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THE AUTHORS RESPOND

Stacie Goddard

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Opportunities for dialogue between scholars who perceive of themselves as “international relations theorists” and those with area expertise are rare (in part, because those of us who lack regional expertise fear the consequences). For this reason, I’m grateful to the scholars who engaged with my work in this forum, all of whom are notable experts on China and contemporary power politics. Certainly any of us writing on great power politics and power transitions in current affairs—including those in this forum, alongside other scholars (e.g., Edelstein 2017; Murray 2018; Ward 2017; Goh 2013)—intend our work to say something about US–China relations. And while we accept our limitations as generalists, we do hope that our theoretical insights and comparative work is somewhat illuminating, even to those who know the China case far more deeply than we do.

To give a brief overview of my own work, *When Right Makes Might* asks why great powers accommodate, even facilitate, the rise of some challengers, while others are contained or confronted, even at the risk of war. What explains a great power’s strategic response to rising powers in the international system? The conventional wisdom suggests that a great power’s response to a rising power rests on how it perceives the challenger’s intentions (e.g., Glaser 1992, 2010; Kydd 1997b; 1997a; Schweller 1999). When a rising power has limited ambitions, it is unlikely to pose a threat, and great powers will choose to accommodate the new power’s rise. A rising power with revolutionary aims, in contrast, poses a significant threat, and thus great powers must do anything they can to check the emerging challenger, even if doing so risks war.

Less clear in the literature is how great powers know the intentions of rising challengers. How do great powers decide that they are certain enough about their potential adversaries’ ambitions to commit to a strategy of containment, confrontation, or accommodation? I argue that great powers divine the intentions of their adversaries through their legitimization strategies, specifically, the ways in which rising powers justify their aims. If a rising power can portray its ambitions as legitimate, it can make the case that, far from being a revolutionary power, it will use its power to preserve the prevailing status quo, making accommodation likely. In contrast, if a rising power’s claims are illegitimate—if they are inconsistent with existing international

rules and norms—then great powers will see its actions as threatening, and containment and confrontation will be likely.

All of this is pretty straightforward but, as I demonstrate through historical case studies of the United States, Prussia, Germany, and Japan, making legitimate appeals is not an easy process. Because rising powers must placate multiple audiences at home and abroad, they must engage in multivocal legitimization strategies—appeals that can be heard differently by different audiences. Moreover, legitimization strategies only resonate when the great power audience is institutionally vulnerable, when the great power believes the normative system it favors is under attack. Institutional vulnerability makes a great power more likely to listen to and accept a rising power's reasons for its aggression, to hear a rising power's reasons as a credible signal of limited and revolutionary aims.

While the substantive focus of the book is on rising power politics, then, the theoretical wager is that rhetoric really matters in international politics, that it shapes how states understand and react to their environment, even when the stakes are high. Talk, contrary to what much scholarship suggests, is not at all cheap.

In the conclusion of the book, I consider the implications of this argument for US–China relations, arguing that the uptick in tension between the United States and China after 2014 stemmed from both China's shift towards more nationalist rhetoric and an increased sense on the part of the United States that the liberal institutional order had become more vulnerable.

The reviewers raise a number of important points, and I cannot cover all of them in a brief reply. Here I focus on three—whether theories based in Eurocentric concepts and cases can be generalized to China; the role of nationalism in current US–China relations; and the need to think about power politics in the contemporary world from a “non-realist” perspective.

EUROCENTRISM AND GENERALIZABILITY

Increasingly scholars question the ability of international relations theorists to generalize across time and space and, more specifically, the wisdom of taking theories, often rooted in studies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European power politics, and projecting them onto contemporary US–China relations. David Kang is particularly adamant in his review about the limits of theory. He notes that the books reviewed in this forum focus primarily on European cases and questions whether these models apply to China which 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.”

Kang makes an extremely important point. One of the reasons constructivist theorizing can be useful is the premise that while there are generalizable processes at play—in my case, that legitimization processes occur across time and space—neither the *content* of those legitimization processes nor the *outcomes* are static; they instead hinge on social and historical context. As I note in the book, for example, the identity of a speaker affects whether they have the authority to make a particular claim. A rising power's history shapes whether and how its leaders can justify expansion.

While rhetorical contestation is constant, it is always shaped by time and place, identity and history.

Yet, while I agree that identity and history matter, it is less clear whether China's international relations can be reduced to its history as a hegemonic empire. After all, China has quite a bit of experience at this point playing contemporary power politics and, as Ian Johnston argues, is exceedingly adept at adapting to and strategically using international forums for *realpolitik* reasons (Johnston 2008). In constructivist terms, it thus may be that China has been socialized into a system informed by balance of power dynamics, with the dynamics themselves informed by the European experience. China would hardly be unique in this, even in East Asia: for example, scholars have long argued that nineteenth-century Japan demonstrates how states transform in response to their international social environment, strategically deploying norms and rules, even if this involves a shift in diplomatic practice. In other words, while states have their own unique trajectory, the globalization of diplomatic norms and rules may make theories of power politics more generalizable than Kang might suggest (e.g., Buzan and Lawson 2015).

NATIONALISM AND RHETORIC

One interesting commonality among the books reviewed here is that none of us believe that the outcome of power transitions is determined. None of us are persuaded by the “Thucydides Trap” (Allison 2017) —we see lots of cases of cooperation between rising and declining powers. At the same time, Ross and Zhang are right that my book ends on a note of concern, because I do see two disturbing trends in US–China rhetoric. The first is the rise of more nationalist discourse in China, particularly over the South China Seas. The second is a growing tendency of the US to view China through the narrative of “assertiveness,” as it becomes ever more insecure about its own liberal international order. The concern here, then, is that, caught in an institutionally vulnerable position, the United States might not only react, but overreact, to China's rhetoric in the South China Seas.

At the risk of sounding ambivalent, this is not to say conflict is set in stone. China, arguably, still has the flexibility in its rhetoric, and its language on initiatives like the AIIB and One Belt, One Road has arguably remained consistent with liberal international norms. Moreover, in the United States, the current administration has shown less interest in the liberal international order and might prove less likely to react to illiberal claims. But no doubt there are temptations on both sides to deploy more hardline rhetoric, with potentially dire consequences. Indeed, as Zhang notes in her review, while China's economic rise has been going on for decades, it is only recently that we see the US and China becoming entrenched in a trade war. As she writes, “this change might be explained by virtue of China's growing economic nationalism and the United States' own inward turn in domestic affairs in the Trump administration.” China stepped up its hardline rhetoric at the same moment the United States “felt increasingly vulnerable at home. That is, the norms surrounding liberal internationalism might be chipped away by populism both in the United States and abroad. It is in this context that we see a growing consensus.”

IDEATIONAL POWER POLITICS

Zhang's review, especially in the conclusion, notes that many of the works here try to push the study of power politics beyond the conventional analysis of economic or military competition. To be clear, all of the works here understand that economic and military power are key to great power politics.

But as Zhang notes, great power competition was never limited to material power; it is also a contest over the rules and norms of international order. Such was the case when Prussia challenged concert norms, or when European states watched the United States warily to see if it would mount an outright challenge to imperial orders. And analyzing US–China power politics, Zhang rightly notes, means seeing power politics broadly. It means analyzing, as she argues, “China’s current attempts to justify its behavior in the South China Sea, Belt and Road Initiative, and Huawei.” It means understanding that China’s power is as much tied to its growing economic and institutional networks, ties that are giving it new resources to legitimate its foreign policy.

Given the cost of great power war, power shifts between the United States and China are unlikely to end in war (at least intentionally); and that is a major concession to the critics. But expanding our concept of *realpolitik* will give us more potent tools to analyze how the competition is likely to play out over the next several decades. Put differently, if the United States and China come to see each other as rivals, each constructing their own legitimate orders, then this has significant costs—akin to those one might face in wartime—as well. It will further fragment the trading system into regions. It will undercut any effort to regulate cybertechnology on a global scale. It will likely lead to competition over military technology and artificial intelligence more broadly. Even without war, the costs of seeing each other as illegitimate are high indeed.

Stacie Goddard is Professor of Political Science at Wellesley College, and Faculty Director of the Madeleine Korbelt Albricht Institute for Global Affairs.

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Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent

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How do great powers respond to decline? Do they tend to embrace policies that raise the risk of war with rising challengers? These were the core questions that we set out to answer in our book *Twilight of the Titans*. We focused on these questions because there is a growing consensus among many policymakers and pundits that shifts in relative power are particularly perilous. In an influential 2015 *Atlantic Monthly* article, for example, the political scientist Graham Allison argued that “war between the United States and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than recognized at the moment. Indeed, judging by the historical record, war is more likely than not” (Allison 2015; 2017). In 2017, Allison reportedly briefed these findings, which are derived from his accounting of sixteen historical power transitions, to Trump’s National Security Council (Crowley 2017). For better or worse, academic arguments about rising and falling powers are helping to shape contemporary Sino-American relations.

Probably for worse, because the marquee finding in our book is that power transition theory is wrong. Ordinal transitions between rising and declining powers tend to be less—rather than more—conflict prone. The main reason why this is the case is because great powers tend to respond to decline not by lashing out against their rising rivals, but by adopting policies of strategic retrenchment. These policies do not always work, and different structural conditions can make it easier or harder for declining powers to use retrenchment to effectively manage decline. Yet to the extent that hawks in the United States are drawing on power transition theory to advocate for “confronting” a rising China or for a strategy of “great power competition,” these policy recommendations are based on flimsy intellectual foundations.

We appreciate the care with which all three of the reviewers have engaged with the arguments and evidence we present in our book. All three seem to accept the basic conclusion: that the impending Sino-American power transition may be turbulent, but that conflict is less likely than not. Yet there are some important areas of dispute. One concerns what the chief source of grand strategy is and how that will affect great power relations. Along with Robert Ross, we tend to rely on structural material factors, while David Kang and Ketian Zhang rely more on domestic and/or non-material factors. The other concerns how conflictual the rise of China will be. Ironically, although we tend to share Ross’s analytical focus on systemic factors, we reach a much more optimistic