

# ***The U.S.-China Power Shift Which Side Should Operate More Conservatively to Achieve a Peaceful Power Transfer?***

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**Abstract:** The world is witnessing the rise of China as a global power and its increasing influence, which have led to a reconfiguration of the international order and have challenged the long-standing US hegemony. The intensifying competition between these two global powers raises concerns about tense security conflicts affecting the stability of the international system. The dynamics between the United States and China have reached a critical juncture, and questions about the nature and implications of the possible future power shift between the two states have become increasingly pertinent. Engaging in discussing the classic topic in international relations - power transitions, this paper explores which side should adopt a more conservative approach between the US and China to ensure a peaceful power transition. Drawing from historical precedents and the current global landscape, the analysis delves into the potential benefits and challenges of various strategies pursued by both nations. By evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each side's approaches, this study aims to shed light on the pathways that can lead to a harmonious transition of power between the United States and China, emphasizing the importance of constructive dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding. Ultimately, this paper offers insights contributing to the ongoing discussion on managing the U.S.-China power shift to maintain global peace and stability.

**Keywords:** power transition, rising and declining power strategies, stag hunt

## **1. Introduction**

The global landscape has been undergoing a notable power transfer as China and the United States vie for influence and contend for dominance on numerous fronts. United States' current score results from several factors that all had a role in 2020. Dismissing inspectors general, prosecuting or terminating whistleblowers, and seeking to control or alter information on COVID-19 are all examples of how the Trump administration has undercut government openness. Mass demonstrations occurred throughout the year, and although they were mostly peaceful, there were several notable incidents of violence, police brutality, and fatal clashes with counter-protesters or armed vigilantes. Since 2010, the number of journalists imprisoned and physically attacked has increased dramatically, typically while covering protests. Lastly, the electoral institutions were under the extreme strain of the departing president's startling efforts to reverse his election defeat, culminating in his instigating rioters who stormed the Capitol as Congress gathered to affirm the results in January 2021 [1]. This issue has weakened the United States' overseas reputation and brought to light the dangers of political divisiveness and extremism at home. A Time magazine cover article referenced the January 6 Capitol

uprising as evidence that the US is becoming a “Divided States of America” due to internal political conflict [2]. Other internal issues also impede US advancement. The COVID-19 high death rate negatively impacts federal and state governments. Inflation, poor infrastructure, and supply-chain problems worsen gun violence and high crime rates, which already affect the U.S. economy. On the other hand, China has been rising since it refocused on manufacturing inside global capitalism in the 1980s for several reasons. In a historical twist of irony, China was struggling with its colonial past, in contrast to the Soviet Union. Hong Kong was under British rule until 1997; Macau was under Portuguese control until 1999; and US politicians still consider Taiwan a protectorate.

China is now the world’s second-largest economy, possessing significant strength in military power, advanced technologies and cultural expansion. The rise of China threatens US hegemony over the world to a great extent. Like the Cold War, long-term antagonism between the US and China is inevitable. However, there are also the vulnerabilities within China’s great rejuvenation. Corruption challenges stability in Chinese politics [3]. China’s “software” (banking and service industries) is less developed than its “hardware” (high-speed trains and other infrastructure projects), leaving it vulnerable to global financial crises. China’s autocratic political system and lack of transparency hurt its soft power and increased social inequality and instability. Finally, China’s aging population may stall its economy, and the degradation of natural resources portends significant ecological and environmental difficulties. China’s need for more transparency in decision-making would hinder its modernization and partnership with its neighbors and the US. Hence, it is important to note that the power dynamics between the United States and China are multifaceted and complicated.

Based on internal issues and external circumstances both countries are facing as a background, this article investigates the competitive interplay between these two entities in light of power dynamics. Focusing on the crucial question of which state should act more conservatively in order to achieve a peaceful power shift, there might be a situation akin to a prisoner’s dilemma. This essay will mainly explore potential strategies for both declining and rising powers and the implications of each approach. The conclusion will also try to provide some insights into the path forward to navigate a peaceful transfer of power.

## **2. The Strategies of Declining Power**

### **2.1. Neo-isolationism**

To put it simply, neo-isolationism is the least ambitious and, at least among foreign policy experts, the least popular grand strategy choice. “The new isolationists have adopted a narrow vision of U.S. national interests, making internationalism pointless and hindering national interests. Survival of the nation requires preserving” U.S. interests are limited to protecting its citizens’ safety, freedom, and property. The new isolationism is also grounded on a realist understanding of international politics and emphasizes national sovereignty. Its supporters query, “Who can challenge the sovereignty, territorial integrity, or safety of the United States?” Nobody is the reply they provide. A precarious power balance in Eurasia is now due to the Soviet Union’s demise [4]. There are enough affluent and competent powers on either end of Eurasia to constrain Russia or China if either starts to build up its military force [5]. Russia and China do mutually collaborate to restrain each other. As a result, no nation can subjugate the others and amass enough resources and workforce to challenge the American way of life. This tactic, similar to isolationism, recognizes that the presence of vast seas makes this kind of danger very implausible. While not entirely self-sufficient, the United States is better positioned than most to “go it alone,” controlling over one-quarter of the gross global product, twice as much as its closest rival, Japan. Military strength among the United States’ northern and southern neighbors is low and will remain low for some time. The United States ranks among the best in the world regarding national security. In a strategic sense, the United States is safe [6].

Considering the US's ambition to sustain its hegemony, it seems unlikely for the US to take such a conservative approach. United States' withdrawal from the 2015 Paris climate agreement might be an example because this let China and the EU take over the leading role of the global climate regime to some extent. However, many democrats strongly criticized Trump's decision, and Biden rejoined the agreement in 2021, right after he was elected president. Hence, the approach was not adopted in the end in this case.

## 2.2. Band Wagoning

Quincy Wright's *A Study of War*, and Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of Multinational Politics* were the first to use "bandwagoning" to describe the behavior of international alliances. Wright and Waltz use the word "bandwagoning" to describe the opposing strategy of "balancing," which they term "the underdog policy"; if "bandwagoning" means to join the stronger coalition, "balancing" means to associate with the weaker side. Unlike Waltz, Wright thought big powers would resort to bandwagoning to maintain power equilibrium [7]. To put it another way, this is the case where "the stronger in a particular battle is a relatively weak state whose strengthening is essential to keep a more powerful neighbor in check." The most robust and revolutionary of the emerging nations have historically drawn the highest number of bandwagoners. This striking anomaly goes against the expectations of the balance of power theory. Look at the major nations' reactions to revolutionary France and Nazi Germany. Prussia, Russia, Spain, and Austria joined Imperial France at different points between 1795 and 1814; similarly, Italy, Japan, Russia in 1939, and perhaps France in 1940 all joined Nazi Germany. Neither revolutionary France nor Nazi Germany had any allies save Britain and the United States. However, the United States was not a major player in the Napoleonic wars, and it did not take any significant steps to counter Nazi aggression until after Hitler had declared war on it [8].

Generally, it is better for declining power to act more conservatively to defend its interests. History also proves this, as the Soviets, joining the most potent and most dangerous side in the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, was little more than bandwagoning since it let them escape a German assault while allowing them to capture practically undeserved prizes in Central Europe. Redirecting the German onslaught westward, where Stalin anticipated the two sides would bleed each other white to the benefit of the Soviet Union, was a clear case of buck-passing. Because of this, the agreement was a textbook case of "free riding," the Soviet Union would reap the advantages of a much-reduced German and global capitalist threat without bearing the expense of fighting. Last, it was fair since the Soviets gained territory and resources to defend against Germany if and when it returned to the East. The Germans were given more time to prepare for an assault, which allowed them to replenish their dwindling troops.

There may be possibilities for the US to use band wagoning approach. In the Russia-Ukraine war, the US called for condemnation from the West World. We unified the EU to impose extensive sanctions against Russia in response to Russia's full-scale invasion. This showed the US's remarkable ability to use the power of coalition to obtain its interest.

## 3. The Strategies of Rising Power

According to the Global Language Monitor, the rise of China was the most significant event of the last decade, surpassing both 9/11 and the Iraq War. The involvement of China at the G20 and the recent 59th Munich security conference was illustrative of the country's rise to the forefront of international efforts to find solutions to urgent issues such as climate change, the Russia-Ukraine crisis, and so on. On the other hand, while this is happening, the authorities in China have been quite loud about the nation's lower GDP per capita and the significant problems inside the country.

According to statements made by Madame Fu Ying, a former Chinese Ambassador to the UK, while China has a sizable economy, its GDP per capita is slightly more than \$3,000 [9]. This places China 104th in the world, behind countries such as Jamaica and Namibia, which both have higher GDPs. Apart from the economic power, China's rise in political and socio-cultural levels and its progress in advanced technologies, such as big data, space tech, and military hardware, significantly challenge US dominance in different areas. Regarding how China deals with the US's fear of being out-competed, the approaches for rising power are mentioned below.

### 3.1. Proactive & Offensive

Relegation is the quick revision of the status quo against the interests of a waning state, casting it out of the ranks of the great powers; "sap significant resources from the waning state, dramatically undercut its capabilities, and threaten the existing distribution of power even in the face of opposition from other actors" (sap significant resources from the waning state, dramatically undercut its capabilities, and threaten the existing distribution of power even in the face of opposition from other actors).

A weakening great power can receive substantial military, diplomatic, and economic assistance from a strengthening strategy (one that is intense and predatory), such as when the United States expelled the Soviet Union from central and eastern Europe in 1989. This enabled the United States to maintain the status quo of the global power structure [10].

One example of this may be seen in the late 1940s when the United States attempted to help Great Britain recover and strengthen its defenses.

However, no prominent signal shows China has chosen any similar approach, although it tends to build its alliance through bilateral and multilateral economic cooperation such as BRI, APEC, BRIC, etc.

### 3.2. Conservative & Defensive

It is weakening, which means progressively transferring power against the falling state without instantly harming it. This might include arming the falling form, attacking its secondary interests (such as outlying colonies), delaying economic development, or starting diplomatic standoffs. Thus, the rising state will profit long-term while avoiding short-term costs.

The bolstering strategy also plays a significant part which maintains the status quo and preventing a declining state from slipping down the great power ranks without investing substantial resources or sacrificing vital interests or relationships; it can offer a declining state limited diplomatic, political, and economic support on an ad hoc basis. Boosting approach is limited, which keeps a sinking state in the great power ranks [11].

In truth, governments have waged preventive wars for offensive and defensive goals, the former to capitalize on a decreasing window of opportunity and the latter to prevent a prospective vulnerability. If the expected costs of peace are higher than those of conflict, politicians may choose preventive war with little chance of victory, as in Japan's 1941 war against the United States.

Thus, whatever technique is best for gaining power is a constant debate. A growing power should use predatory tactics like a strengthening strategy to transfer power. They must first show peace and collaboration [12].

## 4. Discussion

The necessity for strategic adjustment is created by the sense of high urban vulnerability due to quick and unfavorable alterations in the international balance of power; nevertheless, this perception also serves to thwart the actualization of such adjustment [13]. Instead of encouraging restraint and

moderation, feelings of extreme vulnerability paradoxically inspire extremes of both cooperation and competition. The term “high vulnerability” is used in situations of severe strategic inadequacy. Decision-makers think that a conflict that breaks out in the core would likely endanger the sovereignty or territorial integrity of the metropole since their resources, especially when combined with those of their allies, are inadequate to deal with threats to the homeland. A three-step cycle begins with a person’s perception of vulnerability and ends with self-defeating actions [14].

At time 1, strategic beliefs that encourage elites to pursue radical policies are prompted by high urban vulnerability under uncertainty about whether, when, and where threats will come. When the strategic climate is exceptional, the resulting policies are also outstanding. The elites of failing powers tend to pursue policies that are both too cooperative inside the core and too competitive with neighboring states. Rising nations’ elites often seek competitive policies internally and externally [15]. This action is the sensible reaction to a need for more strategic options. At time 2, elites spread specific images and concepts of empire across the body politic to rally domestic support for these extreme measures. To keep up with shifting public opinion, the decision-making bodies, bureaucratic structures, and military formations tasked with developing and enforcing national policy must adapt their core functions and tasks accordingly. Therefore, there is a mutually reinforcing cycle between the views of the elite and the strategic culture. At time 3, as the negative impacts of radical policies increase and strategic ambiguity decrease, elites understand that their policies threaten the safety of the metropole by causing it to be strategically exposed, encircled, or overextended. Decision-makers realize that their views are at odds with new data. Although their convictions change slowly in response to contradictory facts, they recognize that they must alter their approach. However, purposeful cultural modifications carried on by elite lobbying during Time 2 prevent adaptation [16]. By increasing the domestic political costs of reorienting grand strategy to unacceptable levels and by instilling the elite community with full strategic images and conceptions, strategic culture constrains elites by reorienting individuals and bureaucracies toward the attainment of specific goals, effectively removing desirable policy options from consideration [17].

The main argument is that considering both sides’ techniques and the fact that both sides are still determining what their opponent is after.

#### **4.1. Prisoner’s Dilemma or a Stag Hunt**

The rising power may feel pressure, and the declining power may fear any aggressive action the rising power may take to ask for a disruptive change in the existing international order. People from these two states may feel themselves in a situation similar to the prisoner’s dilemma. In this scenario, the rising power’s expansion goal is unclear: what it wants (any particular interest; in which field). Many realist scholars hold a negative view, linking this with their prediction of an inevitable security dilemma in the future, because rising power’s efforts of increasing its strength to ensure its security will be perceived by other states especially declining power as a signal of threatening its current security space [18].

However, the presence of nuclear weapons, which removes the prospect of open hostilities between major world powers, means that the prisoner’s plight has been replaced with a stag hunt [19]. Instead, the most threatening aspect is the absence of power, which indicates that this is a game of cooperation.

#### **4.2. Negotiation and Mutual Accommodation**

In negotiation and mutual accommodation, the stag hunt is the main thing. In game theory, the stag hunt, the assurance game, the trust problem, or the shared interest game depicts a conflict between personal protection and group cohesiveness. This conflict may be resolved by negotiation and mutual



accommodation. Hunting for stags; the four-step technique of Kupchan Peace that is stable, yet with significant restrictions: The power transition between the United Kingdom and the United States is distinct from the power transition between the United States and China due to the absence of cultural and ideological similarities between the two countries. Compared to the current situation faced by the United States, the United Kingdom could adjust to the order it established in the past [20].

Negotiation and mutual accommodation do have a positive impact on the peaceful power shift to some extent. Still, the agreement on order and legitimacy of the new world order is hard to achieve because both countries need help to completely trust each other, especially when there is an overlap of interests which causes a problem of who can make concessions.

## 5. Conclusion

It is preferable for a declining power to operate more conservatively to safeguard its interests. The events of history also demonstrate this to be true. For example, the Soviet Union's decision to join the strongest and the most dangerous side in the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact was little more than bandwagoning. By doing so, the Soviet Union could avoid a German assault while also being granted the opportunity to seize practically undeserved prizes in Central Europe. Moreover, it seems reasonable for a rising power to use predatory strategies like strengthening strategies to transfer power. America is no longer the only global powerhouse now. The second-largest Chinese economy is thriving and prosperous. Long-term hostility between the United States and China is inevitable, just like the Cold War.

Negotiation and mutual accommodation positively impact the peaceful transfer of power to some extent; however, reaching an agreement on the order and the legitimacy of the new world order is difficult. This is because both countries can only partially trust each other, which is especially problematic when there is a conflict over overlapping interests, which raises the question of who can make concessions. There is a possibility that the growing power will experience pressure, and there is a possibility that the declining power will be terrified of any aggressive action that the rising power may take to push for a transformative shift in the established order of international affairs. This results in a predicament often referred to as the prisoner's dilemma. In this situation, the expansion aim of the rising power is still being determined; it is not evident what the rising power intends. The existence of nuclear weapons, which eliminate the possibility of open hostilities between major global forces, implies that the prisoner's dilemma has been replaced with a stag hunt. Nuclear weapons remove the case of open hostilities between major world powers. Instead, the lack of authority, which implies that this is a game of collaboration, is the part that poses the greatest danger. In Negotiation & mutual accommodation, the stag hunt is the critical thing. The stag hunt, or the assurance game, trust issue, or shared interest game, is used to portray a conflict between personal protection and collective cohesion in game theory. Other names for this game include the trust problem and the shared interest game. This dispute could be handled by negotiation and accommodating both sides' needs. However, stag-hunting using the Kupchan method which consists of four steps for a steady peace is accompanied by considerable constraints. Limited by the length of the article, they are not all listed in the above discussion.

In conclusion, as a lens through which to examine the mechanics of power, this essay explores the dynamic of competition between these two organizations. There is never a shortage of discussion on which method of electricity acquisition is superior. What is necessary for both declining and rising power to do is to first demonstrate a commitment to peace and cooperation and have the determination to truly achieve it.

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