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Evaluating the 'China threat': power transition theory, the successor-state image and the dangers of historical analogies

Renée Jeffery

Steve Chan, *China, the US, and the Power-Transition Theory: A Critique*. New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 208, ISBN 978 0 4154 4024 0.

William H. Overholt, *Asia, America, and the Transformation of Geopolitics*. New York: Cambridge University Press and The Rand Corporation, 2008, pp. 366, ISBN 978 0 5217 2023 6.

Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng (eds), *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008, pp. 336, ISBN 978 0 8014 7444 6.

The rise of China and its implications for stability in both the Asia-Pacific region and the world more generally continues to exercise the minds of scholars and policy makers alike. In particular, questions of the geostrategic importance of shifting power patterns marked, in particular, by China's elevation stand at the forefront of contemporary scholarship concerned with international and Asian security. The three works with which this article is primarily concerned all seek to address the challenges posed by a resurgent China. In doing so, Steve Chan's (2008) work and the edited collection of Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng (2008) both focus on power transition theory as a means of explaining China's place in the world. Chan's work provides a fairly comprehensive overview of power transition theory and a stringent critique of its underlying assumptions before concluding, contrary to most power transition theorists, that China is not likely to challenge the United States for global supremacy. Ross and Feng's collection of 12 essays, by contrast, offers a range of different assessments of China's rise from authors including Jack S. Levy, Avery Goldstein, John Ikenberry, and Robert Art, utilising multiple analytical perspectives—constructivism, liberalism, and neo-realism, to name a few. The work is divided into four main parts: Part 1 focuses on power transition theory and the structure of the international system in light of the rise of China; Part 2 then turns to consider the institutional implications of China's ascent; Part 3 analyses

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developments in Chinese policy making; and Part 4 considers the responses of America, Japan, and North Korea to China's position in the region and the world. Finally, a short fifth part, comprising a single chapter by the editors, draws out the relevant theoretical and policy perspectives associated with the rise of China.

In contrast to the works of Chan and Ross and Feng, William Overholt's (2008) book is not concerned exclusively with the rise of China, nor does it focus on power transition theory. Rather, Overholt provides an overview of the transformation of geopolitics that has taken place in Asia since the end of the cold war. His work thus includes chapters on the cold war in Asia and contemporary regional trends before turning to assess the geostrategic positions of a number of states, including China and Japan, Taiwan and Korea, India and Pakistan, Russia, and America. The work concludes by providing six different 'scenarios for the future', each of which maps out the possible course of events that may unfold in the region in years to come.

What unites the works of Chan, Overholt, and Ross and Feng, aside from their obvious subject matter, is that all three make specific use of historical analogies in presenting their arguments. Historical analogies have long been used by international relations scholars, practitioners, and policy makers to understand the past, make sense of the present, and predict the future. Based on the idea that two or more events sharing enough common features can be assumed analogous in other pertinent respects, historical analogies provide so-called 'lessons' from the past to be applied to the problems of the present (Khong 1992: 6–7). Famously, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, President John F. Kennedy appealed to the lessons of Pearl Harbour in rejecting suggestions he use air strikes to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba. Fearing such an action would amount to a 'Pearl Harbour in reverse', Kennedy opted instead for a naval blockade and thus avoided bringing the world any closer to the brink of nuclear war (Khong 1992: 5). Similarly, Jeffrey Record (2002: 57) argues that had it not been for lessons learned from the appeasement of Nazi Germany, 'there probably would have been no decision to stand in Korea, and therefore almost certainly no decision to commit to Vietnam', thereby highlighting the practical role played by historical analogies in formulating foreign policy (Goldstein 2008: 74f.).

However, as the United States' subsequent loss in the Vietnam War illustrates, historical analogies do not always 'provide clear and simple answers' or constitute a reliable foundation for making sound judgements about contemporary international affairs (Garofano 2004: 64). This was British Prime Minister Anthony Eden's experience during the Suez Crisis when, drawing on a historical analogy, he interpreted Egypt's seizure of the Suez Canal as a Hitlerite act on the part of President Nasser (Khong 1992: 3), and led Britain into a 'futile and humiliating effort to retake Suez by force' (May 1973: x). Indeed, as Ernest May (1973: xi) argues, policy makers 'ordinarily use history badly', the historical analogies on which they base

many of their decisions often misguiding and misleading them. '[R]easoning by historical analogy' can thus, as Record (1998: 1) notes, 'be dangerous, especially if such reasoning is untempered by recognition that no two historical events are identical and that the future is more than a linear extension of the present'. Despite these stern warnings, however, historical analogies remain 'the most usual use of history' (Neustadt and May 1986: 91) and, in contemporary thought, have become one of the dominant means by which the threat to international peace and security posed by the rise of China is analysed.[1]

Two main sets of arguments dominate claims that the rise of China constitutes a threat to regional and world order, both of which rely on the use of historical analogies. Proponents of the first view adhere to the fundamental principles of power transition theory and contend that China will threaten conflict by challenging the United States for global hegemonic leadership, just as Germany challenged Britain in the twentieth century. Bernstein and Munro (1997b: 21) argue along these lines that '[i]t seems almost indisputable that over the next decade or two China will seek to become the dominant power on its side of the Pacific'. Not wholly unrelated to this view, for a second group of analysts the 'China threat' can be best understood as a sort of hangover from the cold war. China, they argue, is rising to fill a vacuum caused by the demise of the Soviet Union and thus represents a 'successor state' to the old Soviet power. In this vein, Robert Kaplan (2005) not only characterises China as the new Soviet Union but argues that it 'will be a more formidable adversary than Russia ever was'. This analogy is, at least in part, driven by the assumption that, as states sharing the same communist ideology, China and the Soviet Union will also share certain foreign policy objectives (Gertz 2000: xix).

Despite their current popularity, however, neither power transition theory nor successor-state image analyses of the China threat are immune from the raft of problems associated with using historical analogies to assess contemporary international affairs. With this in mind, the works of Chan (2008) and Overholt (2008), along with several chapters included in Ross and Feng's (2008) edited collection, seek to illuminate the limitations of each of these approaches, and the historical analogies that underpin them. Considered together, all of these works argue, at times explicitly and at other times implicitly, that the misuse of the historical analogies that underpin power transition theory and the successor-state image has led to the misinterpretation of China's intentions regarding its position in the region and the world, and an exaggerated assessment of the threat it poses. With this in mind, this article illustrates the ways in which the use of historical analogies has affected assessments of the threat posed by a rising China provided by power transition theorists and proponents of the successor-state image.

Power transition theory

Power transition theory emerged in the late 1950s with the publication of A.F.K. Organski's (1958) seminal work *World Politics*, and has since become 'over time, one of the most successful structural theories in world politics' (Lemke and Tammen 2003: 269). Organski's theory sought to challenge explanations of the causes of war provided by the realist balance of power theories of Inis Claude (1962), Edward Vose Gulick (1955), and Hans J. Morgenthau (1948). In particular, Organski argued that the international order is not anarchical, as realists suppose, but hierarchical (Kugler and Organski 1989: 172). This hierarchy is pyramid-shaped, at the apex of which sits 'the dominant nation that, for most of its tenure, is the most powerful nation in the international order' (Kugler and Organski 1989: 173). Contrary to the idea that 'an equal distribution of power leads to peace and an imbalance brings about the necessary conditions for war' (Kugler and Organski 1989: 176), Organski argued that 'a condition of parity is more likely to lead to war' (DiCicco and Levy 1999: 681). Indeed, according to power transition theory, 'the danger of war increases when a dissatisfied challenger catches up with or even overtakes an existing hegemon' (Chan 2008: x). 'Challengers', also known as revisionist states, are those that, dissatisfied with their position in the international hierarchy, 'want a new place for themselves in international society' that will allow them to 'redraft the rules by which relations among nations work' (Organski and Kugler 1980: 20, 23). These states, as Randall Schweller (1994: 104) explains, are not afraid to 'employ military force to change the status quo' and achieve the supreme position in the international hierarchy.

Since its inception, power transition theory has undergone several revisions and developments. Statistical tests of the power transition 'hypothesis that the combination of parity and transition is conducive to major war', published by Organski and Kugler in *The War Ledger* in 1980, found that 'among those states capable of contending for global leadership, no wars take place without a transition' and, further to this, that 'half of the observed transitions were followed by the outbreak of war' (DiCicco and Levy 1999: 682). More recently, Douglas Lemke's 'multiple hierarchy model' has moved beyond the 'exclusive focus on power transitions at the very top of the international hierarchy' to include regional and even subregional hierarchies (DiCicco and Levy 1999: 691–2; Lemke 1996; Lemke and Kugler 1996). At the same time, Woosang Kim's (1991: 833) 'revised power transition theory' extends classical iterations to form a theory of alliance transitions which contends that 'the equality of power between two great powers, after taking to account the effects of alliances, has a substantial impact on the outbreak of major wars'. Similarly, as Lemke and Tammen (2003: 269) note, power transition theory has been expanded to address questions of 'nuclear deterrence ... the relationship between arms races and conflict, and the democratic peace', and subjected to analytical analysis of the theory's internal logic (see Kim and Morrow 1992;

Kugler and Zagare 1990; Lemke and Reed 1996; Werner and Kugler 1996). Amongst these analyses have been assessments of the historical foundations on which power transition theory is built.

In its original incarnation, the central precepts of power transition theory were derived from historical analysis of the Anglo-German rivalry of the twentieth century. According to this assessment, both World War I and World War II 'occurred because Germany was surpassing Britain in capability and challenging its leadership of the international system' (Vazquez 1996: 41). Germany was, in short, a revisionist state intent on challenging the British-led status quo. However, as John Vazquez and others have noted, this assessment relies on the marginalisation of the United States from analyses of comparative power relations. Britain, he argues, 'is the first-ranked state' in analyses by power transition theorists, 'only because the United States is not included in the contender sample until 1945' (1996: 41; see also Vazquez 1993). Thus, although the major power transition of the twentieth century actually took place between Britain and the United States, the United States is 'not considered a central contender for international supremacy because of its ostensible self-professed isolationist inclination' (Chan 2008: 21). According to Chan, this refusal to view the United States 'as a leading candidate for international dominance in the years before 1945' seems 'quite baffling' (ibid.). Vazquez (1996: 41–2) agrees and argues that discounting the United States from power transition analyses of the early twentieth century is 'too convenient', for not only did the United States view 'itself as a rival to Britain in the Western hemisphere' but, until 1895, its relations with Britain were 'hostile'. It thus seems something of an anomaly that power transition theory views Germany as a greater threat to Britain's position in the world than the United States.

Vazquez (1996: 42) also argues, contrary to the central thesis of power transition theory, that 'fighting in World War I did not arise because of German challenges to Britain, but with a dispute between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, which was linked to the French–German dispute over Alsace-Lorraine through alliances with Russia'. Contrary to Organski and Kugler's (1980) assessment, World War I was thus not caused by rivalry between the first and second most powerful states in the international system, nor did it initially involve Britain at all. In defence of power transition theory's paradigm case, however, Douglas Lemke (2002: 28) reiterates the view that World War I was 'a clash pitting Britain and its allies against Germany and its allies' (see also Lemke 1997: 32). It was, according to this account, 'very much a competition between Britain and Germany with allies arranged accordingly' (Lemke 2002: 28). However, as Vazquez (1996: 42) makes clear, it is significant, not least of all for the central claims of power transition theory, that World War I did not begin with a power transition between a status quo leader and its challenger, who then dragged other allied states into the conflict, but 'broke out among weaker allies who then dragged in the contenders'. Vazquez (1996): 42–3) also argues that power transition theory's explanation of the outbreak of World War II is found

similarly wanting for it does not incorporate Germany's attacks on the Soviet Union or Japan's attacks on the United States, both of which were critical in turning the conflict into a world war.

Despite the problems associated with the historical foundations of power transition theory, Levy (2008: 32) notes that 'analyses of the rise of China and its consequences for the global system occasionally look for guidance to the experience of the rise of Germany'. As we will see in the following section, however, the use of this historical analogy is perhaps more widespread than Levy suggests.

Power transition theory and the China threat

Assessments of the potential threat posed by the rise of China by proponents of power transition theory most commonly argue that China will precipitate war with the United States either as it overtakes the United States, or in an attempt to displace it as global hegemon (Chan 2008: 2; Friedberg 2005: 17). Thus, one of the 'most common characterization[s] of China' portrays it, as Mearsheimer does, as 'a dissatisfied, revisionist state' bent on ousting the United States from its position at the apex of the global power hierarchy (Johnstone 2003: 6; Brzezinski and Mearsheimer 2005: 46). Despite the current popularity of this view, however, China specialists such as David Shambaugh have disputed its central claims, arguing that they 'do not recognize the China that Mearsheimer describes' and that they 'see no evidence of his "Chinese hegemony" theories' (Shambaugh 2004–5: 94). Others, including Art (2008), Chan (2008), Feng (2008), Ikenberry (2008), and Levy (2008), concur with this view and, in so doing, challenge the assumption underpinning power transition analyses that contemporary China is analogous to Germany in the first half of the twentieth century.

The most common problem associated with power transition theory's use of historical analogies in its treatment of contemporary China centres on the assumption that quantifiable power relations between Germany and Britain in the early twentieth century are replicated in the contemporary relationship between China and the United States. According to Organski and Kugler's (1980: 49) assessment in *The War Ledger*, in order 'to qualify as a challenger, a state must be at least 80 percent as powerful as its rival' (see also Chan 2008: 22). However, precisely how a state's power is measured is a particularly contentious issue. As de Soysa, Oneal, and Park (1997: 525) demonstrate, support for power transition theory itself is largely dependent on the 'measure of power ... chosen for analysis'.[2] Chan highlights several problems associated with the measure of power currently favoured by power transition theorists, the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) that emerged out of the Correlates of War project. Unsurprisingly, it produces the most favourable results for power transition theory (de Soysa *et al.* 1997: 525). He favours a

wide-ranging measure of power that includes gross domestic product (GDP), military expenditure, and number of Internet hosts as a measure of technological capability, as well as the 'scale and spread of a country's international involvement' (Chan 2008: 11–3, 24). According to his assessment, prior to the outbreak of World War I, Germany and the United Kingdom were 'reasonably matched rivals' (Chan 2008: 24). Levy (2008: 29), using GDP as a measure of power, disagrees; he argues that 'Germany had not even reached the 80 percent threshold for parity with Britain'. Germany, with a GDP of US$242.8 billion (in 1990 constant dollars), achieved only 76.9 percent of that of Britain's US$315.7 billion (ibid.).

Regardless of which measure is used, it remains the case that the relationship between China and the United States in no way reflects that between Germany and Britain. China lags behind the United States with the size of its economy being only 61.8 percent of that of the United States, military spending 18.1 percent of that of the United States, and Internet hosts just 0.1 percent of those of the United States (Chan 2008: 21–2). Furthermore, when a measure of the 'scale and spread of a country's international involvement' is used, the United States remains the unassailable world power. In this, China is in no way analogous to Germany in the early twentieth century and, more significantly, despite its impressive growth in recent decades, is not, according to any empirical measure of power, a serious challenger to US hegemony.

Chan (2008: 24) recognises that whatever the extent of China's growing power, the idea that it still poses a threat to international security stems from perceptions about its intentions. Indeed, as Frank Ching notes, 'China's intentions are perhaps even more important than its capabilities' (quoted in Roy 1996: 767) for, as Denny Roy (1996: 768) continues, 'the presence or absence of a Chinese threat turns on whether the regime's intentions are benign or malign'. However, judging the intentions of any state is a difficult task and, as Roy (1996: 770) concludes, in the end is often 'a matter of perception'. Similarly, Overholt (2008: 227) highlights a number of 'fundamental problems' with what he sees as the 'mechanistic view of rising powers' provided by power transition theorists. In particular, he notes that both the Japanese and European Union economies remain larger than China's, and that 'Europe seems to be a rising power, indeed a much bigger, albeit somewhat inchoate one, than China' (ibid.). Similarly, both Steve Chan and Robert Art voice concerns over the assumptions both that China is a dissatisfied challenger and that, like previous dissatisfied challengers, particularly Germany, it harbours dangerous intentions. Chan (2008: 29) challenges the seemingly automatic assumption that the United States is a status quo power while other rising powers in history, including Germany, Russia, and Japan—and today, China—are revisionist, pointing out that these types of arguments are not based on evidence. Art (2008: 263), on the other hand, notes that this assumption ignores China's 'peaceful rise' strategy, although he does admit that 'we cannot predict the exact nature of Chinese intentions and goals a few decades from now'.

Chan (2008: 5) also questions the strategic logic behind the latecomer's predicted challenge to the hegemon. A 'rational challenger', he argues, is more likely to 'postpone such a confrontation in the hope that it will become stronger over time' and 'be able to achieve hegemony without having to incur the costs of waging a war'. However, avoiding conflict in this scenario requires the declining hegemon to accept its diminished status, a direct contradiction of rationalist theory. A more logical course of action for the declining hegemon is rather to 'seek an early', even preventive 'confrontation before the latecomer becomes even stronger' (Chan 2008: 42). According to this assessment, it is the declining hegemon and not the rising challenger who poses the greatest danger to international peace and stability. Germany's challenge to Britain was thus, according to Chan (2008: 49), a 'miscalculation' borne out by the fact that in 'its supposed bid for international supremacy ... Germany lost both World Wars'.

According to John Ikenberry (2008: 106, 90), there are several reasons why China will not 'repeat the experience of post-Bismarck Germany ... as it rises up', the most important of which is the fact that it 'faces a very different type of status quo international order than that faced by previous rising states'. Contemporary international order, complete with the multitude of institutions designed to uphold its central principles, 'is a wider and deeper political order than any other built up earlier' (Ikenberry 2008: 90). That is, it is an order more difficult to overturn and more straightforward to join than past global hierarchies (Ikenberry 2008: 91). As both Chan and Ikenberry note, it is within this order that China's rise has taken place and, as such, there is little reason to think that this order will not continue to facilitate its continued development. Thus, as Ikenberry (ibid.) argues, even if China reaches the 'position where it could decisively shape the rules and institutions of the international order ... it is not self-evident that it would seek to establish a radically new set of organizational principles' (see also Chan 2008: 62). Rather, it is likely that China will continue to work within the rules and institutions of the current international order, thus standing it well apart from post-Bismarck Germany.

For Jack Levy, it is another aspect of the international order, both past and present, which poses particular problems for power transition theory's use of historical analogies to analyse the rise of China. In Levy's (2008: 11) assessment, 'applications of power transition theory to the rise of China are compromised by the failure to recognize ... the contextual differences between a potential Sino-American transition and past power transitions'. Power transition theory, as Levy (ibid.) notes, is concerned with a single global hierarchy and 'the rise and fall of great powers within that hierarchy'. According to this view, both the international system in which Germany and Britain vied for supremacy and the contemporary system, marked by an impending power transition between the United States and China, are single power hierarchies. However, Levy disputes this assessment and argues:

> For most of the last five centuries of the modern world, at least until the twentieth century and probably until 1945, there have been two elite power systems, one based in Europe and the other encompassing the entire world, with an overlapping but not identical set of leading powers (Levy 2008: 20).
>
> For example, in the nineteenth century, 'Britain was the dominant power' in the global system, while a number of different powers enjoyed dominance in Europe before Germany took the leading role (Levy 2008: 21).

According to Levy, in assessing the causes of World War I and World War II, power transition theorists commonly conflate these two power systems and argue that Germany challenged Britain for world supremacy, despite the fact that they sat on, or towards, the apex of different power hierarchies. Levy (2008: 29) argues along these lines that '[t]he idea that the initiation of these two wars can be traced to the dynamics of the global system rather than to those of the European system is not plausible, especially in the case of World War II.' World War II was, in his view, 'first and foremost about European, not global, politics'. Power transition theory's failure to recognise this, in Levy's (2008: 32) view, means that it also overlooks a number of 'key questions regarding global–regional interactions'. This is significant for evaluating the potential danger posed by the rise of China as it is 'neither purely regional nor purely global' (ibid.). In addition, it would seem that attempts to apply the historical analogy of Germany, a contender state in the specific regional hierarchy of Europe, to China are foolhardy, as they must necessarily neglect the specificities of Asian regional relations.

Art (2008: 267) similarly points to specific details of the relationship between China and the United States to implore his readers not to 'assume that Sino-American relations will follow the course of recent cases where a rising power has challenged a dominant one'. In particular, he compares the current competition between China and the United States with three earlier competitions: Britain versus Germany prior to World War I, Britain versus Germany 1933–9, and the United States versus the Soviet Union during the cold war. The three variables he uses to explain the outcomes of each of these cases are 'the level of security that both powers enjoyed, or believed they enjoyed ...; the extent of economic interdependence between them ...; and the degree and intensity of ideological competition that they experienced' (2008: 267–8). In general terms, Art found that

> it is the degree of security enjoyed by these pairs of states vis-à-vis one another, and especially the severity of the threat to its security that the dominant state perceives emanating from the rising state, that constitutes the most important variable to predict whether a hegemonic struggle will result in war. When security was low or believed to be low, intense crises and war were more likely; when security was high or believed to be high, better relations and peace tended to prevail (Art 2008: 270–1).

> In light of this, his specific conclusion maintains that 'China does not present the type of security threat to the United States that Germany did to Britain, or Britain to Germany' (Art 2008: 272), thus highlighting yet another flaw in the use of this historical analogy.

The successor-state image

William H. Overholt (2008: 226) also concludes that the threat to regional and international peace and security posed by China is both exaggerated and misconceived. Although he cautions that even the most optimistic analysts must acknowledge that China's future is profoundly uncertain, he argues, contrary to the pessimistic 'threat' perspective, that

> China has been the region's big country most supportive of stability among its neighbours, the country most willing to compromise regarding its boundaries, and the country most directly helpful to the United States on the big regional political and economic issues (Overholt 2008: 298).

> Indeed, according to Overholt (2008: 2), the dominant characterisation of China as a threat is based on 'the assumption that China fills the old Soviet shoes'. This, however, as he points out, 'is a case to be argued, not a self-evident reality'.

There are several facets to the 'successor-state image' of China following in the footsteps of the Soviet Union, many of which rely on 'obsolete and inaccurate caricatures' of the intentions and character of Chinese foreign policy (Overholt 2008: 7). First, in concordance with power transition theory, developed during the cold war and 'based on the economics and weaponry of a previous era', is the assumption that 'any rising power will violently disrupt the system' (Overholt 2008: 20). Second is the assumption that power is built and sustained through the practice of territorial conquest. The third and final aspect of this account of the 'China threat' is the assumption that 'any country professing communist or leftist ideologies must somehow be aggressive, like the old Soviet Union' (Overholt 2008: 20–1). Thus, a popular view of China in the 'Western media and in the national security establishments' is one shaped by the cold war that assumes that 'the Cold War effectively continues' (Overholt 2008: 226).

The successor-state image of China that dominates much of the public discourse is derived from the idea that 'because it is ruled by a Communist Party, today's China must be aggressively expansive like the Soviet Union of yesterday' (ibid.). This assertion is based, in part, on viewing China through the lens of the Soviet Union and, in part, on the claim made by both offensive and human nature realists that great powers relentlessly seek power (Mearsheimer 2001: 21). Mearsheimer (2001: 190, 169), in particular, argues in favour of the primacy of land power. In his analysis of 'great powers in action', he argues that

Japan from the Meiji Restoration in 1868 until the end of World War II, Germany from the rise of Otto von Bismarck to power in 1862 until the defeat of Adolf Hitler, and, in particular, Russia and the Soviet Union from 'before the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917' until the end of the cold war 'were almost always looking for opportunities to expand through conquest, and when they saw an opening, they usually jumped at it'. Interestingly, and contrary to the views of proponents of the 'successor-state image' of China, Mearsheimer (2001: 191) argues that 'over time', Soviet foreign policy became 'driven mainly by calculations about relative power, not by communist ideology', as many 'China threat' analysts have insisted.

However, the extent to which Mearsheimer's (2001: 21) nineteenth- and twentieth-century examples of aggressively expansionist powers, driven by the belief that 'survival mandates aggressive behaviour', are applicable to contemporary China is somewhat questionable. Indeed, as Overholt (2008: 61) notes, 'China's systematic settlement of land borders with weaker powers, to the satisfaction of those weaker powers, hardly betokens an Asian version of Hitler's or Stalin's expansion.' In recent years, China has 'managed to peacefully resolve all of its land border disputes except one (with India), having concluded treaties that delimit 20,222 kilometres of its boundaries' (Shambaugh 2004–5: 66). Thus, although a number of maritime disputes remain unresolved, China hardly appears to be aggressively expansionist. On the contrary, David Shambaugh (2004–5: 64) writes that 'most nations in the region now see China as a good neighbour, a constructive partner, a careful listener, and a non-threatening regional power', a distinct shift from the dominant regional perspective of just a few years ago that feared China was becoming 'a domineering regional hegemon and powerful military threat', and a view directly at odds with the successor-state image version of the 'China threat' school.

Finally, proponents of the successor-state image of China taking the place of the Soviet Union in the post-cold-war international order base their views on ideological considerations. Western perceptions of China are marked by 'the Manichaean view that there are Leninist systems on one side of a great political and moral chasm and democracies on the other, with no connection between the two sides other than a Soviet-style collapse into the chasm' (Overholt 2008: 119). As Emma Broomfield (2003: 267) notes, China-threat analysts regularly refer to China specifically, and pointedly, as 'Communist China', thereby emphasising the importance of its ideological bent. Critically, '[w]ith the demise of the Soviet Union, China is seen as the new ideological leader of what is left of communism and thus, by the nature of the East–West rivalry, an ideological competitor of the United States' (Broomfield 2003: 268). Thus, writers such as Bill Gertz (2000: 5) assert that China is the 'ideological leader of what was left of the world communist movement'. Yet, as Broomfield (2003: 268) counters, 'China has not sought to expand its control or ideology beyond its borders except in areas where it has a historical claim'.

Many prominent writers argue that 'the basic nature of communism threatens America and its means of existence' (Broomfield 2003: 271). For example, Gertz writes that

> Communism seeks to change not only external political conditions but also the internal nature of human beings – hence its emphasis on mass indoctrination and its hatred for anything that might offer a contrary view of man. It is this feature of communism that accounts for its most dangerous characteristic: its failure to value human life (Gertz 2000: 5).

Similarly, in their work *Red Dragon Rising*, Timperlake and Triplett argue:

> If the Communist Chinese can gun down thousands of innocent civilians in order to ensure the regime's survival, it is only a matter of time before they turn their guns on the rest of the world to satisfy their territorial ambitions (Timperlake and Triplett 1999: 42).

Not satisfied with confining their threat assessment to their ideological concerns over communism, they also contend that 'communist China poses an extraordinary military threat to the United States and the rest of the world' (Timperlake and Triplett 1999: 12). Interestingly, appearing to focus exclusively on the security aspect of this threat, Charles Krauthammer (1995) has maintained that '[t]here is no ideological component in this struggle'. He continues to write, however, that '[e]ven more important' than containing China, is 'undermining its aggressively dictatorial regime'. In Overholt's (2008: 113) view, however, not only does China's communism not constitute a threat to the rest of the region or world, but notions that it is stubbornly defended by a cadre of 'gerontocrats ... the Chinese counterparts of Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko slowly dying in their expensive chairs while their antique system withers away', are simply false. China, he argues, 'is not politically stagnant' but is reforming its polity, although perhaps not at the pace that many in the West would like (Overholt 2008: 120).

Conclusion

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Napoleon Bonaparte famously warned: 'China is a sleeping giant. When it awakens, the world will tremble.' Two centuries on, that giant has certainly awoken from its slumber and the world, or at least certain parts of it, is indeed trembling. As Gary Klintworth (1994: 223) notes, for many 'that Napoleonic image of China as an awakening Chinese dragon' remains a powerful image. China is, according to this view, 'non-European, non-democratic and avowedly the last communist stronghold left in the world' (ibid.). That is, China is seen as the Soviet Union of the twenty-first century, a state to be feared on account of the expansionist intentions it will inevitably exhibit and the incompatibility of its communist ideology with

Western liberal democracy. It will, in short, follow in the footsteps of the Soviet Union, challenging the United States and bringing instability to the region and to the world. For others, it is simply China's recent growth, interpreted through the lens of post-Bismarck Germany, that 'augurs an impending power transition between it and the U.S.' (Chan 2008: x).

Contrary to these assessments, Chan and Overholt in particular agree, in part on shared grounds, that China does not constitute an immediate threat to international peace and security or, more specifically, the United States. Perceptions of the supposed threat it poses are derived from 'obsolete and inaccurate caricatures' of Chinese intentions and character that have come to influence the formulation of foreign policy, in particular that of the United States (Overholt 2008: 7). Thus, neither power transition theory nor the successor-state image provides an accurate assessment of the China threat for Chan or Overholt. China does not, according to either author, pose a direct threat either to the United States in particular or the international community in general. In particular, the historical analyses on which claims of the threat posed by a rising China are based, and their subsequent pairings as historical analogies with contemporary China, are fundamentally flawed. Not only does post-Bismarck Germany represent a questionable case on which to base the central principles of power transition theory, but the assumption that it is in pertinent respects analogous to contemporary China is unfounded. Similarly, there is little evidence to suggest that China, though sharing the same communist ideology as the Soviet Union, will emulate its actions in the twenty-first century. Analyses of the threat posed by a rising China presented by proponents of power transition theory and the successor-state image are thus based on the misappropriation of historical precedents.

However, both Chan and Overholt recognise that even despite China's non-threatening position and intentions, it may still become embroiled in serious great power conflict. As Chan (2008: 9) notes: 'even in the absence of a power transition, China may clash with the U.S. over Taiwan'. Thus, even amongst writers unconvinced by alarmist arguments about China's supposed drive towards world supremacy, the issue of Taiwan's desired independence remains a significant problem. Similarly, Art (2008: 272) recognises that '[w]ar by miscalculation is always possible' between China and the United States, but maintains, along with Bush and O' Hanlon (2007: 90), contrary to most power transition analyses, that it is unlikely.

Notes

1. For various arguments about the 'threat' posed by a rising China, see Bernstein and Munro (1997a), Kang (2003: 61), Krauthammer (1995), and Roy (1996: 758).
2. Organski and Kugler (1980) used gross national product, while Houweling and Siccama (1988), replicating Organski and Kugler's study, used Doran and Parson's five-factor measure

and achieved significantly different results. In contemporary scholarship, the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) that emerged from the Correlates of War project is most commonly used.

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