Has the threat posed by China to international security been overstated?

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Abstract

This article evaluates whether the threat posed to international security by a rising China has been overstated. The literature analyzed during the research reveals that China’s rise does most definitely pose a threat to international security, a threat widely interpreted as being of an economic, military, and ideological nature. The article argues that claims of a China threat have not been overstated, but they have been misguided. There has been an overfocus upon China’s military build-up, as well as focusing upon the events of the economic development of China, as opposed to concentrating on the consequences of this economic development. It is fundamental that the appropriate factors of the threat are focused upon and considered, in order for the international community to adapt and respond in a manner that minimizes the impact upon international security, as the threat is likely to grow in significance over future decades, as China’s phenomenal rise continues.

Keywords: China, security, threat, power, US

Introduction

China is a rising superpower, a rise that has been well documented. China’s growing significance in the international system has been underpinned by its economic successes, its ever-improving military capabilities, and its soft power influence (Hang, 2017). This ascension has led to China being widely perceived as the greatest threat to international security. Chinese activity has had a wide-ranging impact upon international politics for a long time, yet this impact could be greater than ever as China is now deemed to be a military threat. The increased military threat comes at a time when China’s relationship with states such as the US and UK has deteriorated considerably, the precarious US–China relationship is particularly concerning. The belief that China poses a substantial threat to international security is not
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However universal. For some China’s rise will not lead to conflict with supposed adversaries such as the US, instead leading to peace and cooperation, particularly in an economic sense.

This article will evaluate if the threat posed by China to international security has been overstated. The “Chinese threat theory” has gained prominence in recent times. A theory that contends “that it is inconceivable for China to have a peaceful rise” (Al-Rodhan, 2007: 41). Yet the theory is contradicted by China’s behavior that has not consistently been indicative of a state that will compromise international security, as China seemingly looks to prioritize economic and political integration over conflict and isolation. By assessing the significance of China’s rapid economic growth, and its extensive military modernization, while also considering the relevance of China’s ever-expanding soft power, it will be clearer to see whether current concerns are well-founded or not.

“The rise of China will undoubtedly be one of the great dramas of the twenty-first century” (Ikenberry, 2008: 23). However, it is difficult to predict how this “drama” will unfold, how the international system will be altered, and international security impacted. The lack of clarity regarding the intentions of China has been divisive. Far greater attention has been given to the idea that China is a threat, than to the idea that China could rise in a peaceful and stable manner, as much of the academic work on China is from an American standpoint distorting the balance of the debate.

China’s economic rise

The main factor in the argument for China being a significant threat to international security is the substantial economic rise of China, a topic now heavily focused upon, particularly by America. China’s rise to the status of an economic superpower, the quickest continual expansion by a major economy of all time (Morrison, 2019) is not only a standalone factor, but also the foundation of other notable factors that together constitute the notion of a Chinese “threat”. Resultingly, it is fundamental that this economic rise is evaluated in order to assess the extent to which China poses a threat to international security.

When considering threats to international security there is an excessive focus on political relationships and military actions, while economic matters are ignored (Overholt, 2021). The rise of China and its labeling as a threat to international security has been underpinned by its economic rise. Such a rise has established China as an economic powerhouse and is yet to reach its conclusion. The Chinese economy until the late 1970s was in a poor condition. The primarily agricultural economy that was centrally controlled had been stagnating for years (Morrison, 2019). However, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping China began market-oriented reforms and “opened-up” (Men, 2003). China’s decision to embrace aspects of capitalism and free trade, benefited the economy greatly. Albeit a crude measure of economic power (Nye, 2020), China’s phenomenal economic rise is best displayed via its GDP. China’s GDP when the reforms commenced in 1978 was just under $150 billion, by 2016 it was over $10,000 billion (Sommella, 2019). Such an unprecedented growth was achieved by an annual growth rate averaging around 9% for three decades from 1979 (Al-Rodhan, 2007). This growth was driven by a model unique to China based upon a high level of savings, accepting vast amounts of foreign investment, and a focus upon exports (Yongding & Hamid, 2008).

As China’s economic strength has increased, so too has the attention received from the international community. America as the world’s leading economy is most concerned by China’s evolving economy, now viewing China as a threat. The notion that China poses an economic threat to America has strengthened since the 2008 financial crisis, which heavily affected many of the world’s developed economies yet had little impact on China, which grew around 9% in 2008 and just over 8.7% in 2009, while America saw a negative growth of just below 2% in 2008 and just under 2.5% in 2009 (Xuetong, 2010). Such growth threatens America as they recognize that China could replace them as the leading economy. Forty years ago, such a situation would have been
unimaginable, but the economic balance of power is shifting rapidly. A growth rate of 8% means an economy doubles every 21 years (Broomfield, 2010). China consistently had a growth rate superior to this. While as the world’s leading manufacturer China has positioned itself as the leading trade partner of 124 countries (Lampton, 2018), at the expense of America, whose export market has decreased. America itself has not been immune to the appeal of Chinese exports and has subsequently built up a trade deficit with China that in 2016 totaled around $350 billion (Lampton, 2018). Projections vary, but there is a growing consensus that in the next 30 years, the Chinese economy will have surpassed that of the US by a considerable margin (Sommella, 2019). The US are not naïve regarding the potential repercussions of this, aware that the economy is the foundation upon which a hegemon is built.

The slowdown

Media coverage increasingly presents China as a threat to international security, centered on the speed of its economic growth alongside its military development (Okuda, 2016). Much of this media coverage originates in America. Due to America’s position as the leading economy, it suits the American agenda to portray China as a “threat”, as this justifies the US acting to contain or counter China’s expanding economic power, particularly in Asia where the US has been the regional hegemon since World War II (Layne, 2012). The media focus on the potential threat to China’s economic growth only considers one perspective. The Chinese economy is not as strong and unstoppable as it is frequently portrayed. The economy in China has matured and growth has slowed. The growth rate in 2007 was above 14%, by 2018 it was below 7% and by 2024 is projected to be around 5.5% (Morrison, 2019). China’s growth model characterized by savings, investment, and exports (Yongding & Hamid, 2008) has served the country well, barring the 2008 financial crisis when the export market was affected, dropping by nearly 16% (Morrison, 2019). However, this growth model has evidently run its course. China is aware of the need for change and is now transitioning from an export-centered economy to one focused upon domestic services and household consumption (Myers, 2018), which is highly achievable due to the size of China’s domestic market (Yongding & Hamid, 2008). If such a change is implemented successfully China can limit the economic slowdown, while the move from investment and exports to consumption, is expected to raise living standards and grow the middle class (Drysdale et al., 2017). Change is necessary as in terms of GDP per capita China is trailing far behind the US (Lampton, 2018), and income inequality is widening.

Furthermore, China’s shift away from exports is partly driven by concerns that export demands will be difficult to meet as the workforce is decreasing in size and will continue to do so owing to the one-child policy of the past. The Chinese workforce peaked in 2011 at around 925 million, by 2030 it is expected to have dropped by around 100 million, when over a quarter of the population will be over 60 (Morrison, 2019). If changes are not made China is likely to have the biggest economy, but not the most advanced and well-balanced (Overholt, 2021). Clearly China has some long-term issues regarding internal stability (Al-Rodhan, 2007), meaning that China’s economic trajectory is extremely hard to predict. China’s economic status will look greatly different in the next 30 years depending on whether the growth rate continues to decline or is redeemed. Either outcome is plausible, despite the media portrayal of a China whose economic growth rate is certain to be high.

International institutions

China can be viewed as a threat to international security due to the power transition theory, whereby a rising power is willing to rewrite the rules and institutions of the international system to change the status quo and accommodate its rise (Jalil, 2019). As China’s economic strength has increased, so too has its level of engagement with the international community.
No longer an outsider, China is now a participant (Men, 2003). This increased engagement has been demonstrated by China acquiring membership in many institutions from the IMF to the World Bank. China has made it clear it intends to actively participate in the reform and development of the international governance system (Mobley, 2019). There is now growing concern about China’s desire for more authority and influence within the international system, particularly the US-led international economic order that China is actively challenging (Hang, 2017). Post World War II, America created the institutions that formed the Western Liberal Order (Nye, 2020), a system that is heavily self-centered and self-benefiting (Overholt, 2021). China has become disillusioned with this system, as despite its economic might it has little influence and a minor role in decision-making. The system had worked successfully for several decades; however, it is no longer reflective of the international environment, where several emerging market economies have caught up with the long-established industrial powers (Drysdale et al., 2017). America and Europe must now accommodate the BRICS, who by 2050 could be larger economically than the original G6 (Ikenberry, 2008). These emerging powers must be appropriately represented and capable of expressing their interests within the existing system, hence the growing calls for substantial reforms.

Alongside voicing support for institutional reform, China is now actively challenging the current system via the creation of several new initiatives, from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank to the Belt and Road Initiative (Hang, 2017). These new institutions and initiatives in many ways emulate the existing system and may challenge it (Godement et al., 2018; Sommella, 2019), breaking the monopoly of its institutions. Despite the world being accustomed to America having the most influence, as China’s grows economically, so does its influence and capability to project power (Mobley, 2019). This could see the international systems’ economic and political center of gravity shift from the US and Europe to Asia (Layne, 2012).

**American economic decline**

Concerns about China’s economic rise have been fueled by the simultaneous decline of America. Since the 1980s there has been uneasiness about the structural economic weaknesses in America including the debt-to-GDP ratio (Layne, 2012). However, worries were downplayed as America was the leading economic and military power, and a global role model (Overholt, 2021). America has been slow to realize that such an era has ended. America’s decline was apparent in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis when the GDP fell for two consecutive years (Xuetong, 2010). Much of America’s weakening has been attributed to its excessive financial outlay, to fund military activity, extensive social programs, and the investment required to compete with countries such as China (Lachmann, 2011). By overstretching financially, America is viewed as being on course for a fiscal crisis, that would worsen its decline considerably (Lachmann, 2011). America could lose its long-standing economic and military supremacy. Within China, belief is growing that the world has entered a “post-American” era, the global balance of power shifting away from the US (Lampton, 2018). America’s decline could be accelerated by China’s growth, as China has already impacted the US economy in numerous ways. China undervalues the yuan relative to the dollar by around 20% (Myers, 2018), increasing the attractiveness of Chinese imports. In America, the Chinese goods flooding the market have come at the expense of American jobs, wages, and living standards (Morrison, 2019). The extent of this problem is demonstrated by China’s annual $200 billion trade surplus with America (Myers, 2018). Another form of Chinese involvement in the US economy is the purchasing of US Treasury securities, of which China has bought $1.1 trillion (Morrison, 2019), allowing the US government to finance the federal debt, and maintain low interest rates (Morrison, 2019). However, China could use the purchasing of American debt as a form of leverage (Myers, 2018). As should China dump the dollar, the US could be
brought to its knees (Nye, 2020). However, China would damage its own economy by doing this, as the yuan would appreciate (Myers, 2018), ending China’s strategic advantage in the export market.

America’s economic decline could worsen if the balance of power in Asia shifts. Many Asian countries view America as their greatest ally (Okuda, 2016), as America’s presence prevents Chinese domination (Nye, 2020). China is now looking to undermine America, to prevent such influence (Hang, 2017; Jalil, 2019). China does this as it seeks to be the regional hegemon, particularly as the center of gravity of the consumer market is now Asia (Overholt, 2021). Should America’s economic engagement with Asia decrease so could its power and influence within the region. If America is to slow or reverse its decline, it is imperative that it remains the regional hegemon in Asia. This will require America to compete with China in all the traditional fields of great power competition (Nye, 2020). If America cannot compete with China at least economically, then it will need to adapt to a new global order, one in which it is not the leading power (Layne, 2012), this would unquestionably have major implications for international security and politics.

China’s rise has been one of the most extraordinary transformations in history. China’s economic development has been the foundation of this rise, which has seen China labeled a threat to international security. The “China Threat Theory” has been predominantly shaped by concerns regarding China’s economic development, as well as its military modernization. However, the scale of the economic threat posed by China is open to interpretation.

The notion that China’s economic rise will compromise international security is not only based upon incredible economic expansion and its effects, but also on the assumption that this economic expansion is certain to continue. China’s average annual growth rate from the early 1990s to the present day has averaged around 9% (Al-Rodhan, 2007), recently it has become clear that China will not necessarily sustain such impressive growth rates, a point reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic. China’s economy is maturing, this has seen the growth decrease at a notable speed, in 2007 the growth rate was over 14%, a decade later it had fallen to below 7% (Morrison, 2019). Should China’s growth rate maintain this rate or slow further, it may not replace America as the world’s leading economy, and subsequently the probability of US hegemony being challenged to an extent that impacts international security is significantly reduced. Furthermore, the success of the Chinese economy has been achieved largely due to the move away from isolationism. China has integrated into the world economy, utilizing the benefits of globalization to become the world’s leading exporter. This integration has established a deep economic interdependence. Should China go on the economic offensive, it will harm its own economy, an economy built upon an export-centric model. China needs cooperation, not competition.

Although the maturing and interdependent nature of the Chinese economy needs to be considered when evaluating the economic threat posed by China, this is not to suggest that the threat posed is fabricated or overstated. It is however somewhat misguided. Much of the academic focus on China’s economic rise is centered heavily upon China’s GDP and annual growth rate, and comparisons to the US. A great deal of attention is also given to how China’s growing economic power is facilitating a greater military expenditure. Yet should China compromise international security, this is unlikely to be the nature of the threat. More attention should be given to how China’s increased economic capabilities will enhance its influence within international politics, particularly as China is not only seeking to reform numerous economic and political institutions but is also creating institutions. China’s economic development is seemingly destined to radically change the long-standing international order, the repercussions of which are currently hard to envisage. However, it would be reasonable to assume that in such a transitional period, international security would be impacted.
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The economic threat posed by China is only one factor of a much larger issue. Yet it is perhaps the most difficult to fully assess. There are a great deal of projections and hypotheses regarding the scale of the threat, but it is only once China is the world’s leading economy that its full intentions will become evident. Predictions for when China will be in such a position vary from 10 years, to within the next 30 (Nye, 2020). How China behaves at this point will allow for a more accurate understanding of the economic threat posed to international security.

**China’s military modernization**

When considering the extent of the threat China poses to international security, its military has to be discussed. After China's economic rise, most attention has been given to China's military growth, these two factors have shaped the “China Threat Theory” (Okuda 2016). Despite China emphasizing its commitment to a peaceful rise, belief in the West is that as China gains more power it will abandon its peaceful rise rhetoric and behave in a way that threatens both the US and the global order (Mahbubani, 2020). China's military modernization is a complex process that is causing paranoia, particularly in America, as historically cases of rising powers versus established powers tend to lead to conflict (Okuda, 2016). China is on course to become the dominant regional power in Asia, replacing America. Alongside significant economic and political factors within this shift, there is a military factor that will become increasingly important should China's military modernization continue. China's economic growth has enabled huge increases in its military spending (Robertson & Sin, 2015). In the last two decades, China’s military budget has had a double-digit annual increase (Matsumura, 2016), leading to an extraordinary military rise. China’s military modernization has been occurring for around three decades, during which the structure of the military has been reformed, its operations remodeled, and its equipment modernized (Lampton, 2018). These changes have occurred right across the military from the navy to the air force. Each year China announces its official military budget and its reasoning for any increase in expenditure like many other countries. However, in the case of China there is considerable skepticism regarding both the accuracy of the figures and justification for the increased spending (Chen & Feffer, 2009). Such uncertainties are undermining China’s peaceful rise rhetoric. From the official spending figures, it would appear that China simply wants a modern military that is in line with its major power status, positioning itself as a benign global partner (Chen & Feffer, 2009; Shambaugh, 2005). Yet, if external concerns are correct and military expenditure is being downplayed then China is on the path to becoming a military superpower, building its ability to project power beyond its borders (Chen & Feffer, 2009; Thompson, 2010).

Due to China’s notable international standing, any change in its military strategy is sure to have implications both regionally and internationally. Regionally, within Asia, the Chinese military build-up has had an intense psychological effect (Matsumura, 2016). The build-up is escalating insecurity throughout the region, straining the already volatile US–China relationship, which could compromise international security. This is because America is still a substantial player in Asia, and should China look to change this balance of power, there are likely to be countermeasures. Certain countries in Asia will look to help maintain US military dominance in the region, as the US has alliances with Japan, The Philippines, and Thailand, while Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore provide access to US forces (Chen & Feffer, 2009). A China with a strong military escalates concern and tension in Asia as even when militarily the Chinese have been much weaker, they have still acted aggressively, notable examples being Korea, Tibet, and Taiwan (Broomfield, 2010). It would be incorrect to suggest that military conflict involving China is inevitable. However, internationally caution will be exercised as there are some geopolitical issues that could be flashpoints, such as Taiwan and the South China Sea.
Taiwan

One issue regarding China seen as a possible threat to international security is Taiwan. Initially it appears that should the China–Taiwan tension escalate into conflict, the impact would be limited to Southeast Asia and consequently pose little threat to international security. However, America’s commitment to Taiwan, means China and America could clash militarily (Jalil, 2019), raising the stakes of any conflict. China has always prioritized issues that concern its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Men, 2003), consequently this has meant that Taiwan has remained a high-level concern for China. China’s stance on Taiwan leaves no room for compromise (Shambaugh, 2005), any move from Taiwan toward independence would not go unchecked. Two factors have increased the likelihood of conflict erupting across the Taiwan Strait, calls in Taiwan for independence have grown in number, while China has developed its military, raising concern throughout Asia that China could use its newfound strength against Taiwan. Taiwan’s independence movement has gained traction partly because of cross-Strait relations worsening, while also being somewhat responsible for this deterioration (Wuthnow & Taylor-Fravel, 2022). The desire by some of Taiwan’s population for independence has gone largely unchecked in the past, yet this changed once China became aware that America had sold advanced weaponry to Taiwan, a move interpreted in Beijing as promoting independence (Jalil, 2019). China’s response has been far from subtle. China, having modernized its military, is undertaking numerous exercises and operations that have developed into a campaign of military harassment against Taiwan (Blackwill & Zelikow, 2021). This frequent harassment has consisted of large-scale naval operations off China’s east coast, as well as fighter jets passing increasingly close to Taiwan (Wuthnow & Taylor-Fravel, 2022).

In stark contrast to the military power available to China, the armed forces of Taiwan look to be too low in number, poorly trained, while also not being suitably equipped (Blackwill & Zelikow, 2021). Naturally there are concerns as to whether Taiwan could now defend itself to the required level. Taiwan will certainly need support from the US, while also needing to rely progressively on asymmetrical strategies (Kastner, 2015). As America will want to maintain a stable relationship with China for the sake of international security, there is a chance that it will loosen its ties with Taiwan, particularly as China’s build up has coincided with the relative decline of America’s military (Matsumura, 2016). Should the US commit fully to helping Taiwan move toward independence, the US–China relationship would likely be damaged beyond repair and chances of future cooperation diminished. How the Taiwan issue comes to be solved will not only affect the cross-strait relations, but it will also likely affect the security of both Asia and the world (Men, 2003).

South and East China Seas

Another flashpoint regarding China with the potential to compromise international security are the long-standing issues with the South and East China Seas. From a geopolitical perspective, the South China Sea is of a high strategic value, connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and therefore functioning as a major trade route (Raditio, 2015). Unsurprisingly claims of ownership have been frequent, in the 1990s the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei all made claims (Raditio, 2015). However, since the turn of the 21st century, as China’s military standing has risen, the country has become more aggressive and uncompromising, demonstrating a clear militaristic streak in the area (Mahbubani, 2020). Resultingly, the contest for ownership has narrowed to just China and America, both seek military control, but naturally only one will achieve this. For China, the South China Sea is economically vital, a lack of control over the sea lanes would be severely damaging to the Chinese export market (Matsumura, 2016), which is so fundamental to China’s economic performance. The South China Sea is also important for the American economy, over 1 trillion dollars’ worth of goods destined for the US pass through it (Okuda, 2016).
Another significant factor of the South China Sea that could impact US–China relations is that around two-thirds of Japan’s imported energy goes through the area (Broomfield, 2010). While the US has an alliance with Japan and wants a strong Japan to help check Chinese power in the region, China would prefer a weakened Japan. A weakened Japan would benefit China, as the two countries dispute the boundaries of the East China Sea, due to the area potentially having large deposits of both gas and oil (Chen & Feffer, 2009). Therefore, for America it is essential that at least some control of the area is maintained. Although the importance of the South China Sea was evident both America and China had agreed not to militarize the area. The decision by China to break this promise has been destabilizing (Overholt, 2021). China has militarized the South China Sea via the construction of numerous artificial islands (Matsumura, 2016). The building of these islands has the potential to determine the future ownership of the Sea as they can operate as footholds that could enable both air force and naval dominance (Matsumura, 2016), allowing for China to not only control this area of the South China Sea, but also establish itself as the regional hegemon in East and Southeast Asia. As both countries have placed significant importance on being the predominant power in this region (Layne, 2012), neither is likely to back down and play a secondary role. Therefore, the chances of a conflict that would be detrimental to international security are increased.

Military limitations and misconceptions

Concerns regarding the military threat posed by a growing China often ignore that militarily China has numerous weaknesses and limitations. Although much attention has been given to the relative decline of the US military, China is aware its own military is inferior (Matsumura, 2016). Estimations are that despite modernizing, China will not have a modern military until 2050 (Broomfield, 2010). Consequently, China is not in a position for the foreseeable to act in a way that would lead to direct confrontation with America. China’s inability to rival America militarily is not the only reason why China restrains its ambitions regarding Taiwan and the South China Sea. Any conflict with America would have economic repercussions, owing to the ever-growing economic interdependence of the two nations (Hsiung, 2009). The movement of goods and capital between China and the US has greatly supported China’s economic development (Myers, 2018), increasing tension with the US has the potential to compromise Chinese economic growth. Recently, as tensions grew, both countries increased their import tariffs (Morrison, 2019), the subsequent reduction in trade demonstrated that long-term this would be incredibly harmful, particularly to China whose stability appears somewhat dependent upon the continued success of its export-centric economy. China’s vulnerability to US sanctions (Al-Rodhan, 2007), arguably renders any military modernization futile, as should forces be mobilized due to a situation that goes against American interests, the economy of China will suffer.

The Chinese feel there has been a Western tendency to overfocus upon the militaristic threat posed by China to international security. Such ideas have been built upon the work of the “China Threat Theory” that suggested by 2025 China would have caught up with the US both economically and militarily (Hsiung, 2009). As each year has passed the inaccuracy of the predictions has become clearer. The China Threat Theory interprets China’s increased military spending as an indication that it will look to be a revisionist and expansionist military power. However, China’s increasing military spending is in line with its economic growth. China’s military spending to GDP ratio has been consistent in recent decades, around 2% of GDP, normal by global standards (Robertson & Sin, 2015). Ironically, it is America that continues to outspend the rest of the world militarily, spending around 10 times more on its military (Raditio, 2015). Furthermore, Beijing’s justification for its military expenditure has been to defend itself from any foreign aggression, while also catch-up with
the West (Thompson, 2010). This suggests that China’s military modernization is defensive in nature, the natural course of action for a country that prioritizes economic growth. A peaceful international environment better suits economic development. If international security is compromised by conflict, the environment is not conducive to trade, a situation China will actively avoid.

When considering China’s astonishing rise and the potential consequences such a rise could have upon international security, it is almost inevitable that a significant amount of attention is given to military developments. China’s military modernization is a complex process (Shambaugh, 2005), one that other nations monitor where possible in order to protect their own interests, as any potential shift in the balance of military power could be highly disruptive to international security (Kastner, 2015). Particular attention has been given to China’s military modernization due to regional instability in Asia that could function as flashpoints for conflict. China is becoming ever more assertive in the highly disputed South China Sea, as well as adopting a more confrontational style when interacting with Taiwan. Both the South China Sea and Taiwan are areas where China could quickly find itself confronted by the US who as the regional hegemon in Asia, has a vested interest in maintaining the current order. An order that is deemed as being increasingly under threat as China’s military capabilities continue to improve.

To complicate matters further China’s modernization has occurred in a period when the power of the US military is in relative decline (Matsumura, 2016). Concerns that America’s power is waning creates paranoia and feelings of insecurity throughout the international system. Should America’s military decline lead to its power and influence over the international system being reduced, this could create a power vacuum, a gap that China increasingly has the most potential to fill. Albeit internationally such an outcome is unlikely in the short-term, it can be viewed that the process has begun regionally in Asia, where China’s military presence has become far-reaching and increasingly clear to see, while the US appears more cautious in making countermoves than it has done historically.

Even though the militaries of China and America appear to be on different trajectories, enabling China to close the capability gap, it must be remembered that the gap remains big, the US is still the leading military power by some distance. It is projected that it will be 2050 before China has a fully modern military (Broomfield, 2010). China is not ignorant to the fact that militarily it is still vastly inferior to America, and therefore it seems unlikely that China will look to compete militarily with America. Considering that the military playing field remains uneven, it seems that the “China Threat Theory” is subsequently overemphasizing the military factor of the overall threat posed by China. Even if China’s intentions are to replace America as the world’s leading nation, the path to becoming and then remaining a superpower is not a military path, it is an economic one (Overholt, 2021). This suggests any threat to international security posed by China will be economic, political, and/or ideological in nature, areas of great power competition that now must be given more attention.

China’s soft power

Chinese soft power is a potential threat to international security, frequently overlooked due to the focus upon China’s economic and military rise, as despite China’s economic and military might, the country possesses little soft power (Shambaugh, 2015). China is not ignorant of this and is aware that soft power was extremely beneficial to a rising America throughout the 20th century (Overholt, 2021). Therefore, increasing soft power regionally and internationally (Hang 2017), is now an integral aspect of China’s foreign policy (Kalimuddin & Anderson, 2018). The desire for greater soft power could also be a countermove to neutralize the “Chinese threat”
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narrative. China’s growth in soft power is predicted to lead to confrontation with America, as belief is growing that any clash will be an ideological and cultural one (Nye, 2020).

BRI

As part of China’s decision to boost its soft power capabilities, it announced in 2013 the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to finance infrastructure improvements in developing nations (Eisenman & Heginbotham, 2019). The Chinese government focused the efforts of the BRI toward sub-regions of Asia, Africa, and Europe, areas accounting for nearly two-thirds of the global population and just under one-third of the global GDP (Huang, 2016). The initial BRI proposal was an ambitious plan to reduce the infrastructure gap between developed and developing nations, via the construction of railways, gas and oil pipelines, and ports, for example (Yagci, 2018). Yet the BRI has expanded beyond the original plan. The BRI has become a key component of China’s foreign policy, a means by which to increase connectivity physically, financially, digitally, and socially (Mobley, 2019). Particularly in Asia, the BRI is making significant progress, Chinese influence is rising (Mobley, 2019). This could see the advancement of China’s diplomatic interests and its economic and security interests. Cambodia exemplifies the BRI’s impact. China has invested billions in Cambodia, now one of the fastest-growing economies in the world and Cambodia is now seemingly willing to do whatever is asked of them by China (Mobley, 2019). Such loyalty could be instrumental in dealing with issues such as the South China Sea. The ability of the BRI to help China achieve its foreign policy objectives (Yagci, 2018) is one of the main reasons that China’s growing soft power is seen as a threat to international security.

Alongside the soft power aspect of the BRI there is an economic aspect. In America’s opinion, the BRI is part of a Chinese economic offensive (Nye, 2020). Where China makes economic gains, America frequently suffers losses. Similarly, it is felt that as China’s soft power develops, America’s will be eroded. China has suggested it could spend around $8 trillion on the BRI (Morrison, 2019), expanding not only its soft power but also its export and investment markets (Morrison, 2019). This is certain at some point to compromise the economic interests of America. Strategically, China is focusing on areas neglected by the Bretton Woods System such as the Middle East (Overholt, 2021), meaning these countries will potentially look to China as a leader and source of progress, supporting any Chinese move toward hegemony. When the US appears to be scaling back involvement within other countries, while the BRI provides economic benefits and the opportunity for Chinese values and soft power to thrive abroad (Soong, 2022), the balance of power does appear to be shifting. Cooperation with China is understandably appealing for developing countries, over time developed countries will likely feel the same way. This would possibly signal the end of US dominance not only economically, but also in terms of soft power and cultural reach.

Outward foreign direct investment in developing countries

China’s strategy of economic outreach to boost its diplomatic power (Lampton, 2018), has not been confined to the Belt and Road Initiative. China is actively investing in and assisting developing countries that geographically are not connected to the routes of the BRI. Developing countries in regions such as Latin America and Africa are progressively playing a large role in China’s geostrategy (Eisenman & Heginbotham, 2019). Chinese influence in Africa is already firmly established, around 3,000 Chinese companies operate in Africa, constructing infrastructure, teaching Mandarin, and engaging in African politics (Sommella, 2019). In Africa, Chinese influence is appealing and welcomed due to the economic success
story of China (Yagci, 2018), many African countries would seek to emulate the Chinese model of development. China’s economic diplomacy approach to soft power is seemingly destined for success not only in Africa, but the Global South in general, because the Beijing Consensus is viewed as superior to the Washington Consensus (Kalimuddin & Anderson, 2018). Such a viewpoint is being constantly reinforced, as the US appears to be cutting back on spending (Layne, 2012), presenting China with an opportunity to build up its influence, which it has fully embraced. Where the US has retreated, China has advanced, frequently visiting developing countries, signing substantial trade and investment deals, agreeing generous loans, and handing out significant aid packages (Shambaugh, 2015). These outward investment projects are almost never profitable for China (Huang, 2016), indicating that such investment is done for the purpose of increased soft power and influence. China’s financial capabilities are being used as a tool to win over developing nations; any Chinese move to engage such countries is likely to undermine the American-dominated international order in the future (Tse-Hei Lee, 2007).

China’s campaign to expand its soft power, at a time when its economy and military are rising, is driving the American belief that China is a threat to international security. China’s desire to position itself as a form of leader within the developing world (Xuetong, 2010), is being interpreted as a move to counterbalance against US hegemony, by encouraging and nurturing a multipolar world order (Eisenman & Heginbotham, 2019). Should China succeed in countering US hegemony through its increased soft power abilities, which are supported by substantial hard power capabilities, the change to the long-standing status quo will be so significant that it is hard to predict the consequences for international security, but it is clear why the US will interpret any change as a threat.

China and regional institutions

During much of the 20th century China’s engagement with neighbors and participation within institutions was limited. China’s low level of interaction was partly due to the system’s American-dominant nature, however, China was aware of the benefits of participating (Hsiung, 2009). China initially focused on the economic benefits of involvement with the system, but awareness is now growing of how the system could be utilized to increase soft power. China is now using institutions as a means by which to facilitate new relationships and expand its influence (Eisenman & Heginbotham, 2019). China’s belief is that its economic power should permit greater involvement within regional and international organizations (Paradise, 2016). As a result, China is now seeking greater authority and leadership within numerous institutions (Dams & van der Putten, 2015). Should China succeed, global governance could be reformed (Yagci, 2018), becoming more closely aligned with the ever-expanding global interests of China (Eisenman & Heginbotham, 2019; Stephen, 2021). How easy it will be for China to modify a system dominated by America is relatively unclear. The current economic system provides an indication of the challenges China faces. The US leads the economic system, as it is the dominant actor in the IMF, World Bank, and World Trade Organization (Huang, 2016). Aided by the dollar being the foundation of the system, America is in a position to both write and enforce the rules. Consequently, China is trapped, playing a limited role in the system despite its superpower status, hindering China’s ability to increase its soft power capabilities.

While China persists in attempting to alter long-established organizations, it is simultaneously developing its own Beijing-dominant institutions (Stephen, 2021). Over the last decade, China has created various multilateral regional organizations (Shambaugh, 2015), forming a China-centric international system that runs parallel to the one dominated by America. Many countries, particularly developing ones, see China’s regional organizations as an opportunity, not a threat (Stephen, 2021). China is encouraging a multipolar
structure, as it provides a greater challenge to US unilateralism (Men, 2003), while improving the relationships China has with many developing countries, which could enable China to set the agendas of global governance (Yagci, 2018). The effectiveness of China’s approach cannot be disputed, demonstrated by the fact more African leaders attended the Forum on China–Africa cooperation than the UN General Assembly (Stephen, 2021). For America, China’s continual forming of organizations, is an institutional offensive (Paradise, 2016), threatening America’s standing within the existing order of global governance, as China has facilitated its rise by shaping the international environment (Kalimuddin & Anderson, 2018). China’s growing sphere of influence has seemingly placed it as leader of one system, while America leads the more established system. Eventually countries may have to choose one system (Soong, 2022). Should China’s soft power continue to grow throughout the developing world, the US-led system may be rendered largely redundant.

China’s soft power limitations

China’s soft power capabilities are increasing; however, in comparison to its economic and military rise, progress has been moderately paced. At a time when globalization has led to unprecedented levels of interconnectedness, soft power is increasingly viewed as vital in establishing a country as a great power (Huang & Ding, 2006). Soft power is commonly understood to have three main components: political ideology, culture, and foreign policy (Nye, 1990). China is hindered by flaws across all three areas, limiting China’s global reach. Beyond its borders, China’s profile is low considering its size and strength (Hsiung, 2009), and when compared to the global reach America enjoys. Regarding political ideology, despite China’s decision to embrace elements of capitalism, China’s soft power is weakened by the communist-authoritarian political system. The Chinese Communist Party functions as part of a repressive system that places numerous restrictions upon the Chinese people (Shambaugh, 2015). China’s soft power is faced with the challenge of Western rejection due to the political divide. In the West, the dominant narrative is that capitalism and liberal democracy go together (Zhao, 2014), as China is challenging and essentially disproving this notion, Western criticism and condemnation of China’s political system is becoming more direct. Foreign media is now drawing attention to China’s authoritarian system, lack of transparency, and human rights violations (Eisenman & Heginbotham, 2019). China’s political ideology is likely to directly impact its soft power capabilities more than it would for other countries, due to China’s unique approach to soft power. Most countries’ soft power is derived from its people, yet China’s originates from the state (Nye, 2017), consequently the state’s negative image discourages foreign acceptance of Chinese influence, especially within Western liberal democracies. Furthermore, China’s political system is not conducive to the expansion of the culture beyond its borders. The spread of a nation’s culture is more likely to occur successfully within a politically open environment, one that encourages freedom of expression and a free exchange of ideas (Gill & Huang, 2006), criteria that China doesn’t meet.

To safeguard the future development of China, the Communist Party will need to use soft power efficiently to enhance the external image of China, reducing the challenges from foreign countries (Soong, 2022), and to counter the China Threat Theory. Foreign policy would be at the center of this process, however, currently China’s is detrimental to relationship building. China’s leaders are attempting to use rising nationalism as a vehicle for achieving foreign policy objectives (Huang & Ding, 2006). The nationalist-inspired foreign policy has seen China adopt a more assertive attitude toward Taiwan and the South China Sea (Lampton, 2018). However, this nationalist stance is viewed negatively (Huang & Ding, 2006), leading to further deterioration of relationships with foreign powers, and undermining potential soft power gains. Should China fail to adopt a new approach, the country will continue to be limited by its lack of soft power.
Academic discussion regarding China’s rise tends to overlook the role of soft power, instead focusing upon economic and military developments. This reoccurs when considering the possible threat, and soft power is downplayed, deemed a minor part of the overall threat. There is a case to be made that this is to be expected. In comparison to the economic and military transformation China has undergone, its soft power growth has been gradual, consequently gaining less attention. A major reason for China’s limited soft power is the domestic issues China faces, which due to foreign media coverage, reduce the country’s international reputation. Undermining China’s efforts to increase its soft power is its authoritarian political system, led by the Communist Party, a system plagued by widespread corruption, and a poor human rights record, as well as growing Chinese nationalism and socio-economic problems, worsened due to a lack of commitment to social development (Gill & Huang, 2006; Al-Rodhan, 2007; Huang & Ding, 2006).

Additionally, coverage of Chinese soft power may be limited due to different understandings of the term soft power. China’s idea of soft power is heavily influenced by economic factors to the extent that China’s economic diplomacy activities are the foundation of its soft power (Yagci, 2018). To the West this economic diplomacy, which in certain instances can be considered economic coercion, would be viewed as hard power. This suggests that China’s soft power is not being overlooked, it is instead being evaluated within discussions of China’s economic development and power, due to the blurring of the lines as a result of China’s concept of soft power.

Irrespective of which understanding of soft power is correct, China’s soft power is rising quickly. The BRI is at the heart of this rise, bringing countries into China’s orbit, increasing not only China’s influence but also its ability to project power (Mobley, 2019). The initiative has seen China’s reputation grow particularly among developing countries, countries that once would have looked toward America. The BRI, alongside China’s increased involvement within international institutions could assist China in changing the international system so it becomes progressively more beneficial to China. Alongside China’s unique form of soft power, the Chinese are using more traditional tools of soft power to improve the nation’s influence. China has established education centers abroad to teach Chinese culture and the language (Sommella, 2019), as well as expanding its media outreach abroad. This form of soft power is less likely to pose a threat to international security. However, China could use this cultural outreach as a way to spread propaganda.

Overall, China’s soft power is underdeveloped, China is not ignorant of this, hence the development efforts. Currently to suggest that China’s soft power is a threat to international security is an exaggeration, the gap between China’s soft power and that of America illustrates this. Besides trade, China’s influence abroad remains limited. However, China’s economic approach to soft power will be of concern to the West in the future. As in the West it will be interpreted as hard power, and subsequently responded to with a certain level of suspicion. This soft power appeal will likely reach a level by which it can be classified as a threat, as China’s influence within international institutions and developing countries will have important political and security implications for the international system.

Conclusion

The findings of this research suggest that the threat of China has not been overstated, however, understandings of the nature of the threat have been misguided to a certain extent. Regarding the economic element of the Chinese threat, the attention has been on the figures and statistics that demonstrate China’s economic development as opposed to the consequences of this development. The economic threat will come from China’s economic strength increasing its influence, enabling a more significant role within international politics. It is the transitional period when the international system has to completely adapt and
accommodate a fully established China that will be a particularly challenging time within international relations. Similarly, when considering China’s soft power there is much literature covering the traditional forms of soft power that China could utilize in a manner that impacts international security. It is, however, far more likely that China’s heavily economic form of soft power will be far more harmful to international stability. China’s approach to soft power could see China gain the following of the developing world, which would likely see the power balance of the international system shift progressively toward China, away from America and Europe. As for the military factor of the threat posed by China, this has been overstated to some extent, despite China’s military development, the capability gap between China and America remains substantial. Therefore, it is unlikely that China would act in a way that would lead to direct confrontation with America. The threat of China is more likely to be economic and ideological than militaristic.

References


Has the threat posed by China to international security been overstated?

Owen Tench


