

# Bringing Balance to the Strategic Discourse on China's Rise

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## Introduction

“When you perceive a truth, look for a balancing truth,” Lord Acton once observed.<sup>1</sup> If the United States is going to properly understand—and wisely respond to—China’s rise, nothing is more needed than the prudent application of Acton’s dictum. The truth American pundits and policy makers are now perceiving is that China’s rise is not ephemeral: there is no imminent Chinese “collapse” or “crackup” and the nation is not about to democratize. Consequently, America’s era of unchallenged unipolarity has ended. This is all perfectly true; recognizing this truth is the necessary first step in thinking seriously about international politics in the twenty-first century.

The problem is that American discourse on China, as Michael Swaine has recently observed, is increasingly resembling the “paranoid style” described more than half a century ago by the historian Richard Hofstadter.<sup>2</sup> The tendency of this style is to begin with accepted facts and then shift to a much more radical position without ever justifying the leap. During the Cold War, the tendency—as John F. Kennedy observed in a 1963 address—was to note the Soviet Union’s vicious ideas and practices and then, making the jump, conclude that peace was “useless until the leaders of the Soviet Union adopt a more enlightened attitude.”<sup>3</sup> In the present instance, having decided China’s rise is real and that the nation has not been “socialized” to the extent desired by many, American elected officials, military officers, and civilian strategists now warn that the whole international order is threatened, that China wants to—or even, soon will—“dominate” East Asia, and that freedom and justice may be extinguished. The only thing that stands in the way of these grim outcomes is American power and resolve. Both must be boosted, we are told, to maintain America’s unipolarity and keep the “Rising Dragon” from burning down the benevolent structures that enable the current order.

It makes for a nice story—the unambiguous kind that is useful for winning votes, reassuring yourself of your own righteousness, and boosting military budgets. However, it is out of balance and, in some cases, borders on the paranoid. This article seeks to bring balance to the discussion. To do so, we challenge a series of assertions made by two respectable and influential figures: America’s Amba-

sador to South Korea, Admiral (Ret.) Harry B. Harris Jr.; and Aaron L. Friedberg, a professor at Princeton and former official in the George W. Bush administration. We then seek to bring balance to the discussion by reflecting on two ideas that have almost been pushed outside the realm of respectful discourse: first, the time has come—to put a twist on Dr. Strangelove—to stop worrying and love the balance of power, and second, we need to (once again) “make the world safe for diversity.” These two moves, we contend, are the most promising ways to preserve the most important elements of the existing international order that have benefited both China and the United States so much.

The essay proceeds by challenging the two great assumptions of contemporary discourse: that international peace is dependent on American primacy and that China is unambiguously seeking to undermine the existing international order. We then redirect the conversation to the salient features of contemporary international relations (nukes, norms, nationalism, defensive dominance, and globalization), arguing that these realities are more fundamental than any discussion about intentions. Finally, we outline an alternative: an emerging order regulated by balance and preserved by diversity.

### **Myths of the Reigning Hegemon**

One of the most repeated ideas in international affairs discourse today is that after World War II the United States created a “free and open international order” and that this order has been responsible for keeping the Indo-Pacific “largely peaceful” for the last 80 years.<sup>4</sup> China is then typically said to be promoting a vision “incompatible” with this order—something that should make us worry, as it may herald the return of violent power politics.<sup>5</sup> Michael Lind has summarized the perspective: “in my experience, most members of the U.S. foreign policy elite sincerely believe that the alternative to perpetual U.S. world domination is chaos and war.”<sup>6</sup>

It is indeed true that the years since World War II have been peaceful when compared with most of European history and that violence of all kinds has declined.<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon has been dubbed the “New Peace,” and the United States certainly played some role in bringing it about.<sup>8</sup> However, there is no consensus among scholars to what extent US actions—or more abstractly, the supposed “order”—contributed to the decline in war and violence. Existing academic explanations stress the role of nuclear weapons restraining states from major war;<sup>9</sup> the evolution of territorial norms (as well as regimes and institutions, like the United Nations);<sup>10</sup> the development of globalized markets and “trading states”;<sup>11</sup> the longer-term spread of reason, sympathy, and feminization alongside the rise of stronger states;<sup>12</sup> the settlement of territorial disputes after World War II,<sup>13</sup> the spread of democracies;<sup>14</sup> the declining utility of war as a rational instrument of

statecraft;<sup>15</sup> and hegemonic stability, which emphasizes (in its liberal form) how the United States helped create global institutions and shape norms<sup>16</sup> and (in its “realist” form) how US power has deterred or compelled rivals to behave.<sup>17</sup>

This is not the place to judge between the various explanations, but it should be clear that they are diverse and the overall explanation is likely multivariate. Only the realist version of hegemonic stability directly supports the narrative of the free and open international order. Christopher Fettweis has recently sought to test the theory by looking at the changing pattern of global peace/violence relative to US military spending, frequency of intervention, and selection of grand strategy across four presidential administrations (Bush Sr. to Obama). He found no relationship at all. “As it stands,” he concluded, “the only evidence we have regarding the relationship between US power and international stability suggests that the two are unrelated.”<sup>18</sup> If US officials and strategic pundits are going to claim that peace is dependent on an abstract *order* created *and maintained* by American power, they need to provide serious evidence for their claims. Until then, while we can be thankful that the United States contributed to postwar institutions like the United Nations, helped delegitimize colonialism, and did not abuse its power (as much) as many other states would have, policy makers and scholars should be highly skeptical of more sweeping claims.

Laying aside the question of how the New Peace came about, another oft repeated notion is that China is determined to undermine the contemporary international order, according to Friedberg, by corrupting, subverting, and exploiting it.<sup>19</sup> The proof for this claim is generally said to be China’s “militarization” of the South China Sea (SCS) through “salami-slicing” and “grey-zone tactics,”<sup>20</sup> and occasionally, a retired Chinese official or *Global Times* commentator is quoted as representative of China’s official (even if unarticulated) policy and intentions.

In the abstract, such claims are alarming—in context, and in balance, rather humdrum. In fact, the evidence of any Chinese intention to destroy, or even merely undermine and exploit, the current order is slight. China is certainly using its growing military power to defend its claims in the SCS and even—on occasion—to coerce its neighbors. It uses protectionist economic policies to boost the prospects of Chinese companies and reduce competition. It employs economic statecraft to serve its interests abroad. And it certainly is opposed to America’s policy of global democracy promotion. However, none of these positions fundamentally challenge the existing order, none of them radically depart from America’s own actions when it was a rising power in the nineteenth century, and none of them obviously surpass America’s own contemporary record of order subversion.

When the United States was a rising power, it took half of Mexico and considered taking the rest, it colonized the Philippines and Hawaii, and it unilaterally

seized the maritime choke points of the Caribbean (Puerto Rico and Cuba).<sup>21</sup> The United States used tariffs—which by 1857 averaged 20 percent<sup>22</sup> and by the end of the nineteenth century were “the highest import duties in the industrial world”<sup>23</sup>—to protect its industries. It stole intellectual property,<sup>24</sup> and it ideologically challenged the governments of the “Old World.” Today, despite no longer being a rising power, the United States has launched two disastrous invasions, tortured prisoners, and dispatches drone strikes at a whim with little international legal authority.<sup>25</sup> The point is not that two wrongs make a right; it is that international order is much more resilient than critics seem to realize,<sup>26</sup> and it is utopian to expect any rising Great Power to act in a way that uniformly satisfies one’s moral scruples, evolving, in Friedberg’s words, “into a mellow, satisfied, ‘responsible’ status quo power.”<sup>27</sup>

Friedberg or Harris might object that America’s rise took place in the context of a different order. This is perfectly true, but the more important point is that the long nineteenth century (1815–1914)—the era of America’s rise—was the first iteration of the New Peace.<sup>28</sup> The implication is that relative peace can and has coexisted with limited wars, property and territorial thefts, acts of coercion, and aggressive assertions of status. This does not mean any of these are desirable—they are not—but it shows that they need not be fatal to the system. Insofar as there is a lesson from that first period of relative peace, it is that Great Power confrontation is the one thing that is fatal. Accepting this does not mean capitulating in every instance, as implied by some,<sup>29</sup> but it does mean rediscovering the rules of Great Power competition<sup>30</sup> alongside the art of strategy.<sup>31</sup>

Focusing only on areas that China’s rise violates the scruples of the established powers, moreover, downplays the extent to which China, has, in fact, conformed to the existing order. As a RAND Corporation report published in 2018 concludes, China has been a supporter—albeit a conditional one—of the international order: “Since China undertook a policy of international engagement in the 1980s . . . the level and quality of its participation in the order rivals that of most other states.”<sup>32</sup> The way in which Xi Jinping, following his 2017 Davos speech in defense of globalization, has been heralded as the most prominent champion of international order and defender of globalization underscores the fact that there are different elements of this order, and that China supports many, if not most, of them. Even in places where China is supposedly “altering” the current order, Beijing tends to simultaneously affirm that order. China’s Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, for instance, actually mirrors existing structures, and China has intentionally copied elements and “best practices” of the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. China is playing the same game, even if it is seeking a bigger role within it.<sup>33</sup>



*Photo by US Mission Korea*

**Figure 1. Ambassador Harris.** Ambassador Harry Harris meets with South Korean prime minister Lee Nak-yeon, a former Korean Augmentation To the United States Army (KATUSA) soldier, at the Fifth Korea–US Alliance Forum. The Korea–US Alliance Foundation and the Korea Defense Veterans Association cohosted the forum in July 2019.

To the contrary—Admiral Harris declares—China has a “dream of hegemony in Asia,”<sup>34</sup> in which it seeks economically to draw the region’s states into a “China-centred Eurasian ‘co-prosperity sphere’”<sup>35</sup> and militarily to “dominate East Asia,” beginning with the SCS.<sup>36</sup> Such rhetoric has become the standard geopolitical interpretation of China’s rise.<sup>37</sup> The implication—usually left unstated—is alarming: if China were to succeed, it could use the region as a base “perhaps even to attack the United States itself.”<sup>38</sup> Alternatively, Ely Ratner declares, “uncontested Chinese dominance” to be the “biggest threat facing the United States . . . in Asia today.”<sup>39</sup>

Purveyors of the coming Chinese domination and/or hegemony rarely define their terms. The best they often manage is some dark reference to Nazi Germany, Imperial Germany, or Imperial Japan, as Friedberg does above with the phrase “co-prosperity sphere.” Hence we are often left with argument by aspersion, or—at best—by analogy, but reams of political science and cognitive science research have demonstrated how analogical reasoning typically is used as an alternative to serious thought and often, when left on its own, leads to poor decision making.<sup>40</sup> Balanced thinking about China’s rise has to do better than this.

China’s intentions and dreams entirely aside, the nature of contemporary international relations and the geopolitical realities of Asia and East Asia make “dominance” and “hegemony”—both taken in the sense of imperial or borderline-imperial control over other sovereign states and territories—impossible.<sup>41</sup> Nuclear weapons, norms, nationalism, defensive dominance, and globalization all tell a different story.<sup>42</sup>

Imperial dominance/hegemony, long a feature of states systems—from Hatti’s conquest of Mitanni in the mid-fourteenth century BCE in the Ancient Near East to Japan’s conquest of much of China and indeed Asia from 1937 to 1945—has ceased to be possible today among major states because of nuclear weapons, what Edward Luttwak calls “the irremovably extant court of appeal against an adverse verdict in the lower court of non-nuclear warfare.”<sup>43</sup> Of course, not all states have nuclear weapons—even though some, like Japan, could acquire them easily—but here the other features of the modern era intercede.

Since the World War II, a powerful norm against taking territory through force has developed,<sup>44</sup> and any state that dares violate this norm in a significant way risks delegitimization and sanctions. Territory is no longer available just for the taking, with “souls” to be redistributed as needed. Even were China to violate this norm, the only thing waiting for it would be a bloody and likely unsuccessful insurgency, because we live in an age of nationalism,<sup>45</sup> in which citizens will fight to defend their state from occupation, as the United States discovered in Vietnam and Iraq, and the Soviets found in Afghanistan.<sup>46</sup> One might respond that, despite this norm, Russia annexed Crimea anyway, while China continues to maintain its claims in the SCS even after the 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration dismissed notable elements of Beijing’s legal case. However, neither aberration undermines the larger point. Putin’s Russia—which seeks “controlled chaos,” sustains itself through energy and arms exports and dismisses globalization as an elite conspiracy<sup>47</sup>—has much less to lose economically and in the court of public opinion than China, whose successful rise depends on integration in the regional and global economy.<sup>48</sup> As for the SCS disputes, they have already hurt China’s reputation in the region, acting as a “curse” limiting the potential of China’s aspirations to lead the region.<sup>49</sup>

At the same time, the response to China’s assertiveness in the SCS has not been more drastic for the simple reason that the disputes are of limited importance—no states or peoples are at risk of being conquered—the result of the convoluted legacy of imperialism and World War II,<sup>50</sup> and have been handled by China recently with relative equanimity. The states of the region, including the various disputants, seem to recognize this in a way the United States does not, which explains why, despite the occasional episode of cheap talk, regional defense spending relative to GDP remains stable.<sup>51</sup>

Statistical data, internal Chinese documents, and interviews—in other words, the best open source evidence available—indicate China has acted assertively when it believed its resolve was in question, responding to other claimants’ perceived provocations (such as oil exploration or island fortification)<sup>52</sup> or the relative weakness of China’s own position though intense bursts of activity (such as land

reclamation in the Spratlys in 2013 to 2015) shaped by perceived closing windows of opportunity.<sup>53</sup> Even those who might disagree with this assessment should recognize that China actually used lethal action to secure its claims in 1974<sup>54</sup> and 1988,<sup>55</sup> and already—still in the era defined by Deng's call for China to keep a low profile<sup>56</sup>—was accused of using “slicing of the salami tactics” in response to its 1995 occupation of Mischief Reef.<sup>57</sup> That the dispute has been conducted with no, or minimal, lethal violence since—despite China's increasingly strong military position—is a development that likely signifies China's interest in limiting the strength of the SCS's curse.

The geography of East Asia, furthermore, is a “tough neighborhood for hegemons,” as US Naval War College professor James Holmes has remarked.<sup>58</sup> These seas do not have any dominant features that would make strong naval outposts. Moreover, in the event of a regional war, defensive strategies and tactics today have a decisive advantage: China's “base” on Fiery Cross Reef could easily be turned into a literal fiery cross by over-the-horizon use of precision-guided munitions, which are becoming increasingly cheap and prevalent.<sup>59</sup> Lt Gen Kenneth McKenzie (US Marine Corps), director of the Joint Staff, has recently said as much.<sup>60</sup> Detailed strategic analyses going back 70 years have judged control of the islets to be a “minor” issue absent overall sea control.<sup>61</sup> However, this is precisely what the islets make difficult today, for their true potential is as platforms for small units of soldiers armed with antiship cruise missiles and anti-air launchers. A recent RAND study suggested that a network of ground-launched systems could potentially shut the entire SCS down in a contingency.<sup>62</sup> China is likely to acquire this antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD) capability in the SCS, but the key point is that other claimants can too.<sup>63</sup> In other words, the geostrategic situation is one where balance, not dominance, is the favored outcome.

What about economic hegemony and coercion? The evidence here is still developing, but so far, as Robert Ross has recently argued with special reference to Malaysia, Singapore, and Australia, “China's rising asymmetric economic power does not generate strategic accommodation by East Asia's economically dependent small states.”<sup>64</sup> The reason for this is, according to Ross, that economic power just is not very fungible, while the regional economic order, in which the United States is heavily invested, remains bipolar. As Luttwak argued now seven years ago, it is “inevitable” that states will hedge their economic bets.<sup>65</sup> This is a natural response, and globalization facilitates it.

So, what then of the alarming predictions of coming Chinese dominance? There is no reason to give serious credence to such projections, even if the Chinese government did “dream of hegemony,” an assertion that itself remains unproven.

The nature of contemporary international relations and the geopolitics of East Asia make any such outcome singularly implausible.

In sum, there is little reason to believe that the New Peace is dependent on American dominance, that such peace is threatened by China's rise, or that China is a uniquely disruptive state. To the contrary, China has conformed—and is conforming—to the international order in its most important aspects and in a manner at least as convincing as the United States a century ago; even if China were to seek to dominate East or Southeast Asia through territorial conquest or economic coercion, the almost certain outcome—the result of nationalism, defensive dominance, norms, and globalization—would be a grotesque fiasco. That being said, China clearly has its own interests, some of which diverge from the status quo; quite naturally, it is pursuing them. Can these be restrained and checked without provoking a new Cold War or a quest for dominance?

### **The Alternative: Balance, not Dominance**

Both Harris and Friedberg clearly believe the United States needs to work to maintain a favorable balance of power. A *favorable balance of power* is, in fact, no balance at all; the phrase is newspeak for ensuring there is *not* a balance of power. Instead, Harris and Friedberg, and other such analysts, insist the United States should maintain predominance, supremacy, hegemony, leadership, unipolarity, and so forth. For these analysts, a *balance* of power is highly undesirable and perhaps even *unimaginable*. Thus, the title of Friedberg's book: *A Contest for Supremacy*.<sup>66</sup>

In fact, the supremacy perspective ignores much of what we know about states systems. During the long nineteenth century (1815–1914), for instance, Europe's powers were able to experience a period of relative peace precisely because they accepted a balance of power in combination with a long-term systems perspective and a commitment to coexistence and cooperation.<sup>67</sup> By abandoning the quest for supremacy and settling their territorial disputes, these states facilitated the most peaceful era in all modern European history.<sup>68</sup>

A balance requires compromise and reciprocity: no longer will one state (the United States) get to dictate the terms. This will be a painful transition for a formerly unipolar power highly susceptible to nationalism and moralism in international relations.<sup>69</sup> In practice, as Michael Swaine, Hugh White, Patrick Porter, and Lyle Goldstein have all argued, this will require transitioning from a sea-control/offensive dominance model (exemplified by the AirSea Battle concept, now renamed Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons) to a sea-denial/defensive model based on mutual deterrence.<sup>70</sup> Along the way, understandings will have to be reached (or reiterated) over Taiwan; freedom of



navigation; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations; and the region's territorial disputes.<sup>71</sup>

Even as China's influence and military power continue to grow in East Asia, as they will, the United States can increasingly focus, as James Kurth has argued, on regional accommodation *and* global balancing, particularly in the Eastern Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region, where America has geographical advantages.<sup>72</sup> Even if Chinese power someday does become predominant in China's neighboring seas, American power will remain predominant in the great bodies of water to the East and West, allowing an equilibrium to be maintained and, if needed, a system of tit-for-tat deterrence established. This reality is recognized by the Pentagon's new branding of the *Asia-Pacific* as the *Indo-Pacific*: the game is larger than just East Asia, and it includes more than just two players. As Luttwak has commented, "Independent states will by all possible means resist losing their independence."<sup>73</sup> As the game progresses, the response of these states will be strongly influenced by perceptions of Chinese benignity.

Even as US strategy ought to be reoriented to a *balance* of power, US discourse needs to be transformed from the *ideological clash* model now fashionable—Harris, for example, tells us that "freedom and justice" depend on the United States maintaining its military superiority, while Friedberg insists that there can be no stable peace between those with ideological disagreements—to the *ideological diversity* model John F. Kennedy sought to promote after experiencing one of the most dangerous moments of the Cold War.<sup>74</sup> In 1963 at American University, he declared: "I speak of peace, therefore, as the necessary rational end of rational men. I realize that the pursuit of peace is not as dramatic as the pursuit of war—and frequently the words of the pursuer fall on deaf ears. But we have no more urgent task."<sup>75</sup> Practically, that meant seeking to resolve differences with the Soviet Union, and, when they could not be resolved, agreeing at least to "make the world safe for diversity."<sup>76</sup>

To be clear, our argument here is not that China represents a new form of benevolent superpower nor that the United States should refrain from standing up for its liberal-democratic values. The United States must continue to engage China on difficult issues, such as the country's record on human rights and the current imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.<sup>77</sup> However, it is not the case that states with ideological disagreements cannot live peacefully together. After Pres. Richard Nixon's rapprochement, the United States and China were on good terms during the Cold War; in the long nineteenth century, liberal Britain coexisted with authoritarian Russia and Prussia; in the seventeenth century, Catholic France joined with Protestant states to fight the (Catholic) states of the Holy Roman Empire. Examples could be multiplied, but the point is clear

enough: ideological rivals can find ways to live and cooperate when the incentives are right. And as JFK highlighted in his speech in 1963, never have we had stronger incentives than in an age of total war and nuclear weapons.

The question today is whether the United States—and the world—must suffer some catastrophe or near-catastrophe before its strategists and pundits are awoken to the imperatives of balance and diversity. Unfortunately, historical and theoretical evidence indicates that paradigms tend to continue operating long after they have been undermined.<sup>78</sup> Today, primacy—because it has served the United States well for a generation—has become a comfortable habit for the United States and its strategists.<sup>79</sup> However, as facts evolve, so must strategy. Abandoning this habit will not be easy. The first step in the process must be to recognize that peace and order are still possible without primacy. The second step is to begin thinking seriously about balance and diversity. Such steps are not those of the woolly-eyed peacenik but the hardheaded realist; together, they are needed to bring balance to contemporary strategic discourse on China's rise. 🌐

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