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CHAPTER 1

Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China

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NOTICE

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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.¹ 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

1. For a classification of the literature on the rise of China in terms of realist, liberal, and constructivist international relations theory, see Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?" *International Security* 30 (fall 2005): 7-45.

and then Gilpin who first constructed systematic theories of power transitions.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 concentrations of power generate counterbalancing coalitions and occasional counterhegemonic 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

2. A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1958); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Gilpin, "The Theory of Hegemonic War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18 (spring 1988): 591–614.

3. A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Kugler and Douglas Lemke, eds., *Parity and War: Evaluations and Extensions of The War Ledger* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Ronald L. Tammen et al., *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century* (New York: Chatham House, 2000).

4. Organski, *World Politics*; Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1948).

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 it maintain stability and manage the international system. Schroeder emphasizes the collective mind sets that facilitate the construction of an international order. G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Paul

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. 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

W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). For an earlier effort to explain the rebuilding of order after major wars see Charles F. Doran, *The Politics of Assimilation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971).

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 indicators. Organski and Kugler, *The War Ledger*, 34. They also operationally defined political capacity (chap. 2). See also Jacek Kugler and Marina Arbetman, "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 Correlates of War operationalization of national strength, see J. David Singer, Stuart A. Bremer, and J. Stuckey, "Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820–1965," in *Peace, War, and Numbers*, ed. Bruce Russett (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1972), 19–48.

7. Whereas 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.

8. On the role of other states in strengthening the existing order, see Ikenberry's chapter in this volume.

9. Organski initially argued (*World Politics*) that war is most likely prior to the point at which the challenger overtakes 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 involved overtaking and parity, 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 overtaking, 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.

11. The United States overtook Britain in GDP by 1880, in GDP/capita by 1913, in crude steel production by 1890, and in naval capabilities by 1920. See Agnus Maddison, *Monitoring the World Economy, 1820–1992* (Paris: OECD, 1995), cited in David P. Rapkin and William R. Thompson, “Power Transition, Challenge, and the (Re)Emergence of China,” *International Interactions* 29 (October–December 2003): 325; George Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Leading Sectors and World Powers: The Coevolution of Global Economics and Politics* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), p. 101; George Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Seapower in Global Politics, 1494–1993* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), p. 131.

12. Power transition theorists 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 societies have a 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.

15. Organski and Kugler, *War Ledger*, chap. 3. Power transition theorists argue that punitive peace settlements generate dissatisfaction and hence a relatively short peace, whereas more lenient peace terms, combined with postwar assistance programs and other efforts to transform defeated countries from dissatisfied to satisfied states, generate a more sustained peace. Tammen et al., *Power Transitions*, 31. In contrast, Geoffrey Blainey emphasizes the stability of a punitive “Carthaginian peace” in *The Causes of War*, 3d ed. (New York: Free Press, 1988). There is substantial evidence that civil war settlements based on one-sided victories are the most stable. See Roy Licklider, “The Consequences of Negotiated Settlements in Civil Wars, 1945–1993,” *American Political Science Review* 89 (September 1995): 681–90.

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 overtake states 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 been no 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.

16. Tammen et al., *Power Transitions*, 17-18.

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 two of the three 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 can 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 Ikenberry'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 late 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).

21. Douglas Lemke, *Regions of War and Peace* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

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 power transition theory's view of the causes of war. We note its neglect of 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 $\text{national power} = \text{population} * \text{GDP/capita} * \text{political capacity}$. 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

22. For good critiques see John A. Vasquez, "When Are Power Transitions Dangerous? An Appraisal and Reformulation of Power Transition Theory," in Kugler and Lemke, *Parity and War*, 35–56; DiCicco and Levy, "Power Shifts and Problem Shifts."

23. An emphasis on leading economic sectors is central to leadership long cycle theory and to Thompson's "challenger model," each of which also emphasizes sea power as an instrument for

Consider the last couple of centuries.²⁴ The first phase of the Industrial Revolution took place in Britain and emphasized textiles and iron production, while a second phase focused on the development of steam power and railroads. Leadership in the Industrial Revolution then shifted to the American and German economies and was based on steel production, chemicals, and electrification. Subsequently, new leading sectors involved automobiles, jet engines, and semiconductors, followed by the Information Revolution, with developments in computers and biotechnology. These shifting leading sectors roughly correspond with shifts in power in the international system.

In emphasizing the importance of industrialization in generating bursts of economic productivity for different states at different times, Organski and his colleagues acknowledge the role of technological innovation, but they do not give it sufficient prominence in their model. In addition, power transition theorists' empirical focus on the last two centuries of the industrial era is too limiting. We can easily extend the theory back in time to earlier historical eras and incorporate preindustrial technological changes that have driven economic development. Relative economic productivity and growth grow out of comparative advantages of leading economic sectors. A more direct emphasis on leading sectors provides a more complete causal mechanism to explain growth trajectories, and a better early-warning indicator of significant shifts in those trajectories, than does power transition theory's treatment of economic productivity.

New leading sectors, and the technological innovations upon which they are based, are generally difficult to predict, so that the extrapolation of current economic trends into the future is highly problematic. In the 1980s, when many were predicting a shift in economic power from the United States to Japan, the Information Revolution enhanced American economic dominance in a substantial way. This suggests that power transition theory's prediction that rates of growth continue to level off in mature economies may not always be accurate, given the possibility of new innovations and the emergence of new leading sectors that propel growth. The relative strengths of the American and Chinese economies in the future, and thus the point of a future power transition, are likely to be affected by the location of new technological innovations and the strategies that states decide to adopt as well as by the expected path of current growth trajectories.²⁵

maintaining trade routes and political influence. Modelski and Thompson, *Seapower in Global Politics*; Karen A. Rasler and William R. Thompson, *The Great Powers and Global Struggle, 1490–1990* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994); Thompson, "The Evolution of Political-Economic Challengers in the Active Zone," *Review of International Political Economy* 4 (summer 1997): 286–318.

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

25. Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

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.²⁶

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 American 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 Sino-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. It is more useful to recognize multiple international systems, 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 private entrepreneurs, promote interregional capital mobility, and other privatization functions—are things that 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).

27. McGregor Knox and Williamson Murray, eds., *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300–2050* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Each system has evolved with the rise and fall of great powers within it, but the basis of power in the system, the structure of power, and the patterns of strategic interaction of the great powers in each system have been different. The leading powers in the two systems have been different, and the rise and fall of great powers in the two systems have often not been correlated. Moreover, a state can be satisfied in one system but dissatisfied in another system.²⁸ Any attempt to talk about dominance in the international system, the distribution of power in that system, or power transitions in the system, without first specifying the geographic scope of the system and the basis of power in the system, is not particularly meaningful.²⁹

Power in the pre-1945 European system was based primarily on land power, whereas power in the global system was based on sea power and on the economic wealth underpinning the great maritime empires.³⁰ The European great power system has been much less hierarchical than the global power system. While sustained hegemonies (or at least periods of dominance) have been common in the global system (Britain throughout much of the nineteenth century, the United States throughout much of the twentieth century), they have not arisen in the last five centuries of the European system.³¹

The leading powers in the two systems have almost always been different, at least until 1945. Britain was the dominant power in the nineteenth-century global system, but the European system was characterized by a handful of great powers of roughly equal strength from 1815 to 1871 and by the leading role of Germany after that. Whereas power transition theorists speak of the Pax Britannica, Eurocentric balance of power theorists often speak of the nineteenth century as the "golden age" of the balance of power.³²

28. Satisfaction/dissatisfaction is a central concept in power transition theory, but it raises a number of conceptual and methodological problems. It is multidimensional, continuous rather than dichotomous, and extraordinarily difficult to measure. See DiCicco and Levy, "Power Shifts and Problem Shifts." China is highly dissatisfied with its relationship with Taiwan, moderately dissatisfied with its relationship with Japan, satisfied with the rest of the Asian regional order, and somewhat satisfied with the global order.

29. Jack S. Levy, "Long Cycles, Hegemonic Transitions, and the Long Peace," in *The Long Postwar Peace*, ed. Charles W. Kegley Jr. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 147–76. Alternatively, one can speak of a single global system with a number of regional systems nested within it. In this conceptual framework, Europe is one of several regional systems, and the global system was "subsystem dominant" until 1945. Morton A. Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1957).

30. Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, "Hegemonic Threats and Great Power Balancing in Europe, 1495–2000," *Security Studies* 14 (January–March 2005), 1–30. See Goldstein's chapter in this volume for further discussion of the distinction between maritime powers and continental powers.

31. If we use army size as an indicator of power, one state has acquired 50 percent of the military capabilities among the great powers in the system only twice: the Habsburgs throughout most of the 1560–1640 period and Russia during the 1940s and then again after 1970. *Ibid.* Few would consider either hegemonic during these periods.

32. As A. J. P. Taylor argues, based on comparative data on population and military spending across various services, "after 1890 Germany was clearly the greatest military power on the

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.³³ 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 77.9 percent of British GDP in 1913, just short of parity.³⁴ 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.³⁵ Later in the century, Bismarck managed the system through a network of entangling alliances.³⁶ 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.³⁷ The global system in the early seventeenth century was dominated by the Dutch based on their strength in trade, finance, and naval power,³⁸ 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

Continent." Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), xxviii. Germany's leading role after 1871 has led many scholars to make comparisons between the rise of Germany in the nineteenth century and the rise of China in the twenty-first century, in order to facilitate an analysis of the factors that might lead toward or away from the conflictual outcome that defined Germany's rise. Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge*, 204–12.

33. Colonel T. N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and General Staff, 1807–1945* (McLean: The Dupuy Institute, 1984).

34. Angus Maddison, *Monitoring the World Economy, 1820–1992* (Paris: OECD, 1995); Rapkin and Thompson, "Power Transition, Challenge, and the (Re)Emergence of China," 323–25.

35. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics*.

36. William L. Langer, *European Alliances and Alignments, 1871–1890* (New York: Vintage, 1964).

37. Levy, "Long Cycles."

38. Jonathan I. Israel, *Dutch Primacy in World Trade, 1585–1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

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.³⁹ In contrast, military or naval coalitions have formed relatively infrequently against the dominant global powers during the last five centuries.⁴⁰ 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 Coalesce Against Leading Maritime Powers?" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2003. Dominant maritime 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. On 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, one 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 no great power 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

41. For contrary evidence from non-Western historical systems see Stuart Kaufman, Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *Balance of Power in World History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

42. Rasler and 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*.

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 can 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 declining 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.

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. P. Taylor (*Struggle for Mastery*, xxxvi) 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 war, though as I noted earlier they sometimes disagree about the precise timing of the war.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

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 doesn't the challenger wait until 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 on preventive war.⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰

Dominant states do sometimes behave in this fashion, and Tammen et al. are correct to illustrate the argument with the NATO alliance against the

47. Organski, *World Politics*. Organski and Kugler (*War Ledger*) later found that wars were most likely to occur after the point of transition, but those findings were subsequently reversed as a result of more recent research by power transition theorists, who continue to debate the question of the timing of war.

48. Tammen et al., *Power Transitions*, 27.

49. Jack S. Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics* 40 (October 1987): 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).

50. Tammen et al., *Power Transitions*, 27–28.

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 likely. 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?⁵¹

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 preventively 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.⁵² 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 neglect of preventive war strategies 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 leaders' 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.⁵³

51. *Ibid.*

52. 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 1792, and Louis XIV's initiation of the War of the League of Augsburg in 1688. See Copeland, *Origins of Major Wars*; Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1967); Jack S. Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914," *International Security* 15 (winter 1990–91): 151–86; Van Evera, *Causes of War*, chap. 4; T. C. W. Blanning, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* (New York: Longman, 1986); John A. Lynn, *The Wars of Louis XIV, 1667–1714* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1999).

53. On time horizons see Philip Streich and Jack S. Levy, "Time Horizons, Discounting, and Intertemporal Choice," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51 (April 2007): 199–226. On risk behavior see Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

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.⁵⁴ 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."⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶

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 upward from regional to global." They also argue that "the dominant role of the U.K.-German dyad . . . account[s] for the initiation of both world wars," with a dissatisfied Germany rising and overtaking Britain first in 1907 and again in 1936.⁵⁷

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

54. Gordon Chang, "JFK, China, and the Bomb," *Journal of American History* 74 (March 1988): 1287-1310; Scott Silverstone, *Preventive War and American Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Marc Trachtenberg, "Preventive War and U.S. Foreign Policy," *Security Studies* 16 (January-March 2007): 1-31.

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

56. John Lewis Gaddis, "The Long Peace," *International Security* 10 (spring 1986): 99-142; Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). Important exceptions include John Mueller, "The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons," *International Security* 13 (fall 1988): 55-79; McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988).

57. Tammen et al., *Power Transitions*, 8, 51-52.

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.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰ A good argument can be made, however, that the war, and certainly decision-making in

58. Maddison, *Monitoring the World Economy, 1820-1992*, cited in Rapkin and Thompson, "Power Transition, Challenge, and the (Re)Emergence of China," 325). The GDP per capita figures, in 1990 constant dollars, are 7,018, 6,546, 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. Modelski and Thompson, *Seapower in Global Politics*, 124). In terms of military expenditures, The Correlates of War data show that Germany outspent Britain two to one (in 1938, at the time of the Munich crisis, it was approximately four to one). See <http://cow2.la.psu.edu/>.

59. P. M. H. Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe* (New York: Longman, 1986); Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

60. Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Naval Rivalry, 1860-1914* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982). Many argue, however, that German *Weltpolitik* was driven more by domestic politics than by any consensus about the need for a global presence. Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

the July 1914 crisis, was more about mastery in Europe than about mastery in the world. Power transition theory is correct that power transition played an important role in World War I, but the leading power that worried most about a decline in relative power was Germany, not Britain, and the rising power that posed the greatest threat to destabilize the system was Russia, not Germany. Moreover, Germany was a satisfied power, not a dissatisfied one, at least in Europe, and wanted primarily to secure the status quo, European and domestic, against pressures for change. Though German leaders may have preferred a diplomatic realignment or a localized Austrian-Serbian war as a means of securing the status quo and its benefits for Germany, if those outcomes were not feasible German leaders were willing to adopt a strategy of preventive war to eliminate the growing Russian threat and secure German mastery in Europe.⁶¹

To summarize, although power transition theory claims to provide a theory of great power war at the top of the international hierarchy, a look at its application to historical cases reveals that in important respects the theory mis-specifies the causal mechanisms leading to war. It underestimates the historical importance of preventive war strategies and the extent to which major wars between the great powers are driven by regional issues rather than by the struggle for primacy in the global system; its interpretations of the two world wars of the twentieth century are quite misleading; and it underestimates the deterrent effects of nuclear weapons in post-1945 power transitions.

Conclusion

Power transition theory is a highly successful research program, one that probably attracts more attention now than at any time since Organski introduced the theory a half-century ago. With its emphasis on hierarchy, differential rates of economic development, and systemic transformations, power transition theory is a natural point of departure for those wanting to understand the implications of the rise of China for the international order. Although the theory offers a useful perspective from which to think about the dynamics of systemic transitions, it fails to provide a complete explanation for many of the transitions (or possible transitions) of the past. In addition, there are important gaps between the assumptions of the theory and the conditions

61. Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, trans. Isabella M. Massey (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), vols. 2–3; Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, vol. 2: *The European Powers and the Wilhelminian Empire, 1890–1914*, trans. H. Norden (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970); Levy, “Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914”; Van Evera, *Causes of War*; Copeland, *Origins of Major Wars*. For an argument that Germany saw a preventive war strategy as its last opportunity to create the conditions for German hegemony over Europe, see Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*; and Keir A. Lieber, “The New History of World War I and What It Means for International Relations Theory,” *International Security* 32 (Fall 2007): 155–91.

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, involved power 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.⁶²

Power transition theory lacks the conceptual apparatus to understand these multilevel struggles for power.⁶³ 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 a 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.

62. Realists generalize and talk about the role of offshore balancers. Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

63. The same is true of balance of power theory, which is highly Eurocentric and which focuses primarily on balancing within Europe or perhaps other well-defined regional systems. Jack S. Levy, “Balances and Balancing: Concepts, Propositions, and Research Design,” in *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate*, ed. John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 2003), 128–53. For a useful analysis of China from the perspective of the intersection of global and East Asian systems, see Robert S. Ross, “The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first Century,” *International Security* 23 (spring 1999): 81–118; Ross, “Bipolarity and Balancing in East Asia,” in *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, ed. T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 267–304.

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. global 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.⁶⁴

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.⁶⁵ 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,

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.

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.

66. One possibility worth exploring is whether the absence of serious military threats on the Asian continent might allow China to direct more resources to the development of its global power projection capabilities, and with what consequences.