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THOUGHT GAMES ABOUT CHINA

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These books are about power transitions in the Western experience, and collectively they represent a good cross-section of the best mainstream scholarship about power transitions. However, when Japan, China, or non-Western cases are involved, it is almost exclusively in the context of the twentieth century and in relation to Western powers (e.g., Goddard, chapter 6). As a result, this is an awkward review to write. I am being asked to assess four books based not on what they tried to do, but on what they did not try to do: actually research China.

The insights thus are about what might be expected: if China acts "as if" it were an eighteenth-century European power, then we can expect it to behave like … an eighteenth-century European power. Yet in extending their findings to the current era, none of these books examine Chinese interests, perceptions, goals, identity, history, religion, culture, and philosophy—or even capabilities, domestic politics, or its economy—in any depth. None explore East Asia as a region and China's place in it. If identity, culture, and ideas, or even the domestic politics and business of a country, have even a marginal impact on the behavior and perceptions of actors in international politics—and a wide swath of the IR profession, along with MacDonald and Parent, Goddard, and Schake, clearly believes that they do—then we cannot expect the books under review to tell us much about China and power transitions. Rather, China and East Asia serve as empty vessels—as Rorschach tests—into which we can put whatever ideas, assumptions, fears, and guesses we wish.

This review will thus interrogate one central question: are the contours of power transitions universal? To answer this requires addressing two additional questions about power transitions specifically and how we research East Asia more generally. Are we all Westphalian now? And what does China want?

For arguments about power transitions to be widely applicable, states all around the globe would have to react the same way to changes in relative power. Yet changes in states' goals must also be opaque—it is the potential for unlimited appetite that drives fears during power transitions. Most IR scholars would probably assume that "yes," all states are Westphalian, and "no," we have no idea what China's aims are. Yet a closer examination of China and the East Asian region itself would likely yield the opposite answers: no, all states are not Westphalian beyond the most superficial elements; and

yes, we know exactly what China wants because they have been telling us quite clearly for decades.

RESEARCH "AS IF" CHINA WERE LIKE A EUROPEAN STATE

All four books lay out general theoretical claims about power transitions or international order and posit enduring realities of anarchic international politics. All four books use mostly European or Western cases to test their ideas, in particular the US–UK power transition of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. All four authors specifically delineate their scope conditions to include only "great powers," although only Shifrinson provides a definition of what constitutes a great power (Shifrinson p. 13; Goddard pp. 2–5; McDonald and Parent pp. 2–3; Schake p. 16–17). Two books emphasize structural conditions as causally most important (Shifrinson and MacDonald and Parent); two emphasize ideational factors (Goddard and Schake). To varying degrees, the four books under review devote a small portion of their conclusions to speculating about how their arguments might apply to China. Although some of these scholars are more optimistic than others, all point out that transitions and the predictions about possible outcomes are considerably more complex and contingent than is perhaps typically believed.

SHIFRINSON

Josh Shifrinson explores how rising powers approach declining powers, focusing on the US, Soviet Union, and Great Britain in the twentieth century (p. 4). He argues that rising powers adopt either predatory or supportive strategies with declining peers depending on circumstances. Shifrinson argues that structural reasons determine the strategy a rising power takes, such as the distribution of power, geography and political relationship, and the declining state's own military tools (p. 3). He writes that "like the concerns voiced in ancient Athens, pre-1914 Germany, and the late Cold War Soviet Union, worries that future rising states will prey on a waning United States are alive and well" (p. 4). In many ways, Shifrinson's book is a model of social science: well argued, logically constructed, with convincing historical evidence for the cases at hand. So the quibbles I raise here are largely peripheral to the argument made in the book, which is largely convincing within its own scope conditions.

From pages 182 to 186, Shifrinson discusses China and the United States, arguing that "although concerns with Chinese predation are well-founded, visions of a China wedded to pushing the United States into the dustbin of history are not … there is room for cautious optimism that the United States can at least prevent China from pursuing Relegation" (p. 183). He concludes that "the surest way for the United States to cap Chinese predation is to maintain as robust a military posture as possible" (p. 183). At first glance, this seems straightforward and reasonable. But, I would have liked Shifrinson to be a bit more precise. Upon reflection, I'm not sure that I understand what he means. Why are concerns of predation well-founded? What is the "dustbin of history"? In two of the three analogies used, the aim of both Germany and the USSR was clearly global—or at least regional—conquest. Does this mean Shifrinson thinks that China wants to invade and conquer the United States or Asia? If not, then what is the extent of Chinese military aims? If national survival is not at stake for the US,

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then why would a possible power transition worry the United States? Even if China's aims are to dominate the East Asian region militarily, does that affect US security and does that involve a power transition in any meaningful sense?

Given that Shifrinson thinks a robust military is the most important way to contain China, where is the line? Is the military minimally needed to deter a Chinese invasion of the US? Does the US need to do more than that, and deter a Chinese invasion of Vietnam and the Philippines? Or does Shifrinson have a maximalist view, wanting the US to be able to fight China over uninhabited rocks in the South China Sea, or perhaps to maintain total military superiority over China at all times, everywhere? In thinking about how declining powers confront rising ones, why begin with the military in the first place? Why not focus on regional or multilateral institutions, economic relations, or diplomacy? These are not truculent rhetorical questions; they are genuine questions that arise from taking seriously Shifrinson's argument.

GODDARD

Stacie Goddard focuses on ideational elements of power transition, most centrally on the claims rising powers make about their goals and ambitions, and how those claims are perceived by other great powers. Goddard argues that "great powers divine the intentions of their adversaries through their legitimation strategies, the ways in which rising powers justify their aims" (p. 2). Goddard's emphasis on the legitimation strategies of states, and how states understand each other's aims, is a key corrective to a literature on power transitions that often focuses solely on structural or material interests.

Like Shifrinson, Goddard devotes a small section of her conclusion (pp. 188–194) to discussing how her thesis might be applied to contemporary China. Goddard does not examine actual Chinese rhetoric, but instead cites some of the English-language secondary literature about Chinese rhetoric. Her section is thus more about how (mostly) American scholars have debated Chinese rhetoric, not about China itself. Like Shifrinson, Goddard sees a wide range of possible Chinese ambitions. But "since 2009, United States *perceptions* of China's intentions are changing; over the last decade the United States has started to see China as a more ambitious, revisionist power" (p. 189, emphasis in original). She argues that "China's own rhetoric has pushed the United States towards a new interpretation of its ambitions, especially its shift to the language of 'core interests' to justify its claim in the South China Seas" (p. 190). She does admit that this claim is debatable, pointing out that "it is worth noting, as Swaine argues, that there is no corroborating evidence that Chinese officials actually used 'core interests' to justify their actions in the South China Sea" (p. 192).

However, Goddard largely accepts the thesis that Chinese rhetoric has become more bellicose. She concludes that "China has flexibility to walk back its rhetoric, and its language on initiatives like the AIIB and One Belt, One Road has arguably remained consistent with liberal international norms" (p. 194). But this is a surprising conclusion: after noting that there is a debate about whether China used one particular phrase about one particular dispute, Goddard accepts as fact the "bellicose" argument and then extrapolates that conclusion to argue that China has clearly and unambiguously changed its rhetoric since 2009, and apparently across all issues areas.

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It is a bit difficult to review this book, because it is largely about how American scholars discuss Chinese rhetoric, not Chinese rhetoric itself. However there is some exciting recent scholarship that examines official and unofficial Chinese rhetoric as it relates to foreign policy. Alex Yu-Ting Lin (2019) for example, used automated text analysis to examine the topic and sentiment of over 8,000 statements made by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1978 to 2018. He found no change before or after 2009, which is a direct challenge to the argument that China became more assertive around 2009. Similarly, Erin Baggott Carter, Alastair Iain Johnston, and Kai Quek (2019) have examined "Chinese nationalists in their own words." Using original survey data from China, they found that when China initiates unilateral aggression towards Japan, feelings of patriotism disappear. They conclude that, "For the majority of Chinese society—including its most influential members, party members—nationalism in an international crisis scenario is conditional upon moral considerations." Taken together, this research shows that China is not solely focused on the US or other great powers and indeed cares deeply about its relations throughout the region, and that many supposed drivers of revisionist behavior are less prevalent than typically imagined.

MACDONALD AND PARENT

MacDonald and Parent write about how declining powers respond to a relative decline compared to other great powers. Examining sixteen cases of relative decline in the "great power pecking order" since 1870, they find that retrenchment is "by far the most common response" (p. 3). Defining retrenchment as "an intentional reduction in the overall cost of a state's foreign policy," they distinguish retrenchment from the more generic issue of reform. Retrenchment reduces commitments, lowers foreign policy goals, and attempts to "shift the burden to allies or dependencies" (p. 8). They argue that "relative decline causes prompt, proportionate retrenchment because states seek solvency … the depth of decline shapes not only how much a state retrenches, but also which policies it adopts … structural conditions are the most important factors shaping how great powers respond to relative decline" (p. 2). Relative rank and availability of allies being two of the most important.

MacDonald and Parent have written a powerful counterargument to the often-pessimistic views of power and hegemonic transitions. Their scholarship shows directly that domestic choices can be consequential for state behavior, and this reminds us that international relations is not as ineluctable and inevitable as sometimes portrayed. Although the majority of their book examines Britain, Russia, and France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in their conclusion (pp. 189–199), McDonald and Parent discuss US decline relative to China. They argue that "the United States has already adopted elements of retrenchment in anticipation … there are good grounds for optimism in the Sino-American transition" (p. 189). They focus on attempts to reduce the defense budget, changes in force structure, and attempts to increase burden sharing among allies. MacDonald and Parent write that "the Obama administration placed increasing weight on a reinvigorated NATO, more assertive Japanese Self Defense Forces, and regional partnerships with Australia, Singapore, and Thailand" (p. 193).

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In contrast to Schake, MacDonald and Parent view the Britain–America transition as grounds for optimism. They write that "if the United States uses the same firmness and flexibility that Britain did, even thorny issues can be kept in perspective and managed" (p. 197). This is an excellent book, full of fascinating insights and thoughtful research. But when assessing its implications for US–China relations, the focus is squarely on the United States, not China. As a result, this book has the feel of "one hand clapping" at least in respect to China itself. Although we learn much about the US, we learn little about China or the interactions between the US and China.

SCHAKE

Schake's book is about the US–UK transition in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Schake's book is a bracing read. She writes beautifully, and the argument brims with important detail and careful historical scholarship. Schake's emphasis on the values, norms, ideas, and domestic politics that made the US unique among the European powers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is important for reminding us that international relations is not simply about structure and relative power.

Schake describes the Britain–American transition as the "only peaceful transition between global hegemons since the nation-state era came into being" (p. 2). Schake never tells us what all those other unpeaceful hegemonic transitions were, but I would suppose they are all from European history. Schake gives us a number of reasons why she believes the US–UK transition was different from all the other (European) transitions. Yet the US and UK were also clearly states in the European mold, and they shared many traits with the other European great powers; I'm not sure why we can extrapolate anything about China today.

Schake, however, argues that an examination of this US–UK transition bodes poorly for the US and China: "the experience of the passage from British to American hegemony suggests that a peaceful transition from American to Chinese hegemony is highly unlikely" (p. 3). But Schake's analysis leads me to very different conclusions: that the European Great Powers are much more than simply "states," and their behavior depended on much more than power transitions by states in anarchy.

When we talk about "Great Powers," Schake's book makes explicit that we assume slew of specific and unique conditions. Although Schake never formally defines or identifies the general properties of what comprised a Great Power, she argues that a peaceful US–UK transition "was a highly contingent outcome, even between two countries with significant commonalities in history, philosophy, and language. It depended on the convergence of their foreign and domestic practices, the timing of domestic change, the alliance of continental European countries, technological innovation disrupting military advantage, the occurrence of international crises, and a lack of democratization in other countries." If this is the case, and China is totally different from these Western great powers, then why wouldn't that outcome be similarly contingent?

It is in Schake's book that the hidden assumptions of what comprises a Great Power become central to the analysis. As Schake rightly points out, "American foreign policy has always been grounded in the belief that the behavior of the traditional great powers was both morally and practically insufficient for American interests … [in Washington's time] there were no other countries like the United States, politically, culturally,

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and economically. Democratic Britain suggested states similarly constituted could have enduring similarity of interests" (p. 16). Again, I completely agree; but then what follows logically is that if China is not like those Great Powers, then we should have no reason to think it will behave like those old European Great Powers, either. Rather, we will have to examine China itself to see what its identity, aims, and goals are. If China is different from the European powers in terms of identity, values, and ideas, why would we conclude that China is going to behave just like those powers, and have the same goals, perceptions, and aims?

Schake spends a small portion of the conclusion (pp. 286–292) speculating about the future of US–China relations. She does not cite a single source from the extensive scholarly literature on China. For a book with such confidently pessimistic predictions about the dangers of a US–China transition, this is a little surprising. These few pages in the conclusion are devoted to a number of entirely plausible (to the American policymaking establishment) but totally unsupported claims: China engages in a "swaggering nationalism" (p. 286); China has an "increasingly combative military being primed with high-tech weaponry." (p. 286). "China clearly does want to change the rules—even as it benefits from them." (p. 288). Almost everyone in DC from both left and right will nod in agreement as they read Schake's assessment of China; but these are simply assertions that arise neither from her own account nor from a summary or evaluation of the most current scholarship.

After all, as former Singaporean ambassador to the United Nations Kishore Mahbubani recently pointed out, "China is the only great power today that has not fired a single bullet across its borders in 30 years. By contrast, even under the peaceful American presidency of Barack Obama, the US dropped 26,000 bombs on seven countries in 2016" (Lee 2019). So if China is "swaggering" and "combative," how much more hyperbolic language would Schake need to describe the US military and the American worldview over the past three decades? In what ways does China want to change the rules? From the vantage point of 2019, it would appear that a plausible case could be made that the United states is doing as much or more damage to global political and economic institutions than China.

Furthermore, there is probative evidence that China plays by many of the rules of the international system. Economists Chad Brown and Douglas Irwin (2019) note that "China has complied with findings from the WTO surprisingly often," while David Welch and Kobi Logendrarajah (2019) of Waterloo University conclude that "China has been cooperating surprisingly well" with the 2016 ruling from the Tribunal in the Hague over the South China Sea dispute between China and the Philippines. Chin-hao Huang (2019) has surveyed ASEAN summit statements and Chinese behavior in the South China Sea from 2012–2018. Huang finds a positive relationship between ASEAN's summit statements that exhibit strong consensus on the South China Sea and China's restraint.

The degree to which China is playing by the rules and not changing them is hotly debated. There is clearly evidence that in some areas, China is working within global norms. A fair amount of research suggests that it is trying to maintain the free trade aspect of the global liberal order, yet shift other parts of it closer to its national interest, principally human rights and sovereignty issues. For example, Ted Piccone's (2018) Brookings report points out on how China and Russia are working together at the

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UNHCR to insert the right to economic prosperity into the list of human rights, so China can call itself a leading human rights defender.[1] Erin Baggott Carter and Brett Carter's (2019) chapter on Chinese propaganda narratives about international politics shows that China advances precisely these arguments: the global free trade order is important, but that the international order needs to downplay human rights and emphasize non-interventionism. Thus, there is a debate, but it is far from clear that China is necessarily any worse than other countries in this regard.

More importantly, if Schake is concerned about a Chinese bid for hegemony, why would she look at Great Britain and the US for lessons? Why not look at how China has acted when it was previously a hegemon for clues about how it might act again? Schake argues that "Dominant states hold their position by force as long as possible, and are eventually defeated by challengers in the form of a fresh rising power or a collection of lesser powers working together" (p. 1). Yet the end of Chinese hegemony in the nineteenth century did not occur like Schake claims occurred in European history. How much of the Qing collapse in the early twentieth century was due to internal factors such as the Taiping rebellion, and how much was due to external interference from the Western powers, is a matter of debate. But it is clear that roughly six centuries of Chinese hegemony in East Asia did not end the way Schake describes it.

I have gone over these books in detail because I want to make clear that they are wonderful books—deeply researched, clearly argued, with interesting theoretical contributions. This is serious scholarship. And, I want to point out that it is difficult to assess through the lens of what they conclude about China individually. Yet the value of reviewing these books comes not from their individual insights. Rather, it is the questions they raise collectively that makes this exercise both important and timely.

ARE WE ALL WESTPHALIAN NOW?

Taken as a group, the four books under review raise two key questions: are we all Westphalian now? That is, is China simply like all other Great Powers that arose out of the European historical context, to the point that we can unproblematically assume that all states are the same in the contemporary world? And second, what does China want? Do we know Chinese intentions and ambitions?

All four books assume the answer to the first question is yes and the answer to the second question is no. Yes, all states are Westphalian now and can be theorized in standard realist terms; and no, we have no idea what China's ambitions might be. Yet there is good reason to believe that the opposite might be the case. If China is not like other European states, and if we clearly know China's goals, then it is not clear that power transition is the most appropriate framework for understanding China today.

China is not a rising eighteenth-century European state competing desperately for power in a multipolar system. China is a massive and ancient country with an enduring civilizational influence. From the time of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), although Chinese power waxed and waned over the centuries, East Asia was a hegemonic system, not a multipolar balance of power system as existed in Europe. As MacKay (2016, 474) observes:

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TABLE 1 European and East Asian Share of World GDP, 1000–1820

	China	Western Europe	Japan
1000	22.68	6.90	2.63
1500	24.89	15.47	3.10
1600	28.98	17.11	2.90
1700	22.31	19.05	4.15
1820	32.96	20.39	2.99

Western Europe = Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, UK (12 W. Europe)
Data From: The Maddison Project (2013)

> For more than two millennia … a relatively consistent idea persisted of what Imperial China was or should be. When China was ascendant, as during the Han and Ming dynasties, this identity justified Chinese regional dominance. When China was in decline, it provided a source of aspiration. When foreigners occupied the country, as did the Mongols under the Yuan dynasty and the Manchus under the Qing dynasty, they justified their rule by claiming the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*) for themselves.

Every other political actor that emerged in the past two thousand years emerged within the reality or idea of Chinese power (Pines 2012). Korea, Japan, Vietnam, the peoples of the Central Asian steppe, the societies of Southeast Asia—all had to deal with China in some fashion and decide how best to organize their own societies and to manage their relations with the hegemon. The reality of Chinese power and Chinese ideas and debates about the proper role of government and state-society relations and the different ways to conduct foreign relations were a fact of life in East Asia. Surrounding peoples could choose to embrace or reject the idea and fact of China, but they had to engage it no matter what they chose.

Thus, even a cursory glance at East Asian history would reveal that the conditions for power transition almost never obtained in East Asian history. China was a hegemon and predominant through much of East Asian history, with virtually no other contender ever coming close to being a peer competitor of China in the past thousand years. China alone comprised 22.6 percent of the world's GDP and 22 percent of the world's population in 1000 CE, dwarfing Western Europe's shares (Table 1).

Compared to any European hegemon, Chinese hegemony in East Asia lasted much longer. Why not look at the far more long-enduring Chinese hegemony for clues about how China might behave while ascendant? Contrary to assumptions that the European experience of constant warfare and continuously rising and declining great powers is universal, East Asia shows a clearly different pattern of long-enduring hegemony. Over the centuries, China expanded in some directions but crafted enduringly stable relations with many countries, as well. As Dincecco and Wang (2018, 342) observe about China, "The most significant recurrent foreign attack threat came from Steppe nomads … external attack threats were unidirectional, reducing the emperor's vulnerability." Rarely does anyone ask, however, why these threats were unidirectional and arose mainly from nomads, rather than from powerful states such as Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Explaining how and why these historical patterns developed over time will likely provide better

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TABLE 2 Dynastic Changes and Their Causes in East Asia, 500–1900 CE

Country	Dynasty	Dates	Cause of fall	Internal or external
Korea	Koguryŏ	37 BCE–668 CE	Tang/Silla alliance and decade-long war	External
	Silla	57 BCE–907 CE	Aristocratic families, civil war, king was figurehead for last century. Koryŏ eventually conquered	Internal
	Koryŏ	907–1392	Yi Songgye rebelled	Internal
	Chosŏn	1392–1910	Japanese imperialism	External
Japan	Nara	710–794	Rebellion	Internal
	Heian	794–1185	Minamoto no Yoritomo seized power	Internal
	Kamakura Shogunate	1185–1333	Nitta Yoshisada, conquered them.	Internal
	Ashikaga Shogunate	1336–1573	Sengoku warring states era, Hideyoshi (2nd great unifer), Tokugawa (3rd great unifier)	Internal
	Tokugawa Shogunate	1600–1868	Meiji restoration	Internal
Vietnam	Lý	1009–1225	Trần Thủ Độ forced Lý Chiêu Hoàng to give the throne to Trần Cảnh.	Internal
	Tran	1225–1400	Hồ Quý Ly rebellion	Internal
	Hồ	1400–1406	Ming China intervened on behalf of Tran dynasty	External
	Later Lê	1428–1788	Mac rebellion	Internal
	Mac, Le, etc.	1527–1788	Many rival civil wars	Internal
	Nguyen	1802–1945	French imperialism	External (Western)
China	Tang	618–907	Zhu Wen rebellion	Internal
	Song	960–1279	Mongol invasions	External
	Yuan	1271–1368	Zhu Yuanzhang rebellion	Internal
	Ming	1368–1644	Li Zicheng rebellion	Internal
	Qing	1644–1912	Empress Dowager Longyu, Yuan Shikai and Sun Yat-sen	Internal

insight into China's priorities and how East Asia as a region dealt with China than looking at European history (Kang, Nguyen, Shaw, and Fu 2019).

Indeed, the fact that the historical East Asian system was hegemonic did not rule out the rise and fall of particular regimes. If they did not result from power transitions, then what was the cause? Table 2 provides an overview of the causes of the rise and fall of these dynasties. Strikingly, only three out of twenty dynastic transitions before the nineteenth century came as a result of war. Perhaps the biggest lesson to draw from East Asian history are the dangers of internal challenges rather than external threat (Kang and Ma 2017). Also notable is the startling longevity of these countries. In stark contrast to the European experience, there were centuries when most of these countries did not face

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existential threats from external powers. These four countries—recognizably the same countries today—spent centuries living with each other and interacting with each other, but only rarely fighting with each other. Turning to the question of Chinese intentions, and viewed through the lens of history, China is not a rising power with unknown aims and ambitions. It is a massive and ancient country that is returning to power and stability after a tumultuous century.

An obvious rejoinder is that all the world is Westphalian now, and China is interacting on a global, not regional scale, so even if the theory only applied in Europe at certain times in history, the theory is applicable today. As I argued long ago (Kang 2003, 67), "A century of chaos and change, and the increased influence of the rest of the world and in particular the United States, would lead one to conclude that a Chinese-led regional system would not look like its historical predecessor." However, states that developed over millennia in vastly different cultural and structural situations than those of Europe perhaps remain different today. There is a robust scholarship that argues that history does not end, and that the past continues to influence politics and society in the present. For example, Seo-hyun Park (2017, 12) uses the term "usable past" for the fact that states create and sustain collective identities and memories and that they join international orders that are not created on a blank canvas.

It is simply not possible to answer these questions without directly addressing the reality of China itself. The question is, how much of this "usable past" influences and informs China today, and how much has changed. Arguably, pre-Qing regimes were more similar to each other than to today's CCP, given the massive shocks of modernization, the leveling of traditional culture during the Cultural Revolution, and the transition to single party rule. Stated differently, is China still the same China? These shocks may have made China Westphalian, or they may have made China more like a standard autocratic single party regime. Perhaps most likely, China's behavior may be partially like other countries and partially a function of its own past (Perry 2008).

After all, few contemporary countries have survived over millennia as recognizably the same country as have those in East Asia. Few autocratic single party regimes can call upon the historical and cultural resources that the CCP can. Few countries are massive and centrally located in their regions. Directly researching what has changed and what China is like today would perhaps be a more useful starting point for explaining and predicting Chinese behavior and relations with the United States, rather than the generalizations the four authors reviewed here seek to make based on European historical experience.

Indeed, one of the most intense debates in the contemporary scholarly literature concerns whether China poses a threat to the contemporary Western liberal order (Acharya 2014). As Allan, Vucetic, and Hopf (2018, 839–869) summarize it: "how strong is the US-led Western hegemonic order and what is the likelihood that China can or will lead a successful counterhegemonic challenge?" If China is so different in its identity or goals that it is at best a partial member of the contemporary order, then it follows that it is not clear that China will follow behavioral patterns that only occurred within that order. But if China is completely Westphalian now, and the liberal international order is not simply Western—can China simultaneously be so different that is poses a fundamental threat to that same order?

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It is here that MacDonald and Parent, Schake, and Goddard, by focusing on domestic politics, political choices, and national interests and ideas and values, have provided us with all the elements of a truly insightful view of China. Schake's argument rests on a number of unique American traits. If she is right—that power transitions rest on a host of domestic contingencies—then we cannot predict what will happen without closely examining Chinese traits. But the logical conclusion is thus the opposite of what Schake and Goddard conclude: We have no reason to believe China will behave like a European rising power and fight a power transition war or claim hegemony like the US did. As Allan et al. (2018, 843) argue, "if hegemony is simply leadership of a rule-based order conditioned by elite beliefs, then in the abstract it can incorporate any rising power. But if hegemony is a thick phenomenon … then the substantive ideational content of the order, rather than its abstract form, is crucial."

China cannot simultaneously be unproblematically and completely Westernized and Westphalian, and yet also pose a fundamental challenge to that same Western, Westphalian order. There is insufficient room in this brief essay to adequately address the extent to which China's past affects its present. My point is that although it can be argued whether the most relevant characteristics of China today are its capabilities relative to other Great Powers, whether China's foreign policy is most centrally a function of its institutional makeup as an autocratic single party regime, or whether China's most relevant characteristics are its history, aims, or nationalism, much social science scholarship points in the direction of looking directly at China itself. Merely recognizing these debates means that it is not clear that power transition theory is the best lens to view China today, and it is not clear that power transition theory can be applied uncritically to contemporary US–China relations.

WHAT DOES CHINA WANT?

Perhaps a more perplexing aspect to these types of studies on contemporary China is the almost willful way in which many scholars do not research China itself. All four books under review begin with the assumption that a state's goals are almost completely unknowable. Indeed, a large swath of IR theory relies directly on the assumption that states' goals are opaque and indeed unknowable, while simultaneously ascribing particular objectives to them, ranging from defensive to offensive realist aims.

A problem with applying many abstract IR theories to actual cases is that most theory is spare and assumes all states have little information about each other and approach each other *de novo* and in a "fog of uncertainty." In this case, scholars frequently expect states to believe the worst about each other and to misperceive more generally. Indeed, much contemporary international relations theory is suffused with these pessimistic assumptions. The security dilemma, many variants of realism, and some applications of the bargaining theory of war are all examples of this. But these are simply assumptions, not empirical states of the world. Indeed, as Schultz and Goemans (forthcoming) recently argued, "historically states bargain within far more limited confines defined by well-bounded claims … the size of claims is weakly related to the relative power of disputants and unaffected by dramatic changes in power, and smaller claims are associated with a higher probability that the challenger will receive any concession."

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The reality is that most countries have limited aims and good information about each other. And, most countries do not plan based on worst-case, what-if assumptions. Bolivia is not preparing for a surprise attack from Chile "just in case," while the United Kingdom and Germany are not arming based on worst-case, "just wait" possibilities of a third European war. In the case of East Asia, theories based on worst case assumptions and just-in-case expectations lead to fears of East Asian instability caused by China; but a closer look at the countries in the region leads to a different conclusion.

China is not a cipher upon which we need to endlessly speculate about what they want. China has clear and consistent priorities. Rooted in deep history and enduring relationships, China cares about Taiwan, the South China Sea, and residual border claims with India. It also deeply cares about its sovereign rights over various parts of China that the rest of the world has agreed are Chinese—Tibet and Xinjiang. As Taylor Fravel (2005, 46–83) noted years ago, China has resolved over 22,000 kilometers of borders. What China does *not* care about is invading and conquering Korea and Vietnam, much less Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and perhaps eventually the US. This is clear empirically, but we are so blinded by theory we ignore what is in front of us. Some might argue that the issue is not war, but rather the possibility of China limiting US access to the region militarily, weakening alliances, and creating economic dependencies. But this is inconsistent: the four books in question—and indeed, the overwhelming majority of the power transition literature—see war as the big risk in power transitions (Organski and Kugler 1980, 42–45; DiCicco and Levy 1999, 682). It is inconsistent to then switch and argue that we are not concerned about war with China. If we are not concerned with war, then scholarship on power transitions loses much of its urgency and relevance.

And, China is probably unlikely to start a war. By many measures, the US is the revisionist power in East Asia, not China (Johnston 2003). On North Korea, it is the US that is trying to implement regime change, or at least upend the status quo—not China. It is the US that wants China to directly intervene in the affairs of a sovereign nation, and China that resists. One of the chief US frustrations with Chinese leaders has been that they do not pressure or interfere in North Korea more.

But this makes little logical sense: we want China to interfere in other countries when we want them to, and we don't want them to interfere when we don't want them to. A better explanation for Chinese behavior is that China has some issues it cares about and some issues it does not care about. Korea and China have successfully navigated a neighboring relationship since the seventh century CE. By 1034 CE, China and Korea had formally demarcated their border at the Yalu river, and that border has remained the same since that time. There is no evidence that China has any interest in invading or conquering Korea. And, neither North Koreans nor South Koreans treat China as if it did.

In fact, the Chinese intervened on the Korean peninsula in 1950 to defend what China deemed to be the legitimate Korean government, just as China had intervened three centuries earlier, during the 1592 Japanese invasion of Korea.[2] In both cases, Chinese troops were the only reason that Korea did not fall. In both cases, Chinese troops could easily have remained on the peninsula indefinitely, and Korea could have been incorporated into China proper with little effort. However, in both cases, Korea was clearly not

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Chinese, and Chinese military forces were withdrawn back to China proper within a few years of the end of the conflict.

There was no Chinese land grab in Korea in 1950, and nobody expects one now, either. By 1958, China had withdrawn all its troops back to its home country and has never sent troops back to the DPRK (Tian 2014). Since then, despite recurrent wishful claims that China has finally changed its mind about North Korea, China has continued to treat North Korea as a sovereign country and does not interfere nearly as much as some pundits argue it should.

Similar to Korea, Vietnam also does not view China as an existential military threat. When Vietnam and China normalized their relationship in 1991, the three remaining issues centered on territorial and maritime disputes. These included the overlapping claims to the Parcel and Spratly archipelagos, to water and continental shelf areas in the Gulf of Tonkin, and along the land border. By 1999, the two sides had signed the bilateral Land Border Treaty (陆地边界条约). In 2000, China and Vietnam signed the Agreement on the Demarcation of Waters, Exclusive Economic Zones and Continental Shelves in the Gulf of Tonkin (中越关于两国在北部湾领海、专属经济区和大陆架的划界协定), ratified by both parties in 2004.

What needs to be emphasized is that neither the disputed land border nor the Gulf of Tonkin were easier to solve compared to the current South China Sea. The disputed land border encompassed both mountainous terrain that is not easily accessible and the activities carried out by the local population and authorities that impinged on the borderline, which were further complicated by the 1979 invasion along the border lines between the Guangxi and Lang Son provinces (Thuy 2009, 6). The Gulf of Tonkin, on the other hand, involved problems such as how to define the nature of islands under UNCLOS, how to honor the Sino-French Agreement of 1887 that established the administrative control over the islands in the Gulf, as well as the issue of fishing. Nevertheless, despite the complexity, the two parties managed to settle the disputes through rounds of negotiations, which provide important references for solving the issues in the South China Sea. Vietnamese leaders clearly believe that their dispute with China is limited to the one well-known maritime issue that is already under negotiation. No matter how this dispute is ultimately resolved, there is no evidence that Vietnamese leaders fear that China will attempt to renegotiate either of the two sets of previous agreements.

Indeed, despite decades of Western predictions to the contrary, it is by now widely admitted that East Asian states are not forming a balancing coalition against China out of fear of its rise. As Robert Jervis (2019, 2) observed in 2019, "many observers thought that China's rise would call up a local counter-balancing coalition. These predictions did not come true, leading scholars to wonder whether balance of power theory was obsolete—or even wrong." East Asian states are showing few signs of responding militarily to China's growth. Over the past generation, there has been almost no significant response by major East Asian countries (Figure 1). While China dramatically increased its military spending over the past quarter century measured in constant terms, three decades of leaders in major neighboring countries have decided year after year not to contest that growth and not to prepare their militaries for war (Kang 2017, chapter 3).

In short, East Asian states show few signs of fear or of balancing against China. If they are not, it is difficult to sustain the argument that the US itself should be afraid. Moreover, there is voluminous evidence that China's goals are limited to the relatively few issues

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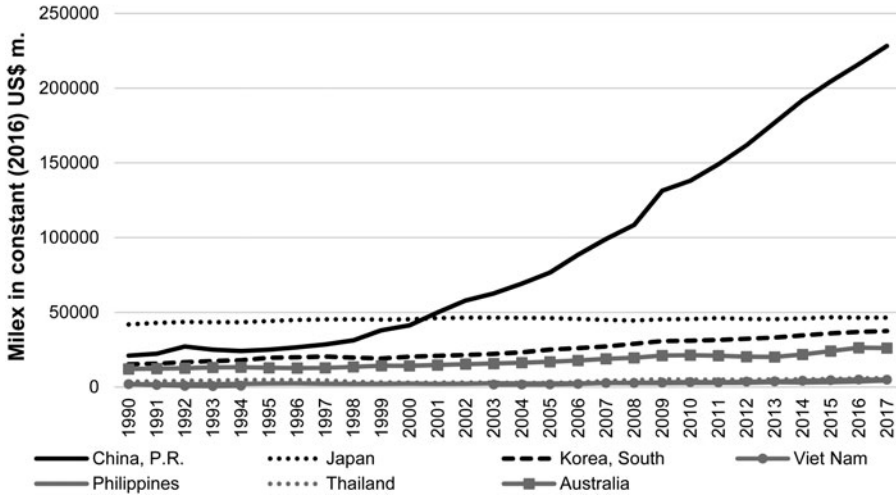
FIGURE 1 East Asian Defense Expenditures, 1990–2017 (Constant US$ 2016 m.)



Data From: SIPRI 2019.

that are well-known today and that its behavior has been less assertive than is commonly believed in US policymaking circles. Indeed, the best evidence that China's goals are well-known and limited is the response of China's neighbors, who have to live with China.

As to whether East Asian countries are simply sheltering under a US defense umbrella, there is evidence that they are not (Anders, Fariss, and Markowitz forthcoming). For example, a detailed study of defense spending in East Asia concluded that "U.S. allies and non-U.S. allies responded negatively to Chinese ME [military expenditures], indicative of a lack of perceived threat during the 1991–2015 period. This is especially surprising because China and some sample countries have territorial disputes" (George, Hou, and Sandler 2019).

CONCLUSION

An examination of East Asian history and the region today raises fundamental questions about the transportability and scope and boundary conditions of power transition theory. Most significantly, much contemporary social science would point to directly interrogating China itself for insights about whether its rise is destabilizing or not; rather than simply assuming that it would act like an eighteenth century European power. And indeed, I have provided probative evidence that China is not the threat that it is often assumed. While China and the US are sorting out their relationship, it is far from clear that a war of power transition is likely or even possible. As Ryan Griffiths (2016, 519–545) points out:

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> China's territorial claims are not based on claims over other sovereign states; or on key sections of their landmass. The existing territorial grid has already been determined through diplomacy, war, and the other practices, both fair and unfair, that shape international relations. Of course, conflicting claims over territory do exist on the margins of that grid—Taiwan being one of the most prominent … But these cases are limited in number, rooted in history, and not simply conjured whole cloth.

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NOTES

1. To be fair, it is precisely because of the lack of attention to economic rights that many Western scholars and activists criticize North Korea. Fahy (2019, chapter 2) points out that many scholars and activists have criticized North Korea because "access to food is a human right," while Noland (2013) has written extensively on "North Korea and the Right to Food."

2. The official Chinese name for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (조선민주주의인민공화국, Chosŏn Minjujuŭi Inmin Konghwaguk), is 朝鮮民主主义人民共和国. "Chosŏn" being the name of the dynasty that existed from 1392–1910 (朝鮮王朝). Up until diplomatic relations were formed between the PRC and ROK in 1992, the PRC viewed the southern regime as the illegitimate regime and referred to the Republic of Korea as "South Chosŏn," or 南朝鮮.

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