Many scholars writing on the rise of China and its consequences for world politics in the twenty-first century attempt to ground their analyses in power transition theory. This is not surprising, given the theory's emphasis on international hierarchies, differential rates of economic development, power shifts, the transformation of the international order, and the violent or peaceful means through which such transformations occur. I argue that applications of power transition theory to the rise of China are compromised by the failure to recognize both the theoretical limitations of power transition theory and the contextual differences between a potential Sino-American transition and past power transitions. I give particular attention to the theory's focus on a single international hierarchy and its lack of a conceptual apparatus to deal with global-regional interactions, which are important because China is more likely to pose a threat to U.S. interests in East and Southeast Asia than to U.S. global interests, at least for many decades. I summarize power transition theory, identify logical problems in the theory and empirical problems in its application to systemic transitions of the past, and address the relevance of the theory for analyzing the rise of China and its impact on the emerging international order of the twenty-first century.

Power Transition Theory: A Summary

Although one can find elements of power transition theory throughout the long tradition of international relations theory in the West, it was Organski...
and then Gilpin who first constructed systematic theories of power transition.² Gilpin's initial treatment was in many respects theoretically richer than Organski's, but it was not followed by subsequent theoretical and empirical development, while Organski and subsequent generations of students went on to refine the theory, extend it to new empirical domains, and analyze its policy implications.³ Now, a half-century after Organski's initial conception, power transition theory remains a thriving research program, its relevance enhanced by the end of the bipolar Cold War paradigm, the emergence of American hegemony, and the rise of China.

Organski developed power transition theory to correct for the deficiencies he saw in balance of power theory, as systematized by Hans Morgenthau and others.⁴ Organski rejected balance of power assumptions that equilibrium is the natural condition of the international system; that a parity of power promotes peace while a preponderance of power promotes war; and that combinations of power generate counterbalancing coalitions and occasional countergemcnic wars to restore equilibrium. He also argued that balance of power theory's conception of power was excessively static, narrowly focused on military power and on the role of alliances in aggregating power against external threats, neglectful of the internal sources of national power, and insensitive to the importance of differential rates of growth among states.

Unlike balance of power theory's assumptions that hegemonies rarely if ever form in international politics, Organski posits a hierarchical international system, with a single dominant power at the apex of the system and a handful of other great powers and larger numbers of middle and smaller powers. Organski and his colleagues emphasize that while the dominant power controls the largest proportion of resources in the system, it is not a hegemon because it lacks the coercive power to control the behaviors of all other actors. Dominant states can use their power, however, to create a set of global political and economic structures and to promote norms of behavior that enhance the stability of the system while at the same time advancing their own security and other interests.⁵

⁵. Organski, World Politics; Tammen et al., Power Transitions; 6. Gilpin (War and Change) and subsequently Ikenberry provide useful analyses of the leading state's role in building international institutions and developing norms to help maintain stability and manage the international system. Schroeder emphasizes the collective mind set that facilitates the construction of an international order.

The system evolves with the rise and fall of states, their uneven growth rates driven primarily by changes in population, economic productivity, and the state's political capacity to extract resources from society. Of Organski and his colleagues measure productivity in terms of GDP/capita. Their aggregate measure of power is the product of GDP and political capacity.⁶ If a great power increases in strength to the point that it acquires at least 80 percent of the power of the dominant state, it is defined as a "challenger" to the dominant state and to that state's ability to control the international system.

The threat posed by a challenger is a function of the extent of its dissatisfaction with the existing international system. The dominant power, which plays a disproportionate role in setting up the system, is by definition a satisfied power. Most of the other great powers, and many middle and smaller states, benefit from the existing system and are satisfied states. They support the dominant state, ally with it,⁷ and help reinforce the international order that it created.⁸ One or two of the other great powers, along with many weaker states, may not share this satisfaction with the existing international system. They come to believe that the existing system, and the institutions and rules associated with it, provide a distribution of benefits that is unfair and that does not reflect their own power and expectations. Such states prefer to replace the existing system and its leadership. While most dissatisfied states lack the resources to ever pose serious threats to the dominant power and its system, the emergence of a dissatisfied great power might pose such a threat if it continues to grow in power.

A key proposition of power transition theory is that war is most likely when a dissatisfied challenger increases in strength and begins to overtake the dominant power.⁹ The probability of war is quite low before the challenger

⁶. Earlier, Organski and Kugler used GNP as an indicator of power. They showed that the GNP indicator was highly correlated with the composite capabilities index of the Correlates of War project, which includes equally weighted demographic, economic, and military indices. Of Organski and Kugler, The War Ladder, 34. They also operationally defined political capacity (chap. 2). See also Jacek Kugler and Marina Arthaber, "Choosing among Measures of Power: A Review of the Empirical Record," in Power in World Politics, ed. Richard J. Stoll and Michael D. Ward (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1989), 49–77; Tammen et al., Power Transitions, 15 n. 8. On the GNP indicator as a measure of national strength, see J. David Singer, Stuart A. Bremer, and J. Stucky, "Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1520–1965," in Peace, War, and Numbers, ed. Bruce Russett (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1972), 19–48. While balance of power theory generally treats all alliances as short-term strategies to aggregate capabilities against an existing threat, power transition theory suggests that most alliances are more durable strategies for system management.
⁷. On the role of other states in strengthening the existing order, see Ikenberry’s chapter in this volume.
⁸. Organski initially argued (World Politics) that war is most likely prior to the point at which the challenger overtake the dominant state. Subsequent research suggested that war is
achieves parity, and it drops off sharply after the challenger has overtaken the dominant state and established itself as the new dominant power.

It is the combination of parity, overtaking, and dissatisfaction that leads to war, though power transition theorists have been inconsistent regarding the precise relationship among these key causal variables. In the most recent statement of the theory, it appears that dissatisfaction and parity each approximate a necessary condition for war between the dominant state and the challenger.¹⁰ The overtaking of the dominant state by a satisfied challenger will not lead to war (the U.S. overtaking Britain in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, for example),¹¹ and a dissatisfied state will not go to war until it reaches approximate parity with the dominant state.¹²

The importance of satisfaction, for theory as well as for policy, is illustrated by a comparison between the Anglo-American transition at the end of the nineteenth century and the Anglo-German transition a decade or so later. Each was an important traded transition, but the first transition was peaceful and the second was not. The key difference—from the perspective of power transition theory—is that the United States shared British political and economic institutions, liberal democratic culture, and the British vision of the desirable political, economic, and legal international order. The U.S. was a satisfied state and believed that its interests could be served by a change in the hierarchy within that system rather than a replacement of that system with a new order. British leaders understood what kind of order the United States was most likely after the point of transition (Organski and Kugler, War Ledger, 59–61); see also Jonathan M. DiCicco and Jack S. Levy, "Power Shifts and Problem Shifts: The Evolution of the Power Transition Research Program," Journal of Conflict Resolution 43 (December): 675–704. Power transition theorists now argue that the probability of war is greatest before the overlapping, while the most severe wars occur after overtaking. Tammen et al., Power Transitions, 28–29. The resolution of this question of the timing of power transition wars is sensitive to precisely how power is operationally defined.

10. This is clear from fig. 1.13 in Tammen et al., Power Transitions, p. 28.


12. Power transition theories are less clear about the impact of overtaking. Presumably, a condition of parity between a dominant state and a challenger is more war-prone if power is shifting and if actors anticipate a complete power transition, but war is still likely if no such overtaking is expected—that is, if the challenger's trajectory is expected to level out, leaving the challenger in a condition of parity with the leading state. In fact, Kugler and Lemke, Parity and War, give greater emphasis to parity than to transition, as reflected in the title of their volume. As DiCicco and Levy argue ("Power Shifts and Problem Shifts," 697), this is a significant step back from Organski's initial emphasis on the dynamics of transition in contrast to the more static nature of balance of power theory. likely to construct when it ultimately achieved a dominant position, and they were willing to accept a somewhat diminished role within that order. In the Anglo-German transition, however, Germany was politically, economically, and culturally different than Britain, and had a different conception of the desirable international order. Thus Germany was a dissatisfied state. British leaders understood this, and consequently they were willing to make fewer compromises and to accept greater risks of war rather than accept a peaceful transition to a different international order in which British interests would be poorly served.¹³

Another important theme in power transition theory is that once the demographic, economic, and political conditions for power transitions are in place, neither outside actors nor external shocks can significantly affect the process of transition. In addition, war has only a temporary impact on long-term growth rates.¹⁴ Societies recover relatively quickly from war, usually within a generation, a pattern that Organski and Kugler describe as the "Phoenix factor." War has an impact on the probability of future war, however, by increasing the dissatisfaction of the defeated state.¹⁵

The near irreversibility of transitions reflects power transition theory's conception of power. Given a certain population, political capacity, and state of technology, growth is basically endogenous, and in the long term market economies with an efficient distribution of resources tend to follow similar growth trajectories, one reflected by an S shaped curve. Growth starts off slowly, accelerates rapidly during a period of technological change, and eventually settles into a pattern of more modest but sustained growth. Societies with higher political capacity grow more rapidly than states with lower political capacity (above a certain GDP/capita), but the differences in GDP/capita diminish once economies reach a level of sustained growth.

The central variable is population, which provides a resource pool that can be utilized for a variety of purposes, including economic development and the development of military capabilities. As Tammen et al. argue, "population is the sine qua non for great power status," and "the size of populations ultimately

¹³. Tammen et al., Power Transitions, chap. 2.

¹⁴. Ibid., 16–17. This assumes there is an overall sufficient GDP and political capacity. Societies with limited GDP and low political capacity risk falling into a "poverty trap" from which it is difficult to escape. It is conceivable that war might push a less developed society below the critical point, and thus reverse a transition process that has already begun.

determines the power potential of a nation." When societies with similar populations are at different stages of their growth trajectories, one will be dominant. When two countries with similar political capacities reach similar stages of growth, the one with a substantially larger population will dominate. The most dangerous situation, in terms of the likelihood of a major war, is one in which a dominant state has already achieved a position of stable but modest growth and is being overtaken by a rapidly growing, dissatisfied country with a substantially larger population.16

A key assumption here is that of the three key components of national power, population is the least subject to rapid change, either naturally or through governmental manipulation. While governments can intervene economically to enhance productivity and politically to enhance political capacity, it is harder for them to affect population growth rates, particularly in the short term. Consequently, societies with high populations will eventually outdistance societies with smaller populations, and that there is nothing that the smaller country can do to avoid this outcome. Thus, population has a critical impact on power in the long term; economic growth has a large impact in the medium term; and political capacity has its greatest impact in the short term.

Power transition theory provides a straightforward explanation for the long great power peace after World War II: the United States has been the dominant power, no other state has come close to parity, and consequently there has never been a great power war, or even a substantial threat of one. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that nuclear weapons have played a significant role in maintaining peace among the leading powers in the system, power transition theory argues that "the acquisition of nuclear weapons is not a remedy for conflict... Overtakings, dissatisfaction, and nuclear weapons do not mix without serious consequences."17

For power transition theory, the centrality of population, combined with endogenous growth theory and the hypothesis of convergence, has enormous implications for the Sino-American relationship. The substantial American advantage in economic productivity, defined in terms of GNP/capita, is only temporary, as is the current American dominance in the international system, given the fact that China's population is four times larger than that of the United States. The question, according to power transition theory, is not whether China will eventually overtake the United States, since that is practically inevitable once China completes its modernization and moves up its growth trajectory,18 but rather when and with what consequences. Power transition theorists equivocate in their discussion of the timing of the transition, but not about the conditions determining whether the transition will be peaceful or warlike.

17. Ibid., 33.
18. That outcome could be avoided only if China were to break up into smaller units, which is extremely unlikely.

Power transition theorists argue that one of the two conditions for war (parity and overtaking) will be present in the U.S.-China relationship, and that the presence of nuclear weapons or other technologies will play a minor role at best in avoiding a catastrophic war. The key variable is the extent of China's satisfaction with or grievances against an international order that the United States did much to shape and still has the power to influence. The primary determinants of Chinese satisfaction will be institutional similarity, economic interdependence, and American strategy. The more China adopts liberal democratic institutions, the greater its economic interdependence with the United States and other states in the global economy, and the more the United States acts to minimize Chinese grievances, the greater China's degree of satisfaction with the system.19 As Tammen et al. argue, "The reconciliation of preferences, the attainment of satisfaction within the international order, is the remedy."20

The early stages of the power transition research program focused on the international system as a whole and on the relationship between the dominant power and rising challengers. In an important recent development, Douglas Lemke has extended the theory to regional systems, each with its own set of dominant powers, middle powers, and lesser powers, and each operating according to the same set of power dynamics that characterize the global system. Each of these regional hierarchies is nested within the global hierarchy. Lemke found that the same conditions of overtaking, parity, and dissatisfaction account for variations in war in regional systems, particularly in the Middle East and Far East, and also in Latin America and Africa.21

Limitations of Power Transition Theory

With power transition theory, Organski provided an important alternative to balance of power as a theory of power dynamics in the international system. Subsequent extensions and refinements of the theory by Kugler, his students, and their associates have been a major intellectual contribution to the literature

19. The relationship between economic interdependence and satisfaction is undoubtedly reciprocal. The greater Chinese satisfaction with the system, the more China will attempt to reach out to the world economy. On the congruence between current Chinese economic interests and the global economy, see Lieberson's essay in this volume.
20. Ibid. Power transition theorists make additional forecasts about the future of a Chinese-dominated international system. They argue that there is a good possibility that India might overtake China later in the twenty-first century or early in the twenty-second century. The peacefulness of that transition, if it occurs, will be determined by the extent of Indian grievances against the international order that China establishes. After that, Tammen et al., make the striking forecast that in all likelihood there will be no further power transitions, since there is unlikely to be another country that can match the population resources of China or India. This is an interesting variant of the "end of history" hypothesis (though power transition theorists do not use that phrase). On the end of history see Francis Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man (New York: Free Press, 1992).
on international relations theory and international conflict in particular. Of the various international relations theories, power transition theory is probably the most widely used by scholars seeking to better understand the likely dynamics and consequences of the rise of China in the contemporary global system. The theory’s emphasis on the importance of the satisfaction/dissatisfaction variable in explaining whether international change is accomplished peacefully or with bloodshed seems quite plausible, and its policy implications provide a useful corrective to the hardline rhetoric by some American analysts.

Still, some aspects of the theory are misleading, and in other respects the theory does not provide a complete or fully accurate picture of the dynamics of the rise and fall of states. This is not the place for a thorough critique of power transition theory.22 It would be useful, however, to examine more thoroughly those aspects of the theory that are particularly relevant for analyzing the likely course of Sino-American relations over the decades to come. We begin with the theory’s conception of power, and in particular its emphasis on population as the sine qua non of national power capabilities. Next we argue that the theory’s emphasis on a single international hierarchy for great power relations is theoretically restrictive and historically inaccurate, and that an explanation of the rise and fall of great powers in the past needs to recognize multiple hierarchies—not only the global system, but also the European regional system, which has been neglected in existing treatments of regional hierarchies. We then turn to the theory’s view of the causes of war. We note its neglect of a preventive logic as a possible mechanism leading from narrowing power differentials to war, as well as its downplaying of the possible deterrent effects of nuclear weapons on the outbreak of war. We question the argument that past great power wars have been driven primarily by competition for power and dominance in the global system, and argue instead that regional issues have played a critical role.

Power

Power transition theory posits that national power is a function of population, economic productivity, and the political capacity to extract resources from society and transform them into national power. Thus in most applications of the theory national power = population * GDP/capita * political capacity. One problem with the emphasis on population and GDP is that while GDP captures quantitative changes in the growth of the economy as a whole, it does not fully capture qualitative changes in the form of technological innovations that generate new leading economic sectors and trigger paradigmatic shifts in economic production.23


24. This discussion follows Rapkin and Thompson, “Power Transition, Challenge, and the (Re)Emergence of China,” 323.

China’s Ascent

Although we lack a theory of the origins of technological innovation, many have argued that liberal democratic states—with their political openness and unrestricted access to scientific information, and their open and competitive economies—provide a much more fertile ground for the encouragement of innovation than do less open political systems. China’s relatively closed political system does not currently provide the optimal conditions for the kinds of innovations that might thrust it into a position of world economic leadership, and China’s future economic growth and leadership depends in part on the opening of its political system.16

Another consideration is that technological innovation can affect national power, and hence power transitions, through its direct impact on military power in addition to its impact on economic power and the economic foundations of military power. Examples include the “Military Revolution” of the sixteenth century, the nuclear revolution, and the “revolution in military affairs” of the late twentieth century. Certainly one factor enhancing America’s military dominance in the last two decades was the revolution in military affairs based on the revolution in microelectronics and information.27

To summarize, although power transition theory suggests that China’s overtaking of the United States is both inevitable and imminent sometime within the next generation, a focus on the leading economic sectors and the technological innovations that drive them suggests a more cautious attitude in predicting a Sinoo-American power transition.

Single or Multiple Great Power Hierarchies?

Another analytic limitation of power transition theory that bears on any analysis of the international impact of the rise of China is its focus on a single great power hierarchy in the global system and on the rise and fall of great powers within that hierarchy. Power transition theorists, like many international relations theorists, speak of the international system, each containing its own leading powers. For most of the last five centuries of the modern world, at least until the twentieth century and probably until 1945, there have been two elite power systems, one based in Europe and the other encompassing the entire world, with an overlapping but not identical set of leading powers.

26. One indicator of the weakness of the Chinese economy, despite its enormous growth over the last decade, is its overreliance on foreign direct investment. Huang argues that the key benefits provided by such investment—the ability of foreign firms to provide venture capital to promote entrepreneurship, provide interregional capital mobility, and other privatization processes—promote domestic firms in an optimal functioning economy should be able to provide themselves. Yasheng Huang, Selling China: Foreign Direct Investment during the Reform Era (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

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This conventional wisdom that Germany was the leading great power on the continent is based in part on the size, efficiency, and leadership of the German army. Power transition theory, with its emphasis on the GDP and GDP per capita indicator of national strength, cannot capture Germany’s power and influence in the European system. In 1913, on the eve of World War I, Germany’s GDP was only 56.1 percent of Britain’s. Germany did not reach parity (defined by power transition theorists as 80 percent of Britain’s power) until the 1950s. The GDP per capita indicator gives Germany 77.7 percent of British GDP in 1913, just short of parity. Measures of power in continental systems are invalid unless they give significant weight to land-based military power.

It is also worth noting that power transition theory’s argument that the global leader serves as the system manager does not apply to the nineteenth-century European system. A collective great power management of the system by the Concert of Europe emerged after the Napoleonic Wars. Large in the century, Bismarck managed the system through a network of entangling alliances. Indeed, the 1870–90 period is often described as the “Bismarckian system.”

If we go back further in time, we find further support for this view of different power hierarchies in different systems. The global system in the early seventeenth century was dominated by the Dutch based on their strength in trade, finance, and naval power, while in Europe power was fairly evenly distributed between Spain, the Austrian Habsburgs, Sweden, the Netherlands, and France, which emerged as dominant by the 1660s. While Britain was the leading power in the global system after the mid-eighteenth-century wars, the European system was characterized by several great powers of roughly equal strength. France was the dominant power on the European continent during the French Revolutionary Wars, while Britain dominated the seas. The only time in the last half-millennium that leadership in the European and global systems coincided was the late sixteenth century, when Spain was in a dominant position.

The European and global systems have also been characterized by different patterns of coalitional balancing against the leading power. Coalitions usually formed against potential hegemonic threats in Europe—against Spain under Philip II late in the sixteenth century, against France under Louis XIV late in the seventeenth century and then again under Napoleon, and against Germany first under Wilhelm II and then under Hitler in the twentieth century. In contrast, military or naval coalitions have formed relatively infrequently against the dominant global powers during the last five centuries. The prevalence of grand coalitions and war in response to high concentrations of power in the European system, as predicted by balance of power theory but not by power transition theory, reinforces my argument that power transition theory does not capture the strategic dynamics of the European system over the last five hundred years. This is significant, as the European system was a dominant subsystem in global politics until 1918 or perhaps 1945.

The European system and the global system have not been entirely distinct, of course, but instead have interacted in complex ways. A full understanding of the dynamics of great power politics of the past or those of the future requires a theoretical integration of the dynamics of strategic interaction in nested international systems, but power transition theorists—and most other international relations theorists, for that matter—have given relatively little attention to this important question.

One thing that a more integrated theory of power transitions will have to incorporate is the idea that concentrations of power are probably stabilizing in global systems and almost certainly destabilizing in continental systems, or

39. Levy and Thompson, “Hegemonic Threats.” A balancing coalition also formed after 1945 against the Soviet Union, the leading land power in Eurasia, and not against the United States as the leading global power—just as the great powers coalesced against France under Louis XIV and then against Napoleon, but not against the Netherlands and Britain, the leading global powers in those periods. The absence of great power coalitional balancing against the United States today is not the anomaly that some would suggest, but an enduring historical pattern. Admittedly, though, the United States has power projection capabilities that are historically without precedent, which complicates attempts to draw parallels with past systems.

40. Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, “Balancing at Sea: Do States Coalice Against Leading Maritime Powers?” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2003. Dominant continental states provide less of a threat than do dominant continental states, at least to other great powers. The threat posed by strong continental states and their large armies is far greater than the threat posed by global powers, whose primary aim is to maximize market share rather than to control territory. In addition, the loss of strength gradient over distance and particularly over water further diminishes the threat posed by maritime powers, though that threat can still be substantial to weaker states in the system. States built up their own naval strength against dominant sea powers (as Germany did against Britain before World War I), but the absence of coalitional balancing at sea is still striking. One of the loss of strength over water see John J. Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (New York: Norton, 2001).
at least in the European system that formed the heart of the world system for most of the last five centuries.41 The most destabilizing situation historically is one characterized simultaneously by the combination of the diffusion of power in the global system, to the point of an impending power transition, and an increasing concentration of power in the European system. Many of the most destructive wars in the modern world fit this pattern, including the wars of Louis XIV (1672–1713), the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (1792–1815), and World War I.42

Although Lemke has extended power transition theory to regional hierarchies, it has to be very careful in taking a theoretical logic designed for states at the apex of an autonomous international system, subject to no external influences, and applying it to states in a regional system that is open to the influence of external actors.43 A dominant regional actor cannot shape the rules for the regional system in the same way that a dominant global actor can shape the rules for the global system. Things might be different if the global system is “subsystem dominant,” with influence running from the regional system to the global system. That was in many respects the situation that characterized Europe’s position in the global system for many centuries, but it is unlikely that subsystem dominance is likely to arise in the future (though it might be interesting to speculate about Asia towards the end of the twenty-first century).

It is striking that Lemke applies his regional hierarchy model to the Middle East, the Far East, Africa, and Latin America, but not to Europe. Whereas Lemke’s regions include those regions that could pose a threat to the leading global power, at least until Japan did so in the twentieth century, the European region has always included at least one or two strong states that posed a serious threat to the interests of Britain as the leading global power for two centuries. The Netherlands, as the leading global power in the seventeenth century, faced more immediate land-based security threats than did Britain.44 China will likely face greater land-based security threats than did Britain, but whether those threats will be as great as those faced by the Netherlands is hard to say.

Power transition theorists’ neglect of the important role of Europe reflects their broader theoretical argument that the global hierarchy always dominates regional hierarchies. Tammen et al. argue that “regional hierarchies are influenced by the global hierarchical system but cannot, in turn, control that larger system,” and that “regional hierarchies are subordinate to the global hierarchy.”45 This is an interesting proposition, but one cannot make a strong argument that the European system has dominated the global system for most of the last five centuries.46 As I argue in the next section, most wars involving power transitions among the great powers have grown out of European regional issues, not global issues.

Power Transition Theory and the Causes of War

Although a central aim of power transition theory is to explain the initiation, timing, and severity of war, many of its propositions about these phenomena are problematic. As a consequence, the theory’s analysis of the conditions under which a Sino-American transition might be peaceful or violent could be very misleading. One general theoretical problem is that power transition theory downplays the growing state’s incentives to adopt preventive war strategies, though as we shall see that problem is unlikely to be critical for the purposes of analyzing the Sino-American rivalry in the twenty-first century. A second problem is that power transition theory minimizes the deterrent effects of nuclear weapons on the outbreak of war, and a third problem arises from the theory’s argument that the primary cause of great power wars is the struggle for power and dominance in the overarching global system. We consider each of these points in turn.


42. Rafe A. Thompson, The Great Powers and Global Struggle. The wars of Louis XIV coincided with the decline of the Dutch supremacy in trade, finance, and sea power, and simultaneously the rapid rise of France under Louis XIV. The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (1792–1815) occurred under the simultaneous decline in relative British sea power and global economic strength and a concentration of European military power in the hands of France. Britain regained its dominant global position in trade, and sea power in the nineteenth century, but Britain’s share of power resources in the global system began to erode by the end of the century with the rise of the United States, at the same time as the increasing concentration of land-based military power in the hands of Germany on the continent. World War II deviates from this pattern, but in a way that power transition theory cannot explain. Tammen et al. (Power Transitions, 51) talk about Germany surpassing Britain, but in fact the United States was the leading global power in terms of GDP and most other indicators. World War II coincided with an increasing (not decreasing) concentration of global power in the hands of the United States, and an increasing concentration of land-based power by Germany on the European continent.

43. Lemke, Regions of War and Peace.

44. The major threat to the Netherlands came from the rise of France under Louis XIV in the 1660s. The only other leading global economic power to have a foothold on the European continent during the last five centuries was Spain in the sixteenth century, which also faced a threat from France early in that century.

45. Tammen et al., Power Transitions, 7-8.

46. A. J. F. Taylor (Struggle for Mastery, xxiv) traces the end of European dominance to the end of World War I. He argues that “Henceforth, what had been the centre of the world became merely ‘the European question.’” Given the centrality of the subsequent counterhegemonic struggle against Hitler’s Germany, and even the fact that the central issue of the global Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was the future of Germany, Taylor was premature in pronouncing the end of Europe. But his general argument stands. On the Cold War see Marc Trachtenberg, A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
Organski argued that dissatisfied challengers initiate major wars just prior to the point of a power transition. They aim to accelerate the transition and put themselves in a position of power so they can create a new set of political, economic, and legal arrangements at the international level. That would help bring the benefits they derive from the system into line with their newly acquired military power. Subsequent power transition theorists have consistently reinforced the argument that it is the dissatisfied challenger that initiates wars, though as I noted earlier they sometimes disagree about the precise timing of the war. Power transition theorists have repeatedly dismissed the argument that the dominant state, in anticipation of being overtaken, adopts a strategy of preventive war in order to block the rise of the challenger before it grows too strong.

The argument that the rising power initiates the war prior to the point of power transition is theoretically problematic, because at that point the rising state is still weaker and is likely to lose the war. Why does it have the chutzpah to try? After the transition, when its stronger position would significantly increase the likelihood of military victory? Furthermore, why wouldn't the dominant state, anticipating this, pursue a strategy of preventive war to defeat the rising challenger while it still has military superiority? Historians and political scientists have identified a long list of cases of military responses to rising adversaries by states in relative decline, and have developed a substantial body of theory.

Power transition theorists continue to argue that dominant states do not adopt strategies of preventive war. They emphasize the constraining effects on unilateral preventive action imposed by the system of institutions, rules, and norms created by the dominant state to secure its interests and those of its allies. Prevention would violate the rules, disrupt the system, and result in a serious loss of support. As Tammen et al. argue, “Once the dominant country sets the rules at the international level, its actions are inhibited by adherence to the status quo that it has devised.” Instead, the dominant state uses its resources to attract as many satisfied great powers as possible, creating a strong coalition of power that will deter any challenger.

Dominant states do sometimes behave in this fashion, and Tammen et al. are correct to illustrate the argument with the NATO alliance against the Soviet Union. But what if this strategy does not work? What if the dissatisfied challenger has a large enough population, substantial enough economic productivity, and high enough political capacity (as power transition theorists argue that China will have) to overtake the dominant state and its coalition, and what if it is not deterred from challenging the existing system? Tammen et al. imply that under these conditions the dominant state's allies would punish it for breaking the rules by resorting to force to block the rise of the challenger. This is possible, but not inevitable. Why would the dominant state's allies, who reap so many security and economic benefits from the existing system, prefer that the dominant state stand by and allow the dissatisfied challenger to overturn the system?

Although scholars have conducted no systematic empirical study of the likelihood of system leaders adopting preventive war strategies in response to rising challengers, there is enough evidence of preventive motivated wars by great powers and other states to suggest that the neglect of the possible role of preventive responses by declining leaders against rising challengers is a serious limitation in power transition theory. The omission is puzzling, since a strategy of preventive war is consistent with the basic theoretical logic of power transition theory. It is simply an alternative causal mechanism leading from the rise of a dissatisfied challenger to the outbreak of war, one that is quite plausible under certain conditions.

Admittedly, the theory of preventive war strategy is not critical for an analysis of the likely strategic dynamics of a Sino-American power transition, because other factors—especially nuclear deterrence—counteract any incentives for preventive military action. Any decision for war under conditions of transition must be based on the dominant state's calculations regarding the costs and benefits of war versus the costs and benefits of delay. While such calculations include a variety of factors, some of which are difficult to measure (like time horizons and risk orientations), the unambiguous costs and risks of escalation to nuclear war should almost certainly be sufficient to deter the adoption of a preventive war strategy against a nuclear-armed state.

31. Ibid.
32. A brief look at responses by leading European states to rising challengers during the last several centuries suggests that preventive logic may have played a role in Germany’s attack against the Soviet Union in 1941 (perhaps affecting the timing of war more than the motivation for it), the German push for war in 1914; the war of the First Coalition against revolutionary France in 1793; the War of the League of Augsburg in 1688;Copeland, Origins of Major Wars; Fritz Fischer, Germany's Aims in the First World War (New York: Norton, 1967); Jack S. Levy, “Preventive War,” World Politics 40 (October 1988): 82–107; Levy, “Preventive War and Democratic Politics,” International Studies Quarterly 52 (March 2008): 1–24; Stephen Van Evera, Causes of War. Power and the Roots of Conflict (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), chap. 4; Dale Copeland, The Origins of Major Wars (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).
This argument is reinforced by the experience of the U.S. reaction to the rise of the Soviet Union and of China in early Cold War period. Despite some discussions among U.S. officials in the late 1940s and early 1950s about a preventive strike against the Soviet Union, and U.S.-Soviet discussions in the early 1960s about a possible preventive strike against China, U.S. political leaders did not come close to implementing prevention as American policy, even at a time when the risk of a devastating nuclear retaliation was relatively small.44 With the increasing destructiveness of nuclear weapons, and the increasing invulnerability of second-strike retaliatory capabilities in the last four decades, it is virtually impossible to imagine a scenario under which U.S. political leaders could come to believe that a major preventive strike against an adversary like China, with a substantial nuclear capability, would be a rational instrument of policy. Similarly, the chances that later in the century China might respond to the threat of a rising India with a strategy of preventive war are exceedingly small.

Power transition theorists, while minimizing the likelihood of a Sino-American war, would reject the statement that it is significantly influenced by the presence of nuclear weapons. They argue that nuclear deterrence is not particularly stable, and that nuclear weapons have played only a minor role in maintaining the long great power peace since World War II. Tammen et al. state that “When the conditions of overtaking and dissatisfaction are present, the probability of war is high, nuclear weapons notwithstanding. Nuclear deterrence is tenuous.”45 This interpretation of the long great power peace is at odds with that of the vast majority of strategic theorists, who argue that nuclear deterrence played a significant role.46

Now let us turn to the power transition theory argument that great power wars are the product of the struggle for power and control over the global system. Tammen et al. claim that “wars will diffuse downward from the global to the regional hierarchies but will not diffuse upwards from regional to global.” They also argue that “the dominant role of the U.S.-German dyad . . . accounts for the initiation of both world wars,” with a dissatisfied Germany rising and overtaking Britain first in 1907 and again in 1936.47

Although a thorough assessment of the relative impact of global and regional factors in the emergence of the two world wars of the twentieth century is not possible here, a brief response would be in order. The idea that the initiation of these two wars can be traced to the dynamics of the global system rather than to those of the European system is not plausible, especially in the case of World War II. Let me briefly address that case first, since it is the clearer of the two, and then turn to World War I, about which there might be more disagreement.

First, it is not clear why power transition theorists focus on Britain in the 1930s, since by their own GDP measure the United States was the dominant power in the world. If we look at GDP for 1940, in billions of 1990 constant dollars, Maddison gives 930.8 for the U.S., 315.7 for Britain, and 242.8 for Germany.48 Germany had not even reached the 80 percent threshold of parity with Britain, much less with the United States. The United States, as the most powerful state in the global system, chose to play little role in the European system. Hitler was quite confident that the U.S. would not enter the war, or at least that if the U.S. did intervene it would be too late to make a difference. Nor did he envision a global struggle for power with the United States. Hitler sought domination on the European continent, with an emphasis on eastward expansion, and often contemplated an agreement with Britain on global issues. Early on he believed that he could fight and win a European war without British intervention, though he probably expected that at some point Britain would intervene in an attempt to contain Germany’s expansion in Europe.

Few historians would accept the argument that Germany was engaged in a struggle for primacy in the world system, at least not in 1939–45. World War II was first and foremost about European, not global, politics.49

World War I is more complicated, and some historians might endorse the argument that Germany initiated the war as a means of challenging Britain’s dominance in the world system. Kennedy, for example, emphasizes the importance of the Anglo-German naval rivalry, and many point to Germany’s adoption of Weltpolitik at the end of the nineteenth century.50 A good argument can be made, however, that the war, and certainly decision-making in


45. Tammen et al., Power Transitions, 39 (emphasis in original).


47. Tammen et al., Power Transitions, 8, 31–52.

48. Maddison, Monitoring the World Economy, 1820–1992, cited in Rapkin and Thompson, “Power Transition, Challenge, and the (Re)Emergence of China,” 329. The GDP per capita figures, in 1990 constant dollars, are 7,018, 6,446, and 5,545 for the U.S., Britain, and Germany, respectively. In terms of sea power, Britain and the United States were about equal, each about three times stronger than Germany. Maddelssen and Thompson, Sea Power in Global Politics, 124). In terms of military expenditures, The Correlates of War data show that Germany’s expenditure twice to one in 1938, at the time of the Munich crisis, it was approximately four to one. See http://vow.org, zung.edu.


that are likely to define the context for a possible Sino-American transition in the future. For these reasons scholars need to be very cautious in using power transition theory as a conceptual framework for the analysis of the rise of China and its impact on the international order.

One important limitation of power transition theory is that its conception of a single international system undercuts the theory’s utility for analyzing situations involving the complex interactions between the global system and regional systems nested within it. This affects the study of both past and future power transitions. While some past transitions were primarily concerned with leadership in the overarching global system, as illustrated by the Anglo-American transition at the end of the nineteenth century, other transitions were primarily about dominance in the European system. These include conflicts arising from the rapid rise of France under Louis XIV in the late seventeenth century and of Germany under Hitler in the mid-twentieth century. Many other competitions for dominance and leadership, however, involve regional factors and influence at both the global and regional levels. The “second Hundred Years’ War” between Britain and France in the eighteenth century was a struggle for empire and control of the seas as well as a struggle for Europe, as was the subsequent British struggle against Napoleon. The multilevel competitions were linked. Britain’s recurring motivation to avoid the emergence of a sustained hegemony over the European continent, and hence its willingness to play the role of the “balancer,” was driven by the fear that a state that was able to control all of the resources of the continent would be able to use those resources to mount a challenge to the British empire and its control of the seas.65

Power transition theory lacks the conceptual apparatus to understand these multilevel struggles for power.66 It might be well suited for an analysis of a situation in which a leading global maritime power faces a rising maritime power, but it is less well suited to explain the strategic interaction between dominant global power and a rising regional power, and even less well suited (judging from historical experience) to explain intraregional power transitions, where counterhegemonic balancing plays a significant role.

Power transition theory neglects some key questions regarding global-regional interactions: How does a global power balance threats to its global interests and threats to its regional interests? How does the regional threat environment of a rising regional state affect its behavior toward the global power, and the global power’s behavior toward the rising challenger?

The rise of China falls in the same category, neither purely regional nor purely global. Power transition theory is correct to identify the rise of China as the leading geopolitical event of the coming decades, but applications of the theory place too much emphasis on its impact on the global hierarchy and not enough on the Asian regional hierarchy. The rise of China will constitute a challenge to the United States in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Asian rimland; Chinese economic growth will continue to erode the leading U.S. position in the global economy; the extension of Chinese economic interests will compromise specific U.S. security interests, as illustrated by recent events in Africa; but it is very unlikely that China will develop the power projection capabilities to pose a challenge to vital American security interests on a global scale for many decades to come.

The primary threats posed by China to American interests are likely to be in Asia, and regional dynamics will undoubtedly affect U.S. relationships with Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asia. How that will affect U.S. interests is more difficult to predict. Neither power transition theory nor alternative international relations theories provide a theoretical apparatus adequate to make specific predictions about foreign policy behavior and strategic interaction in the context of complex regional-global interactions. Lemke offers a regional hierarchy model, but he applies the model only to regions consisting of states that play no significant role outside of their regions, while he ignores the historically more relevant case of Europe. Thus Lemke’s model provides little guidance for an analysis of regional-global interactions of the kind that are likely to emerge from the rise of China.44

Power transition theory gives inadequate attention to how the threat environment of a rising regional power might affect its relationship with the global power. As noted earlier, analyses of the rise of China and its consequences for the global system occasionally look for guidance to the experience of the rise of Germany in the late nineteenth century.67 That analogy is useful in some respects, but one important difference is the different regional threat environments facing nineteenth-century Germany and twenty-first-century China. Germany faced a number of potentially serious military threats on the continent, and in fact Germany’s fear of the rising power of Russia was a leading cause of World War I. While Taiwan remains a major issue for China,

It is quite unlikely that China will face the kinds of regional threats that Germany faced, at least for the foreseeable future. As to what difference this makes, we have no well-developed theory to guide us.66

Let me end by repeating a theme that runs throughout this chapter: most applications of power transition theory focus on challenges to the leading power in the global system, whereas applications of balance of power theory have traditionally focused on the strategic interaction of the leading powers on the European continent, with the assumption that those patterns can be generalized to any continental system. Neither theory alone provides a useful framework for the analysis of the rise of China in Asia and the world, and in its implications for the Sino-American rivalry for the international system more generally. Scholars can invoke insights from each of these theories, but in doing so they must remain cognizant of the assumptions and scope conditions of the theoretical propositions that guide their analyses. A fuller understanding of situations like the rise of China, as well as of many systemic transitions of the past, requires a theoretical integration of strategic dynamics at both the global and the regional levels.

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64. Lemke, Regions of War and Peace.
65. Another interesting analogy is Britain’s response to the rise of Germany in the 1930s, in the context of its concerns about threats to its East Asian interests from Japan and to its Mediterranean interests from Italy.