

Power Transitions: Thucydides Didn't Live in East Asia

Are power transitions between a rising power and a declining hegemon particularly volatile? Is a war between China and the United States possible or even likely as a power transition draws near? Scholars and policymakers are increasingly worried about such a possibility. Richard Ned Lebow and Ben Valentino, specialists in international relations, point out that power transition “theory has become an accepted framework for many scholars and policymakers who focus on Asia,”¹ while Susan Shirk, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for China during the Clinton administration, has written that, “History teaches us that rising powers are likely to provoke war.”² More recently, political scientist Graham Allison wrote that “war between the United States and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than recognized at the moment. Indeed, judging by the historical record, war is more likely than not.”³

But what historical record are Shirk and Allison referring to? By far, the most commonly examined case studies of power transition in the scholarly literature are the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE) and the rise of Germany under Bismarck and Anglo-German rivalry of the twentieth century.⁴ In arguing that contemporary U.S.-China relations are potentially dangerous, Allison claims that 12 out of 16 historical power transitions ended in war; but *every single one* of his cases

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before the mid-nineteenth century involves only European powers (e.g. Habsburgs, Dutch Republic, Sweden, France). Only two cases involve Japan (the Russo-Japanese War and World War II), while China appears just once (First Sino-Japanese War). Allison may be the most recent scholar to use Greek and European history to explain the entire world's future, but he is neither the first nor the only scholar to do so. The link has been made for decades.⁵ Scholars also regularly use the rise of nineteenth century Germany as an analogy for Asia today.⁶ Even when scholars argue that China's rise might not cause the same instability that Germany's did, they are still operating within a framework that uses European examples as case studies to make sense of Asia, and often the entire globe.

It is troubling, however, that the empirical examples that international relations scholars use to derive their theories are almost all European. This European selection bias has led to an overexpectation that power transitions and the rise and decline of great powers relative to each other are a prime factor for war. The rise and fall of Chinese dynasties, however, are all *potential* examples of power transitions, not to mention those in Vietnam, Korea, Japan, and elsewhere. If we widen the selection of cases, particularly to examine important cases from East Asian history, we would find very different implications for how widely applicable and universal the theory actually is, and to what extent it explains security relations today. Specifically, examining two pre-modern East Asian cases—the Imjin War (1592-1598) and the Ming-Qing transition (1644-1683)—as we will below, lead to three new insights about power transitions: First, power vacuums are often as dangerous as power transitions. Second, internal decline is often more damaging to hegemony than are external challengers. Third, challenges often came from the smallest powers, not the largest powers.

Self-inflicted wounds may weaken the U.S. position in Asia as much as any challenge from China.

Not only does this focus on selection bias have fundamental implications for power transition theory, it also has implications for contemporary East Asian regional security dynamics. Most clearly, self-inflicted wounds may weaken the U.S. position in Asia as much as any challenge from China. A voluntary retreat from leadership and an unwillingness to embrace the region and its issues are as likely to weaken the U.S. position in East Asia—and indeed around the globe—as is any Chinese challenge. Furthermore, some of

the most pressing security issues are being driven by the smallest countries in the region—such as North Korea—and not the largest, such as China itself. Power transitions may or may not lead to war, but given the selective and partial

(European) way in which conventional international relations scholars have examined the historical record, it is difficult to draw any systematic conclusions about exactly how dangerous power transitions truly are. If scholars and policymakers want a meaningful discussion of a way out of U.S.-China conflict, rather than just threat inflation, they would need a more careful analysis of the East Asian historical record itself.

More attention to East Asia itself, both modern and historical, is in fact critical if the United States is going to deal capably with the complexity of contemporary East Asia. For example, almost all international relations scholars know the lessons of the Peloponnesian War, but almost no American scholars or policymakers know the lessons of the Imjin War (1592-1598)—a war larger in scale than anything experienced in Europe and the only war between China, Japan, and Korea in six hundred years. The Ming Dynasty of China (1368-1644) was at the height of its power, yet Japan, under its hegemon Toyotomi Hideyoshi, invaded Korea in an attempt to conquer China, failing miserably. Fifty years later, the Ming dynasty crumbled, but not because of Hideyoshi's invasion. The Manchus eventually succeeded the Ming, declaring themselves the Qing dynasty in 1644, but it is not at all clear that the Manchus ever intended to conquer China. Rather than a power transition, it was a power vacuum that drew the Manchus to China.

Examining not only why the Ming fell, and why Hideyoshi failed, but also why the Qing eventually succeed the Ming dynasty is of critical importance to both theories of power transition and contemporary East Asian security issues. The massive scale of the Imjin War and the Ming-Qing transition are consequential, as they affected the fate of what was unquestionably the most powerful and advanced country in the world at the time. Analyzing these cases could prompt scholars to ask more questions about power transition theory, and whether it applies today.

The End of the Ming Dynasty

Power transitions theories often begin with Thucydides, who wrote over 2,000 years ago that “What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian Power and the fear which this caused in Sparta.”⁷ The logic of the theory is straightforward: rising powers may have rising ambition; a dissatisfied challenger, whose preferences of international order differ substantially from the dominant one, seeks to alter the *status quo*. Consequently, war is mostly likely between a dissatisfied great power and the dominant power.

In 1600, Ming China was the most powerful and sophisticated country on the planet. In 1600, China had a population of 160 million and a GDP of \$96 billion. The size of China dwarfed any other political unit in either Asia or Europe. By

comparison, Japan in 1600 had a population of 18.5 million and a GDP of \$9.6 billion. France had a population of 18.5 million, Italy 13.1 million, and Spain 8.2 million with correspondingly small economies compared to China.⁸ On China's periphery were smaller political units, such as the unified Chosŏn Korean dynasty (1392-1910), Vietnam, Tibet, Siam, Burma, and various tribes, clans, and political units on the vast Central Asian steppe that runs from the Pacific Ocean across Russia to Turkey.

Princeton historian Frederick Mote writes that in the early seventeenth century, China was "the largest, richest, and most populous society in the world at that time ... it ensured local social order, collected revenues, and reinforced the normative system ... how could any enemy challenge a structure of such weight and stability?"⁹ It was a hegemon, a source of "civilization" for the entire region. Chinese language, legal codes, political institutions, religious and philosophical ideas were borrowed throughout the known world, especially in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

Ming China was also a military behemoth. Military historian Kenneth Swope notes that in the fifty years between 1570 and 1620:

the Ming managed to make peace with the Mongols, intervened in border disputes in Burma on multiple occasions, launched destabilizing strikes into Jurchen and Mongol territories, suppressed a major troop mutiny in Ningxia, sent tens of thousands of troops on two occasions to oust the Japanese from Korea, mobilized another 200,000 troops to crush an aboriginal uprising in Sichuan, and conducted numerous smaller military actions ... in the process the Ming retained its political, military, and economic primacy in East Asia.¹⁰

Yet by 1650, the Ming dynasty had crumbled and the Qing had replaced it. How this happened is perhaps a clue that there is more to wars than simply who is bigger.

The Imjin War (1592-1598)

In 1592, Japanese general Hideyoshi invaded Chosŏn Korea with over 160,000 troops on approximately 700 ships, intending to conquer China after first subduing Korea.¹¹ Over 60,000 Korean soldiers, eventually supported by almost 100,000 Ming Chinese forces, defended the peninsula.¹² The Imjin War "easily dwarfed those of their European contemporaries," involving men and material ten times the scale of the Spanish Armada of 1588.¹³ The Armada, described as the "greatest and strongest combination that was ever gathered in Christendom" in Renaissance Europe, consisted of 30,000 troops on 130 ships, and was defeated by 20,000 English troops.¹⁴ The staggering scale of the Imjin War in itself should be sufficient cause for international relations scholars to explore its causes and consequences. Yet even more important for the study of international relations, Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea

marked the *only* military conflict between Japan, Korea, and China for over three centuries either before or after the war. In fact, although the war had a massive and lasting impact on Korea and Japan, it is viewed in China as just one of many border maintenance campaigns that the Ming engaged in.

Initially, the Japanese routed sparse Korean forces and drove north past Pyongyang. As the Japanese stormed up the peninsula, they were met with greater Korean resistance as Korean admiral Yi Sunsin attacked their ships mercilessly and cut their supply lines repeatedly. The Chinese joined the war in 1593, meeting and defeating the Japanese at Pyongyang, and pushing them back to Seoul. It soon became clear to both sides that Japan could not hope to conquer Korea, much less China.¹⁵ Japanese soldiers began to defect in large numbers, with reports of over ten thousand having joined the Korean side. Hideyoshi was now forced to negotiate, and he demanded that Korea cede to Japan four southern provinces, and that the Ming send a daughter to the Japanese court to remain as hostage.¹⁶

After years of fruitless negotiations, in which Hideyoshi's demands were summarily rejected, Japan launched a second invasion in 1597, which was much less effective than the first. By this time, the Korean and Ming forces were more prepared and stronger, and the Japanese forces had been weakened. Hideyoshi then suddenly died in 1598, and the disorganized remnants of his forces retreated in chaos back to Japan.

Thus, Japan's sole revisionist attempt to upset the hierarchy of the premodern tributary system ended in a disaster. For three hundred years both before and after the Imjin War, Japan was a somewhat reluctant part of the Chinese world. That the three major powers in East Asia—and indeed, much of the rest of the system—could peacefully coexist for such an extended time span, despite having the military and technological capability to wage war on a massive scale, raises the question of why stability was the norm in East Asian international relations.

The Chinese Ming-Qing Transition (1644-1683)

Although Hideyoshi could not topple the Ming, and indeed could not even conquer Korea, a few decades later, the Manchus succeeded where Japan failed. The consensus among historians is that the early Manchus had no intention of trying to conquer China, but as the Ming fell into greater internal disarray, and as eventually the Ming dynasty was toppled from within by rebels, the Manchus pushed on an open door.

The Imjin War dwarfed European contemporaries, involving forces ten times the Spanish Armada.

The Ming dynasty in the early seventeenth century faced increasing internal rebellions, roving bands of regional bandits, and a general decline in economic conditions, especially in the northwest region. The Ming dynasty collapsed in April 1644, when rebels from Shaanxi led by Li Zicheng took the capital without a fight—the gates having been opened from within—and the last Ming emperor hanged himself. As Mote writes, “the circumstances of Ming collapse – the capital’s finding itself suddenly defenseless against a foreseeable and far from invincible military attack – were not brought about by any general disintegration of government and society . . . those circumstances were brought about carelessly . . . the fall of the Ming was, in short, caused by an accumulation of political errors.”¹⁷

When Li Zicheng captured Beijing, Manchu forces were still months of travel away from the capital, in the northeast frontier region of Liaodong. Indeed, the Manchus showed no signs at that time of contemplating an attack on the Ming themselves. But with the suicide of the emperor, the Ming administration throughout the empire began to collapse. A Ming general on the northern border, Wu Sangui, had actually been negotiating for years with the Manchus, as Wu’s uncle and some other relatives had already joined them. Wu eventually invited the Manchu forces to join him, and together they routed the rebels and jointly entered Beijing in June 1644. The Manchus proclaimed a new dynasty, renaming themselves the Qing. Although the Qing date the founding of the dynasty from June 1644, the subsequent transitional warfare lasted until 1683 on Taiwan and 1664 on the mainland. The last Ming claimant was actually killed by Wu Sangui in 1662 in Yunnan.

The Manchus had arisen in the frontier regions to the northeast of China in the late sixteenth century. Manchuria at the time was home to many disparate peoples, languages, and cultures. Qing specialist Pamela Crossley notes that, “the result was not the refinement of a homogenous people and culture from heterogeneous sources, but the settlement of the uneven terrain of the region by culturally diverse groups who on occasion wove their lineages and federations together.”¹⁸ In the late sixteenth century, a local warlord, Nurhaci (1559–1626), began to unite a number of disparate tribes under his banner. In the late 1500s, Nurhaci had accepted a Ming military appointment, and had even offered to help Korea during the Imjin Wars. Using diplomacy, marriage, and coercion, Nurhaci quickly expanded his power base. In 1616, he declared himself “Khan” of the “latter Jin” dynasty.

Yet even the founding or expansion of the Qing Empire was not clearly about conquest, nor was it a rejection of the prevailing international order. Peter Perdue, Yale historian of East Asia, notes “As he [Nurhaci] defeated rival clan leaders . . . he incurred responsibilities for provisioning these troops . . . the urgent need for grain supplies became a major factor in the expansion of the state.”¹⁹ One of Nurhaci’s

first attacks on Ming frontier outposts, at Fushun in 1618, was prompted by heavy rains, ruined harvests and the starvation that Nurhaci's people were facing.²⁰ As Crossley writes of the creation of the Manchu state and declaration of war against the Ming in the early seventeenth century, "It is probable that Nurhaci's declaration of war against the Ming was motivated less by the prospect of a dramatic increase in distributable wealth than by fears that the current levels would be constricted."²¹

Lessons from Asia: Power Vacuum, Not Transition

The Imjin War was an obvious moment of potential power transition involving a massive conflict that dwarfed most of the ones in Europe. This case might even be used to buttress the likelihood of violence in contemporary power transitions, but the fact that it does not come up suggests that, once again, scholars are using European examples to explain the world. If mainstream international relations scholars were to include the Imjin War, they would be obligated to think much more broadly and deeply about East Asian history, not only because it might have something useful to say about China today (certainly at least as much as Greece/Athens) but because it might affect our understanding of international relations more broadly.

The lessons of the Imjin War speak to the heart of power transition theory. Most strikingly, this was an example of a relatively tiny country deciding to make an unprovoked attack on the unipolar hegemon. This works totally against the way most realist, balance of power theories would predict. As Thucydides famously wrote of the Melian dialogue, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."²² Yet even a unified Japan in 1592 was no possible military or economic equal of China. In 1600, China's economy was almost ten times that of Japan, and far more sophisticated. Japan may have started a war, but there is no possible way it was motivated by a power transition between a rising and declining power.

Hideyoshi's rationale for invading Korea remains unclear, although almost all evidence points to either status, economic, or domestic political considerations. There is almost no evidence that supports factors that power transition theorists cite, such as a changing balance of power. Elizabeth Berry, historian and author of the definitive biography of Hideyoshi, sees a desire for greater status: "He [Hideyoshi] was clearly less interested in military dominion abroad than in fame,"²³ while Swope notes that Hideyoshi demanded a dynastic marriage with one of the Chinese emperor's daughters along with the resumption of tribute trade.

The lessons of the Imjin War speak to the heart of power transition theory.

Historian Gang Deng sees a Japanese desire to reenter into tribute status with China, writing that, “Hideyoshi invaded Korea, a Ming vassal state, to force China to allow Japan to resume a tributary relationship, and threatened that a refusal would lead to invasion of China itself.”²⁴ Historian Samuel Hawley emphasizes continual war as a way for Hideyoshi to quell internal dissension among his followers.²⁵ As Ki-baek Lee, historian of premodern Korea, noted, “Having succeeded in unifying the country, Hideyoshi sought to direct the energies of his commanders outward, thereby to enhance the solidarity and tranquility of Japan itself.”²⁶

Notably absent is the evidence from either the Chinese or Japanese archives of any assessment of the relative military capabilities or balance of power between the two sides. There is no archival evidence that Hideyoshi or any of his advisors made any assessment of the balance of power, nor any judgment that China was in decline and that Japan was rising. China evaluated the Japanese threat within the broader framework of its commitments and defense needs around Asia, but there was virtually no discussion of the Japanese as a strategic threat at the time. As for Hideyoshi, one potential reference point was the success of pirate raids (*wokou*) in the 1550s and the 1560s, a threat that Ming effectively curtailed by the mid-1560s. It was also evident that the most damaging raids were decidedly headed by Ming Chinese, rather than Japanese.²⁷ Thus, it is true that real knowledge, and assessments based on that knowledge, were sorely lacking. And this makes little sense given how Hideyoshi had waged war in Japan prior to this, with careful preparation. As Berry observes, “there is no evidence that he [Hideyoshi] systematically researched either the geographical problem or the problem of Chinese military organization.”²⁸ In short, the central causal argument about power transitions, that rising and declining powers fear and focus on each other, finds no support in the case of Japan’s invasion of Korea in 1592.

Furthermore, the dynamics between the countries involved at the time worked the

The most consequential transition in Asia over 500 years looked nothing like Thucydides would predict.

opposite of the way balance of power theories would predict. Japan and Korea—the two small powers—certainly never allied together to balance China, even if at the beginning of the Imjin War, China deeply suspected that very possibility. It took three months of intense Korean diplomacy to convince Ming China that Korea was not conniving with Japan against them.²⁹ It is doubtful a balancing strategy would ever have occurred to the smaller states, because each had their own separate

relationship (tributary or not) with China, and China was the only pole in the East Asian state system.

Like Hideyoshi’s invasion of Korea, the Manchu conquest of China appears to have been undertaken and accomplished with almost no attention to the change

in power distribution. Although the Ming were aware of the new Manchu force, it is not clear they did a whole lot about it. Manchus were not even the cause of the toppling of the dynasty, as we have seen. Ming officials were certainly concerned about the Manchus, but peasant rebels generally took precedence from the 1630s onwards (at least for most of Ming officials, although the emperors tended to vacillate on this point). The peasant rebels were the “disease of the heart” whereas the Manchus were the “disease of the skin.”³⁰ The most consequential dynastic transition in Asia over a period of half a millennium had almost nothing to do with the causal processes any of our power transition models envisage. It looked nothing like Thucydides would predict.

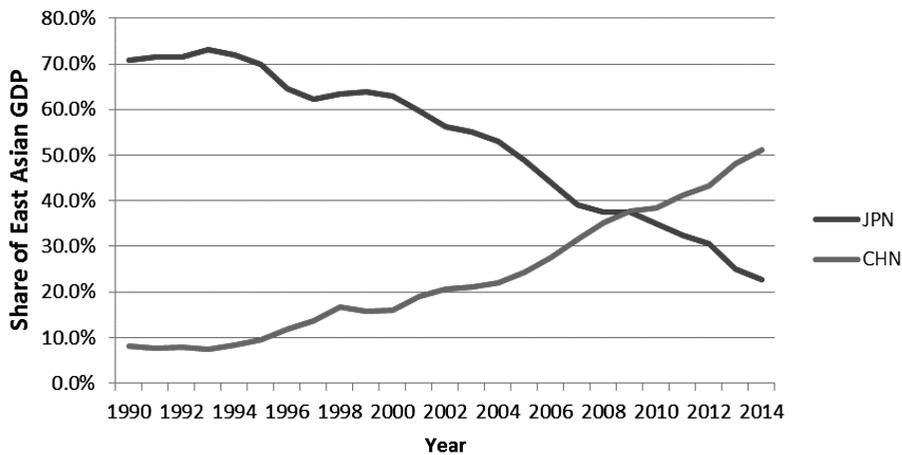
Just as significantly, after Hideyoshi’s defeat, Japan under the Tokugawa had no interest in taking advantage of the turmoil on the Asian mainland in the early seventeenth century. Rather than seizing a window of opportunity to attack China again, the Japanese—and Koreans—in the early seventeenth century remained almost completely out of the disorder that gripped China. Tokugawa Japan did nothing when the Ming began to crumble. The Tokugawa at the time, as Japan before Hideyoshi, were not an expansionist regime. It appears that Hideyoshi was the exception, not the norm, in how Japanese leaders viewed themselves and their relations with the rest of East Asia. After all, Japan, Korea, and China clearly had the military, logistical, organizational, and economic capabilities to conduct war across oceans on a massive scale. It was a political *choice* not to do so, not a material limitation.

Today’s Power Transition Has Already Occurred

The East Asian tribute system of international relations is gone, never to return. Those old rules, norms, and institutions have been obliterated. All countries—particularly China—view the world through the lens of the territorial Westphalian nation-state. The collapse of the tributary system, the fall of the Qing, and the arrival of the Western powers in the late nineteenth century set off a century of chaos in East Asia. Into the power vacuum of Qing decline came many powers, most notably Japan. War, colonization, and subsequent decolonization have occupied the minds of political elites throughout East Asia during the twentieth century.

China has *already* completed a regional power transition, astonishingly quickly and peacefully.

Yet after that century of chaos, China has once again *already* completed a regional power transition. It has done so astonishingly quickly, and it has

Figure 1. Share of Total East Asian GDP, 1990-2014

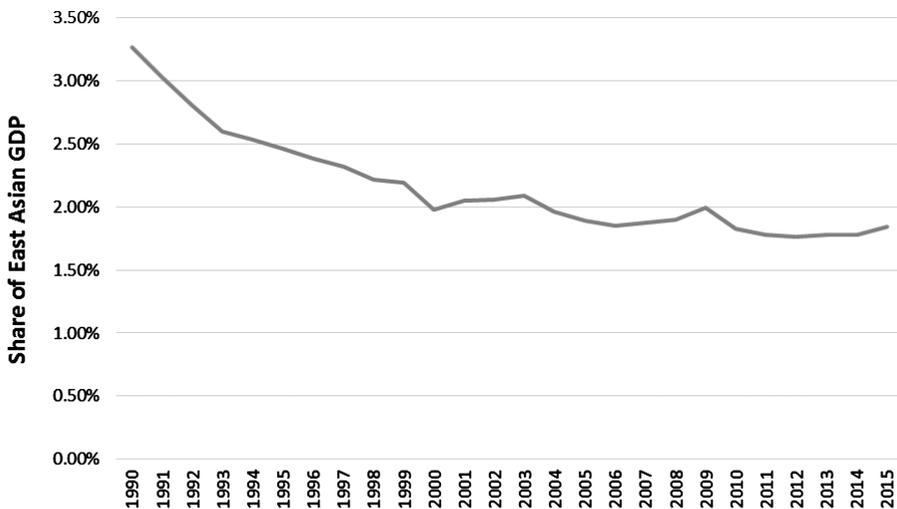
Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators. (Countries: China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Australia)

done so peacefully. China's share of regional GDP grew from 8 percent in 1990 to 51 percent in 2014, while Japan's share fell from 72 percent in 1990 to 22 percent today (Figure 1).

As China has grown richer and more integrated within East Asia itself, East Asian defense spending has steadily declined. The proportion of the economy devoted to defense spending is now almost half of what it was in 1990 and shows no sign of increasing (Figure 2). Specifically, the defense spending of eleven main East Asian states (the same 11 countries cited in Figure 1) declined from an average of 3.35 percent of GDP in 1990 to an average of 1.84 percent in 2015.

These two figures tell an accurate, enduring, and often overlooked story about East Asia. China has already managed a head-spinningly fast regional power transition. The only question is how much larger the gap between China and its neighbors will become. Countries are rapidly increasing their economic ties to China and each other. And East Asian countries have steadily reduced their defense spending, which suggests these countries think most of the region's unresolved issues are not worth fighting over. All countries in the region have to coexist with each other—none are picking up and moving somewhere else. Countries are dealing with that reality and seeking diplomatic rather than military solutions with each other.

The standard response to more than a quarter-century of stability is to credit the United States: all Asian countries “must be” free-riding on a U.S. commitment to the region. However, this runs counter to the evidence that over the same time

Figure 2: East Asian Defense Spending, 1990-2015

Source: Stockholm Institute of Peace Research, 2016

period, the U.S. military commitment has declined, U.S. attention has wavered, and indeed the perception of U.S. inattention over the past few decades even prompted the Obama administration to claim it was “pivoting” to Asia. These two trends are hard to square: if East Asian countries did not respond even to reductions in U.S. deployments and attention, then perhaps they do not see the remaining issues worth fighting over. After all, these countries show no signs of hedging, in either their economic relations with China or in their military expenditures. If countries were worried and thought the United States might leave, they would presumably be preparing at least in part for that possibility. Instead, the defense spending trends show powerfully a steady, decades-long reduction, even in the face of massive increases in Chinese power and wavering U.S. commitment to the region.

This East Asian reality runs counter to a largely Western narrative of threat inflation that views China’s rise as dangerous and the region as increasingly unstable. Indeed, for over a quarter century, some scholars have made dire and continued predictions that East Asia is going to experience an arms race, that the regional security dilemma is intensifying, and that dangerous instability driven by China is just around the corner.³¹ In recent years, perceptions of increased Chinese assertiveness, regional fears, and a muscular U.S. rebalancing effort toward the Pacific have increased concern among some observers that the region may be drifting toward rivalry and containment blocs. However, there is little evidence that East Asian states are engaged in an arms race, and few states

are sending costly signals about their resolve to suffer the costs of war. The lessons and implications for power transition theory from late sixteenth and early seventeenth century East Asia are instructive for today. Indeed, being more aware of the nuanced view of power transitions leads to three observations about contemporary East Asian security.

First, the Ming crumbled from within—surely a cautionary tale to any declining power that a healthy domestic political situation and economy are key elements of any enduring grand strategy or hegemonic status. The lessons of the Ming-Qing transition from history point us to examine closely the domestic politics and economic vibrancy of the United States and China today, and to look for clues as to whether these countries and their leaders have internal stability and vision. Self-inflicted wounds may be more dangerous than actual ones.

For example, in 1990 it was widely believed that Japan was the next peer competitor to the United States. Today, that is not the case, not because of any war, but because Japan never recovered from the economic malaise of the 1990s. Domestic challenges removed Japan as a peer competitor of the United States. For China as well, immense internal problems may limit its immediate ability to challenge the United States.³² Chinese dreams of regional or even global leadership will depend as much or perhaps more on how it manages the domestic social, environmental, economic, and political issues within China than it will on how China deals with its external relations. Susan Shirk has argued that China is “strong abroad but fragile at home.”³³ China expert David Shambaugh argued in 2015 that, “China’s political system is badly broken,” writing that political censorship and repression has skyrocketed under Xi Jinping, money and elites are fleeing the country, corruption is endemic, and economic reforms are blocked by powerful interests.³⁴ It is widely reported that China spends more on internal security than it does on external defense.³⁵

We make no predictions as to whether or not those internal problems will be solved. After all, China has continued its economic, social, and political development much farther and faster than almost anyone thought possible a few decades ago. Certainly, pessimists have consistently overstated the problems facing China—author Gordon Chang has been confidently predicting the collapse of the Chinese Communist Party for over fifteen years, although the party appears stronger than ever in 2018.³⁶ Whether or not the Chinese regime is about to collapse or whether the economy is about to stall is not our point. Rather, more important is to point out that domestic issues may be more consequential for the future of China, and for China’s place in the world, than would be any titanic struggle with the United States over global dominance.

This same observation is true for the United States. As many have pointed out, the key issue for the United States is not some challenge from China that may occur in the abstract, nor Chinese challenge in the South China Seas that lies at the margins of U.S. interests. Rather, many observers believe that the central challenge to American hegemony arises from political, economic, and social issues within the United States itself.³⁷ From a massive financial crisis to a civil society that is fracturing in ways not seen in a half-century, the United States may inflict far more damage on itself than any external competitor could.³⁸

The second lesson for East Asian security is that power vacuums are often more dangerous than power transitions. The Qing succeeded largely because the Ming collapsed, *not* because the two engaged in a titanic battle for dominance and survival. In the twenty-first century, there is increasing debate and concern that the United States is ceding its leadership position in East Asia. Regional leadership involves soft power, and attractive power, as much as it does hard military power and bullying.³⁹

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Even as a Trump doctrine for East Asia and the world emerges, it is also clear that U.S. leadership and policy is in the midst of a major change. No matter what overall U.S. grand strategy emerges under and even after President Trump, the post-World War II approach and institutions appear to be in question in ways they never were before. This may accelerate a trend in East Asia that has already been underway. The region has widened its economic and institutional focus beyond the United States—the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) are all examples of this. The United States used to be the sole social and economic focus, but now it is only first among equals. Investment, trade, and financial flows between Northeast Asian countries and China continue to increase rapidly, despite political rivalry that dominates the headlines.⁴⁰ This waning of U.S. influence began long before Trump backed out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and began openly discussing the possibility of abrogating the U.S.-Korea free trade agreement. Betts notes that by the end of the Cold War, “only about 17 percent of U.S. military manpower was allocated to Asia, only about 6 percent was deployed forward in the region.”⁴¹ A generation later, those proportions are even smaller.

Finally, sometimes threats come from the smallest countries, not the biggest. Japan in 1592 was not deterred by China’s size. Today, despite a GDP of only \$50 billion, North Korea is a much bigger problem for regional, and even global, stability than China-Japan or China-United States relations. Outgoing

President Obama reportedly told incoming President Trump in December 2016 that North Korea would be his biggest challenge, a prediction that has sadly been true so far.⁴² Smaller powers can cause havoc.

East Asia's Lessons

A U.S.-China power transition would be global, not regional. And there are numerous other factors that would play into a truly global transition between the two countries. Yet in the short run, it is true that China is seen, particularly in the United States, as increasingly aggressive and the U.S. Pentagon is putting deterring China at the center of a new national defense strategy.⁴³ The Trump administration appears to be planning to take a more confrontational stance toward China and a more protectionist stance toward the rest of East Asia (and indeed the rest of the world). How this U.S.-China dynamic plays out will have an impact on regional security, of course. But if the United States and China increasingly compete directly with each other or engage in a trade war, it is unlikely that East Asian countries will feel the necessity to choose sides. The evidence is fairly clear: regional states want good relations with both the United States and China, and there is little appetite in the region for a containment coalition against China. Put differently, East Asian leaders and peoples share some, but not all, American priorities.

Considering the ample evidence of China's rising power, states in the region could easily have already begun a vigorous counterbalancing strategy against China if that were their intention. It seems reasonable to argue that if states were going to balance against China, they would have begun by now. Those who predict that a containment coalition will rise against China in the future need to explain why this has not already occurred, despite three decades of transparent and rapid Chinese economic, diplomatic, and military growth. Idle speculation about what could happen decades from now provides little insight into the decisions states are making today. If China's neighbors believed China would be more dangerous in the future, they would have begun preparing for that possibility already.

Despite the growing influence of East Asia, America lacks necessary expertise on the region. In a survey of international relations scholars published in 2012, seventy-six percent of U.S. respondents named Asia as the area of the world that will be the most important to their country in twenty years.⁴⁴ However, only thirteen percent of the respondents said Asia is the main region of their focus. Fifty-four percent of the top-40 international relations departments in the United States do not even offer a *single* graduate-level seminar on Asia. In other words, Ph.D. students are able to take a seminar on Asia in less than half of the

departments. There is clearly a major disconnect between the recognition that Asia is increasingly becoming important and the lack of expertise on East Asia in U.S. scholarly and policymaking circles.

This lack of expertise about Asia is a national security threat. It puts the United States at a severe disadvantage in dealing with a complex, ancient, and dynamic region. Americans do not understand Asia well. Its complex languages, varied religions, and cross-cutting tangle of conflicts are difficult to fully grasp. American scholars still focus more on other regions of the world. This strongly suggests

The lack of U.S. expertise about Asia is a national security threat.

that poorly informed U.S. action will have huge second-order effects that cannot be predicted. The squabbling by numerous countries over maritime claims lies at the margins of the territorial grid and does not pose a threat to the survival of any country. Neither Korea, Vietnam, nor Japan fears an actual Chinese military invasion.

There are indeed numerous problems to be solved, and the United States and China need to figure out how to live together. Their relationship is more than simply an East Asian relationship—it is potentially global. There is a desperate need for quality scholarship that can help guide American policymakers as they navigate the complex relationships with China and other countries in East Asia. The United States and China may or may not end up in an unlikely war, but the scholarship that uses European history to explain Asia's future does little to illuminate the issues at hand. The solution is not to double down on learning about Europe, but rather to invest deeply in the much more difficult task of learning East Asian languages, history, politics, and culture.

Scholars who worry about power transitions are influential because threat inflation about U.S.-China relations is an easy sell these days. Pessimists are never accused of being naïve, no matter how wrong they are. But talking ourselves into fear through theories based on biased and selective evidence from another continent harms U.S. foreign policy making and blinds us to the reality of East Asia today.

Notes

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