

China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics

edited by Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng
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The rise of China has seeped into our everyday reality as we are flooded by China-made products—ranging from clothing and foods to electrical appliances—as well as media coverage on every conceivable aspect of the Middle Kingdom. We are also numbed by the fact that Sino-American relations will become commensurate with U.S.-Soviet relations during the Cold War era—i.e., the most crucial geostrategic variable in international politics. Viewed in this light, the publication of *China's Ascent* is a timely and welcome contribution to the ongoing debate on the implications and ramifications of the emergence of China, as either a “responsible stakeholder” or a hegemonic competitor.

This book, co-edited by American scholar Robert S. Ross and Chinese academic Zhu Feng, tackles the daunting question of the U.S.-China power transition and pertinent possibilities of international conflict in four parts. In Part One, three authors examine the contemporary global and East Asian structures of international relations and their effects on the U.S.-China power transition. Jack Levy, on the basis of European cases of power transition, concludes that a fatal flaw in

power transition theories concerns their failure to presuppose and understand multilevel struggles for power. Zhu Feng focuses on the U.S.-China transition of power within the context of a unipolar system, highlighting the constraints the United States imposes on China to limit the latter from challenging the U.S.-led system. Avery Goldstein investigates international factors and national attributes that are likely to affect China's rise and concludes that uncertainties loom large and some conflicts may be inevitable down the road.

In Part Two, the potential role of international and regional multilateral institutions in mitigating the sources of systemic instability is discussed in detail. John Ikenberry examines the role of global multilateral institutions and suggests that they can be effective in constraining U.S. unilateralism and lessening Chinese threat perceptions, thereby reducing the likelihood of Sino-American confrontation. Qin Yaqing and Wei Ling look at regional multilateral institutions in Asia and the implications of Chinese participation in them. They contend that for one, China is an engaged beneficiary of the current international order, and that for another, China and the United States can mitigate the inherent strategic competition between them by actively participating and cooperating in regional multilateral institutions.

Part Three deals with intricate state-level variables affecting China's ascent (i.e., intentions, ideas, and perceptions) and the process of U.S.-China power transition. Tang Shiping looks at the Chinese leadership's cognitive map and suggests that its appreciation of the security dilemma (i.e., "defensive realism") is a key to diluting the sources of U.S.-China strategic competition. Jeffrey Legro delves into an examination of the role that ideas have played in China's successive bids to become a great power since the 19th century. While Tang argues that neither ambition nor dissatisfaction is predetermined (i.e., they are more evolutionary in nature), Legro suggests that China's efforts resemble that of "purpose transitions." Yet Legro adds that America's China policy can be a key factor in integrating—rather than isolating or aggravating—

China into the international system with minimal friction since history has shown that outside influence, especially when it was multilateral, often worked well on China.

In Part Four, the issue of how other states are responding to the ascent of China is discussed in detail. More specifically, the modes of response by three states—South Korea, Japan and the United States—are analyzed. Kim Byungkook argues that South Korea's mode of response is to accommodate China's rise while Takahara Akio contends that Japan's *modus operandi* is to resist it. Two American scholars have somewhat contrasting views on the United States' response to China's ascent. Jonathan Kirshner is concerned about the economic impact of China's rise on Sino-American relations, and interestingly, points to the adverse effect of America's mismanagement of its own economy on U. S.-China relations. Robert J. Art argues that neither economic interdependence nor ideological competition is a good predictor of power transition wars. He further suggests that given the absence of "territorial" disputes (with the sole exception of Taiwan), future U.S.-China relations can, for the most part, be placed in a cautiously optimistic scenario.

The volume poses a fundamental question regarding the future direction of international politics of the 21st century: is China's rise destabilizing? The answer that all the contributors to this volume seem to share, though not without some variations in focus and emphasis, is (1) that China's ascent can be destabilizing but power transition wars are nevertheless not inevitable; and (2) that strategic competition between the United States and China will grow down the road but can and should be wisely managed by both.

To a considerable extent, it was perhaps natural that this volume came up with an optimistic projection for the future of United States' relations with a rising China. At least three reasons explain why this had to be the case. First, being a large-scale international collaborative research project, it must have been unavoidable for the editors to look for contributors with moderate or middle-of-the-road orientations. Second, if

the project had presupposed a conflict-oriented scenario for future Sino-American relations, it would not have gotten the support of the Ford Foundation (Beijing Office), and thus, would not have materialized in the first place. Third, much of the volume's contents is about the future—the uncertain and unknown future—for which no empirical findings can be available. In their absence, it is perhaps always desirable (i.e., politically correct) to be more optimistic than pessimistic.

Let the devil's advocate come in for a while here. First of all, the volume suggests that a peaceful power transition is possible. The flipside of this statement is that a peaceful power transition is not inevitable just like power transition wars are not unavoidable. Then, the key question is, under what conditions or circumstances is a peaceful power transition possible? Zhu argues that U.S. constraints on China may be effective. However, what he does not mention is the possibility that U.S. efforts to constrain China may indirectly—and increasingly directly—provoke Beijing's defensive instinct, thereby turning the Sino-American strategic game into a zero-sum one. Both Ikenberry and Qin contend that global and regional multilateral institutions do matter in mitigating the sources of strategic competition between the United States and China. Yet a crucial question remains as to whether these international institutions can really become superordinate to these superstates when push comes to shove. Rhetoric and ideals can be pretty at peacetime, but will they work even when there are bombs whizzing overhead?

Tang and Legro pay close attention to the issues of intentions, perceptions, and ideas. One can legitimately ask, however, if ambitions and intentions are not really predetermined. What, then, explains China's persistent aspiration to gaining great power status? Why is China hypersensitive to even the slightest insinuation of the erosion of state sovereignty? Why is someone like Wang Gungwu calling the current ascent of China "restoration" rather than "rise?" Let us bring in John Mearsheimer at this juncture. His argument is as follows: regardless of China's intentions and others' perceptions of them, China's rise is bound

to reduce the room for America's strategic maneuvering, first in Asia and then globally. Accordingly, Mearsheimer claims that competition between the two is unavoidable and that this competition may even lead to confrontation. This volume, however, does not appear to address this important argument effectively.

In contrast with the innovative efforts to frame China's rise against dynamic backdrops in Part Three, the chapters in Part Four are rather static. Kim's chapter appears overly critical of Roh Moo-hyun's external and China policy. The reviewer finds that a more balanced assessment on the matter will require a longer time frame. In fact, the utmost priority in South Korea's foreign policy is still the identification of and preparation for worst-case scenarios. Takahara's chapter is also somewhat sterile. It is similar to many earlier studies on Japan-China relations and lacks an innovative perspective on the possibilities of genuine change. Additionally, neither chapter offers much in terms of the implications of China's ascent for secondary and tertiary states in the global system.

For obvious reasons (i.e., that we humans cannot predict the future well), this volume does not deal with the most important current event—the global economic crisis. About twenty years from now, the ongoing crisis may be remembered as the most crucial turning point in the 21st century. In this respect, this volume does not seem to give sufficient attention to how external factors, which are usually unpredictable, come to shape the world we live in. Fareed Zakaria aptly characterized 19th-century America as “imperial understretch” (i.e., an empire in capacity but quite short of it in intention); China may be going through a similar process of incubation right now. A global economic crisis or other sudden, large-scale events may shorten that process, giving China the necessary boost to rise as a new competitor for hegemony. Such a possibility was not given adequate consideration in this volume.

One of the central themes that addresses the future trajectory of Sino-American relations concerns cultures, values and norms (i.e., “soft”

elements of national power or attraction): China's neighbors' attitude toward a rising China. In fact, scholars like David Kang and Amitav Acharya have debated over whether the Asia of the future will be as accommodating toward China, if not outright Sinocentric, as it was in traditional times. Admittedly, the so-called "Beijing Consensus" is as yet an empty category, but it is nevertheless both important and necessary for us to ask if China will become culturally acceptable or normatively appealing to most members of the East Asian community. The fact of the matter is that a "popularity race" or "soft-power competition" has already begun between Washington and Beijing.

Something else that is missing from the volume concerns the crucial issue of what East Asia can do for itself proactively. Considering the huge differences between Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia and the intra-regional variations even within ASEAN, optimism is not warranted in this regard. While it is undoubtedly important for Washington and Beijing to avoid being trapped into a vicious cycle of confrontation and escalation, East Asia must also come up with some strategic thinking of its own. For instance, whichever power that first preaches the "us or them" exclusivity is likely to lose more than gain since it will ipso facto constitute a greater threat to the region of East Asia. How East Asia can put this to its advantage is a daunting challenge.

Many earlier studies on the rise of China and its ramifications presented case studies of different countries' varied responses to China's ascent. This volume, in contrast, is more theoretical and offers much food for thought to anyone seriously interested in the future of global politics and regional dynamics in East Asia. The downside, of course, is that it is very difficult to gauge the empirical validity of many of the book's interesting observations.

In conclusion, this volume is useful not only to students of international and East Asian politics but also to practitioners interested in the future of the global order. It will be interesting to see how much of its contents will stand the test of time.