

The Future of U.S.-China Relations

Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, the international system has shifted from a bipolar to a unipolar system, characterized by the overwhelming dominance of the United States economically, politically, and militarily. This could soon change, however, as China becomes an emerging superpower rivaling the United States. The question that will have large implications on American policymakers in the future is whether China's rise to power will be peaceful or violent. Charles Glaser and John Mearsheimer offer differing predictions on this question, with Mearsheimer arguing that China's rise will inevitably lead to conflict with the United States and Glaser believing that China's rise need not be as dangerous as realists predict. While Mearsheimer gives some convincing arguments as to why China should be feared, the presence of nuclear weapons has rendered the theoretical foundation of his argument obsolete. Therefore, I believe that Glaser's prediction is a more accurate description of the international situation.

Mearsheimer uses offensive realism to analyze the relationship between the United States and China. He assumes that states are rational actors and that their top priority is survival. While both of these assumptions are debatable, I will not challenge them here. What I would like to challenge is Mearsheimer's belief that the United States will feel the need to check China's power in Asia by forming alliances with China's neighbors, based on classic balance of power politics. His mistake is that balance of power politics is no longer relevant with the advent of nuclear weapons. Because nuclear weapons give a state direct access to its opponent's civilian population, essentially allowing the state to hold the population hostage, nuclear weapons have eliminated the uncertainty of military conquest and thus the need to "balance" another powerful state through conventional armed forces (Fearon). With nuclear weapons, a state no longer has to rely on alliances to successfully conquer or defend itself; rather, alliances take on a different

meaning – not military security, but nonproliferation – an idea which Glaser realizes but Mearsheimer does not. Therefore, if the United States does form alliances with other Asian states, it will not be for the reasons Mearsheimer believes.

Instead of aggressively limiting China's expansion, the United States may be able to find ways of peacefully accommodating its Asian rival on the international stage. Glaser offers a more balanced approach, stating that while a peaceful rise is not guaranteed, it is certainly possible, as the outcomes will depend on how American and Chinese policymakers handle the issue. He also understands how nuclear weapons have dramatically changed the ways in which states behave toward one another. The security dilemma suggests that a state will be more secure when its adversary feels secure, because then its opponent will not feel the need to adopt threatening policies. Since nuclear weapons provide the ultimate security, the United States will have less to fear about the growth of its adversary in terms of military might. Glaser does, however, acknowledge that there are issues that could alienate the two, such as Taiwan, which could lead to nuclear escalation.

Overall, I feel that Glaser's view is more realistic than Mearsheimer's because it does not put all its eggs in one basket – i.e. it does not strictly adhere to one specific outcome. Rather, Glaser recognizes there are multiple routes the United States could take in regards to China, and our foreign policy decisions will determine which path we take. He also acknowledges that because of nuclear weapons, policymakers face a radically different world than they did in the last century. In a sense, nuclear weapons have made room in the international community for another major power to rival the United States. They have also made it feasible for this transition to happen peacefully. But whether it will happen this way will depend on the actions of policymakers in the United States and China. The possibility is there; we just have to take it.