Are the United States and China destined for conflict, or might Sino-American relations be managed more peacefully? Many scholars of international politics cast a concerned eye at the prospect of a rising great power approaching the capabilities of a relatively declining great power. Following this logic, the United States and China may find themselves caught in the “Thucydides Trap,” by which the fear of a rising great power produces war. Other scholars are more optimistic. They point to the growing engagement of China in international institutions, to the high levels of economic interdependence between the two countries, or to the presence of stable nuclear deterrence as factors that limit the possibility of conflict between the two states.

Underexplored in these debates is the mix of cooperative and competitive strategies that declining powers typically pursue toward rising powers. Though many scholars have understandably fixated on the danger of conflict between rising and declining powers, the empirical record of power transitions reveals a more nuanced picture characterized by strategies that balance cooperation and conflict. Why would such cooperation take place in the shadow of rising and potentially threatening power?

In order to move this debate forward, I make four arguments. First, over the last three decades, the United States has done more to abet the rise of China than to
thwart it. To those who are most concerned about the dynamics of rising great
powers, this behavior is surprising.

Second, in order to explain this behavior, I focus on the time horizons of pol-
itical leaders in the United States and China. Cooperation between the United
States and China has been facilitated by the interaction of short American time
horizons and long Chinese time horizons.

Third, such cooperation depends primarily on the continued patience of China,
but there are good reasons to doubt whether Beijing will be able to sustain a
patient approach to its rise. Even if China continues to grow more powerful,
those capabilities will not wholly speak for themselves. Whether or not China’s
rise is a peaceful one ultimately will depend not only on the trajectory of
Chinese capabilities, but also on American perceptions of China’s intentions for
using those capabilities both now and in the future.

Fourth, the resolution of short-term threats that the United States faces—such
as from North Korea and Iran—would, for better or for worse, provide the United
States with the opportunity to focus on the more long-term threat posed by China.

**Unexpected Cooperation and the Rise of China**

“Integration, the prevailing U.S. approach toward China and the one followed
assiduously since the 1970s,” observe long-time Asia hands Robert Blackwill
and Ashley Tellis, “has undoubtedly contributed to China’s rise as a future
rival to American power.”¹ The United States has not been naïve about the
rise of China. The U.S. military has made little secret of its efforts to prepare
for the potential threat. At the same time, however, the United States has
been China’s greatest trade partner and runs substantial trade deficits on an
annual basis. As a consequence, China has accumulated significant holdings
of American debt, and while there is good reason to doubt whether such hold-
ings can be used strategically against the United States, there is less reason to
doubt whether growing Chinese capital can be translated into Chinese military
power. Far from strangling the baby in the cradle, the United States has been
enabling China’s continuing growth into an adolescent, if not yet a fully
grown, great power.

To many theorists of international relations, such cooperation is fundamentally
surprising. Great powers like the United States must fear the rise of other great
powers that can threaten their interests. For these theorists, Chinese capabilities
are inherently threatening, and prudent great powers must assume the worst
about how those capabilities will be used.⁵ In the dangerous world of international
politics, great powers cannot afford to risk their security on uncertain indicators
of Chinese intentions. Thus, for all the proclamations of China’s interest in a
“peaceful rise,” the United States must prepare itself for the possibility that those intentions will change for the worse.

Now-or-Later Dilemmas
Great powers face “now-or-later dilemmas” when confronting rising great powers. They can pay the costs now of addressing a rising power when it is likely to be less expensive than later, but those costs now may be unattractive for domestic political reasons. Alternatively, they can put off the costs until later, which may have short-term advantages but make the rising power more difficult to deal with later. Faced by such a dilemma, declining great powers have tended historically to kick the can down the road because of both the cost of acting now and the underappreciated ways in which probabilistic risk assessments can encourage cooperation.

Scholars of international politics have often overestimated the likelihood of competition between rising and declining powers because they have confused risk and uncertainty. Uncertainty is best thought of as a situation in which states cannot estimate the probability of any given outcome. Under such a circumstance, it would indeed be sensible for a great power to assume the worst about the intentions of a rising power and act competitively toward it. In most cases, however, what declining powers confront in actuality is not uncertainty, but risk. Risk in international politics, like in our everyday lives, can be estimated probabilistically. Just as we know that there is some probability that we will get hit by a car when we cross the street, states can estimate a probability that a rising power has malign intentions. As they receive more information, those states refine their beliefs and may become more or less certain. Unlike many scholars’ predictions, states prefer to act probabilistically because the costs of acting on worst-case assumptions about a state’s intentions may be both exorbitant and unnecessary. The heavy costs of a preventive war may be unattractive for both domestic and international reasons. Thus, states’ actions are often based on probabilistic risk assessments, which increase the likelihood of cooperation rather than worst-case assumptions more likely to lead to competition.

States are similarly reluctant to pursue irreversible strategies toward rising great powers. Irreversible strategies foreclose future options for a state, and the pursuit of competitive, irreversible strategies may create a self-fulfilling prophecy of competition and conflict. Competitive strategies tend to increase antipathy between states while leading them to invest resources in military capabilities that only make a state appear more threatening. Unwinding that threat is far more difficult.
than creating it in the first place. The concept of irreversibility is not new to the social sciences, even as it may be new to thinking about state strategies in international politics. Economists have discussed irreversibility in the context of land development policies, while others have discussed it ranging from environmental policy to nuclear energy. In each case, the argument is that the prospect of irreversibility makes actors more reluctant to pursue certain strategies. Similarly, in international politics, states often refrain from pursuing irreversible strategies as long as there remains some reasonable probability that a state’s intentions may be benign. Competitive strategies are costly, and leaders would prefer to avoid paying those costs.

How Time Horizons Explain Cooperation

Existing great powers have a range of strategies available to pursue toward rising great powers. Roughly speaking, these strategies can be arrayed from more cooperative—such as trade and investment, military-to-military cooperation, and diplomatic engagement—to more competitive—such as arms racing, balancing alliances, or at an extreme, preventive war. These strategies vary in the degree to which they seek to constrain the growth of a rising great power as well as by how actively or passively they either constrain or enable a rising power. Finally, states rarely pursue only cooperative or competitive strategies. Most grand strategies are a combination, which allows states to hedge their bets on an inherently somewhat uncertain future.

I explain cooperation between existing and rising great powers like the United States and China by focusing on the interaction of the time horizons of the two states. I do not assume that existing great powers are forward-looking, nor do I assume that existing great powers have much confidence in their ability to shape the intentions of rising powers. Instead, I contend that declining, existing great powers are compelled to focus on short-term opportunities for pragmatic cooperation. Existing great powers must attend to immediate threats, and when they begin to decline, they cannot afford to sacrifice any short-term opportunities for gain in exchange for the possibility of long-term benefit. Meanwhile, rising great powers value cooperation as a way of sustaining their rise. Patience is a virtue for rising powers. As Deng Xiaoping famously advised at the end of the Cold War, “Observe things coolly, manage things calmly, hold one’s ground, hide our capacities and bide our time.
The pursuit of short-term gains by a rising power could lead declining powers to turn away from cooperation toward more competitive strategies. Cooperation emerges out of the interaction of these two time horizons, and cooperation is sustainable as long as both powers retain those preferences.

When the time horizons of either declining or rising powers shift, then the prospects for cooperation decline. Most obviously, a declining power is likely to shift more attention to the long term as the capabilities and intentions of a rising power become more of an apparent threat. The aggressive pursuit of short-term gains by a rising power leads a declining power to become increasingly concerned about a rising power’s long-term intentions. Declining powers are also more likely to focus on the long term when they face few imminent threats. Great powers rarely have this luxury, but when they do, they may expend resources on preventing the emergence of any other threats. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the United States faced few imminent threats, so more attention was focused on the possible threat posed by a rising China, no matter how distant that threat was. In the 2000 Republican presidential primaries, George W. Bush and John McCain actively debated the significance and severity of the threat posed by a rising China. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States became all-consuming by the threat of transnational terrorism in the short term, attention to the long-term threat posed by China faded, and cooperation between the United States and China continued.

As for rising powers, they are likely to become less patient, seeking short-term gains, under three conditions. First, nationalist populations may demand assertive behavior from their leaders. In such cases, domestic pressure to seek short-term rewards may supersede international incentives to remain patient. Second, smaller states may goad a rising power into behaving aggressively. If a smaller state claims a piece of territory as its own, the rising power may face the choice between letting that territory go or acting aggressively to reclaim it. Third, a rising power may reach the limits of what its current territory and resources can provide and seek to acquire new territory in order to feed its growth. All three of these mechanisms are rational, but they are also likely to draw the attention of existing great powers and make cooperation less likely.

Does the nature of the regime in either rising or declining powers affect the time horizons of their political leaders? Democratic leaders may be more inclined to short time horizons because of their necessary concern about the next election that they or their party faces. While democracies undoubtedly face such short-term pressures, recent research suggests that authoritarian leaders are also...
subject to the pressures of domestic audience costs. And tyrannical leaders may be particularly prone to paranoia that induces short time horizons. In short, all domestic political systems likely exert pressure on leaders to have short time horizons, leaving it as a poor explanation for variation in time horizons. And yet, rising powers of all regime types often take the long view and cooperate.

**Alternative Rationales for Cooperation**

There are three alternative rationales that might account for the pattern of cooperation with a rising power such as China. Each of these is worth considering both theoretically and empirically to see if they perform better than my temporal explanation for rising and existing powers. First, it might be the case that the United States is counting on other states to do the heavy lifting of balancing against a rising China. After all, other capable states like Russia, Japan, and South Korea are more geographically proximate, have more directly at stake, and may be encouraged to take the lead in resisting China’s rise. In the logic of such “buckpassing,” a great power recognizes the threat posed by another great power but does its best to get others to pay the costs of balancing. Meanwhile, the United States could continue to enjoy the benefits of cooperation even as others balance.

Buckpassing provides a plausible explanation for American cooperation with China, but it—and buckpassing in general—faces two significant logical problems. First, the logic of buckpassing requires that states recognize the long-term threat posed by a rising power, but this implies problematic assumptions about the foresight of political leaders. If state leaders are focused on the short term, they may not be cognizant of a long-term threat for which they want to pass the buck. As I have suggested above, existing great powers, like the United States, tend to be more focused on the short term. Second, buckpassing states can have no confidence that any other state will pick up the buck. If buckpassing is in one state’s interests, then presumably, it is in all states’ interests. Moreover, some states may simply be incapable of picking up the buck and effectively balancing. In the contemporary case, Washington could not have any confidence that any other state would choose to pay the cost of balancing, nor that they could effectively do so on their own.

An alternative argument suggests that the United States is trying to induce future cooperative behavior from China through a strategy of engagement. By this argument, Beijing would come to see the many benefits of cooperation, and it would recognize that it stands to gain more through cooperation than competition, even when it is more powerful. Following one liberal internationalist logic, the United States has been seeking since the end of the Cold War to cement a legitimate international order into which other great powers will
Even after the United States declines relative to China or other great powers, this order favorable to American interests would survive and be difficult to abandon. In the logic of engagement, a rising power’s intentions are uncertain, and cooperation is a strategy intended to push those intentions in a favorable direction. Through cooperation, a rising great power would come to see the benefits of the current international order and would, therefore, be less inclined to upend that order once it has the capabilities to do so. Existing great powers are willing to sacrifice some potential short-term advantages that might be gained by taking advantage of the rising power in order to cement a stable future international order. In the logic of engagement, the United States today would be seen as cooperating with China in order to transform it into a “responsible stakeholder” in the international order with little benefit to be gained from the rising power seeking radically to alter that order.

Like buckpassing, the logic of engagement cannot fully explain cooperative behavior. Even if an existing power induces a rising power to cooperate in the short term, it can have no confidence that such behavior will be sustained over the long term. The short-term rewards of cooperation may still be worth pursuing for their own sake, even if the benefits may not be sustainable. Realists are correct to be concerned about the possibility that intentions can always change, and while engagement might lessen the likelihood of such change, it cannot eliminate it. More specifically, engagement faces two logical challenges. First, it assumes that dominant powers are willing to sacrifice short-term opportunities in order to capture long-term gains. In the logic of Princeton University professor John Ikenberry’s argument, a risen great power foregoes an opportunity to capitalize on its dominant position in order to preserve a more beneficial order in the future. Such behavior may, however, be problematic for political leaders driven by either domestic or international factors to have shorter time horizons. Few political leaders have the luxury of such long-time horizons. Second, the arguments underestimate the incentives for rising great powers to modify the international system in ways that will suit their interests. There may, indeed, be elements of the international order that rising great powers will want to maintain, but the history of rising great powers, including of the United States when it rose, suggests that there will be elements of that order that the rising power will want to, at a minimum, modify, and at a maximum, completely transform. Existing powers may hope that cooperation has long-term beneficial effects on a rising power’s behavior, but it cannot alone be the motive for such cooperation.

A final rationale for cooperation between existing and rising powers might simply be the lack of alternatives. “If you can’t beat them, join ‘em,” might explain why the choice to cooperate is often made in the absence of plausible alternatives. If the trajectory of a rising power cannot effectively be impaired by the existing great power, then that state’s leaders might calculate that gaining
any potential benefits from cooperation is better than losing everything by fruitlessly pursuing more competitive strategies. By this argument, cooperation is borne out of resignation rather than any particular preference. With regard to contemporary China, the argument in this case would be that cooperation has been pursued with China because the United States had few realistic options for curtailing that growth. If resignation is the correct explanation for cooperation, then it is also a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more powerful a rising power becomes, the harder it is to envision alternative, more competitive strategies. Resignation begets only further resignation.

The challenge of this rationale for cooperation is that it tends to underestimate the alternatives that were plausibly available to an existing power. Influenced by the history of what actually transpired in a particular case, analysts find it difficult to look in retrospect and identify alternative strategies that might have been available. Moreover, analysts fail to appreciate the full range of options available to states. The choice for an existing power is not as simple as full-fledged assistance or preventive war. In between those two extremes lay a variety of other strategies and hybrids of economic, diplomatic, and military strategies. For example, an existing power may not be able fully to disrupt the economy of a rising power, but it can pursue more targeted economic approaches that may combine with diplomatic and military instruments to curtail the growth of the rising power. In the case of the U.S. response to China, the United States could not have disrupted the Chinese economy without doing damage to its own economy, but some economic tools combined with military and diplomatic ones may have had some effect, especially if employed early on in China’s rise. For example, the United States could have resisted China’s entry into the World Trade Organization, which facilitated its further integration into the global economy. Resignation, then, is often a poor explanation for cooperation even as the growing capabilities of a rising power may, in fact, limit the options available to an existing power. In most cases, cooperation arises not from resignation, but rather from a conscious choice based on a calculation of the costs and benefits of doing so. The short-term costs of disrupting the rise of another great power could grow to be prohibitive.

The Track Record of Cooperation

U.S. cooperation with a rising China is not a new phenomenon. In fact, an analysis of reactions to rising great powers over the last two centuries reveals a pattern of behavior between existing and rising powers. I draw on evidence from four such cases and make one central point in each: First, in the case of the late nineteenth century rise of Germany, German chancellor Otto von Bismarck effectively managed European time horizons to keep them focused on opportunities for
short-term cooperation and not the risk of Germany’s long-term rise. Second, British reactions to the rise of the United States at the turn of the twentieth century demonstrate how more temporally proximate threats, in that case the threat posed by Germany, leads states to cooperate with more distantly rising states. Third, European reactions to the rise of interwar Germany illustrate how even in a situation when we might expect existing great powers to be most skeptical, they are still willing to cooperate. Finally, in the case of the U.S. reaction to the rise of the Soviet Union, it was growing concern about long-term Soviet intentions, not just its capabilities, which led to the emergence of the Cold War.

The Rise of Nineteenth-Century Germany

Despite abundant reasons to be concerned about the rise of Germany following its unification at the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, other great powers in Europe showed little inclination to balance against Germany until Bismarck left office in 1890. Bismarck adeptly positioned Germany to be an “honest broker” in Europe, alleviating any concerns about long-term German intentions. At the same time, in the multipolar structure of Europe, great powers were too concerned about short-term conflicts to devote much attention to the potential long-term threat posed by Germany. Kaiser Wilhelm II and Bismarck’s successor, Leo Caprivi, were less inclined to offer reassuring signals of Germany’s intentions. In 1890, Germany abandoned the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia, pushing Russia toward a closer relationship with France. By the end of 1893, the Franco-Russian alliance had been consummated—the first active effort to balance against Germany since its unification.

For Bismarck, patience was a virtue, and for other European powers, the prospect of paying the short-term costs to act preventively against German was unattractive. The result was an unexpected period of cooperation with the continent’s fastest rising power. The perceived need of Bismarck’s successors for a more aggressive foreign policy reflecting their impatience effectively brought an end to this period of cooperation and began the road to World War I.

The Rise of the United States

The rise of the United States is noteworthy because it occurred without any great power conflict. In particular, despite a century of animosity, the United States and Great Britain were able to establish the basis for a friendly relationship even as the United States became more powerful and posed a threat to British interests. In a
series of crises in the late nineteenth century—over Venezuela, control over a prospective Panama Canal, and the Canada-Alaska boundary—the British ultimately ceded control over the western hemisphere to the United States. Importantly, these British interests were not insignificant. Both sides recognized the risk of war over Venezuela, and the British admiralty expressed great concern about the prospects for American control over the canal.

In the end, though, London ceded to the United States for two major reasons that accord with the expectations of my time-based argument. First, at the same time that the United States was rising, so was Germany. The threat posed by Germany was more proximate, both temporally and geographically, and Britain needed to prioritize that threat over any more distant American one. Second, unlike in other cases, Great Britain came to the conclusion that American intentions were not threatening to British interests. A shared Anglo-Saxon identity not only alleviated any concern about the American threat, it also formed the foundation of the Anglo-American “special relationship.” Temporal distance and perceptions of long-term intentions played a critical role in the peaceful power transition between Britain and the United States.¹⁸

The Rise of Interwar Germany

Europe’s great powers were immediately suspicious of the prospects of a resurgent Germany after World War I. The Treaty of Versailles famously limited Germany’s military and imposed harsh economic reparations, yet Europe’s powers also found space for cooperation with Germany beginning in the middle of the 1920’s. Through the Locarno Treaties and subsequent economic agreements, Europe’s great powers reduced the economic burden on Germany. Meanwhile, through the Treaty of Rapallo, the Soviet Union established a furtive relationship with Germany that allowed Germany to train its air force pilots in Soviet air space.¹⁹ Like Bismarck, Gustav Stresemann, the Weimar foreign minister, insisted that Germany only sought security while reclaiming its place as a European great power.²⁰ In fact, European cooperation with Germany continued well into the 1930’s as Adolf Hitler insisted on his own benign intentions. Once again, Europe’s great powers demonstrated an instinct to procrastinate on the threat posed by Germany.

This was not buckpassing as no European power could have expected any other European power to accept the cost and risk of more aggressive behavior toward Germany. In the 1920’s, the danger of short-term economic collapse superseded any concern about the long-term threat posed by a potentially resurgent Germany. Uncertainty about long-term German intentions did not lead to aggressive balancing; instead, it led to cooperation aimed at shifting Germany’s intentions in a more benign direction. Only when German intentions and
capabilities became difficult to ignore did Europe begin to respond more aggressively to the rise of Germany.

The Rise of the Soviet Union

While the bipolar structure of the post-World War II international system certainly made tension between the United States and the Soviet Union more likely, it was ominous indicators of malign long-term Soviet intentions that ultimately cemented the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union were, of course, allies in fighting Nazi Germany, but both sides also warily eyed each other’s postwar intentions. Developments at the wartime conferences gave some hope that cooperation could continue after the war concluded, but Soviet behavior in three different crises were interpreted in Washington as ominous signs of Soviet intentions. First, in Iran, the Soviet Union delayed its exit from the country, suggesting that Moscow might seek to expand its sphere of influence.21 Second, in Turkey, a disagreement over control of the Dardanelles similarly generated concern about expansive Soviet intentions. Third, in Germany, Soviet behavior was seen as an indicator of long-term expansionist intentions.

The United States did not assume the worst about Soviet intentions, but they did interpret Soviet behavior as threatening and the Cold War was the result. Intentions, not capabilities, brought an end to cooperation with Moscow. Soviet behavior in crises from Eastern Europe to the Middle East that signaled malign long-term intentions, not just the fear of Soviet capabilities, cemented the Cold War. President Harry Truman observed in the midst of the dispute over control of the Dardanelles, “I had proposed the internationalization of all the principal waterways. Stalin did not want this. What Stalin wanted was control of the Black Sea straits and the Danube. The Russians were planning world conquest.”22 While Stalin initially recognized the value of cooperation with the West, he soon realized that he could not simultaneously promote communism while also cooperating.23 At the same time, facing few other short-term threats to its interests, the United States was free to devote attention to the long-term threat potentially posed by a rebuilding Soviet Union.

From these brief historical case studies emerge a few different evident conclusions: First, rising powers can benefit from maintaining uncertainty about their intentions. Uncertainty can create the space for cooperation rather than foreclosing it. Second, states prioritize threats that are temporally near over those that are temporally distant. Threats are relative in terms of capabilities, intentions, and time. Third, political leaders—in all types of regimes—often prefer the short-term
benefits of cooperation, even as it leads them to kick the can of balancing or the costs of war down the road. Fourth, while capabilities are inherently threatening, it is changing beliefs about intentions that more directly drive state behavior. Intentions are always difficult to assess, but some degree of uncertainty does not imply complete uncertainty.

On the Future of Sino-American Relations

Generalizing from these historical cases to the present moment may be difficult. The forces of globalization may make it even more difficult to isolate a rising great power, to cut it off from the global economy, and thus to impair its continued rise. And U.S. hegemony may be more fragile given its dependence on economic and political ties to the rest of the world. While the United States still may have been able to adopt more aggressive balancing strategies toward China, what globalization likely has done is increase the short-term incentives to continue to cooperate with a rising China even further. Precisely because the U.S. economy has been so tightly connected to the Chinese economy, it is difficult for American politicians to contemplate paying the short-term costs of disrupting that relationship.

This analysis suggests four different implications for thinking about the past, present, and future of Sino-American relations. First, patience has served China well. As Bismarck recognized the importance of appearing to have benign intentions, so too did Deng Xiaoping. Inasmuch as China has followed Deng’s advice of “lying low” over the past few decades, it has left sufficient uncertainty about Chinese intentions to facilitate cooperation. Earlier, more aggressive Chinese behavior would have raised concern about Beijing’s intentions and deteriorating Sino-American relations. Instead, China has continued its rise, fueled by economic cooperation with the United States, without precipitating significant efforts to constrain that rise.

Second, the more the United States has felt compelled to address short-term threats, the less inclined it has been to focus on the long-term threat posed by China. In its own now-or-later dilemma, Washington has generally favored to procrastinate dealing with the potential threat from China in favor of dealing with other threats first. When the United States has not faced other immediate threats, it has been more likely to focus on the long-term threat from China. In the 1990’s, after the Cold War ended and the United States faced no other
significant threats, the United States paid great attention to the rise of China.
After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States was compelled to
address the threat of transnational terrorism. The rise of China became less of a
concern, and in fact, the United States sought opportunities for pragmatic
cooperation with China to address the threat posed by terrorism.

In recent years, as the United States has attempted to extricate itself from wars
in Iraq and Afghanistan and in conjunction with provocative Chinese behavior,
the United States has again started to focus more attention on the long-term threat
posed by a rising China.\textsuperscript{24} Even more recently, concerns about Russia's increas-
ingly assertive behavior—whether it be the invasion of Crimea or meddling in
U.S. elections—has somewhat distracted American attention from China. Impor-
tantly, though, the recent Trump administration National Defense Strategy reas-
serts the importance of great power politics and the threat posed by both Russia
and China.\textsuperscript{25}

Third, in recent years, Sino-American relations have begun to fray largely, but
not entirely, because of increased Chinese aggression in the South China Sea.
Why would China decide to act aggressively at this moment and not wait until
later when it is more powerful? My argument suggests three possible reasons that
Xi Jinping appears to have abandoned the earlier Chinese approach of grand stra-
tegic patience. Chinese leaders may be feeling domestic political pressure to act
assertively.\textsuperscript{26} In addition, other smaller states may be baiting China into aggressive
action, in part to motivate the United States to remain engaged. While China cer-
tainly carries significant responsibility for events in the South China Sea, other
smaller countries have also provoked China and put it in a position of either
having to refrain from responding or acting in ways that raise concerns about its
long-term intentions.\textsuperscript{27} China has chosen to respond, often aggressively. Finally,
it may be the case that China sees the need to expand in order to fuel its continued
rise.\textsuperscript{28} There is less evidence of this motive in the case of China than in other his-
torical cases, but one could imagine China feeling the need to guarantee its access
to certain resources essential for its continued growth.

What might the argument imply about Sino-American relations going forward?
If my argument is correct, then one implication is that it may behoove both the
United States and China to try to manipulate each other's time horizons. China
benefits from having the United States preoccupied with other short-term
threats, and it may, in fact, find it useful to manufacture such threats. At some
point, though, China may conclude that the benefits of acting aggressively, even if it reveals malign long-term intentions, outweigh the benefits of continued
cooperation with the United States. Such a change may be the product of inter-
national pressures to capture territory in East Asia, domestic political pressure to
assert China's place in East Asia, or the inclination of a powerful political
leader like Xi Jinping. Such Chinese assertiveness is likely to be the inflection
point in Sino-American relations where the relationship takes on more of an acrimonious adversarial relationship.

On the other side, U.S. political leaders may stand to benefit from convincing China to refrain from short-term aggression that might force Washington to adopt a more confrontational stance toward China. Again, though, if China sees the benefits of that cooperation as relatively limited, then we ought to see cooperation recede in favor of competition.

In short, the United States may be approaching a critical moment in its relationship with China, but the pressures are cross-cutting. On one hand, Xi Jinping’s various initiatives have raised concerns about China’s long-term ambitions. The Belt and Road Initiative may signal the birth of a new Chinese sphere of influence.29 The Made in China 2025 initiative augurs an era of decreasing Chinese dependence on economic relations with the United States.30 And Xi Jinping has done little to hide his ambitions to build China into a global superpower in the next few decades.31 The question is what, if anything, the United States can and will do now to attempt to quell China’s continued rise?

As the United States becomes increasingly worried about Chinese intentions, it is likely to be more inclined to act now to prevent China from growing into the threat it has the potential to be. At the same time, the United States also faces a variety of more immediate challenges, ranging from Afghanistan to North Korea to the greater Middle East. Ironically, tension in the Sino-American relationship is likely dependent on the resolution of these shorter-term threats, which would then clear the way for the United States to address the longer-term threat posed by China.

In the end, most rising powers in history develop aggressive ambitions, and most declining powers at some point resist that aggression, sometimes with catastrophic consequences. While such a development is by no means certain, there are good reasons to fear the deterioration of cooperative relations between the United States and China. Should that come to pass, the United States may grow to regret the cooperation that helped fuel China’s rise.

**It’s About “Time”**

Scholars and analysts of international politics ought to pay more attention to the temporal dynamics of such politics. The time horizons of political leaders indelibly shape the strategic decisions they make and can explain behavior that cannot be
accounted for by other factors. The importance of time horizons is not limited to cases of rising great powers. We might expect temporal considerations to be significant on issue areas ranging from environmental policy to monetary policy to military technology transfer. In each of these cases, states are presented with opportunities to capture short-term gains but with potentially deleterious long-term consequences. To understand why states make certain choices in those circumstances requires an appreciation of the time horizons under which political leaders operate.

The argument also contributes to a perennial debate in international relations over the importance of capabilities versus intentions in the perception of threats. I have argued here that states view capabilities alone as insufficient for judging the long-term intentions of a rising great power. Though China’s material rise undoubtedly is inherently threatening to some extent, U.S. strategic shifts are more likely to follow changes in perceived Chinese intentions than changes in Chinese capabilities. States do not simply assume the worst about others’ intentions because the costs of acting on such assumptions would be prohibitive. Still, more work remains to be done on understanding how states conceive of threats and the relationship between capabilities and intentions in those perceptions.

Finally, the history of rising and falling great powers is not one that is generally happy. Nearly every major power war can be cast as a war that resulted from the fear that a declining power saw in the rise of another power. Yet, we continue to see cooperation between these states, mostly in an effort to capture short-term rewards from cooperation despite the long-term risk. For states, this might ultimately be the tragedy of great power politics. As welcome and mutually beneficial as short-term cooperation may be, it may also only lay the foundation for conflict to come.

Notes

27. On recent perceived provocations in the South China Sea by nations other than China, see Felipe Villamor, “Duterte Orders Military to Parts of South China Sea Claimed by


