Why the United States and China Are on a Collision Course

BOTTOM LINES

- **Predicting U.S.-China Relations.** China’s rise has sparked a debate about whether or not we will see another round of great power conflict, this time between the United States and China in Asia.

- **Uncertain Intentions and International Competition.** Great powers cannot be confident that their peers have peaceful intentions and therefore feel compelled to strengthen their forces and alliances. In doing so, they trigger dangerous action-reaction spirals with the potential for arms races, crises, and possibly even wars.

- **The Inevitability of Conflict.** In the future, the United States and China will likely engage in fierce competition that neither will be able to avoid. A major reason for this tragic state of affairs is mutual uncertainty about the other’s intentions.

**By Sebastian Rosato**

*This policy brief is based on “The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers,” which appears in the Winter 2014/15 issue of International Security.*

**PREDICTING U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS**

The rise of China has the potential to transform the balance of power in Asia. If the Chinese military and economy continue to grow at their current pace over the next few decades, the United States will confront a genuine peer competitor for the first time since the Cold War.

Assuming that this scenario unfolds, interested observers will want to know its effect on international politics. Are the United States and China destined to compete or can they find a way to coexist?

**UNCERTAIN INTENTIONS AND INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION**

The likelihood of international competition is shaped largely by what states conclude about each other’s intentions—that is, their plans regarding the threat or use of force over the medium to long term. Great powers that are confident that their peers have peaceful intentions are more likely to maintain good relations with them even as their power rises and falls. On the other hand, states that are uncertain about others’ intentions view any adverse shifts in military power as threatening. Consequently, political and military escalation become more likely.

There are good reasons to think that great powers cannot reach confident conclusions about the intentions of others. Direct knowledge is elusive because such plans constitute “private” information. Only states know their own intentions. Even in open democracies such
as the United States, plans about the threat or use of force against major rivals are closely held by a handful of people who want to keep them secret, face little pressure to reveal them, and can lie or spin if pressed.

Many experts acknowledge the problem of private information but counter that states can discern intentions indirectly. According to one set of indirect arguments, great powers can infer others’ intentions from their domestic characteristics. To take a well-known example, states seeking security tend to be peaceful whereas states seeking hegemony tend to be aggressive. There is also considerable support for the claim that states trust and respect others that share their ideology and are therefore likely to harbor peaceful intentions toward them. Perhaps the most common statement of all: democracies generally have peaceful designs because their leaders are constrained by pacific publics and other antiwar societal groups.

Arguments based on domestic characteristics are flawed. Figuring out a state’s goals is a difficult task. Indeed, scholars armed with the documentary record and hindsight still debate whether Imperial Germany and the Soviet Union sought security or hegemony in Europe. The point may be moot, however, because a state’s goals say little about its intentions. A security seeker may plan to enhance its security by peaceful means, but it may also plan to do so by eliminating its rivals. As for shared ideology, there are too many examples of great powers threatening or using force against co-ideologues for them to trust and respect each other. The most striking example is World War I, in which Germany fought against four other liberal great powers (Britain, France, Italy, and the United States). Further, ideological arguments ignore the role of nationalism even though it is the most powerful political ideology of the modern period. In a world populated by nationalist states, trust and respect are in short supply. Instead, states understand that others pursue their selfish interests, which may cause them to be peaceful, but may also cause them to be aggressive. Meanwhile, claims that democratic leaders are especially constrained from using or threatening force abroad miss the fact that they can and do exploit their reputation as foreign policy experts, their privileged access to information, and their authority in security affairs to pursue their preferred policies. The evidence on this point is clear: democracies are no more peaceful than other kinds of states.

A second set of indirect arguments maintains that great powers can deduce others’ intentions by examining their behavior. According to one popular claim, states can signal peaceful designs by markedly reducing their military arsenals or by procuring mainly defensive weapons. Another prominent contention is that states can communicate peaceful intent by joining international institutions that proscribe aggression. Yet another suggests that states can infer intentions by looking at past incidents where their peers have threatened or used force.

These behavior arguments also do not withstand scrutiny. Great powers are unlikely to engage in significant arms reductions because doing so may make them vulnerable and signal a lack of resolve. Indeed, the historical record reveals that great powers have rarely engaged in meaningful restraint. The offense-defense distinction has also proven to be of little use for signaling intentions. For one thing, states have been unable to distinguish between the two, as demonstrated at the famous 1932 World Disarmament Conference. Besides, great powers have multiple missions and goals, which means that they must have a mix of weapons and cannot prioritize defense for signaling purposes. Nor do institutions reduce uncertainty. Major security institutions such as the Concert of Europe, the League of Nations, and the United Nations have not required explicit renunciations of force and have not allowed penalties against rule breakers, thus providing scant evidence that the signatories had peaceful designs. Moreover, institutional membership is a poor indicator of peaceful intent because powerful states cannot be forced to abide by the rules they establish. History is replete with examples of great powers violating their commitments regarding the use of force. As for past actions, they may provide insight into a state’s intentions if that state has the same leader with the same goals, acting in the same domestic context, and confronting the same interna-
tional environment today as in the past. In reality, however, domestic and international politics are constantly changing.

To make matters worse, states have significant incentives to conceal or misrepresent their intentions. Those planning aggression may try to hide this fact or appear peaceful to lull adversaries into a false sense of security. Similarly, those that are peacefully inclined may hide their plans or appear aggressive to deter aspiring predators. More broadly, all states follow the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping’s advice to conceal their capacities, interests, and plans until they are ready to act. Because all great powers know this, their mutual uncertainty is heightened even further.

These issues—all of which pertain to current intentions—pale compared to the problem of divining future intentions. Even if a state could determine another’s current designs with confidence, it cannot know what they will be later on because intentions can change and there are many situations in which they are liable to do so. New policymakers with new ideas may come to power, or the same people may rethink their plans. Other changes may arise from international trends: shifting power constellations, technological innovations, or diplomatic realignments are all reasons for great powers to take stock and revise their intentions.

THE INEVITABILITY OF CONFLICT

The United States and China are destined to engage in an intense security competition if the latter completes its rise. Uncertain about the other side’s current and future intentions but acutely aware of its formidable capabilities, Washington and Beijing will go to great lengths to strengthen their military and diplomatic positions in Asia, triggering a dangerous action-reaction spiral with the potential for arms racing, crises, and possibly even war.

There are signs that this competitive logic is already unfolding. Over the past five years, the Barack Obama administration has coupled repeated demands that China clarify its intentions with a military and diplomatic “pivot” to Asia. For its part, the Chinese leadership has expressed serious misgivings about U.S. strategic plans and has displayed what commentators describe as an increased “assertiveness” in the region.

This situation is tragic because it is virtually inevitable. Given the nature of intentions, there is little Washington and Beijing will be able to do or say to persuade the other side that it has and will always have peaceful intentions. In tomorrow’s Asia, great power conflict is destiny.

Statements and views expressed in this policy brief are solely those of the author and do not imply endorsement by Harvard University, the Harvard Kennedy School, or the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

RELATED RESOURCES


ABOUT THE BELFER CENTER

The Belfer Center is the hub of the Harvard Kennedy School’s research, teaching, and training in international security affairs, environmental and resource issues, and science and technology policy.

The Center has a dual mission: (1) to provide leadership in advancing policy-relevant knowledge about the most important challenges of international security and other critical issues where science, technology, environmental policy, and international affairs intersect; and (2) to prepare future generations of leaders for these arenas. Center researchers not only conduct scholarly research, but also develop prescriptions for policy reform. Faculty and fellows analyze global challenges from nuclear proliferation and terrorism to climate change and energy policy.

ABOUT INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

*International Security* is America’s leading peer-reviewed journal of security affairs. It provides sophisticated analyses of contemporary, theoretical, and historical security issues. *International Security* is edited at Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and is published by The MIT Press.

For more information about this publication, please contact the *International Security* editorial assistant at 617-495-1914.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sebastian Rosato is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame.

FOR ACADEMIC CITATION: