6–7.

³¹ Chan, “More Than One Trap”; Ja Ian Chong and Todd H. Hall, “The Lessons of 1914 for East Asia Today: Missing the Trees for the Forest,” *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2014), pp. 7–43; Kirshner, “Handle Him with Care”; Lee, “Did Thucydides Believe in Thucydides’ Trap?”; Platias and Trigkas, “Unravelling the Thucydides’ Trap.”

³² Kang and Ma, “Power Transitions.”

³³ Michael Beckley, “China’s Century? Why America’s Edge Will Endure,” *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2012), pp. 41–78; Michael Beckley, “Conditional Convergence and the Rise of China: A Political Economy Approach to Understanding Global Power Transitions,” *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2021), pp. 1–9; Steve Chan, “Exploring Puzzles in Power-Transition Theory: Implications for Sino-American Relations,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2004), pp. 103–41; Chan, “Is There a Power Transition between the U.S. and China?”; Chan, *China, The U.S., and the Power Transition Theory*.

³⁴ Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?”; Steve Chan, “Can’t Get No Satisfaction? The Recognition of Revisionist States,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2004), pp. 207–38.

³⁵ Lim Yves-Heng, “How (Dis)Satisfied is China? A Power Transition Theory Perspective,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 24, No. 92 (2015), pp. 280–97.

³⁶ Ling Shengli and Lv Huiyi, “Why Are China and the U.S. Not Destined to Fall into the ‘Thucydides’ Trap?’” *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2018), pp. 495–514; Yuan Yang, “Escape Both the ‘Thucydides Trap’ and the ‘Churchill Trap’: Finding a Third Type of Great Power Relations under the Bipolar System,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2018), pp. 193–235; Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?”

Despite these flaws, PTT's relevance to contemporary Sino-US relations warrants scholarly attention. A prominent reason is the theory's significant impact on framing Sino-US relations within policy circles. Policy practitioners and analysts widely agree that the two countries are heading towards a perilous collision course, primarily driven by shifts in relative power. President Joe Biden's *National Security Strategy* report, released in October 2022, explicitly stated, "The People's Republic of China harbours the intention and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order in favour of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit, even as the United States remains committed to managing the competition between our countries responsibly."³⁷ Chinese official discourse also frequently employs the term "bainian weiyou zhi da bianju" ("major changes unseen in a century") and "Dong sheng xi jiang" ("the rise of the East and the decline of the West") to underscore the structural changes. President Xi reiterated that the notion of the "Thucydides Trap," advocated by Graham Allison to emphasize the high likelihood of a war between the rising power and the established power, does not exist. Xi added that Thucydides Trap could become a self-fulfilling prophecy in case of strategic miscalculation.³⁸

Analytical Framework: The Course of Power Transition

This section highlights the weaknesses of the existing scholarly works, particularly when explaining persistent topics in the popular discourse on contemporary Sino-US relations, and proposes a new analytical framework for examining the course of power transition.

The Course of Power Transition: The Missing Piece of PTT

Despite intensive studies on PTT, this article focuses on the course of power transition which holds significant theoretical and policy implications for three reasons.

Firstly, the course of power transition encompasses pivotal questions that demand a comprehensive understanding from policy analysts. For instance, analysts ponder whether China will surpass the USA to become the world's largest economy and, if so, when. Moreover, scholars also examine whether the power transition between America and China will inevitably lead to war. Some analysts also delve into the historical interactions between the two states. America's past China policy has been perceived as a failure, as it inadvertently facilitated China's rise without achieving the anticipated democratization and responsible stakeholder behaviours.³⁹ Recently, *The Economist* argued that China's rise has peaked, suggesting a potential decline in its power.⁴⁰ Beckley and Brands support this notion, emphasizing that "China is at a perilous moment, being strong enough to challenge the existing order violently while losing confidence that time is on its side." This makes the alarming possibility of war "frighteningly real."⁴¹ These discussions underscore the imperativeness of a comprehensive understanding of the course of power transition, as well as the strategies and interactions of these two powers throughout the process.

Secondly, despite intensive policy discussions, PTT and the subsequent studies primarily focus on the "match point" of power transition. This refers to the point at which the two

³⁷ The White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC, 2022).

³⁸ Cyber Administration of China, "Xi Jinping tan Zhongmei: Hui budao guoqu, dan nengyou genghaode weilai" ("Xi Jinping on Sino-US Relations: We Cannot Turn Back the Clock, but Can Create a Better Future"), 29 March 2024, https://www.cac.gov.cn/2024-03/29/c_1713385384322246.htm.

³⁹ Lampton, "The US and China"; Wang Jisi et al., "Did America Get China Wrong? The Engagement Debate," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 4 (2018), pp. 183–95.

⁴⁰ *The Economist*, "Is Chinese Power about to Peak?" 13 March 2023, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/05/11/is-chinese-power-about-to-peak>.

⁴¹ Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022).

powers' strengths reach parity, and the likelihood of interstate war reaches its peak. However, it is crucial to recognize that other phases of power transition also hold significance. Scholarly research increasingly acknowledges the established power's incentives to initiate the preventive war before the "match point" is reached.⁴² Furthermore, Graham Allison highlighted that "twelve of 16 cases in which this occurred (in Allison's own words, when 'a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one') in the past 500 years ended violently."⁴³ This suggests that power transition wars are high-probability events. However, if the scholarly analysis extends to the broader course of power transition and includes failed attempts by other powers to challenge the established power, the probability appears lower and less "intimidating."

Thirdly, popular narratives often suggest that the two powers are on a linear trajectory toward confrontation, with unchanging strategies and interactions over time. Such time-invariant understandings fail to account for the complexity of states' strategies over such a prolonged period. In reality, during the early stages of its development, the rising power may emerge either as a rivalry of the established power or a supporter, exploiting the benefits of the system created and maintained by the latter. This introduces significant nuances and complexities into the long-term interactions between the two powers. Additionally, given that the two powers are the strongest countries in a region, they may seek to avoid a tit-for-tat clash due to the inherent risks and uncertain outcomes of war. A careful examination of the entire course of the power transition can provide a better understanding of the strategic changes that occur between the two powers throughout the process.

Analytical Framework

In his 1958 book *World Politics*, Organski emphasized the significance of industrialization in the changing distribution of power. He then divided the power transition into three distinct stages: (1) the stage of potential power, in which "a nation is not industrial...its people are primarily agricultural, and the great majority of them are rural...productivity per man-hour is low"; (2) the stage of transitional growth in power, when "the nation is undergoing the transition from a pre-industrial to an industrial age"; and (3) the stage of power maturity when "the nation is fully industrial." Organski further elaborated on the stages of states' internal development in *The Stages of Political Development*. He delineated the developmental process of states into four stages: (1) primary unification; (2) resource mobilization for industrialization; (3) the establishment of a welfare state to support the vulnerable through wealth redistribution and facilitation of mass political participation; and (4) the abundance stage, characterized by abundant resources and highly institutionalized political expression.⁴⁴

As the central thesis of PTT seeks to understand the relations between the rising power and the established power, it is important to consider the developmental timeline for the rising power to evolve into a substantial challenger to the established power. With this in mind, I propose dividing the course of power transition, as conceived in popular narratives, into three distinct phases.

(1) The *catching-up* phase: In this phase, the rising power demonstrates remarkable growth, positioning it as a "star of tomorrow" and significantly enhancing its national power. Concurrently, the established power may experience a relative decline, driven by the rising power's rapid growth or internal challenges such as decreased productivity or

⁴² Douglas Lemke, "Investigating the Preventive Motive for War," *International Interactions*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2003), pp. 273–92; Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War"; Amy Oakes, "Diversionary War and Argentina's Invasion of the Falkland Islands," *Security Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2006), pp. 431–63.

⁴³ Graham Allison, "Thucydides's Trap," <https://www.belfercenter.org/thucydides-trap/overview-thucydides-trap>.

⁴⁴ A. F. K. Organski, *The Stages of Political Development* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965).

overextended foreign commitments. Despite this, the established power retains considerable strength relative to the rising power. At this juncture, the rising power cannot pose a direct challenge, while the established power might adopt a “better-now-than-later” rationale, choosing confrontation now to avoid the heightened risks of future conflict under increasingly unfavourable conditions.

(2) The *power parity* phase: In the “power parity” phase, often cited as the period most susceptible to conflict, the rising power reaches a level of strength comparable to that of the established power, creating conditions for potential military confrontations. In classic PTT, this phase is characterized by the rising power’s readiness to challenge the status quo, driven by revisionist ambitions that aim to reshape the global and regional hierarchy. Conflict during this stage not only determines winners and losers but also heralds the formation of a new order. As the rising power asserts dominance, the erstwhile hegemon’s relative decline becomes pronounced, leaving it unable to compete on equal terms. The likelihood of war during this phase is frequently attributed to the rising power’s aggressive pursuit of a dominant status.

(3) The *overtaking* phase: Although a contender may surpass the previously established power in terms of capabilities, this does not mark the completion of the power transition process. Organski originally posited that the rising power initiates war prior to overtaking the established power.⁴⁵ However, he later amended this theory, noting that conflicts typically occur after the rising power has overtaken the established one. This revision is predicated on the observation that the dominant power often maintains a broader alliance network, thus creating a formidable barrier to the rising power. As a result, the rising power may need additional time to consolidate its gains and wait more favourable conditions before effectively challenging the established power.⁴⁶

Identifying definitive cut-off points between the various phases of power transition presents a significant challenge, as the dynamics are heavily influenced by shifts in relative power. In this context, Country A is unlikely to regard Country B as a primary threat if the latter’s strength is markedly inferior. Within PTT, the potential challenger must not only be strong enough to capture the dominant power’s strategic attention but must also surpass the former hegemon significantly to exert structural influence over the regional order. *The War Ledger* posits that a state must attain at least 80% of its rival’s power to be considered a genuine challenger.⁴⁷ Further research highlights escalating tensions as the two powers approach parity, with the rising power achieving roughly 80% of the established power’s capabilities.⁴⁸ The transition from one phase to another—specifically from the second to the third phase—does not occur instantaneously upon the rising power’s overtaking in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Gross National Product (GNP), or other metrics. Instead, “parity” and “overtaking” are best understood as approximate indicators that help elucidate the strategic impacts of relative power shifts on the interactions between the two powers.

Developing a framework for the course of power transition yields several immediate implications. Two of these implications are outlined below. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that power transition can sometimes be “incomplete,” where the rising power grows rapidly and prepares to challenge the established power but declines before reaching power parity. These “incomplete” cases illustrate the intricate and enduring nature of power transitions in the real world. It is entirely possible for a rising power to stagnate or for the

⁴⁵ Kugler and Organski, “The Power Transition.”

⁴⁶ Jacek Kugler and William Domke, “Comparing the Strength of Nations,” *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1986), pp. 39–69; A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 53–61. See also Woosang Kim, “Power, Alliance, and Major Wars, 1816–1975,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (1989), pp. 255–73.

⁴⁷ Chan, *China, The U.S., and the Power Transition Theory*, p. 22; Organski and Kugler, *The War Ledger*, p. 49.

⁴⁸ Organski and Kugler, *The War Ledger*, pp. 42–53; Houweling and Siccama, “Power Transitions as a Cause of War”; Lemke and Werner, “Power Parity, Commitment to Change, and War.”

established power to regain its status.⁴⁹ Secondly, one single case of power transition may end, but great power competition persists. Organski explores the concept of the “phoenix factor,” revealing a common pattern wherein a great power, despite being defeated in a war, manages to regain its prewar growth potential within approximately two decades, akin to a phoenix rising from the ashes.⁵⁰ Germany and Japan, both defeated in WWII, gradually rebuilt their economic capacities and regained international status. These enduring (or “repeated”) cases of great power competition offer valuable insights into global dynamics and the long-term trajectories of nations.

In this study, I explore three contentious issues in the discourse of power transition, analysing their policy implications for current Sino–US relations. The first issue examines whether there is a consistently war-prone moment during the power transition process. While classical PTT identifies the moment of parity between two powers as most susceptible to conflict, this article presents an alternative perspective. The second point of discussion revolves around the role of an established power in the ascent of its challenger. Traditional interpretations of PTT suggest a linear progression in bilateral relations, marked by escalating hostility. However, counterintuitively, historical analysis reveals that the established power can consciously or inadvertently facilitate the rise of its challenger, a recurring and rational phenomenon in history. Thirdly, this study addresses the assumptions that either the rising power or the established power prefers war during power transition, while neglecting their incentives for strategic conflict avoidance. Revisiting the three controversies from historical and theoretical perspectives has significant policy implications for contemporary Sino–US relations.

In the remainder, this article first introduces the salient controversies in the current discussions on Sino–US relations in the policy and media circles in each section. It then focuses on several research questions, which lie at the core of these popular discussions but have been largely neglected or taken for granted in the existing scholarly works on PTT. I revisit related historical and theoretical evidence qualitatively, aiming to provide new insights into these theoretical and policy discussions.

Is There a Regular War-prone Moment in the Course of Power Transition?

A focal point in PTT and Sino–US relations is to understand when a power transition war will occur during the process of power transition. However, the popular narratives and existing scholarly works often lack a coherent analysis of this critical question.

The timing of power transition wars remains a critical yet underexplored issue within the scholarly literature on PTT. Organski initially suggests that the rising power becomes the war initiator before surpassing the established power, but later corrects his arguments, noting that the rising power will initiate wars after surpassing instead.⁵¹ Subsequent research has emphasized the notion of preventive warfare, a strategy employed by the established power to defeat the rising power and weaken its capabilities while it remains relatively weak.⁵² Prospect theory predicts that the established power will initiate preventive war against the rising power, before losing the window of opportunity.

⁴⁹ MacDonald and Parent, “Graceful Decline?”; Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, “The Road to Recovery: How Once Great Powers Became Great Again,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2018), pp. 21–39.

⁵⁰ Marina Arbetman and Jacek Kugler, eds., *Political Capacity and Economic Behavior: The Political Economy of Global Interdependence* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Tadeusz Kugler, et al., “Demographic and Economic Consequences of Conflict,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (2013), pp. 1–12.

⁵¹ Kugler and Domke, “Comparing the Strength of Nations”; Organski and Kugler, *The War Ledger*, pp. 53–61.

⁵² Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 191; Jack S. Levy, “Preventive War: Concept and Propositions,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2011), pp. 87–96; Levy, “Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War.”

Table 1. China's Economic Rise Compared with the USA, 2007–22

Indicator	China as a share of the USA		
	GDP (%)	GDP on a PPP basis (%)	GDP per capita (%)
2007	24.53	62.09	5.61
2008	31.11	68.00	7.14
2009	35.24	76.37	8.12
2010	40.45	82.27	9.35
2011	48.41	88.75	11.21
2012	52.49	93.05	12.17
2013	56.82	96.09	13.17
2014	59.69	97.55	13.85
2015	60.76	97.75	14.12
2016	60.09	100.09	13.99
2017	63.20	102.09	14.72
2018	67.67	105.89	15.77
2019	66.79	109.68	15.58
2020	69.74	116.09	16.38
2021	76.06	118.77	17.87
2022	70.67	/	16.67

Data source: 2000–21 data are from World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/>; 2022 data are calculated by the author based on open source.

Pundits and analysts often rely on aggregate economic indicators to assess China's rise relative to the USA and to predict when China might surpass the USA as the largest economy. [Table 1](#) details China's GDP, GDP on a Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) basis, and GDP per capita as percentages of the USA. While GDP on a PPP basis suggests that the power transition is nearing completion without resorting to militarized conflicts, examining GDP statistics in absolute terms implies a more precarious phase characterized by heightened competition and uncertainty. Moreover, GDP per capita figures reveal a substantial gap between the two powers, which raises questions about the existence or exaggeration of a power transition scenario. These conflicting predictions arising from different economic indicators underscore the challenges associated with accurately measuring power dynamics. For instance, traditional metrics such as GDP, GNP, or composite index of national capability (CINC) often exaggerate the strengths of countries with vast territories and populations and emphasize economic factors, while they often fail to account for critical dimensions of power, such as soft power, cultural influence, diplomatic capabilities, and technological advancements.⁵³

Conventional wisdom holds the rising power won't engage in conflict with the established power until it has reached a certain level of strength. Using data from the Madison project on historical statistics,⁵⁴ this article re-examines the case files compiled in Graham Allison's Thucydides Trap project and presents intriguing findings. It is important to note that my analysis, based on [Table 3](#), may be subject to selection bias, as I only examine the cases that involve countries covered by the Madison project. However, it is crucial to clarify that my intention is not to discredit the merits of the classic claims made by PTT. By leveraging historical statistics, this non-structural analysis still serves the specific analytical objective of this study.

⁵³ Beckley, "China's Century?"; Beckley, "The Power of Nations"; Chan, "Is There a Power Transition between the U.S. and China?"; Chan, *China, The U.S., and the Power Transition Theory*.

⁵⁴ Allison, "Thucydides's Trap"; University of Groningen, "Maddison Historical Statistics," <https://www.rug.nl/ggdc/historicaldevelopment/maddison/>.

Table 2. The Rising Power's GDP Per Capita as a Share of the Established Powers

Time	The established power		Critical War	The rising power		The rising power's GDP per capita as a share of the established power's	
	The established power	The rising power		The preyear before the war starts	The 10-year average		
1	Spain	Dutch Republic	Dutch Revolt 1566–1648	2.46	2.22		
2	Dutch Republic	England	Anglo-Dutch Wars (1652–74)	0.38	0.36		
3	Austria	Prussia	1866 Austro-Prussian War	1.00	0.93		
4	France	Great Britain	Nine Years' War (1689–97)	1.36	1.25		
5	UK	France	Napoleonic Wars (1803–15)	0.53	0.56		
6	France	Germany	Franco-Prussian War (1870–71)	0.93	0.91		
7	China	Japan	First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95)	1.95	1.94		
8	Spain	USA	1898 Spanish–American War	3.00	2.73		
9	UK	Germany	World War I (1914–18)	0.71	0.67		
10	France	Germany	World War II (1939–45)	1.12	0.96		
11	USA	Japan	World War II (1941–45)	0.41	0.40		
12	Iran	Iraq	1980–88 Iran–Iraq war	1.40	0.87		

Notes: (1) When there are multiple critical wars in the transition, I only calculate the economic statistics of the two powers before their first war; (2) "The 10-year average" refers to the average GDP per capita in the last 10 years leading up to the start of the war, including the first year of the critical war; (3) Constrained by data availability, exceptional cases use alternative calculations. For the two ratios, case 1 utilizes Spain's GDP per capita in 1555, case 3 uses Austria's GDP in 1860, case 5 uses the average of France's GDP per capita in 1789 and 1820, case 7 uses the average of China's GDP per capita in 1887 and 1890.

Table 2 presents a crucial finding within Allison's project: GDP per capita does not predict the timing of power transition wars. Several cases, such as the 1st, 7th, and 8th cases, demonstrate that the rising power can surpass the established power significantly in terms of GDP per capita during critical wars. For instance, the 8th case examines the power transition between the rising America and a declining colonial empire, namely Spain, but at that time, the USA was more economically productive than Spain. These instances underscore the importance of considering factors beyond GDP per capita or other economic indicators when interpreting historical cases of power transition. Relying solely on economic metrics to understand and predict the ongoing Sino-US rivalry can be misleading.

Table 2 also highlights the diverse nature of the critical moments in different cases of power transition. One notable example is England's challenge to the Dutch Republic's dominant position in overseas commerce and colonialization, which occurred at an early stage of its development (case 2 in Table 2). Another intriguing case is Japan's surprising attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 (case 11 in Table 2), despite its relative weakness compared to the USA. These instances illustrate the complexity and variability of critical moments in power transitions. Moreover, several cases—such as Austro-Prussian in the mid-18th century, Franco-Prussian in the mid-19th century, the UK–Germany in the early 20th century, and the Iran–Iraq case in the late 20th century still align with Organski's assertions regarding the critical moment.

The diversity of scenarios outlined in Table 2 challenges the conventional view that changes in relative power are decisive in triggering great power wars. PTT can address the varied timings of war initiation in these cases by integrating additional variables into its analysis and controlling for their effects. For instance, the rising power's (dis)satisfaction with the status quo should be considered a critical explanatory variable in PTT, alongside relative power shifts. Empirical studies have suggested that (dis)satisfaction may be as significant as, if not more so than relative power changes in explaining the occurrence of power transition wars.⁵⁵ While initial quantitative research often relied on singular economic or security indicators to gauge the rising power's (dis)satisfaction—such as monetary market discount rates,⁵⁶ domestic military buildups,⁵⁷ or the similarity of alliance portfolios to that of the dominant power⁵⁸—more recent scholarly work adopts a holistic approach. This approach measures (dis)satisfaction using a comprehensive set of economic, security, and strategic indicators, at both international and dyadic levels.⁵⁹ Additionally, quantitative analyses now include other variables, such as enduring rivalries, territorial disputes, and regime type, to provide a more nuanced understanding of these complex dynamics.

However, I contend that these explanations fail to adequately address the variability in the timing of war initiations. My critique centres on the methodological approach to selecting cases of power transitions, which often relies on retrospective, perceptual, and sometimes anecdotal considerations. For instance, as depicted in Table 2, a country might be designated as a “rising power” due to its recent emergence in regional politics, whereas another “old” influential country is usually categorized as an “established power.” While economic statistics may support historical narratives in certain instances, discrepancies can arise in others (e.g., Case 1, 7, and 8 in Table 2). From this perspective, the reliance

⁵⁵ Kim, “Power Parity, Alliance, Dissatisfaction, and Wars in East Asia, 1860–1993”; Lemke and Werner, “Power Parity, Commitment to Change, and War.”

⁵⁶ Bruce Bueno De Mesquita, “Pride of Place: The Origins of German Hegemony,” *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (1990), pp. 28–52.

⁵⁷ Suzanne Werner and Jacek Kugler, “Power Transitions and Military Buildup,” in Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke, eds., *Parity and War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 187–207.

⁵⁸ Kim, “Power, Alliance, and Major Wars, 1816–1975.”

⁵⁹ Benson, “Dyadic Hostility and the Ties That Bind”; Michelle Benson, “Status Quo Preferences and Disputes Short of War,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2007), pp. 271–88; Susan G. Sample, “Power, Wealth, and Satisfaction: When Do Power Transitions Lead to Conflict?” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 62, No. 9 (2018), pp. 1905–31.

on economic indicators to forecast the most war-prone moments in power transition and to identify cases of power transition in modern history is problematic and potentially misleading.

This section focuses exclusively on cases of power transition that end in wars. It does not imply that other cases are peaceful. War is often the culmination of a spiral of rivalry, in which rising and established powers experience numerous low-intensity conflicts before escalating to full-scale war. Indeed, factors such as economic interdependence, international institutions, nuclear deterrence, and domestic constraints have made great power wars less likely. As reviewed earlier in this article, the power transition in the 21st century is expected to be characterized more by great power competition in low politics rather than by war. Future research can investigate cases of power transition that do not result in war and examine whether there is a consistently destabilizing moment in these cases. Additionally, it is important to explore whether low-intensity conflicts in these transitions help the two powers signal their intentions and avoid miscalculation, thus making peaceful resolutions more likely, or if they create a spiral of rivalry that makes war more likely if not inevitable. This topic warrants further scholarly attention.

The Role of the Established Power in the Rise of a Challenger

US media and policy analysts increasingly argue that America's historical policies toward China have inadvertently facilitated China's rise. Consequently, there is growing advocacy for a strategic shift toward economic decoupling, enhanced military deterrence, and increased diplomatic pressure to curb its growth and counter its assertive behaviours. This shift raises a critical question, often overlooked by PTT analysts: What role does an established power play in the ascension of its challenger? Furthermore, why does the dominant power sometimes cooperate with a potential challenger during certain stages of the power transition? This section explores these discussions and reviews historical instances and empirical data to evaluate typical cases of power transition.

Misperceptions: Is China's Rise Disgraceful?

The formulation of future policies is deeply influenced by how relevant parties perceive their past interactions. Regrettably, China and the USA have starkly contrasting interpretations of their bilateral relations, particularly regarding the reasons behind China's rise.

Firstly, while the Communist Party of China emphasizes the merits of its political and economic systems, there is a tendency in the West to stigmatize China's rise. US media and policy practitioners assert that China is not only taking advantage of the liberal order but also acquiring Western technology illegally through forced technology transfer, theft of intellectual property, and unfairly gaining competitive advantages by building inconvenient market access and financing its SOE's overseas expansion.⁶⁰ America's previous China policies mistakenly assumed that China's economic liberalization would transform the communists' regime into a democratic regime domestically and a responsible stakeholder internationally, but these policies ultimately proved ineffective.⁶¹ Secondly, some American analysts believe that the USA inadvertently facilitated China's rise. The Clinton Administration supported China's bid for a seat in the World Trade Organization in 2000; the intensive exchanges and cooperation between the two powers in innovation and research, higher education, and talent training contributed to China's technological advancement and

⁶⁰ See for example, Antony J. Blinken, "The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China," U.S. Department of State, 26 May 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china>.

⁶¹ Lampton, "The US and China"; Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Debate Over US China Strategy," *Survival*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (2015), pp. 89–110.

industrial progress. Lastly, China strategically employed deception and perception manipulation, successfully misleading the USA into engaging China for short-term gains while underestimating the long-term risks.⁶²

During his 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump sharply criticized China. He said that “We can’t continue to allow China to rape our country and that’s what they’re doing. It’s the greatest theft in the history of the world.”⁶³ This perspective shaped the administration’s substantial protectionist measures against Chinese imports. In a speech at the Hudson Institute in 2018, former Vice President Mike Pence systematically criticized China’s “alleged hacking and espionage attempts within the United States, its theft of U.S. technological secrets, its supposedly unfair trade practices, its bullying diplomacy abroad and its crackdown on the rights of ethnic and religious minorities at home” and called for a reset in China-US relations, which many perceived as a portent of “new Cold War.”⁶⁴ As Trump secured the Republican nomination, Beijing prepared for a second Trump presidency and anticipated retaliatory measures against China, including intensified trade war, further restrictions on China’s access to American technology, and increased US political and military support over Taiwan.⁶⁵

The narrative presented highlights the perception that China’s growth is disgraceful and calls for America’s decisive actions to rectify the mistakes of its previous China policies. The portrayal of victimhood mentality among US elites is concerning, as it can justify risk-taking policy decisions aimed at curtailing China’s growth and restoring America’s status and privileges, as suggested by the prospect theory.⁶⁶

These discussions highlight an important question about the role of the established power in the rise of its challenger, which has often been neglected in existing scholarly discourse. The scenario depicted in America’s popular understanding of China’s rise illustrates one possibility: that the rising power emerges and thrives within the established power’s sphere of influence, benefiting from international institutions created and maintained by the established power.

The Role of Established Power in the Rise of Its Challenger

Reviewing the classic works and typical cases of power transition offers valuable insights. PTT emphasizes that “changes in the international power structure were, in all significant respects, the result of the domestic developmental process.”⁶⁷ Organski identified several key factors, including geography, resources, population, economic development, political structure, and national morale. Michael Mazarr evaluated great powers in history and concluded that domestic factors such as “a strong national ambition, a culture of learning and adaption, and significant diversity and pluralism” are “the real drivers of rise and fall” of great powers.⁶⁸ This emphasis on domestic factors fundamentally challenges the notion that the established power plays a decisive role in the rise of its challenger.

⁶² Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015).

⁶³ ABC News, “Donald Trump Calls China’s Trade Practice the ‘Greatest Theft in the World’,” 2 May 2016, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/donald-trump-calls-chinas-trade-practices-greatest-theft/story?id=38812125>.

⁶⁴ Ishaan Tharoor, “Under Trump, U.S. Enters a New ‘Cold War’ with China,” *Washington Post*, 11 October 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/10/11/under-trump-us-enters-new-cold-war-with-china/>. See also Jane Perlez, “Pence’s China Speech Seen as Portent of ‘New Cold War’,” *The New York Times*, 5 October 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/05/world/asia/pence-china-speech-cold-war.html>.

⁶⁵ Lingling Wei, “Beijing Braces for a Rematch of Trump vs. China,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 May 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/china/trump-china-rematch-beijing-0b0a9c6e>.

⁶⁶ Levy, “Loss Aversion, Framing, and Bargaining”; Wohlforth, “Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War.”

⁶⁷ Kugler and Organski, “The Power Transition,” p. 177.

⁶⁸ Michael J. Mazarr, “What Makes a Power Great: The Real Drivers of Rise and Fall,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 101, No. 4 (2022), pp. 52–63.

Table 3. US Trade with UK (\$, Million), 1821–50

	Imports	% of total	Exports	% of total
1821–25	151.3	40.4	122.2m	35.5
1826–30	138.7	38.8	117.6	33.6
1831–35	220.0	40.9	188.3	41.0
1836–40	254.4	38.7	273.8	47.5
1841–45	178.3	37.4	221.1	43.7
1846–50	285.7	40.6	349.5	50.7

Source: Norman S. Buck, *The Development of the Organisation of Anglo-American Trade 1800–1850* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1969), p. 2.

Regarding the role of the established power in the rise of its challenger, the existing works often centre on two polarizing scenarios.

The first scenario involves enduring rivalry, where some rising powers engage in confrontations with the established power even before attaining significant strength or power parity. A historical case of this dynamic is the rivalry between England and Spain, the then-established power. Queen Elizabeth I (reigned 1558–1603) actively incentivized and rewarded the piracy activities against Spanish colonial settlements and treasure ships, while also supporting the Dutch rebels against Spanish rule. In certain instances, the established power may act as a major obstacle to the rising power's quest for national independence. A notable case is the rise of the Dutch Republic, where seven Dutch provinces revolted against Spanish rule in the Eighty Year's War (1568–1648) and successfully achieved independence. Simultaneously, the Dutch Republic facilitated the rise of modern capitalist trade and finance, establishing its dominant position in overseas trade and colonialization. Similarly, the Soviet Union also faced Western military interference and endured economic embargoes since its inception, yet it managed to develop itself into a peer competitor of the USA during the Cold War.

The second scenario is that the rising power survives and thrives within the established power's sphere of influence, benefiting from the institutions created and maintained by the established power. The special US–UK relations during America's rise help partially illustrate this point.

During the 19th century, the USA articulated the Monroe Doctrine, declaring that any foreign intervention in the political affairs of newly independent Central and South American countries would be perceived as acts of hostility towards the USA. In pursuing this doctrine, it cooperated with its former suzerain and the then-world leader, Britain, and opposed Spain and Portugal, two declining colonial powers. Notably, the British Royal Navy was the primary enforcer of this doctrine, as the USA still possessed limited naval strength at the time.⁶⁹ Moreover, thanks to Britain's relaxation of the Navigation Act's restrictions, America was able to develop intensive trade relations with Great Britain. The cotton and textile trade deepened the economic exchanges between the two countries. The UK's exports of cotton goods to the USA accounted for approximately 30% of its total exports of such goods in the first half of the 19th century. Furthermore, throughout most of the 19th century, over half of the UK's imported raw cotton originated from the USA, with the percentage reaching as high as 81.1% between 1846 and 1850. Table 3 provides statistical data on US–UK trade from 1821 to 1850.

Indeed, it is reasonable to suggest that some cases of power transition fall between the two extreme scenarios mentioned above. These intermediate cases are not uncommon for two

⁶⁹ Mark T. Gilderhus, "The Monroe Doctrine: Meanings and Implications," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2006), p. 8.

reasons: firstly, when examining power transition, historical analysis often focuses on European powers, which were geographically proximate and thus facilitated the development of transactional and social relations among them; secondly, globalization, particularly in the economic realm, has further connected different parts of the world and fostered interdependence among some economies. In these cases, cooperation and conflict may coexist, with the depth of cooperation and intensity of conflict varying depending on specific contexts.

The power transition between the Dutch Republic and England is a notable example of intermediate cases in power dynamics. The Dutch Republic's rise to primacy in overseas trade occurred from the late 16th century until the late 17th century, potentially marked by events such as the Third-Dutch War (1672–74) or the War of Spanish Succession (1701–14). Throughout the 17th century, England and the Dutch Republic engaged in fierce competition, including three major Anglo-Dutch Wars. However, the two systemic rivalries also developed cooperative relations in certain areas: they were complementary in the cotton and textile trade in the early 17th century, with England exporting intermediate goods to the Dutch manufacturers, who then produced and sold finished goods; Dutch merchants maintained extensive commercial relations with England's colonies in North America in the middle and late 17th century, despite previous wars over territories, such as the New Netherland—which was eventually captured by England and renamed New York. Moreover, the restructuring of the Dutch economy, shifting its focus from manufacturing and trade to finances, facilitated a smooth transition between England and the Dutch. Dutch merchants were willing to invest heavily in England's government debt for capital profits, which, *in turn*, supported British expansion and transatlantic trade.⁷⁰

The historical cases examined illustrate various factors that facilitated cooperation between major powers. For instance, trade complementarity and mutual commercial interests united the Dutch Republic and England from the late 16th to the late 17th century, as well as Britain and the USA throughout the 19th century. Additionally, the presence of common threats from a third party often provided a strong impetus for cooperation, thereby supporting peaceful transitions in power dynamics. These examples underscore the complex interplay of economic and security considerations in shaping international relations between emerging and established powers.

These theoretical discussions provide important implications for understanding America's role in the rise of China. It may initially seem counterintuitive that the established power would consciously or unintentionally facilitate the rise of its challenger, but historical examples show that such dynamics have repeatedly occurred throughout history.

In the case of Sino-US relations, some factors contributed to the development of cooperative relations, including shared security threats from the Soviet Union in the 1980s, trade complementarity, and the missing ideological conflicts since China's pragmatic reform. Beijing acknowledged that integrating itself into the world economy was a major contributing factor to its rise, but often downplayed or omitted America's contributions (or, the assistance of developed economies). Additionally, Chinese analysts emphasize that America's China policy has been multifaceted, encompassing not only economic engagement but also diplomatic pressure and military deterrence. This includes weapon embargo, export control over sensitive technologies, strengthening alliances with Asian allies, interfering in Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan issues—which are perceived to be internal affairs in Chinese statesmen's thinking, and pressuring for structural reform.⁷¹ In other words, America's China policy has never been purely supportive and cooperative.

⁷⁰ Gert Oostindie and Jessica V. Roitman, eds., *Dutch Atlantic Connections, 1680–1800: Linking Empires, Bridging Borders* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); David Ormrod, *The Rise of Commercial Empires: England and the Netherlands in the Age of Mercantilism, 1650–1770* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Charles Wilson, *Profit and Power: A Study of England and the Dutch Wars* (Springer, 2012).

⁷¹ Da Wei, “Meiguo duihua zhanlue de Yanbian yu ‘Trump chongji’” (“The Evolution of U.S. Strategy toward China and the Trump Impact”), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (*World Economics and Politics*), Vol. 5 (2017), pp. 21–37.

As an intermediate conclusion, this section highlights the multifaceted roles that the established power plays in the rise of its challenger. In the case of the USA and China, misperceptions and exaggerations exist on both sides. Some American hawkists seemingly overstate America's contributions to China's rise and the failures of America's China policy to advocate a policy reorientation. Conversely, Beijing may not fully acknowledge the merits of the America-led international system. These misperceptions about past Sino-US relations risk leading to ill-advised policies and obstructing constructive dialogue and cooperation between the two powers. It is crucial for both sides to critically assess the historical context, understand the nuanced dynamics of power transitions, and recognize the multifaceted nature of their relationship. By doing so, they can promote a more informed and balanced approach to addressing the complexities and challenges in Sino-US relations.

Are the Two Powers Inclined to Favour War Consistently?

The inherent assumption in PTT that both powers view war as a viable response to external challenges is problematic. Often, one actor may recognize the opponent's strong incentive to engage in conflict and strategically choose to avoid or defer such confrontations. This section seeks to integrate the concept of strategic conflict avoidance into PTT, exploring its theoretical implications and potential policy ramifications.

Strategic Conflict Avoidance and Its Implications for Power Transition

Current studies on strategic conflict avoidance prominently focus on the diversionary war theory, which posits that leaders tend to invoke foreign policy adventures to divert the public's attention from their domestic incompetence to a foreign enemy. However, empirical studies also reveal that when leaders of target countries are suffering from domestic popularity crises, other foreign leaders will be less likely to initiate crises or provide "conflict opportunities," recognizing that such leaders have incentives to use force. Consequently, the incentives for strategic conflict avoidance emerge, reducing the probability of diversionary conflicts. Additionally, likely targets of diversionary war tend to exhibit more cooperative behaviour, particularly when this powerful rival favours a diversionary use of force.⁷²

The literature on strategic conflict avoidance highlights a significant logical problem within PTT. PTT assumes that the two powers desire war when the conditions are favourable, whether it is the established power initiating a preventive war during the catching-up phase or the rising power challenging the privileged status of the established power when power parity is reached. Additionally, PTT assumes that once the first player expresses a desire for war, the second player will inevitably accept war as a *fait accompli*.

Indeed, it would be biased to assume that states readily accept war as an inevitable outcome without carefully assessing the potential costs and benefits. As Sun Tzu famously stated, "The art of war is of vital importance to the State. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected." In the context of power transition, a war between the two most powerful states in the region carries significant risks and consumes strategic resources and the lives of soldiers. It would be biased to assume that the two powers are inherently prone to taking such risks without considering potential consequences. There are at least three aspects that confirm the two powers' strategic conflict avoidance incentives and behaviours.

⁷² Giacomo Chiozza and Ajin Choi, "Guess Who Did What: Political Leaders and the Management of Territorial Disputes, 1950-1990," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (2003), pp. 251-78; Benjamin O. Fordham, "Strategic Conflict Avoidance and the Diversionary Use of Force," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2005), pp. 132-53; Brett Ashley Leeds and David R. Davis, "Domestic Political Vulnerability and International Disputes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 6 (1997), pp. 814-34; Alastair Smith, "Diversionary Foreign Policy in Democratic Systems," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (1996), pp. 133-53.

Firstly, the established power may opt to initiate preventive warfare against the rising power during the catching-up phase. Conversely, the rising power may seek to defer the conflict, hoping to gain more time for domestic development and improve its prospects of success. One approach for the rising power to accommodate the established power is by paying “racket fees” directly, such as surrendering benefits or ceding territories, while also actively contributing to the maintenance of the existing system. Additionally, alternative strategies exist to avoid confrontation between the two powers, which can be considered as a form of strategic conflict avoidance. For instance, balancing, whether through internal mobilization of resources or external alignment with other countries, allows the target state to reshape the relative power dynamics in its favour and deter potential aggressors. The two powers may also choose to direct their aggression toward a third country, reducing the risk of direct conflict while still asserting their interests and influence in the power transition game. Furthermore, context-specific factors may constrain the use of force by the two powers. For instance, regime type makes a difference, as Randall Schweller’s incorporation of democracy peace theory into PTT demonstrates. Schweller concludes that the two powers are more likely to mutually accommodate when they are both democracies, while “preventive war as a solution is exclusive to declining nondemocratic states.”⁷³

Japan serves as a paradigmatic illustration of employing mixed strategies for conflict avoidance. Firstly, as a rising power, Japan strategically prioritized the avoidance of war, redirecting its focus towards domestic development. The Meiji Restoration marked a pivotal period during which Japan steadily augmented its national power, concurrently aspiring to establish its position as *Rekkyo*, a member of the great power club. Notably, despite encountering circumstances that could have incited a military response, such as the Korean Crisis in 1873 and ongoing conflicts between Russian and Japanese settlers in Sakhalin, Tokyo exhibited restraint and refrained from resorting to war.⁷⁴ Secondly, when Japan engaged in its first major conflict, the target was China—a formidable yet declining imperial dynasty—rather than other traditional powers such as Russia. This choice was particularly notable given Russia’s continuous expansion of influence in Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula, coupled with efforts to reinforce control over several northern islands situated between Japan and Russia.

Thirdly, Japan predominantly relied on diplomatic means, negotiating with Western colonizers concerning their extra-territorial privileges in Japan. A significant breakthrough was the signing of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902, wherein Britain sought Japan’s assistance to deter Russia’s expansion in the Far East. The alliance was underpinned by geostrategic concerns, as a relatively declining Britain needed Japan’s assistance to curb Russia’s expansion in the Far East.⁷⁵ Historians also posit that the Japanese Army and Navy’s professionalism, efficacy, and contributions to joint military operations in the Siege of the International Legations in 1900 in Beijing, were duly acknowledged by Britain.⁷⁶ Eventually, the West certified Japan’s civilized status and sovereign equality when Japan defeated Russia in the Far East in 1904.⁷⁷

Another example is the British and French’s passive response to the rise of Nazi Germany before WWII. In other words, why did they not initiate preventive war against Germany

⁷³ Randall L. Schweller, “Domestic Structure and Preventive War: Are Democracies More Pacific?” *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1992), pp. 267–8; Lemke and Reed, “Regime Types and Status Quo Evaluations.”

⁷⁴ Marlene J. Mayo, “The Korean Crisis of 1873 and Early Meiji Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (1972), pp. 793–819.

⁷⁵ Zara S. Steiner, “Great Britain and the Creation of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance,” *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (1959), pp. 27–36.

⁷⁶ Ian Nish, “An Overview of Relations between China and Japan, 1895–1945,” *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 124 (1990), p. 602.

⁷⁷ Rotem Kowner, ed., *The Impact of the Russo-Japanese War* (Abingdon, London, and New York: Routledge, 2007); Robert B. Valliant, “The Selling of Japan. Japanese Manipulation of Western Opinion, 1900–1905,” *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (1974), pp. 415–38.

before it consolidated strength? Scholarly works highlight the role of different factors: there was prevalent pacifism among the elites and masses in Britain and France after WWI, coupled with a popular sense of “guilty” rooted in the beliefs that the Treaty of Versailles unfairly treated Germany and that Hitler’s military operations, such as restoring Germany’s control over Rhineland and Sudeten Czechoslovakia were “acceptable”;⁷⁸ the substantial German debt to British capital markets also influenced Britain’s appeasement in Rhineland Crises;⁷⁹ Britain leaders also believed that Germany’s rise was temporary, positing that a mere span of several years would suffice for Britain to rearm and rectify the prevailing balance of power;⁸⁰ the domestic economic problems and apprehension of being abandoned by Britain in case of military operations against Nazis weakened France’s will to intervene militarily.⁸¹ The complex interplay of these factors elucidates the nuanced reasons behind the passive stance adopted by Britain and France in the face of Nazi Germany’s growing power.

A follow-up question is when countries trapped in the scenario of power transition avoid rather than seek war. For instance, Joshua Shiffrin’s research examines the dynamics of cooperation between two powers when faced with pressing threats from a third country. He analyses the great powers’ reactions to the decline of Great Britain in the mid-to-late 1940s and the Soviet Union since the 1980s and categorized the rising power’s strategies towards a declining power into two types: the supportive strategy and the predatory strategies. Shiffrin concludes that the rising power’s choice of strategies depends on “(1) a declining state’s ability to assist a rising state against other great power challengers, and (2) the threat a declining state poses to a rising state in the process.”⁸² Additionally, democracy peace theory has been incorporated into the studies of PTT, arguing that democracies are less likely to fight wars, even if they are trapped in the scenario of power transition. This can be attributed to factors such as anti-war sentiment, a culture of pacifism, and the presence of checks and balances in political institutions,⁸³ although some critics provide counterexamples, where democratic publics have shown enthusiasm for the prospects of war and democratic leaders also initiate preventive wars to eliminate potential threats.⁸⁴

Recent studies on dyadic (dis)satisfaction also have significant implications for understanding the dynamics of power transition and the decision-making processes related to war. While changes in the global distribution of power can create instability and uncertainty, it is equally, if not more, important to consider (dis)satisfaction as a crucial variable in explaining the great power’s war decisions.⁸⁵ Researchers like DiCicco and Levy have highlighted that “It is likely that some states will be satisfied with the systemic status quo but dissatisfied with the status quo of a particular bilateral relationship.”⁸⁶ This perspective

⁷⁸ Sidney Aster, “‘Guilty Men’: The Case of Neville Chamberlain,” in Robert Boyce and Esmonde M. Robertson, eds., *Paths to War: New Essays on the Origins of the Second World War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), pp. 223–68.

⁷⁹ Neil Forbes, “London Banks, the German Standstill Agreements, and ‘Economic Appeasement’ in the 1930s,” *The Economic History Review*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (1987), pp. 571–87.

⁸⁰ Norrin M. Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, “The Preventive War That Never Happened: Britain, France, and the Rise of Germany in the 1930s,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2007), pp. 32–67; Norrin M. Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, “Wishful Thinking or Buying Time? The Logic of British Appeasement in the 1930s,” *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2008), pp. 148–81.

⁸¹ Stephen A. Schuker, “France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland, 1936,” *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1986), pp. 299–338.

⁸² Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*.

⁸³ Schweller, “Domestic Structure and Preventive War.”

⁸⁴ David Silbey, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War, 1914–1916* (London: Routledge, 2004); Jack S. Levy, “Preventive War and Democratic Politics: Presidential Address to the International Studies Association 1 March 2007, Chicago,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (2008), pp. 1–24.

⁸⁵ Benson, “Status Quo Preferences and Disputes Short of War”; Benson, “Dyadic Hostility and the Ties That Bind”; Sample, “Power, Wealth, and Satisfaction?”; Kim, “Power Parity, Alliance, Dissatisfaction, and Wars in East Asia, 1860–1993.”

⁸⁶ DiCicco and Levy, “Power Shifts and Problem Shifts,” p. 690.

has been further developed by other scholars who argue that satisfaction should be examined at multiple levels, including the systemic, regional, and dyadic levels. In particular, the clash of interests between the two powers plays a crucial role in generating dissatisfaction for the rising power with the existing status quo.⁸⁷ Power transitions involving two powers with territorial disputes or enduring rivalries marked by recurrent confrontations are more likely to end with war.⁸⁸

China and the US Incentives for Conflict Avoidance

The remainder of this section explores the policy implications for the Sino–US relationship, highlighting instances of strategic conflict avoidance despite escalating tensions between the two powers.

One notable example is the visit of Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the US House of Representatives, to Taiwan on 2–3 August 2022. This visit sparked concerns from Chinese officials, who viewed it as an unprecedented provocation by the US government and an attempt to undermine the long-standing one-China policy, established as a foundational agreement between the two countries since the 1970s. Prior to the visit, President Xi Jinping engaged in a conversation with President Joe Biden, urging him to prevent Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. The Defence Department, the Indo-Pacific Command, and White House national security officials also outlined the risks associated with the visit. According to President Biden, the military “thinks it's not a good idea right now [to visit Taiwan].”⁸⁹ Although Pelosi still chose to proceed with the trip, the previsit strategic communication between China and the USA suggests that both Beijing and Washington sought to prevent miscalculation and avoid escalation into a militarized conflict. In addition to Pelosi's visit, the trade agreement signed in January 2020 also showed Beijing's willingness to accommodate American interests in bilateral trade. Furthermore, when a Chinese balloon inadvertently entered American airspace in January 2023, leading to a diplomatic standoff, Secretary of State Blinken visited Beijing in June to ensure that “the relationship does not veer into conflict.”⁹⁰

A careful analysis of key factors in Sino–US relations reveals both reasons for cautious optimism and grounds for pessimism. One reason for optimism is that China and the USA lack ideological conflicts, like those witnessed during the Cold War, wherein the Soviet Union aimed to prompt communism, posing a fundamental threat to capitalism. However, the great power competition increasingly portrays a clash between authoritarian and democratic regimes. China's political and economic systems challenge the universal applicability of democratic principles and test their efficacy in the Western context. This ideological divergence adds complexity to the relationship. While China and the USA have no territorial disputes, China has ongoing territorial disagreements with America's regional allies and security partners, including Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, India, and Vietnam. Beijing considers America's involvement in these disputes as interference in China's domestic affairs, whereas Washington seeks to honour its commitment to its regional allies and maintain a firm stance against Chinese aggression.

⁸⁷ Beckley, “Conditional Convergence and the Rise of China”; Benson, “Dyadic Hostility and the Ties That Bind”; Sample, “Power, Wealth, and Satisfaction.”

⁸⁸ Sample, “Power, Wealth, and Satisfaction”; Gary Goertz and Paul F. Diehl, “Enduring Rivalries: Theoretical Constructs and Empirical Patterns,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (1993), pp. 147–71.

⁸⁹ Yasmeen Abutaleb and Tyler Pager, “Chinese Leader Asked Biden to Prevent Pelosi from Visiting Taiwan,” *Washington Post*, 20 August 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/08/20/nancy-pelosi-biden-taiwan/>; Demetri Sevastopulo, “Joe Biden says Pentagon does not Support Nancy Pelosi Visit to Taiwan,” *Financial Times*, 21 July 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/84d06d4b-1888-4149-88f3-abe48278e43b>.

⁹⁰ US Department of States, “Secretary Blinken's Visit to the People's Republic of China (PRC),” 26 April 2024, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-visit-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/#:~:text=The%20Secretary%20addressed%20the%20PRC's,consequences%20of%20PRC%20industrial%20overcapacity.>

The major dilemma lies in the shared desire to avoid a militarized conflict, yet their strategies have the potential to inadvertently trigger such a conflict. The USA is employing mixed strategies of internal and external balancing by rallying support from both the masses and elites through a firm stance on China, implementing structural reforms to enhance US competitiveness, and building international coalitions against China, while China is attempting to buy more time and postpone a conflict, focusing on domestic economic development, while simultaneously preparing for extreme scenarios that may involve conflicts with the West.⁹¹ However, this strategic dynamic can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of war. The spiral of misunderstandings, distrust, and rivalry can eventually escalate into a tit-for-tat clash between the two powers. For instance, Cathy Xu argues that the ongoing economic decoupling between China and the USA, marked by tariff and technology wars, stems from information and commitment problems, stemming from both sides' inability to effectively communicate their intentions.⁹²

Findings and Implications

The prevailing narrative often presents a simplistic view that the rising power and the established power are destined to become arch-enemies and will gradually slide into confrontation as the relative power balance reaches a certain threshold. However, this article challenges this narrative by scrutinizing three critical yet overlooked aspects foundational to policy discussions on power transitions and current Sino–US relations. These include (1) the regularity of the most war-prone moments in the course of power transition, (2) the established power's role in the rise of its challenger, and (3) the two powers' incentives for strategic conflict avoidance.

This article advances existing studies on PTT and enriches policy discussions on the contemporary Sino–US rivalry in several significant ways. Firstly, it challenges the notion of a predictable, most war-prone moment during power transitions by demonstrating that historical economic statistics do not substantiate such claims. The prevalent use of economic indicators to forecast these moments in the context of Sino–US relations is shown to be theoretically unfounded and misleading. Secondly, historical examples reveal that the established power can play supportive roles in the rise of its challenger—a counterintuitive phenomenon that has recurred throughout history. Shared commercial and security interests have historically facilitated cooperation between major powers, and were instrumental in bringing China and the USA together since the 1970s. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union and persistent trade imbalances gradually eroded this cooperation, steering the two nations towards increasing competition and confrontation. Lastly, it is imperative to acknowledge that both rising and established powers frequently have strong incentives to avoid warfare and strategically manage their disputes, given that conflicts involving the two most powerful states in a region—or globally—entail substantial risks and uncertainties for all involved. While both China and the USA exhibit incentives to avoid a catastrophic tit-for-tat militarised confrontation, the potential for a spiral of misperceptions presents a destabilizing and dangerous scenario.

This article suggests that future research endeavours should prioritize two aspects.

Firstly, incorporating neoclassical realism into the studies of power transition offers a more comprehensive synthesis. Neoclassical realism focuses on how states address potential or substantial external threats, which is central to PTT as well. While classical realism

⁹¹ Lingling Wei, "Xi Prepares China for 'Extreme' Scenarios, Including Conflict with the West," *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 June 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-xi-jinping-plays-up-possibility-of-worsening-tensions-with-the-west-aac2dff8>.

⁹² Cathy Xuanxuan Wu, "A Bargaining Theory of US–China Economic Rivalry: Differentiating the Trade and Technology Wars," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2024), pp. 323–45.

believes that states naturally balance against external threats, neoclassical realism highlights states' varied responses. States may under-balance and fail to adequately address the external threats in domestic policymaking.⁹³ Additionally, they may be influenced by domestic politics and adopt strategies such as hedging, accommodation or bandwagoning, and passing the buck when possible.⁹⁴ This article, along with some other works examining the complexity of great powers' choices of strategies amid power transition, demonstrates that the two powers often deviate from the seemingly optimal policies prescribed by classical PTT. Bearing this in mind, PTT and its relevance to Sino-US relations can be tempered with a more nuanced understanding, moving beyond overly pessimistic prophecies.

Secondly, future research should adopt an evolutionary approach to examine PTT. In his book *World Politics*, Organski acknowledges that "The theories of this book, and the theory of the power transition, in particular, apply to the second period [the era of industrialization]...Period 3 [the era of post-industrialization] will require new theories." He further notes, "We are all bound by our own culture and our own experience, social scientists no less than other men."⁹⁵ An evolutionary approach to the studies of power transition should reflect the latest trends in great power politics in the 21st century. A particularly prominent phenomenon is the obsolescence of great power war, attributed to the mixed effects of nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, international institutions, the rise of pacifism worldwide, etc.⁹⁶ While existing studies have noticed that the strategic interactions between China and the USA will differ from the past, the theory of power transition has not evolved sufficiently to account for these changes. Future research should focus on developing an evolutionary theory of power transition that revitalizes PTT's explanatory power in a globalized and turbulent world.

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⁹³ Randall L. Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2004), pp. 159–201.

⁹⁴ Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *The Balance of Power in World History* (Hampshire, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Hunter S. Marston, "Navigating Great Power Competition: A Neoclassical Realist View of Hedging," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2024), pp. 29–63; Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1994), p. 72; Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁹⁵ Organski, *World Politics*, p. 307.

⁹⁶ See for example, Carl Kaysen, "Is War Obsolete? A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1990), pp. 42–64; Siniša Malešević, "Is War Becoming Obsolete? A Sociological Analysis," *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 62, No. 2_suppl (2014), pp. 65–86.