

Author's Response: **Will China and the United States Clash?**

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I appreciate the opportunity to respond to the reviews of my book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. I will not attempt to address all the important points raised by these reviewers, but instead will comment on four sets of issues that are pertinent to the application of the theory of offensive realism to U.S.-China relations: *domestic politics*, *international integration*, *cultural uniqueness*, and *engagement*.

Domestic Politics

There is no question that offensive realism simplifies reality for the purpose of coming up with a parsimonious explanation of great-power behavior. Most importantly, the theory largely ignores domestic politics and treats states as black boxes or billiard balls whose principal distinguishing characteristic is the amount of power they control.

Domestic politics are left out of the theory because I believe that, although informative, they do not tell us much about how great powers behave toward each other. That omission is controversial, as the reviews

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make clear. Whether this simplification is wise, however, depends on how much offensive realism explains great-power politics. Of course, the theory cannot explain everything and indeed there will be instances where the theory fails to explain cases it should be able to handle. That is the nature of social science. Nevertheless, I think Denny Roy is correct in saying that my theory "remains a useful set of principles for understanding much of major power politics in East Asia. Like any general theory, however, it must be augmented by familiarity with domestic and regional political forces."

International Integration

Some reviewers believe that China's continuing integration into the so-called international community is a possible cause for optimism regarding future U.S.-China relations. Richard Baum puts the point well: "A more fully engaged, thriving, globally interactive China is likely to be a more benign, trustful China." Maybe. But I would note that today the United States is active across the globe and is certainly also thriving; yet the rest of the world hardly views the world's only superpower as "benign" and "trustful."

Remember, the Bush administration announced in the fall of 2002 that the United States is the most powerful state on the face of the earth and that it intends to remain on top—in other words, challengers will be crushed. Few Americans objected to that pronouncement. The Bush administration also said that the United States had the right to launch preventive wars against any state that seriously threatened its interests. A few months later, the United States attacked Iraq—despite the opposition of China, France, Germany, and Russia. If a wealthy and engaged China emulates the United States, those two states are likely to clash often and fiercely.

Cultural Uniqueness

It is sometimes said that China historically has not acted according to the dictates of offensive realism. According to one reviewer, Beijing maintains that pursuing hegemony "would be inconsistent with China's

cultural background, commitment to a morally principled foreign policy, and sympathy for small countries." This point dovetails with yet another criticism that I have formulated "an essentially Western theory" whose conclusions are based mainly on "Euro-American" history. Moreover, the argument goes, China's leaders in recent years have pursued a "policy of accommodation" with the United States, not security competition.

Although there is a widespread belief that Confucianism has caused China, over its long and rich history, to behave much less aggressively than the European great powers, the facts tell a different story. Yuan-Kang Wang examined the behavior of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), and the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).¹ He found abundant evidence that these three dynasties and their Asian neighbors behaved just like the European great powers; in other words, they pursued power at each other's expense and when they had the capability to make a run at hegemony, they jumped at the opportunity.

There is no question that contemporary Chinese leaders have emphasized that they have no interest in pursuing hegemony in Asia and would like to cooperate, not compete, with the United States. But that strategy is currently being followed because today China is too weak to challenge America. As Richard Baum notes, "It is gratuitous (and perhaps more than a little disingenuous) for a weak country to proclaim its aversion to bullying others when it clearly lacks the power to do so."

The key issue is how China will behave if it ever has the power to challenge the United States and maybe dominate Asia the way that America dominates the Western Hemisphere. I believe that there are sound theoretical and historical reasons for believing that China will emulate the United States and pursue regional hegemony. I also think it is clear from both the historical record and recent pronouncements by the Bush administration that the United States will move aggressively to prevent China

¹Yuan-Kang Wang, "Power Politics of Confucian China" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, December 2001). Also see Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), which finds that Chinese behavior during the Ming Dynasty is consistent with the predictions of realism.

from dominating Asia. Time will tell whether these predictions are correct.

Engagement

A number of the reviewers argue that the United States should not contain, but rather attempt to engage, China. Engagement will presumably make China wealthy and therefore pacific because going to war would threaten its prosperity. Chinese leaders surely would not kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.

The main problem with an engagement policy is that it promises to greatly increase China's power while at the same time failing to provide a way to predict with confidence the intentions of future Chinese leaders. It may be the case that Beijing has benign intentions thirty years from now, but who can know China's intentions that far into the future? China in the year 2033 just might have aggressive leaders bent on pursuing expansionist policies. Meanwhile, by pursuing engagement, the United States will have helped China develop the material capabilities to make war and shift the balance of power in Beijing's favor.

Proponents of engagement cannot rule out that possibility because they have no way of knowing China's future intentions. Therefore, if the United States pursues engagement, it runs the risk of creating a deadly threat that would be difficult and costly to confront. Great powers usually do not run risks like that—which is why the United States is likely to opt for containment over engagement if China continues to grow economically.