

**William Z.Y. Wang, Stephen G. Brooks  
and William C. Wohlforth**

## Correspondence: debating China's rise and the future of U.S. power

**Article (Published version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Wang, William Z.Y., Brooks, Stephen G. and Wohlforth, William C. (2016) Correspondence: debating China's rise and the future of U.S. power. *International Security*, 41 (2). pp. 188-191. ISSN 0162-2889

DOI: [10.1162/ISEC\\_c\\_00261](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_c_00261)

© 2016 The President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/68701/>

Available in LSE Research Online: December 2016

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

# Correspondence

Debating China's Rise and the Future of  
U.S. Power

William Z.Y. Wang  
Stephen G. Brooks  
and  
William C. Wohlforth

*To the Editors (William Z.Y. Wang writes):*

Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth argue that despite China's impressive growth in material power, the United States will remain the international system's hegemonic leader for the foreseeable future.<sup>1</sup> Implicit in this assertion is the assumption that China is not in a position to undermine U.S. hegemony until it overtakes the United States in overall material power. This view, however, overlooks two issues critical to scholars' understanding of the power dynamics between China and the United States.

The first critical issue concerns the nonmaterial aspects of Chinese power, an issue that Brooks and Wohlforth assume away. Nonmaterial power, by definition, involves a state's capacity to govern a society from which it can mobilize potential military and economic strength to cope with geopolitical challenges.<sup>2</sup> In recent decades, China's spectacular economic growth has produced sweeping societal changes that now challenge the Chinese Communist Party's capacity to rule.<sup>3</sup> The Party's acute sense of regime vulnerability may lead Chinese leaders to pursue a strategy of international assertiveness designed to challenge the United States' hegemonic leadership. There are two reasons why they may do so sooner rather than later. First, they may believe that increased international assertiveness could help boost their domestic legitimacy. To challenge U.S. hegemonic leadership is to claim equal standing with the United States in the international arena. Thus, the greater the challenge China can pose, the more credible its leaders' claim to enhancing China's international status appears to domestic audiences.<sup>4</sup> Second, fearing that regime vulnerability could produce a significant de-

---

*William Z.Y. Wang is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His doctoral thesis investigates the meaning and logic of assertive diplomacy in great power politics.*

---

*Stephen G. Brooks is Associate Professor of Government at Dartmouth College. William C. Wohlforth is Professor of Government also at Dartmouth.*

---

1. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Winter 2015/16), pp. 7–53.

2. See Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

3. Minxin Pei, *China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Jinghan Zeng, *The Chinese Communist Party's Capacity to Rule: Ideology, Legitimacy, and Party Cohesion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

4. See, for instance, Robert S. Ross, "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Fall 2009), pp. 46–81; and Christopher R. Hughes, "Reclassifying Chinese Nationalism: The Geopolitik Turn," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 20, No. 71 (September 2011), pp. 601–620.

cline in China's power, the leadership might seek to extract immediate concessions from the United States before that vulnerability is deemed unsustainable.<sup>5</sup>

The second critical issue is that Brooks and Wohlforth discount the possibility that Chinese assertiveness could undermine U.S. hegemonic leadership indirectly. China's growing power and increasing assertiveness are generating regionwide tensions characterized by arms races, entangling alliance commitments, nationalist sentiments, and repeated crises involving China and the United States' diplomatic partners in East Asia.<sup>6</sup> By generating regional tensions, Chinese assertiveness threatens to erode the foundation of U.S. hegemonic leadership, which, by definition, commits the United States to be the dominant provider of international public goods, while allowing it to reap the lion's share of benefits.<sup>7</sup> In competing with an assertive China for geopolitical influence, the United States may have to assume more commitments to maintain the current international order while restraining itself from reaping short-term benefits if it wants to keep its allies and diplomatic partners on its side. Eventually, the United States could decide that it no longer wants to bear this burden.

This scenario may not be merely hypothetical. The collapse of the Bretton Woods system serves as a cautionary tale that, for the United States, being the preeminent leader of the liberal internationalist order could become unsustainable.<sup>8</sup> And recently, voices urging the United States to disengage from some of its many international commitments have grown louder.<sup>9</sup> China's assertive diplomacy could aggravate this trend if it succeeds in polarizing East Asian states and motivates a bipolar struggle with the United States for regional leadership. Given this possibility, an exploration of China's incentives to undermine the United States' hegemonic order and the international implications of China's challenge seems warranted.

—William Z.Y. Wang  
London, United Kingdom

---

5. This insight builds on the assumption that a great power that is internally vulnerable or weak is prone to conflict or war. See Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 37–50; and M. Taylor Fravel, "Power Shifts and Escalation: Explaining China's Use of Force in Territorial Disputes," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Winter 2007/08), pp. 44–83.

6. Adam P. Liff and G. John Ikenberry, "Racing toward Tragedy? China's Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Fall 2014), pp. 52–91; Ja Ian Chong and Todd H. Hall, "The Lessons of 1914 for East Asia Today: Missing the Trees for the Forest," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Summer 2014), pp. 7–43; Avery Goldstein, "First Things First: The Pressing Danger of Crisis Instability in U.S.-China Relations," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Spring 2013), pp. 49–89; and Evan Braden Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Spring 2014), pp. 115–149.

7. Carla Norrlof, *America's Global Advantage: U.S. Hegemony and International Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

8. Francis J. Gavin, *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958–1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

9. See, for instance, Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, "Dead Center: The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2007), pp. 7–44; and Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2015).

*Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth Reply:*

William Wang rightly stresses that our article did not assess nonmaterial sources of power or seek to predict China's specific strategic choices.<sup>1</sup> Mindful of the inherent challenges of measuring soft power and discerning China's future intentions, we focused on a question we could answer: Will changes in the material scales of power cause the United States' role as the international system's sole superpower to end soon? Too often the concept of polarity informs answers to this question that are themselves polarized between claims that everything is changing or nothing is. We developed an approach to assessing the rise and fall of great powers tailored to the economic and technological realities of the twenty-first century and found that no state, including China, is in a position to match or displace the material wellsprings of the United States' superpower position for many decades. Yet China's rise is a major change that, together with other developments in international politics—notably, Russia's increased capabilities and assertiveness—clearly makes the current period more challenging for the United States than the halcyon 1990s.

Wang argues that domestic incentives might induce Chinese leaders to “challenge the United States' hegemonic leadership.” We are not sure how he defines “challenge” or “hegemonic leadership,” so it could be that we agree. As we noted, nothing in our article contradicts Thomas Christensen's admonition that China can “pose problems without catching up.”<sup>2</sup> Any state is free to challenge U.S. leadership, and one need look no further than Moscow, Tehran, Caracas, or Pyongyang to see that many do. China's leadership may conclude that domestic payoffs to being seen as standing up to the United States warrant the costs and risks. Many scholars argue that this is already occurring. The key questions concern how far China and other states are willing to go to pursue such challenges and what are their prospects for success. Our article showed that whatever China does to challenge the United States, for decades it will not be able to create the capabilities needed to command the commons and perform a superpower's global role or to prevent the United States from doing so.

Given the robust material underpinnings of the U.S. superpower position, we agree with Wang that the most likely way that “Chinese assertiveness could undermine U.S. hegemonic leadership” is “indirectly,” by raising the costs of sustaining the U.S. role in East Asia to the point that the United States decides to retrench from its global role. Just because the United States is capable of sustaining its regional and global positions does not mean that it will choose to do so. We agree that the costs and risks are now higher, which is why we argued that the United States should concentrate on its core missions and shift to a denial strategy vis-à-vis China to reduce potential crisis escalation risks. Still, our view of the scale of the challenge is more optimistic than Wang's, in significant part because we see “local counterbalancing” (a concept one of us developed in this

---

1. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position,” *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Winter 2015/16), pp. 7–53.

2. Thomas J. Christensen, “Posing Problems without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Spring 2001), pp. 5–40.

journal in a 1999 article<sup>3</sup>) as working to Beijing's disadvantage. To this point, greater Chinese assertiveness has certainly led China's neighbors to enhance security cooperation with Washington, lowering the overall costs to the United States of sustaining its position. And while we are sensitive to the difficulty of evaluating the balance of non-material power, we see no reason to disagree with Joseph Nye's assessment that the real issue today concerns "the limits of Chinese soft power" and that "as long as China fans the flames of nationalism and holds tight the reins of party control, its soft power will always remain limited."<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, we could not agree more with Wang that the crucial question is America's grand strategic choice. The greatest potential for a change in the U.S. global position lies within the United States itself. In our article, we showed that the United States will long possess the material wherewithal to sustain the deep engagement strategy whose fundamental underpinnings it has maintained for the last seven decades. We were able only to suggest briefly some reasons why the best course of action for the United States is to focus on the core elements needed to sustain that strategy rather than to expand its aims or retrench; we address this issue in great detail in other publications, which show that the benefits to the United States of sustaining a globally engaged strategy decisively outweigh the costs—even in view of China's challenges in East Asia and Russia's in Europe.<sup>5</sup> Whether that logic and evidence will prevail in U.S. domestic politics remains an open question.

—Stephen G. Brooks  
Hanover, New Hampshire

—William C. Wohlforth  
Hanover, New Hampshire

---

3. William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 5–41.

4. Joseph Nye, "The Limits of Chinese Soft Power," *Taipei Times*, July 13, 2015.

5. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012/13), pp. 7–51.