

## Temporal Theory and US-China Relations

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## **Temporal Theory and US-China Relations**

### **Abstract**

This article explains why existing great powers can engage in cooperative relations with rising great powers that fuel the rise of the latter into competitors. By adopting a temporal theoretical lens and providing an examination of US-China relations in the post-Cold War era, it is argued that uncertainty about Chinese long-term intentions, economic benefits from cooperation, and the existence of other clear and imminent challenges to address incentivized the US to adopt a cooperative policy towards China. Assertive moves by China from the late 2000s onwards that the United States perceived to be indications of long-term malign intentions, the emergence of economic competition, and the fading of other challenges to US interests by the 2010s, removed these incentives for engagement and consequently led to a change from cooperative to competitive policies. This article is aimed to address the crucial questions of why the United States helped accelerate the rise of China into a peer competitor, and why that policy has changed to one in which the United States now has engaged in strategic competition with China.

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## Introduction

The US policy of engagement towards China, John Mearsheimer has recently argued, is the “worst strategic blunder any country has made in recent history,” and that there is “no comparable example of a great power actively fostering the rise of a peer competitor.”<sup>1</sup> This article will clarify the reasons for why great powers, in this case the United States, can engage in cooperative relations with rising great powers that potentially can become competitors, such as China.

Through the application of temporal theory of international politics, and an examination of United States-China relations in the post-Cold War era, the following article will illustrate, contrary to the predominant argument in the extant realist literature, that uncertainty about future intentions, rather than leading existing great powers to implement competitive policies in the short term, in fact can incentivize them to adopt cooperative policies towards rising great powers. Cooperative relations and engagement, it is further argued, is the most desired policy for an existing great power until the rising great power’s long-term intention becomes a measurable and clear risk, which subsequently will incentivize the former to change its strategy from cooperation to competition against the latter.<sup>2</sup>

The remaining of this article proceeds as following. Next section will outline temporal theory of international politics in its simplest form and offer some initial findings from the empirical analysis. The article will then provide a more comprehensive theory-driven examination of primary and secondary sources on China-US relations in the post-Cold War era. The final section provides a summary and conclusion.

### Time-Horizons and Rising Great Powers

Temporal theory of international politics provides us with the details to explain the motivations for cooperation and competition between an existing and rising great power by considering the impact of time-horizons, defined here as “the degree to which states value the future versus the present.”<sup>3</sup> The now-or-later dilemma is at the core of this explanatory variable. This dilemma evolves from the option existing great powers have between:

1. Launching a preventive strategic competition now to halt and reverse the emergence of a rising great power into a peer competitor, based on a worst-case thinking about the rising great power's long-term intentions; or
2. To defer any action until a later point in time when the long-term intention of the rising great power becomes measurable and clear.<sup>4</sup>

Existing great powers value the future in the former option, while in the latter they value the present.

In the extant realist literature, it is argued that uncertainty about long-term intentions inevitably will lead states in an anarchic self-help environment to constantly engage in competition with each other, and that “this is true in the short term as well as the long-term.”<sup>5</sup> Transferring this argument to our context, it should be expected that existing great powers constantly will engage in competitive strategies towards rising great powers to prevent them from becoming peer competitors, simply because uncertainty about intentions incentivizes the former to act upon worst-case scenarios about the future behavior of the latter. This is Mearsheimer's logic briefly.

Temporal theory makes an important distinction between uncertainty and risk. While uncertainty is something truly unknowable, risk is something measurable, is possible to assess by examining evidence, and accordingly acted upon. The transition from uncertainty to risk occurs when information and knowledge gives State A the possibility to assess whether the long-term intentions of State B pose a threat or not. The more certain an existing great power is that a rising great power is a threat to its long-term security, the more motivated it is to value the future and engage in competitive strategies in the short-term. The more uncertain the existing great power is about the intentions of the rising great power, the more likely it is to defer action until intentions becomes clear. By deferring competition, an existing great power values the present and make cooperation with a rising great power in the short-term possible to attain.<sup>6</sup>

According to Edelstein, existing great powers do not a priori assume the worst about rising great powers' long-term intentions as argued in the extant realist literature. They are likewise reluctant to engage in

competition when they are uncertain about future behavior. The costs for an existing great power to engage in competition with a rising great power, based on unknowable intentions, can be unattractive for both domestic and external political, economic, and strategic reasons. Domestically, a competitive strategy might unnecessarily drain resources, lead to popular discontent, self-fulfilling prophecies, and undesired and irreversible policies. Externally, it might distract the focus of the great power from other clear and imminent challenges to its security.<sup>7</sup> Existing great powers are therefore more likely to “kick the can down the road” and “look for opportunities to update any beliefs...about the rising power’s intentions.”<sup>8</sup>

Based on the preceding argument, temporal theory specifies three main variables that determines whether an existing great power decides to launch a preventive strategic competition against a rising great power now or defers such action until a later point in time. These are:

1. Whether the existing great power is certain about the long-term intentions of the rising great power;
2. Whether it is possible to attain short-term economic gains by engaging in cooperative relations with the rising great power; and
3. Whether there are other clear and more imminent challenges to the security of the existing great power.<sup>9</sup>

The more certain that the long-term intentions of the rising great power pose a threat, the less opportunities for economic benefits from cooperative relations with the rising great power, and with the absence of other clear and imminent challenges to address, the more likely it is that the existing great power will adopt competitive policies in the short-term to address the clear long-term challenge. Conversely, the more likely it is that the existing great power will defer competition until a later point in time and adopt cooperative policies in the short-term.

The now-or-later dilemma provides a novel explanation for why the United States engaged in what Mearsheimer defines as strategic blunder.<sup>10</sup> Uncertainty about China’s long-term intentions, economic benefits from cooperation, and the clear challenges of globalizing the liberal bounded order in the post-Cold War era, and addressing the terrorist threat from the 2001 onwards, incentivized the United States to adopt the later

dimension of the dilemma. These trends incentivized the United States to maintain a short time-horizon in its relationship with China, made pragmatic cooperation with China possible and desirable, and helped fuel China's rise. Engagement, as we now commonly define this policy, was by policymakers and scholars alike believed to be able to influence and induce change of China's long-term intentions, whatever they were, in a favorable direction.<sup>11</sup>

The emerging perception of China as a potential regional hegemon in the Indo-Pacific by the late 2000s due to Beijing's assertive behavior in and around regional waters (in other words, as uncertainty gave way to clarity, rightfully or not, about long-term intentions), the advent of economic competition and decoupling, and the fading terrorist threat from 2010s onward, removed the incentives that once favored cooperative relations in the short-term. These developments consequently paved the way for the United States to abandon its policy of engagement and launch a preventive strategic competition aimed to address the clear and long-term China challenge. This preventive strategic competition was launched by the Obama administration with the Pivot to Asia, and later accelerated with Trump administrations' Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy.<sup>12</sup>

Whether an existing great power adopts a cooperative or competitive short-term strategy towards a rising great power also depends on the behavior of the latter, which also faces its own now-or-later dilemma. From the preceding argument, it is obvious that rising great powers should seek to refrain from any action in the short-term that might lead an existing great power to perceive it as a long-term threat if they want to realize their potential. To fuel their rise in an interdependent world, rising great powers are in addition reliant upon economic cooperation with existing great powers and other developed and rich countries.<sup>13</sup> By focusing on more prosperous and prestigious days ahead, rising great powers thus benefit from following Deng Xiaoping's maxim of hiding capabilities and biding time. Through this maxim, rising great powers can keep existing great powers uncertain about their long-term intentions in the service of incentivizing cooperation in the short-term for long-term gains.<sup>14</sup>

As the empirical analysis below will illustrate, China successfully managed to follow this maxim during the early post-Cold War era by refraining from

any behavior that could provoke the United States, for the purpose of securing the long-term prosperity and international standing of the country.<sup>15</sup> By signaling benign intentions, opening up for economic connectivity, taking steps for integration into the liberal international order and partnering with the United States against global terrorism, China managed to sway the United States away from adopting competitive strategies to contain China's rise. Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up, the guideline of hiding capabilities and biding time, and the conception of peaceful rise are the most important manifestations of this approach.<sup>16</sup>

There are, however, several downsides and risks with this strategy, thus making it a real dilemma for a rising great power. The downside this article will focus on is that too much patience by a rising great power can embolden other states to act in ways that it regards as threatening to its rise, thereby incentivizing the rising great power to behave assertively in the short-term to halt any potential erosion of its position and consequently raise concerns about its long-term intentions.<sup>17</sup> This article will in particular illustrate how the attempt by regional powers to claim sovereignty over territories in the South China Sea forced Beijing's assertive hand, and how this behavior played an important role in shifting the United States' time-horizon and ultimately its decision to launch a preventive strategic competition to address the long-term China challenge.

Hence, cooperative, and competitive policies between existing and rising great powers evolves from the interaction between the different time-horizons held by these powers. Cooperative relations are likely to occur when an existing great power is uncertain about the rising great power's long-term intentions and short-term benefits from cooperation are obtainable, at the same time as the rising great power pursues a policy aimed to fuel its long-term rise through cooperation and defer from any immediate action that can raise concerns about its long-term intentions. Competition, on the other hand, is more likely to occur when the existing great power focus on the long-term threat posed by a rising great power and benefits from cooperation is absent, caused primarily the provocative behavior of the latter that raises concerns about its long-term intentions.<sup>18</sup>

The proceeding sections will apply temporal theory to examine China-US relations in the post-Cold War era and provide a discussion to assess the findings considering the theoretical expectations. The following

examination and discussion are crude and abstract and has been necessary due to limitations on space and purpose of academic discourse.

## Changing Time Horizons in China-US Relations in the post-Cold War Era

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States adopted a strategy of liberal hegemony to expand the bounded liberal order it led during the Cold War to the entire world, a process often also conceptualized as globalization.<sup>19</sup> According to Ikenberry, “American-led rules, institutions, and relationships that had been built during the Cold War became the core of the post-Cold War order.”<sup>20</sup> The logic behind this expansion was, according to Mearsheimer, that the globalization of liberal democracy, strengthening of international institutions, and an open international economy would, as it had ensured between the Western countries during the Cold War, facilitate global peace and stability; bring an end to history as one scholar famously argued.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time as the Clinton administration expressed uncertainty about China’s long-term intentions, it was also in a firm belief that the future trajectory of the evolving liberal international order depended on the integration of China into it.<sup>22</sup> The capstone of the liberal hegemonic project was, according to Ikenberry, the United States’ invitation to China to join the World Trade Organization (WTO), and its membership, according to Tooze, the moment that truly inaugurated the era of modern globalization.<sup>23</sup> Friedman, for instance, similarly argues that the integration of China into the WTO helped fuel economic globalization, and, in the words of Ikenberry, made it clear that “the door to China’s integration into the Western liberal order was open.”<sup>24</sup>

In addition to help expand the evolving liberal international order and fuel globalization, integrating China into the liberal international order also benefitted the US economy. The United States would guarantee continued access to the thriving domestic market of China, thus securing continued export for its products, and jobs for its farmers, workers, and companies.<sup>25</sup> China had, in fact, become one of the top trading partners of the United States by the early 2000s. Finally, integration would induce change on China’s long-term behavior, turning it into a “responsible stakeholder in a United States led international order.”<sup>26</sup>

Although the United States' drive for liberal hegemony led to concerns in China about regime survival, it did also provide an opportunity to pursue the long-term goal of national rejuvenation through integration and economic interaction with the United States and the developed world. China's posture as an order-taker, as exemplified by Deng Xiaoping's famous dictum for China to hide its capabilities and bid its time, emphasized non-provocation, continuation of the reform and opening up policies from the late Cold War era, and participation in the arrangements of the liberal international order.<sup>27</sup> According to Chen, Chinese participation into the expanding order was aimed at providing the country with the possibility to focus on its long-term domestic reforms and development, an argument also held by Yan who further argues that the focus also was to prevent the United States from "focusing on containing the rise of China as a global superpower."<sup>28</sup>

There were, however, periods during the 1990s that China behaved in ways that the United States, and other regional powers in the Indo-Pacific, perceived as indications of long-term malign intentions, particularly in relation to the South China Sea and Taiwan. According to Goldstein, claimants in the South China Sea, and in particular Vietnam and Philippines, had by 1994 occupied features that strengthened their positions in the region to the detriment of China as the latter was careful to not inflame any threat perception.<sup>29</sup> China's patience seemed to embolden other regional powers, and Beijing was facing the option to:

1. Either refrain from acting and risk an erosion of its regional position; or
2. To act to defend what it perceived as its sovereign right and risk to raise concerns about its long-term intentions.<sup>30</sup>

China chose the latter option and between 1994 to 1995 took control over and later fortified the Mischief Reef, which the Philippines had claimed as its own territory, to "forestall further erosion of its position."<sup>31</sup>

During the same period as Beijing was engaged in assertive actions in the South China Sea, it did also increasingly fear that the United States was challenging its claim to sovereignty over Taiwan. This perceived challenge followed US arms sales to the island, upgrading of diplomatic relations in

violation of existing United States-China agreements, and the decision by the Clinton administration in 1995 to permit Lee Teng-hui to visit the United States. Fearing that these developments could eventually embolden Taiwan to seek independence, China was again facing a now-or-later dilemma.<sup>32</sup> China's decision was to act immediately and launch large scale military exercises and missile tests in the waters near the island between 1995 to 1996 to demonstrate resolve and deter any move towards independence. The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis culminated with the deployment in March 1996 of two US carrier groups to the area, the largest ever US naval movement in the region since the Vietnam War.<sup>33</sup>

Chinese assertiveness, although defensive from the point of view of Beijing, influenced the perceptions the regional powers, including the United States, held about China's long-term intentions negatively, and accelerated regional security-oriented relationships directed against Beijing.<sup>34</sup> The deteriorating trend in the United States-China bilateral relationship from the mid-90s onwards did in fact motivate the Bush administration in 2001 to plan to designate China as the leading strategic and military competitor of the United States.<sup>35</sup>

The planned move to adopt a competitive policy against China in the late 1990s and early 2000s was however shelved following the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11.<sup>36</sup> The national defense strategy from 2002 did instead emphasize that the United States welcome the emergence of a strong, peaceful, and prosperous China as a partner in the global war against terrorism, and for maintaining international peace and security in general.<sup>37</sup> Sino-US relations following September 11, according to some observers, was in fact at its most stable in the post-Cold War era.<sup>38</sup>

There were three main reasons for this. First, the war on terrorism distracted the United States from the long-term challenge posed by China by consuming Washington's short-term attention to address the challenge posed by radical Islam. According to Walt, the global war on terrorism "was a giant distraction from a host of broader strategic concerns, most notably China's remarkable rise," an argument also held by Rhodes who further claims that "China's ascent in global influence accelerated rapidly following 9/11."<sup>39</sup> The second reason, as Shambaugh makes clear, was the Chinese decision to support and forge partnership with the United States against the global war on terrorism.<sup>40</sup> Finally, it was believed that

continued engagement would incentivize Beijing to change course and participate in pragmatic cooperation and mutual accommodation on regional and international security issues.<sup>41</sup>

China did also do its part to counter the emerging China threat perception, particularly through the development of the peaceful rise concept from 1996 onward.<sup>42</sup> The concept of peaceful rise was expressed, among other things, through China's adherence to achieve a peaceful solution to the South China Sea and Taiwan issues, its active role in developing multilateral for solving regional and international security challenges, such as in relation to North Korea, Beijing's currency policy during the Asian financial crisis which earned it widespread praise among regional powers as a responsible actor, through strengthened economic integration with neighboring countries, particularly with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), by becoming a member of the WTO, and, finally, by joining the global war against terrorism.<sup>43</sup> As argued by Doshi, these policies were crucial for securing a continued favorable environment for national rejuvenation by offsetting any move by the United States, or other regional powers, to encircle Beijing out of fear for its long-term intentions.<sup>44</sup>

Following assertive moves by regional powers over disputes territories in the South China Sea from 2009 onwards, particularly Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, China was again pushed to act assertively to secure its position in the region or to remain passive.<sup>45</sup> While Strangio argues that Chinese assertiveness was motivated by an increasing confidence in its political system following the 2008 global financial crisis, Johnston argues that it was in "response to more proactive diplomacy by other claimants to establish the legal boundaries of their claims in the region," an observation also supported by Edelstein who characterizes Chinese behavior as "reactive assertiveness," and Fravel who argues that China's posture in the South China Sea was a response to the moves made by other claimants but that it nevertheless threatened the weaker regional powers.<sup>46</sup> The increasing militarization and tensions in the South China Sea incentivized United States' involvement and culminated with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's rejection of China's assertive behavior and territorial claims during an ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi in 2010.<sup>47</sup> By the end of the 2000s, it became increasingly clear that the

United States was determined to push back against what it began to perceive as China's effort to pursue regional hegemony.<sup>48</sup>

Several other developments in the region during that year, such as the Diaoyu or Senkaku trawler incident, the North Korean shelling of South Korean held Yeonpyeong Island which the United States believed China had emboldened, and Beijing's distinctly tougher criticism of US military maneuvers in the region and arms sales to Taiwan, led many observers in the United States to claim the China was finally revealing its true long-term intentions.<sup>49</sup> One prominent China scholar even defined the year of 2010 as China's "year of assertiveness."<sup>50</sup> Chinese assertiveness by the turn of the decade altered the belief that engagement could induce change on Beijing's long-term intentions, resulting in an "unceremonious close" for the policy, according to Campbell and Sullivan.<sup>51</sup> That this change followed Chinese assertiveness in and around regional waters is clarified in the national security strategy from 2017 where it is stated that "contrary to our hopes...China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others."<sup>52</sup>

In addition to the increasing clarity about China's long-term intentions and the engagement failed thinking, the economic relationship that once incentivized cooperation was also starting to fall apart by the mid-2010s. With China's steady climb within the global value chain and the ensuing competition over the commanding heights of the 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy, as exemplified by the Made in China 2025 and China Standards 2035 visions, it became less rewarding for the United States to engage with China economically.<sup>53</sup> According to former State Secretary Mike Pompeo, Washington had to "protect the American economy" from increasing Chinese competition.<sup>54</sup> The economic competition led the United States to initiate a trade-war in 2018, aimed to deny Chinese companies dominance over the twenty-first century global economy, leading scholars to argue that a great deglobalization or decoupling to be in the horizon.<sup>55</sup>

According to Can and Chan, China's initiation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2015, which the Silk Road Economic Belt, the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank had laid the foundation for, was intended to offset this evolving China threat perception and maintain a favorable environment for the continuations of its national rejuvenation.<sup>56</sup> By establishing

political and economic networks of cooperation with regional countries, China sought to continue to reinforce the conception of peaceful rise and reform and opening-up. Although the initiative managed to attract participants and reinvigorate China's image as a responsible rising great power in the region, the BRI was from the perspective of policymakers in the United States further evidence of China's desire to forge a Beijing-centered regional order and supplant US strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific: In the eyes of policymakers in the United States it became increasingly clear that China was a revisionist power, and that Beijing's long-term intention was to replace the United States and challenge the existing arrangements of the liberal international order.<sup>57</sup>

These developments, which removed crucial incentives for cooperation with China, coincided with the declining threat of Islamic terrorism and the consequent desire in the United States to undo its military footprint in the Greater Middle East, ultimately paving the way for Washington to adjust its short-term policy to address the long-term China challenge. In the words of then Secretary of State Clinton, the future of politics would be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq. According to Tooze, "it was time to raise the strategic horizon from Basra and Helmand to the great power challenge of...China," while Kurt Campbell, the China czar in the Biden administration, argued for a "movement from the Middle East...but a much greater focus on the Indo-Pacific."<sup>58</sup> Biden himself defended the withdrawal from Afghanistan in mid-2021 by arguing that the United States now needed to "focus on shoring up America's core strengths to meet the strategic competition with China."<sup>59</sup> "We have now retuned to the principal reality of world affairs," according to an observer commemorating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of September 11.<sup>60</sup>

The Obama administrations' launch of the Pivot to Asia was the manifest of this shift in the United States time-horizon and the consequent change from pragmatic cooperation to preventive strategic competition as the defining characteristic in short-term relations. The preventive strategic competition was followed up and accelerated by the Trump administration through the FOIP strategy. The Biden administration has doubled-down the FOIP strategy, ultimately aimed to contain and deny China regional dominance.<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

This article provided a theoretical explanation for existing great power motivation to engage in cooperative relations with rising great powers that fuel the latter's rise into competitors. By adopting a temporal theoretical lens to examine fluctuations in United States-China relations, the article illustrated that the different time-horizon of the United States and China shaped cooperative and competitive bilateral relations in the post-Cold War era.

Short time-horizon in the United States and a long time-horizon in China secured cooperative relations and the emergence of China into a great power competitor. Uncertainty about China's long-term intentions, economic benefits from cooperation, and the existence of other clear and more imminent challenges to address incentivized the short time-horizon in the United States. The need to secure a peaceful and favorable environment for the long-term national rejuvenation into a great power, on the other hand, provided China with the motivation to maintain a long time-horizon. Similarly, Brand and Beckley have recently argued that China's emergence as a great power competitor has been possible due to a "secure geopolitical environment and easy access to foreign markets and technology, all underpinned by friendly relations with the United States. And China's government skillfully harnessed these advantages by carrying out a process of economic reform and opening."<sup>62</sup>

Increasing perception of China as a revisionist power bent on regional dominance, coupled with an engagement failed thinking and economic competition, in addition to the fading of other imminent challenges to address, led to a change in US time-horizon in its dealings with China. From being uncertain about long-term intentions and valuing short-term gains, the United States is now focusing on the long-term China challenge. Strategic competition, rather than cooperation, has become the new normal in United States-China relations.<sup>63</sup> Different time-horizons in the bilateral relationship will continue to shape the future trajectory of United States-China relations, rather than power related variables alone. Perceived risks, economic incentives, and imminent challenges, as should be clear by now, influence time-horizons as much as material capabilities.

The more the United States perceives China as a revisionist power due to assertive moves by Beijing, and the less economic benefits it receives from cooperation in the absence of other clear and imminent challenges to address, the more likely it is to intensify competition to address what it perceives as a long-term China challenge. China, on the other hand, can reduce the incentives for the United States to intensify competitive policies if it manages to continue its peaceful rise and refrain from unilateral and assertive moves in and around regional waters, and through the continuation of its policy of reform and opening-up. Through these steps, China can reduce perceived risk of threat and provide economic benefits for cooperation. An additional opportunity for China in the mid- to long-term will be to partner with the United States to address the increasingly clear challenge of climate change.

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