

The Asian Ascent: Opportunity for Peace or Precondition for War?

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Demographic and social scientific research suggests, with near certainty, that by the end of this century, the two Asian giants, China and India, will have surpassed the United States on certain key indicators of national power. The implications for the future of world politics are profound, but the outcomes are not predetermined. If the coming power transition is managed wisely, there is an opportunity for continued peace among the Great Powers. If the transition proceeds confrontationally, as many have in the past, a serious global conflict is in the offing. There is much that policy makers can do to avoid the most threatening potential outcomes.

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Substantial evidence now supports the proposition that global wars are most likely when a contender, dissatisfied with the norms governing world politics, overtakes the dominant state (Organski 1958; Organski and Kugler 1980; Tammen et al. 2000). In the next half century, China is expected to overtake the United States in overall capability. This assessment is based on economic, demographic, and political research suggesting that Chinese productivity will rise substantially, while the population gap between China and the U.S. remains large. A larger, and increasingly more productive, population is expected to propel China's national capabilities beyond those of the U.S.

This anticipated structural change poses opportunities as well as challenges for American decision makers. To ensure long-term stability, the U.S. should focus on Asia far more than it does on the Global War on Terror. The path to *international* peace can be ensured if action is taken *now* to enhance satisfaction by China and other growing giants in Asia. But if this opportunity is overlooked, the probability of war or undesirable compromises for the U.S. will increase as control over world politics tumbles from the grasp of Western policy makers into the hands of Asian elites.

Equality, Growth, and Power

In an open, competitive system, assumptions of fundamental equality of all people lead us to expect a far different world from that which we now observe. Massive inequalities in national income across nations with comparably large populations defy abstract expectations. Specialization and innovation within a truly competitive system should allow reasonably equally endowed states to achieve comparable levels of development. An argument stressing the fundamental equality of individuals would simply assert that, in the aggregate, all comparably sized national populations are capable of reaching equivalent levels of per capita productivity. Given what we know about the genetic code (specifically that all peoples share more than 99%

of the same genetic material), differences in aggregate productivity must be driven by culture or socialization, and must be reinforced by differences in national abilities to acquire capital. If true, then it would follow that institutions that constrain individuals in each society determine the productivity of individuals.¹

Demographic research suggests that societies that offer equal access to all members, male and female, will achieve a stable population size. It is obvious, of course, that population size varies dramatically across states but changes only slowly within any given state (there are only so many babies one can produce given a 9-month gestation requirement). Individuals across different societies choose very different family sizes for cultural, religious, and economic reasons. When large-scale change in population size does occur, it tends to follow a consistent pattern. Thompson (1929) and Notestein (1945) were the first to demonstrate the existence of a “demographic transition” wherein mortality rate decline precedes declines in fertility rates following increases in per capita income. Thus, as a society develops, demographic rates both fall, but sequentially rather than simultaneously. Additional research demonstrates that politically capable governments can accelerate this transition by establishing female equality in education and the workplace (Arbetman and Kugler 1997). Once a society is fully modernized and has gone through its demographic transition, its population will stabilize at the new rates. As far as we know, nothing further changes this incredible stability. Combined with the economic convergence proposition, the expectation is that over the long run, states will develop stable populations and within them, productivity levels (and thus output per capita), will be comparable. Some states will have large populations after the transition; others will have small populations. But as productivity is expected to converge, there is then no way for smaller population post-demographic transition states to catch large population post-demographic transition states in aggregate output. As aggregate output is essentially equivalent to national power, this suggests that in the long run the larger states will become supreme.

The implications for world politics are fundamental. Consider the distributions of current productivity and population sizes of various leading nations.

Had the economic convergence anticipated by Nobel Prize-winning economists already fully taken place, China and India would dominate world politics with shares of global GDP equivalent to their shares of population. But, as convergence is only underway, the U.S. and European Union (EU) retain far more economic power than their demographic resources theoretically entitle them. Note how Russia, a previous challenger for global hegemony, is today a minor economic power with a share of GDP roughly equivalent to its share of population. Similarly, Japan’s share of global wealth has moved closer to its share of global population. It would seem that convergence has already caught up with these two one-time Great Powers. If the process continues as expected, the Asian demographic giants, China and India, will come to preponderance in world politics supplanting the current Western leaders.

Note especially here the shares of the Middle East. Its share of GDP is, although small by global standards, considerably larger than its share of global population. Surely this is because of the region’s valuable oil resources. Other than that, the region enjoys little or no economic capability. Should oil decline in value, the Middle East’s share of world product will decline precipitously. As a decline in oil prices

¹Modern macro-economists share this perspective. Solow (1956) won the Nobel Prize for his path-breaking exogenous-growth argument that anticipates the ultimate convergence of per capita output. Lucas (1988), another Nobel Prize winner, developed the endogenous growth argument that also forecasts convergence in long-term productivity. The slight but important difference is that Lucas anticipates convergence but retains some long-term differences in individual productivity based on societies’ endowments. Adding politics to the mix, Feng (2003) and Feng and Zak (2003) developed the politics of fertility and economic development approach (POFED), which reinforces Lucas’ convergence argument and uses political factors to reflect how government capabilities can advance development goals and affect long-term growth.

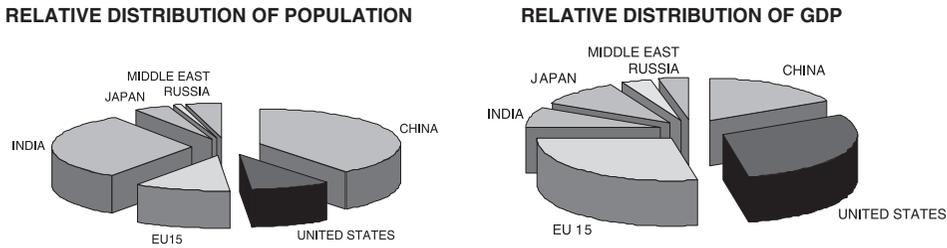


FIG. 1. Global Inequality

is likely, one ponders in vain for any reason for a Great Power to pay attention to the region in the long run. Clearly, current Great Power interest in this region is motivated primarily by the fact that it is the center of terrorist activities. In the long run, the economic and demographic trends suggest that it will recede from view, as did Vietnam, another nation once central to Great Power concerns. In contrast, Asia is extraordinarily unlikely to recede from view.

The impending rise of Asia is generating substantial popular attention. Tammen (2005) reports on over 50 news articles about the rise of China appearing in prestigious foreign policy and news periodicals over the last few years. Similarly, the contributors to this symposium all stress the importance of a rising China. Most of these popular presentations accept the inevitability of China's ascent to the highest positions of global power. Interestingly, many prognosticators made similar predictions two decades ago about the rise of Japan. These proved false because they overemphasized productivity and disregarded Japan's relatively small and declining demographic share. But such disqualifications for long-term pre-eminence do not apply to the rise of other Asian Great Powers like India and China. Note that the sections representing India, Japan, Russia, and China in Figure 1 comprise some three-fourths of systemic demographic resources despite the fact that populous Asian nations like Indonesia are omitted. But this perhaps objectionable omission actually reinforces Asia's enormous potential for absolute growth, and specifically for growth relative to the West. If the convergence arguments continue to be accurate, by the end of this century China and India will tower over all other actors in the international system. This condition is not without precedent. The United States dominated world politics after World War II and established *Pax Americana*. Presumably, a *Pax Sinica* or *Pax Oriental* will be established after Asia's rise to predominance. Based on what we know from the best theoretical and statistical analyses, Asia's rise is as near to certain as our research can reveal. Short of a devastating nuclear exchange, the West will be supplanted by the East. Consequently, it is frivolous of us to squander so much of our foreign policy attention on the relatively less consequential Middle East. It is unacceptable not to embrace a debate about the opportunities and challenges that the process of Asia's ascent raises for national decision makers.

Global Inequality: War or Peace?

Half a century ago, A. F. K. Organski (1958) argued that in the hierarchy of nations, dissatisfied challengers treat equality of power as a precondition for global war. The proposition that balanced capabilities are associated with war challenged the prevailing wisdom that a balance of power among major states ensures peace. What made Organski's claim even more unusual was that, instead of asserting this relationship and relying on previous academic authorities for support, he and his students provided evidence now widely accepted as supporting the contention that war is most likely when power is roughly equal. But this "power transition" research tradition does not imply that war is *always* waged when a power transition

propels a challenger to parity with the system leader; rather, such a war is likely only when the parties fundamentally disagree about the *status quo* (Organski and Kugler 1980; Kugler and Lemke 1996; Tammen et al. 2000; Lemke 2002). Parity combined with disparate evaluations of the international status quo is dangerous.² Based on these insights, the concluding paragraph of the *War Ledger* tells the story of the Cold War, its end, and the post-Cold War world thus far.

We can make our attempts at forecasting a little more specific. We can at least enumerate the major actors in the possible drama. They are the same *dramatis personae* of major international conflicts today. These are: the present dominant nation, the United States: the present challenger, the Soviet Union, which is also the dominant nation in the international Communist order, and China, the present rival of the Soviet Union for possible leadership of the Communist world. Given the pools of human and material resources available to each of the three nations, and the probable rates of change of such pools in the coming decades, we guess that the U.S.S.R. will approach the United States at some time in the future but without being able to surpass her; China on the other hand, given her present base and the gains that will be hers if (and this “if” is real) she develops economically, is likely to overtake the Soviet Union and then, decades later the United States. The period after each passage will create the conditions for nuclear wars to occur. But will they? . . . The reader will recall that peaceful passages by challengers have taken place . . . War is not a certainty. It is however foolish to bank on future luck and the wisdom of the contenders. . . . (Organski and Kugler 1980:226)

Today, the rise of China and India foretells of Asia overtaking the United States and the rest of the West. Estimates by Tammen et al. (2000) anticipate that China will overtake the United States in mid-century (see also National Intelligence Council 2004). India is anticipated to surpass the U.S. toward the century’s end. Thus, American dominance should endure until mid-century. Afterwards, Asian demands for modification to the international system will likely increase, and unless resolved, will be increasingly likely to be imposed by force. The question raised by this empirically grounded extrapolation is whether the West will see China’s (and later India’s) rise as an opportunity for cooperation (as former European enemies did when responding to the post-World War II resurgence of Germany by creating the EU) or for conflict.

Given the fundamental importance of demographic and economic forces in establishing the roster of states capable of fundamentally affecting the structure of world politics, whatever resolution there might be to the Global War on Terror will not alter the major challenge faced by the United States. In the long run, China’s demographic and hence economic power cannot be denied. By the same reasoning, the Middle East has no long-run demographic or economic power. The U.S. courts long-term peril by being obsessively distracted by short-term objectives. To ensure real peace, the U.S. would be much better advised to preserve strong links with the EU, maintain and improve cordial relations with Russia, and most importantly, open a sincere dialogue with India and China designed to maximize their support for the existing status quo. To be sure, positive, but limited, steps have been taken by the United States. American support for China’s entry into the World Trade

²Consider a past instance of Great Power parity. Britain was overtaken by the United States in the latter part of the nineteenth century, but accepted and supported the eventual transfer of leadership to the United States. British policy created the “special relationship” that still binds these two powers. At the same time, however, Britain failed to find an accommodation with the rising German state after its 1870 unification. Thus, when Germany reached parity with Britain, they waged two devastating world wars to determine who would dominate world politics. Germany failed to revise the status quo both times. The United States emerged as the dominant power following World War II, with the Soviet Union as its main contender. Note that the mere overtaking of Britain by Germany does not cause world wars. It did in the 1910s and 1930s, but not in the post-World War II era when Germany again overtook Britain. By then, both states shared similar evaluations of the international status quo. Importantly, it is the combination of dissatisfaction and parity that is especially dangerous.

Organization was important because it helps integrate China's growing economy more fully into the capitalist world economy. Similar recognition for India, not to mention support for Indian membership on the United Nations Security Council, would also be beneficial. Because Taiwan and Korea have replaced the Cold War's Berlin as focal points for potential Great Power conflict, finding an accommodation that meets the desires of the main parties with respect to them is central to the preservation of long-term peace.

The economic, demographic, and political science research summarized above suggests that American foreign policy attention must center on China and India as the major future contenders for global leadership. Although China retains a political ideology inconsistent with democracy, there are good reasons to expect and thus to work toward change to a participatory system based on increasing prosperity (Feng 2003; Feng and Zak 2003). India is the largest democracy in the world, but like China it is still not a major partner of the Western world. While these relationships may develop and prosper on their own, the relative amount of attention paid to these rising giants compared with the Global War on Terror is simply insupportable.

Neither convergence arguments nor power transition theory suggests that future Great Power war between Asia and the West is inevitable. The research described here offers evidence about probabilistic relationships between parity and status quo evaluations on the one hand, and war on the other. Thus, while China's overtaking of the U.S. may be relatively certain, the result of that overtaking is not. Power transition research supports claims that overtakings are dangerous when policy makers fail to accommodate them. A conflict between China or India and the United States as the Asian giants emerge from the shadows of underdevelopment is *not* inevitable. Rather, the political negotiations among contenders determine whether potential challengers can be made satisfied with the rules and norms governing world politics. If the declining dominant state is able to engineer a satisfactory compromise between the demands of the rising state and its own requirements (as Britain and the U.S. did when peacefully passing the mantle of international leadership), war is not expected. If the two sides remain intransigent, war is expected. It is clear that such a war in the twenty-first century would have a very high probability of involving nuclear weapons.

A clear counterexpectation can be drawn from classical nuclear deterrence arguments. They involve a fundamental assumption that as the costs of war increase, the probability of war decreases. Nuclear weapons are then alleged to alter calculations substantially because they raise the expected costs of war so high that war becomes unthinkable. According to this logic, a global war between a newly predominant China and a declining U.S. will never occur thanks to the pacifying influence of the balance of terror. A new Cold War is anticipated by this nuclear deterrence argument. Consistent with this theory, various scholars have advocated the proliferation of nuclear weapons as one method to prevent wars (Intriligator and Brito 1981; Waltz 1981; Bueno de Mesquita and Riker 1982). An odd paradox is raised by the fact that many world leaders accept nuclear deterrence claims, such as that about the stability of mutual assured destruction (MAD), while rejecting the logical concomitant that proliferation of nuclear weapons to more and more states is desirable. What follows logically has stubbornly resisted practical implementation. Thus, using some other logic, leaders of nuclear nations seem to agree that deterrence is stable under MAD but nevertheless also agree that nuclear proliferation must be prevented in order to preserve peace. If decision makers really believed MAD is stable, it is impossible to understand why they would oppose nuclear proliferation to Iran, thereby creating *stable* nuclear parity in the Middle East. This inconsistency was noted years ago by Rosen (1977), but subsequently conveniently overlooked. Theory and policy may frequently be at odds, but seldom when the costs of such logical inconsistency are so high.

Power transition theorists are inherently suspicious of MAD arguments about nuclear stability because they essentially resurrect traditional balance of power arguments. Rather than focusing on conventional balance as a pacifying influence, nuclear deterrence proponents of MAD suggest that a nuclear balance will maintain the peace. Given a fortuitous absence of wars among nuclear states thus far, it is impossible to test arguments such as that about MAD. But what we can observe is not promising. It is not only policy makers who doubt the veracity of MAD when they deny the logical consequence of “beneficial” proliferation. Recent formal presentations of deterrence arguments strongly suggest that a preponderance of nuclear capabilities—specifically in the possession of satisfied states—is more amenable to peace than is MAD (Zagare and Kilgour 2000). Power transition theorists, informed by their own as well as by decades of demographic and economic research, strongly doubt that nuclear parity between the U.S. and a risen but dissatisfied China could preserve the peace.

Conclusions

It is entirely reasonable to anticipate that Asia will dominate world politics by the end of the century. The most important issue facing American decision makers is how to handle the anticipated overtaking.

The research summarized here indicates that the one element of Asia’s ascent that Western decision makers can manipulate is Asia’s relative acceptance of the international system’s existing norms and values. War is not an inevitable certainty. The opportunity for peace is at hand. If Western decision makers can persuade Chinese and Indian leaders through word and deed to join with the current global status quo, peace and prosperity should endure. If, on the other hand, China and India cannot be persuaded to join the existing structure of relations, then the chances for conflict increase around mid-century. The research summarized here suggests this is true even in the face of the enormous costs that reasonably would be anticipated from a nuclear war.

The stakes are high. U.S. policy is now entrapped by the Global War on Terror. Major opportunities for global accommodation are being bypassed. A major policy shift from tactical to strategic foreign policy thinking is due soon. We owe this much to the next generation.

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