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BEYOND THEORETICAL DETERMINISM: EXPLORING THE COMPLEXITY OF POWER TRANSITIONS

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The rise of China and its rapid emergence as a US peer competitor in the East Asian maritime balance has generated a wide-ranging debate in the United States over Chinese intentions and over US policy relating to a rising power (Bush and Hass 2019). Observers differ over whether the US should resist China's rise, accommodate its rise, or pursue a mixed strategy. They also differ over China's intentions, whether it possesses unlimited expansionist intentions or seeks peaceful change with limited aspirations. The outcome of this policy debate has the potential to shape US policy regarding China and East Asian countries for decades and to determine the prospects for regional stability and the extent of US China conflict and cooperation.

In this rapidly changing international and domestic context, we are fortunate that there is a growing body of political science and historical research on the dynamics and the factors affecting the varied outcomes of power transitions in history. This scholarship offers insightful contributions to the literature on great power relations and to our understanding of contemporary US–China relations.

The books reviewed in this symposium consider power transition dynamics from distinct and important theoretical perspectives that speak to both great power relations in general and to contemporary developments in US–China relations. *Twilight of the Titans*, by Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent, and *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, by Joshua Shifrinson, address power transition dynamics from a traditional security studies perspective, stressing the importance of material interests in policymaking. In contrast, *When Right Makes Might*, by Stacie Goddard, and *Safe Passage*, by Kori Schake, focus on the role of ideational variables in shaping great power policies during power-transitions.

These books also differ on their respective countries of analysis. Whereas prior research has tended to focus on the importance of power transitions in decisions to wage war, these volumes address alternative policy responses of rising and declining powers. Parent and MacDonald, Goddard, and Schake all focus on the status-quo power's response to decline, including its tendency to accommodate a rising power. Shifrinson, on the other hand, focuses on the rising power's treatment of the declining power, examining its readiness to allow the declining power to retain a role in great power politics. Combined, these distinct theoretical and analytical perspectives enable a sophisticated and theoretically informed

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consideration of the US–China power transition and the likelihood of a US–China power transition war.

THE US–CHINA POWER TRANSITION: TROUBLE AHEAD?

These books come at an important time in the US–China relations, as the distribution of power in East Asia has rapidly shifted. Increasingly, China's economic rise—under way for decades—is now transforming the military balance of power. As China has approached maritime parity with the United States in East Asia, power transition theories suggest that the prospect of heightened tensions, crises, and war has increased.

Over the past ten years, China has put to sea a large number of advanced ships equipped with sophisticated anti-ship cruise missiles. China's land-based missiles target US security partners throughout the region, neutralizing US war-time access to regional air and naval facilities. Modern Chinese aircraft and land-based surface-to-air missiles enable China to challenge US air operations in regional waters and enable Chinese air power projection far from China's coast. China has also deployed a wide array of satellites to enable improved communication and targeting (Congressional Research Service 2019). Moreover, China's technological advances in drone warfare, cyberwarfare, and artificial intelligence are also impressive, contributing to its own capabilities and challenging the war-time effectiveness of US communication and targeting technologies (Segal 2019).

For every rising power, there is a declining power, and China's growth has translated into a relative American decline. While China now operates approximately 350 ships, the US operates approximately 285 ships and its fleet is rapidly declining. Over the next 25 years, as China's fleet continues to grow, the US fleet will decline to approximately 237 ships (Congressional Budget Office 2015). Meanwhile, whereas China's defense budget increases at 7 percent per year and the PLA provides minimal benefits to its personnel and does not wage war, the US defense budget is flat, covers the costly salaries and benefits for its volunteer force, and funds distant wars and over 100 bases around the world. The United States continues to provide less funding for its navy than for its air force and army. And slow US GDP growth, the large federal deficit, and the large share of non-discretionary spending in the federal budget constrain increased defense spending.

These changes in the distribution of power are transforming East Asia's regional security order. South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia have all declared that they have no intention to side with the United States in the US–China competition; the region is gradually bandwagoning with rising China. Even Japan has begun to hedge against growing uncertainty over US resolve to balance the rise of China.

As China approaches parity with the United States in East Asia, power transition theory suggests that the prospect of heightened tensions, crises, and war is growing. China is a rising revisionist power; it seeks greater regional security by strengthening it naval capabilities to challenge US maritime dominance and to weaken US presence in countries on its maritime perimeter. The United States is a declining status-quo power; it strives to maintain its maritime dominance to constrain China's rise and to maintain its regional alliance system. The growing tension between these two approaches to regional affairs primes the system for conflict. As the gap in capabilities between the

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United States continues to close, how the United States and China respond to their respective shifting fortunes will determine the prospects for great power war and peace.

MATERIAL INTERESTS AND US AND CHINESE POLICY MAKING

There is significant security studies scholarship that argues that a declining power resists accommodation of a rising power and frequently resorts to preventive war to maintain its privileged position among the great powers (Levy 1987). MacDonald and Parent challenge this near-deterministic argument. Through comparative analysis of multiple case studies, they make the important observation that countries experiencing relative decline, rather than straining to maintain the strategic status quo or engaging in preventive war, frequently retrench. They argue that great power retrenchment is premised on neither trust nor fear, but rather reflects a realist effort to "rearm," thus enabling a later return to great power competition with greater resources and resolve to resist long-term decline.

From this perspective, it is not at all inevitable that the United States will respond to decline with a preventive war against China's rising naval capabilities. Rather, the United States, contending with an over over-extended military, significant budget constraints, and relatively slow economic growth, could opt to retrench to "put its house in order" to better compete with rising China and maximize long-term US security. MacDonald and Parent's research shows that in similar strategic circumstances multiple declining European powers from the 1870s through the 1920s pursued retrenchment, with varying degrees of commitment and success.

MacDonald and Parent identify two key variables that shape a great power's readiness to adopt retrenchment. First, they observe that a great power that enjoys preeminence finds it difficult to retrench. Second, they find that retrenchment is more likely when one or more allies are available—i.e., in multipolar systems, when a declining power can engage in buck passing to other great power(s) to contain a rising power while it rearms. In the absence of alliance options in a bipolar system, MacDonald and Parent observe that the declining power will be less inclined to retrench. Here, the absence of another power to help contain the rising power and the corresponding inability of the declining power to engage in buck-passing requires the declining power to rely on its own resources for security.

Applied to contemporary East Asia, these limiting conditions do not bode well for the likelihood of American retrenchment and its ability to avoid heightened competition (if not confrontation) with a rising China. First, since World War II the United States has not simply been the most powerful great power in maritime East Asia, it has been the only maritime power in East Asia. The US navy has exercised hegemony in a unipolar order in East Asia's internal seas: the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea. China's maritime rise now challenges the United States' status as the leading power in all of these theaters. Hence, the US may be less likely to retrench in the face of China's rise than other states contending in relatively symmetric great power competitions.

Second, the United States and China compete in what is effectively a bipolar system. Great powers compete in regional balances of power, not the global balance of power (Levy 1985).[1] Much as the Cold War was a US–Soviet competition over Europe that

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spread to other regions, the United States and China compete over the East Asian balance of power. In East Asia, only the United States and China are great powers. Russia's infrastructure and its military, economic and demographic presence in Northeast Asia are nearly non-existent. Japan's economic stagnation, demographic decline, and aging population render it a second-rank power. The gaps between Indian and Chinese economic growth, technology development, and military spending continues to expand, and India cannot contend with the Chinese navy in its coastal waters, much less compete in East Asia. Relative to China, Russia, Japan, and India are declining secondary states.

Accordingly, MacDonald and Parent's research suggests that US interest in retrenchment will be constrained by the absence of a third great power with which the United States could cooperate to offset US decline and contribute to balancing Chinese power. The United States thus cannot contemplate buck-passing as it considers whether to retrench to manage its domestic problems. Rather, as the only state that can balance China's rise, it may conclude that a prolonged heated competition, including racing, may be its only policy option, despite its strategic vulnerabilities. But as MacDonald and Parent show, declining great powers that do not retrench to rearm frequently encounter more rapid decline and a subsequent inability to recover great power status in the regional balance of power.

Like Parent and MacDonald, Shifrinson emphasizes the impact of security variables in shaping power transition dynamics. But rather than investigate the policies of the declining power and its management of its decline, he focuses on the policies of the rising power and its use of its increased capabilities towards the declining power. Shifrinson thus examines an understudied question in the power transition literature—what do rising states want from declining states? He asks under what conditions the rising power will adopt either belligerent policies to exacerbate the declining power's descent, including war, or more benign polices that endeavor to maintain the declining power's role in the regional balance of power.

Shifrinson identifies two independent variables that determine the rising power's policy choice. The first is whether the declining state retains significant military capabilities to influence regional security. The second variable—what he calls "strategic value" –reflects the importance of polarity in the rising states decision making. In a bipolar system, the declining state has no value in balancing a third great power, whereas in a multipolar regional system the rising power may see value in the declining state's potential contribution in balancing other great powers.

At one end of the spectrum, when a declining state's capabilities are weak in a bipolar system, the rising state tends to adopt predatory policies that aim to accelerate and deepen the declining state's descent, a state of affairs Shifrinson calls "relegation." At the other end of the spectrum, towards a weak state in a multipolar system in which the declining state can contribute to balancing, the rising power will attempt to "strengthen" the declining power's ability to retain its great power status. In between these two extremes, the rising power will adopt more moderate policies—neither intensely predatory nor supportive, but simply "bolstering" or "weakening."

In Shifrinson's framework, the key issue for US–China relations is how China, the rising power, will treat the United States, the declining power. Importantly, from the Chinese perspective, the United States will retain significant great power naval capabilities in a bipolar system, despite China's continued rise. Based on Shifrinson's

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understanding of the interaction of these two variables, China will not adopt predatory policies, but it will nonetheless adopt policies that seek to accelerate US decline, "weakening" policies. Thus, Shifrinson's analysis suggests that China will have minimal interest in moderating US–China competition. On the contrary, although it will avoid excessive risk of hostilities, it will adopt policies that aim to exacerbate US strategic vulnerabilities.

For the United States, Macdonald and Parent's analysis and Shifrinson's analysis combine to suggest an especially pessimistic outcome for US management of its decline. As the former preeminent power in an emerging bipolar system, the United States will resist retrenchment, thus depleting its resources against rising China power, just as China will adopt competitive policies to exacerbate US vulnerabilities and deepen its decline.

The authors' case studies are all well-researched and well-argued. But in their effort to develop multiple cases of power transitions, the authors have selected cases of great power competition that do not fall into the traditional category of power transitions, In particular, they do not focus on cases that scholars expect would create preventive war incentives for the declining power and lead to a hegemonic war. At the time of their respective decisions to retrench, none of MacDonald and Parent's declining powers faced an immediate concern for their survival; their condition is perhaps best characterized as "war weariness." The one exception is Great Britain's policy in 1908, as it faced the rise of German power, but in this case Parent and MacDonald omit attention to the source of British concern in the rise of German naval power. More important, they do not address the costly British effort to balance the rise of German naval power. Great Britain launched its first Dreadnaught in 1906 and its naval budget increased each year through the start of World War I; it should not be coded as a retrenching state.

Similarly, Shifrinson's cases studies focus on US and Soviet policy regarding declining Great Britain in the immediate aftermath of World War II, and on US policy towards the Soviet Union in the final years of the Cold War. But the incentive for the post-World War II rising powers to wage war against Great Britain was minimal; it was clear that Great Britain had lost all hope of retaining its status as a great power in the age of continental states. Shifrinson shows that US policy towards the declining Soviet Union was initially moderately and then intensely predatory, but there was minimal US incentive to use force against a declining Soviet Union. The Soviet Union needed no assistance in expediting its own decline, and nuclear weapons constrained any thought of US use of force.

There is also a European bias in these two volumes' case studies, in that all of the cases involve great power competition in Europe. The geopolitical characteristics of a region influence great power competition, and security dilemma dynamics in Europe are especially acute (Tunsjø 2018). The large number states in a small space, the close proximity of the great powers to each other, and the absence of effective geographic obstacles to power projection across land borders exacerbate threat perception and the difficulty of managing power transitions. In contrast, China's rise takes place in East Asia, where water, mountains, and deserts play dominant roles in mitigating great power tension. And the US–China competition is a naval competition in a maritime theater, so that the stakes are less than in a ground force war in Europe: loss of ships compared to loss of territory. Moreover, in contrast to the power transition among land wars in a continental theater, naval conflicts contribute to a defensive advantage and, thus, reduced

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incentives for preventive war (e.g., Blagden, Levy, and Thompson 2011). The importance of East Asia's geopolitics for the US–China power transition does not weaken the importance of the arguments, but it does require—as with other big IR theories—examination of the scope and limits of the theoretical logic.

IDEATIONAL VARIABLES AND THE COURSE OF POWER TRANSITIONS

Whereas MacDonald and Parent and Shifrinson focus on the effects of material security variables on power transition dynamics, Stacie Goddard and Kori Schake examine the impact of ideational variables on great politics and the preventive war incentives of a declining power. Their research contributes to the growing literature challenging claims that material capabilities are the primary drivers of threat perception and security policy. Goddard and Schake argue that a declining power's understanding of the rising power's intentions matter in policy making, and examine the factors affecting perceptions of benign or hostile intentions that can either ameliorate or exacerbate power transitions politics and the incentives for preventive war.

Goddard examines four cases of power transitions—two cases in which the rising power signaled benign intentions that contributed to the declining power's accommodating policies, and two cases in which the rising power signaled revisionist intentions and elicited hostility from the declining power. In each case, Goddard argues that a rising power's words are central to the course of power transitions. Power transitions are manageable when the rising power's "rhetoric" "legitimates" its aspirations for great power status within the existing international order's "norms and rules," thus ameliorating the status-quo state's threat perception and its incentive to adopt belligerent policies. On the other hand, a rising state's revisionist rhetoric can delegitimate its greater power and exacerbate the status-quo state's concern for the stability of the international order that serves its interests.

Goddard's cases of a declining power's moderation are instructive. When leaders' rhetoric signals conservative and restrained objectives, other powers adopted accommodationist policies. Hence, the US election of James Monroe as president was instrumental in British security policy in the decade following the Napoleonic Wars. Both Monroe and his predecessors pursued similarly expansionist policies in the Western Hemisphere. Yet, whereas since Jefferson, US presidents' rhetoric signaled American revolutionary opposition to the British-enforced "Atlantic order" and its rule-based free trade system, as well as unbridled US expansionism, Monroe's rhetoric expressed restraint and support for the norms of law, free trade, and non-interference. Monroe thus minimized British interest in containment and confrontation in response to US occupation of Florida and to the Monroe Doctrine. Similarly, Goddard argues that the European great powers accommodated Prussia's occupation of Schleswig-Holstein (1864), despite the likely implications for subsequent Prussian expansionism and the unification of Germany for the European balance of power. Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's legitimating rhetoric signaled that the Prussian occupation came in support of international agreements, including the 1852 Treaty of London, signaling that Prussia had limited, non-revolutionary aims.

On the other hand, Goddard argues that eventual European resistance to German expansionism prior to World War II and the emergence of US opposition to Japanese expansionism into China in the 1930s were reactions to changes in German and Japanese

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rhetoric, rather than to their military actions. Britain appeased Germany when Hitler's rhetoric allowed for uncertainty regarding German objectives and legitimated its expansionist aims within existing European institutions, including the Treaty of Versailles. But Great Britain embraced confrontation after 1938, when Hitler's rhetoric shifted to the language of domination and a "frontal attack" on British liberalism. Likewise, after accommodating a series of Japanese expansionist acts, the United States adopted confrontation and containment only after Manchurian crisis in 1931, when Japanese rhetoric shifted from support for the existing international order to nationalist rhetoric legitimating aggression and revolutionary intentions. Japanese rhetoric, rather than its actions, determined shaped US policy.

Goddard offers a well-researched and sophisticated analysis of the importance of rhetoric in international security affairs. Nonetheless, there is an unaddressed puzzle in the analysis. Goddard argues that both Monroe and Bismarck, for example, employed "multi-vocal" rhetorical strategies. In their domestic audiences, they appeased nationalist aspirations with expansionist rhetoric, but to their international audience they signaled moderation and conservative support for pre-existing institutions. But why did the status-quo powers respond to the rising power's self-serving rhetoric of moderation towards external audiences, rather than to its alarming rhetoric of expansionism presented to domestic audiences? After all, scholars have long suggested that rhetoric alone is generally inadequate to establish a state's commitment, suggesting the cause may lie elsewhere (Jervis 1970). Perhaps their material interest in appeasement, in buying time, persuaded the leaders to accentuate the rising power's moderate rhetoric to legitimate to their domestic audiences their own *a priori* interest in international stability. From the final years of the Napoleonic Wars through the early 1820s, Great Britain experienced a major recession and widespread protests against the government. Following MacDonald and Parent, perhaps British appeasement of the United States reflected pragmatic "retrenchment" in response to domestic economic and political instability. Similarly, British appeasement of Germany in the 1930s occurred during the Great Depression, when democratic politics deterred greater extraction of resources from the domestic economy to allow containment of German expansion. Perhaps Britain in this period also preferred retrenchment to rearming, "war later, rather than war now," to allow time for economic recovery and military preparations (Ripsman and Levy 2008; Layne 2008).

Schake's *Safe Passage* focuses on generating insights using the most well-known case of a peaceful power transition: the British accommodation of America's rise in the Western Hemisphere at the turn of the twentieth century. The literature on ideational variables in foreign policy frequently argues that a common Anglo-American identity enabled Great Britain to accept the United States' emergence as the hegemon in the Western hemisphere. This literature relies on a counterfactual argument—had there not been common values or a common identity, the transition would have conformed to the pattern of other power transitions, with greater confrontation and high likelihood of war (Owen 1994; Yongping 2006). Nonetheless, despite the importance of this case in the literature, Schake offers the first book-length treatment of this argument.

Schake's analysis presents the course of US challenges to British interests and the development of common political values from the Monroe Doctrine, through the Oregon boundary conflict, to the heightened conflict at the turn of the twentieth century over US challenges to Great Britain in the Caribbean. She argues that even as the US challenge

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grew, development of a mutual "affectionate regard" between two liberal democracies and a shared understanding of their distinctiveness compared to other countries was decisive in Britain's willingness to accommodate peacefully US hegemony in the Caribbean. "Shared values" was the critical variable in determining the peaceful power transition.

Schake's argument is important and provocative, but it is ultimately unconvincing. At root, the evidence and research are simply missing to support of her core assertions. The book lacks references to British archives or secondary archival-based scholarship to establish the importance of shared Anglo-American values as the key variable determining British decisions on war and peace. Indeed, in the volume's discussion of British aversion to war with the United States, there is scarce if any explanation of the source of its aversion. There are occasional references to British public opinion, but whether public opinion affected policy making is not investigated. Absent a careful analysis of what drove British policy, any number of alternate explanations might fit. Perhaps British aversion to war reflected shared values, but it may just as well have been core material concerns, such as British prioritization of domestic economic interests or an assessment that the interests at stake did not merit war (on Britain's retrenchment, see Friedberg 1987). Ultimately, in the absence of sustained research, the author cannot make the case that shared Anglo-American values were critical to the peaceful Anglo-American power transition.

Beyond the above conceptual and empirical questions with Goddard's and Schake's projects, the studies' treatments of the Anglo-American transition in particular also highlights an important question about case selection in the study of power transitions. Both Goddard and Schake assume that Great Britain's stake in its conflicts with the United States was commensurate with its stake in its conflicts with European great powers, thus allowing comparative analysis of the dynamics of power transitions. But it is significant that the US–British conflicts occurred in the Western Hemisphere—on the periphery of British security, but in the US "backyard"—in contrast to great power conflicts among the European powers that occurred on the borders of the great powers and that entailed mutual survival interests. In this respect, it is not evident that the Anglo-American conflicts can be coded as cases for examining the prospects for peaceful power transitions, insofar as power transition hegemonic wars take place in the theater in which the great powers reside, where their survival is at stake (Copeland 2000). As MacDonald and Parent argue, a great power will often reduce commitments in peripheral regions to address over-extension. and to allow focus on more pressing security interests in its home theater. Tensions and even hostilities in the periphery are thus best coded as the expected "friction" that takes place in international politics, rather than evidence of power transition-related conflict.

POWER TRANSITION THEORY AND THE RISE OF CHINA

As is *de rigeur* in contemporary theoretical treatments of power transitions, the authors of these volumes address the implications of their work for the dynamics of the US–China power transition. Taken together, they offer a mixed picture for America's ability to respond prudently to China rise and for the prospects for war and peace.

Again, MacDonald and Parent expect the United States to retrench in the face of China's rise. Yet, they do not consider the impact of two key variables that they argue have determined retrenchment in history: the prior position of the status-quo power in

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the international hierarchy and the polarity of the region of conflict. Their own theory suggests that prior US preeminence and the development of bipolarity in East Asia will actually make it difficult for the United States to exercise retrenchment. Moreover, their optimistic assessment that, since the Obama administration, the US is retrenching seems unwarranted. Escalating US efforts to contain China since the Obama administration, the Trump administration's launching of the US–China trade war, the United States' increasingly ideologically heavy rhetoric, and its ongoing prioritization of the US Army's budget over the navy's budget suggest US inability to retrench. Moreover, heightened US resistance to Russian naval and ground force activism in Europe and the Caucuses and its continued ground force deployments in the Middle East suggest US inability to rebalance US forces to East Asia. It would seem that MacDonald and Parent's theoretical argument and case study analyses and US policy trends merit a more pessimistic appraisal of US decline: that the United States will be one of those declining powers that does not retrench.

In contrast to MacDonald and Parent, Shifrinson offers a modestly optimistic appraisal of US security in East Asia. Consistent with his theory, he argues that China will not develop an intensely predatory policy against the United States, but will instead seek a more gradual, long-term weakening of relative US power. Although China will not require US balancing assistance against another great power in a multipolar region, the United States' ability to maintain robust air and naval power projection capabilities will continue to promote Chinese caution. Thus, in line with inferences drawn from MacDonald and Parent's theoretical framework and case study analyses, Shifrinson's analysis does not inspire confidence that the United States can forestall its decline.

Regarding Goddard's argument that moderate rhetoric can mitigate conflict associated with power transitions does not seem to apply to US–China relations. China's rhetoric over the past five years in support of a negotiated Code of Conduct for the South China Sea, an Asian regional free-trade agreement, the Paris agreement on climate change, the WTO liberal trade order, and the rule-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank all suggest a commitment to the post-World War II rules-based international order. Per Goddard's theory, one would expect that the US would be broadly reassured over Chinese intentions and adopt conciliatory policies (Medeiros 2019). Nonetheless, Chinese rhetoric has failed to moderate US interest in containing China's rise. On the contrary, the increasingly dominant American narrative holds that China's conservative rhetoric is simply an effort to legitimate its rise and to obscure the implications of its growing military and economic capabilities for its alleged ambitions for regional hegemony. China's maritime capabilities and its expanding influence in East Asia have trumped the weight of its rhetorical support for the global order in US policy making. Moreover, Goddard's case studies make clear that nationalist rhetoric in support of rising capabilities can exacerbate great power conflict. Given contemporary US diplomatic rhetoric and the rise of nationalism in China, there are ample grounds for pessimism regarding the prospects for US and Chinese policy moderation.

From Schake's perspective, the United States and China cannot depend on shared values and mutual affection based on common economic and political systems to promote a peaceful power transition. On the contrary. just as Goddard's analysis underlines that nationalism might intensify US–China competition, Schake rightly observes that the very different US and Chinese economic and political systems cannot provide

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the ideational foundation for a peaceful transition. On the contrary, it would seem that the absence of shared values could aggravate the significant mistrust generated by the security dilemma dynamics intrinsic to the power transition, thus contributing to an especially intense great power conflict.

Nonetheless, although this scholarship suggests that the United States may not be able to stem its decline and that the diplomatic and cultural basis for moderated conflict does not exist, there are grounds for some optimism for a peaceful transition. Most importantly, the US–China transition is taking place not in America's home region, but in distant East Asia. First, political change in East Asia is very important for US security, but it is relatively less import than political change in Europe was for the European powers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Similar to the implications of political change in the Western Hemisphere for British security in Europe during the Anglo-American power transition, the transition in East Asia is taking place in a region peripheral to US hemispheric security and in a region separated from the United States by a vast ocean. These geopolitical factors should enable the United States to accommodate more readily China's rise than European powers have been able to accommodate rising powers in Europe.

Second, relatedly, the stakes in the US–China power transition are also relatively less than the stakes in European power transitions. Although a naval war would be costly to their navies and their maritime security interests, neither country fears that a naval defeat will lead to occupation. Thus, should US–China naval hostilities occur, the tendency for escalation to a hegemonic war will be less than the tendency towards escalation to hegemonic war in European great power conflicts, including in the Cold War, when a defeat on the ground would imperil national survival.

As all of the books discussed here show, the outcome of any power transition is indeterminant; it is not determined simply by systemic variables (Mearsheimer 2001), but by a host of potentially influential domestic and international variables that can either exacerbate great power conflict or ameliorate the likelihood war. These recent publications address a wide range of factors that influence great power relations. They underscore that any analysis of great power relations, including US–China relations, that reduces explanation and prediction to a single variable cannot capture the complexity of power transitions, will fail to assess the likelihood of war and peace, and will contribute to poor policy choices.

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NOTE

1. MacDonald and Parent implicitly acknowledge this, insofar as in each case study their examination of polarity is limited to the European balance of power.

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STRATEGIES, SIGNALS, AND CONFLICT PROPENSITY: RISING STATES, DECLINING STATES, AND CONTEMPORARY US–CHINA RELATIONS

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Issues surrounding "power transitions"—the relationship between a rising state and a declining great power (often the hegemon)—are an important topic for both international

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