

The United States and the Rise of China

POLISCI 101: Introduction to International Relations

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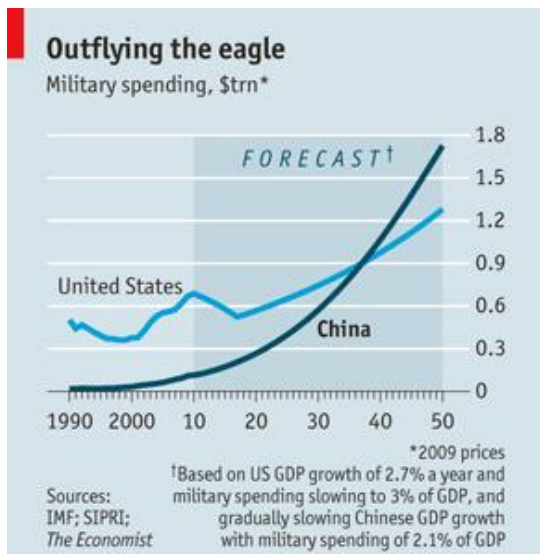
Motivation: In lecture this week, we learned about different theories about what has caused the apparent decline in interstate war. What do these theories have to say about the likelihood of conflict between the United States and China in the future? Do you think war is likely? Why or why not?

Recap: The bargaining model suggests four ways to make war less likely: (1) increase the costs of wars, (2) enforce commitments, (3) reduce uncertainty, and (4) eliminate contentious issues that states might fight over. In lecture this week, we also learned about four potential developments in the international system that may have reduced war through these mechanisms. In particular, we discussed the development of nuclear weapons, the increase in economic interdependence, the role of international institutions, and the spread of democracy. Let's keep this all in mind while examining China's rise and the potential for conflict with the United States.



China's Rise

Many IR scholars and policy analysts worry about the rapid economic growth of China, coupled with the U.S. relative decline. Between 1989 and 2016, China averaged an impressive average economic growth rate in its GDP of 9.74%. Meanwhile, the U.S. economy stalled since the turn of the century. With a low of a -0.92% growth rate at the height of the recession in 2008, the U.S. economy has begun to expand again but at a lower rate around 4%. Because China's economy is growing so quickly, many analysts predict that China will have a larger economy than the United States within the next decade or so. It is worth noting, however, that since 2015, China's economic growth has begun to slow, with their quarterly growth rates around 6%.



As China's economy continues to grow, the government has increased its military spending. Since 2000, the China has doubled the number of naval vessels entering into service, including nuclear submarines and new aircraft carriers. These kinds of vessels will allow China to project its power on a global scale. The chart to the right illustrates what some forecast China's military spending to be over the next few decades. As you can see, there are serious concerns that China stands to become more militarily powerful than the United States.

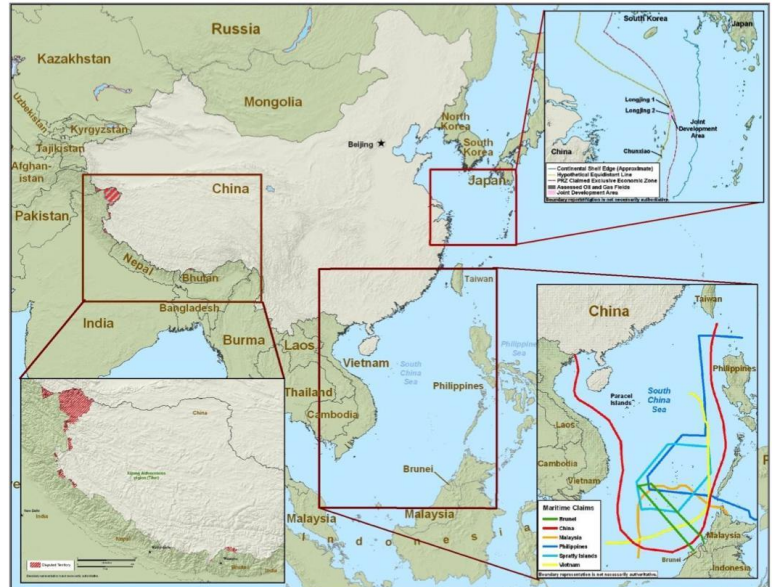
Key Question: What dynamic did we learn about from the bargaining model of war that might be of concern here?

China's Territorial Disputes

The map to the right illustrates the locations of some of China's disputes.

Key Points:

- China has many ongoing territorial disputes with its neighbors, many of whom have close relations with the United States.
- China's conflicts with Taiwan and with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands are particularly worrisome because the United States is committed to these states' defense. Nationalist sentiments lie at the core of both conflicts.



One of the most contentious disputes is China's claim to the Nine-Dash line. This line demarcates China's major territorial claims for several islands in the South China Sea. These small islands in this area are important economically because the law of the sea denotes that 200 nautical miles surrounding a country's land possessions denote an exclusive economic zone, where the country that owns the area has special rights regarding the exploration and use of marine resources. To no surprise, the South China Sea contains a large amount of oil and gas reserves.

China's territorial disputes with Japan and Taiwan are also serious for US-China relations. Since the end of World War II, the United States maintains a military commitment to come to provide for Japan's military defense. China's territorial dispute with Japan concerns a small group of islands known as the Diaoyu Islands in China and the Senkaku Islands in Japan. Although these islands are uninhabited, they represent an important nationalist cause for both rivals. In 2012, there were a series of large and violent anti-Japanese protests in China after a series of skirmishes between the two countries over the islands.

China does not recognize Taiwan's sovereignty and insists on the "One China" principle. Like the Senkaku/Diaoyu island disputes, China's dispute with Taiwan is fueled by nationalist concerns. Following victory of Mao Zedong's communist forces in the Chinese Civil War, nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan. The United States has not formally recognized Taiwan since the United States formally recognized Beijing in 1979. However, the U.S. Taiwan recognition provides a legal basis for unofficial U.S.-Taiwanese relations. Under this act, the United States is committed to "maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people of Taiwan."

Resort to Violence?

Would China resort to military force to resolve its ongoing territorial disputes? While China has fought wars to defend its territorial claims (e.g. Sino-Indian War), China has resolved almost all of its disputes peacefully, even as it has grown stronger militarily. Taylor Fravel shows that China has been willing to make significant territorial concessions in border areas where ethnic minorities live when the CCP has faced domestic unrest. However, it's possible that the CCP will use its conflicts with Taiwan and Japan as a nationalist rallying cry to build support its regime in the face of mounting domestic challenges.