

REVIEW

REVIEW PAPER: SHAPING THE CHOICES OF CHINA?

The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising
Power

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Thomas Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (W. W. Norton & Company, NY: 2016); 400 pages; \$17.93 (Paperback)

Introduction

The rise of China in the past decade has sparked widespread theoretical debates among scholars as to whether its rise would bring hegemonic war as has happened in World Wars I and II. Nonetheless, it is clear that China's recent foreign policy has become more offensive and assertive. The 2012 Sino-Japanese islands dispute, the establishment of the Air Defensive Identification Zone (ADIZ), buildup of artificial islands in the South China Sea, and the Sino-Indian standoff in 2017 all seem to be confirming John Mearsheimer's predictions that the rise of China, based on his offensive realist standpoint, will bring hegemonic war.¹ Thomas Christensen, however, disagrees with this pessimistic conclusion. In his recent publication, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power*, he agrees that while the rise of China is real, China as a rising power will not bring hegemonic war.

Reviewing this path-breaking work will bring to light four theoretical themes that provide far-reaching implications on future policy making and reveal the underlying theoretical and policy preferences. The first theme is evolving distribution of powers and strategic challenges in Asia along with the rise of China, a theme which aims to touch upon the long debate of whether China's power is exaggerated, and if it is not, what strategic challenges would China bring to the United States. The second theme is Chinese motive and perception of states, which attempts to analyze how the authors respond to debates of the intention. The third theme is international cooperation, which responds to the longstanding zero-sum game debate among different schools of international relations. After scrutinizing the approaches taken by the authors in addressing

1 Mearsheimer suggests that the rise of China would repeat the history of WWI and WWII in that the rise of a potential regional hegemony would bring war in the long term. See John Mearsheimer, "Can China Rise Peacefully?," *The National Interest*, Oct 25, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204>.

the first three themes, I examine the fourth theme, shaping the choices of China, Christensen's novel foreign policy recommendation to the US.

Evolving Distribution of Powers and Strategic Challenges

In Chapter 3 of his book, "Why Chinese Power Will Not Surpass U.S. Anytime Soon," Christensen argues that the Chinese economy is suffering from "other institutional, legal, and normative hinders," preventing China from becoming a global leader.² By "other," Christensen convincingly argues for the problem of innovation and invention, rather than only focusing on arguing about currency policy, inflation, and corruption. Chinese academic culture that emphasizes only "numerical measures of success," hindered the creation of knowledge, which makes China "trail far behind the United States and the Europeans in international branding."³ Militarily, Christensen states that the United States still remains superior to the Chinese military force "in quality, quantity, or both."

Christensen also emphasizes a new form of power—what he terms "cyber-power." Rather than only analyzing Chinese conventional military force by quality, experience, and quantity that can challenge the U.S. position in Asia, Christensen states that "there is little doubt that China has developed a large cadre of government sponsored hackers and cyber-warriors," which enables China to penetrate, disable, and destroy the network.⁴ Yet, he also states that while the U.S. government seldom mentions its offensive capabilities, instances such as the U.S. and Israeli attacks on the Iranian nuclear Stuxnet and Flame program, and previous government statements, demonstrate to a certain degree that the U.S. has advantages over China in terms of power in the cyber sphere. However, although Christensen counts cyberpower as a form of power, Christensen fails to go beyond this argument by classifying whether this form of power can also be put into conventional international relations' offensive-defensive framework. Moreover, he does not elaborate how cyber-power can impact the traditional security dilemma.

China's Intentions and Perception of States

Besides the balance of power, the debate over intention has long occupied international relations scholars. As Sebastian Rosato argues, if states can

2 Thomas Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 61-69.

3 *Ibid.*, 73.

4 *Ibid.*, 87-89.

never understand others' intentions, "then self-help is persistent, balancing is endless, the security dilemma is intractable, and relative gains loom large."⁵ Whereas some structural realists such as John Mearsheimer believe that intentions are inscrutable, Christensen believes that it is possible to discern the intention of China.

Christensen stresses that states can understand others' intentions. In terms of the motive of China, he provides a new and thoughtful starting point—the global financial crisis since 2009—to examine the changing motives of China. As he states, "the great recession remade Chinese popular and elite psychology."⁶ First, he quotes the sources of Chinese interlocutors to suggest that "large segments of the Chinese public and elites feel that China's global power has risen quickly since the financial collapse." He suggests that there are three factors contributing to the offensive motive of China. First, since the financial crisis, many Chinese people believe that China has been getting strong enough to challenge the United States' predominant position. Second, Xi Jinping, who has demonstrated his power as a political strongman, would want to play a more proactive role in global affairs to further demonstrate his leadership. Third, the consistent domestic instability may drive China to take a more offensive stance in international disputes in order to divert domestic discontent. He argues that "Beijing's unfortunate combination of external confidence and internal anxiety renders China more assertive internationally on occasion and more acerbic on others."⁷ Yet, also due to the presence of domestic instability, he states that China has strong intention to cooperate within the institutional framework. As he argues, "I can see few reasons why China would intentionally seek conflict with its trade and investment partners or undercut the institutional framework that has enabled its historic economic development."⁸

Another conundrum is how China's neighbors perceive this potential rising hegemony. The territorial disputes between China and its neighbors in these years in fact have created serious conflicts within the Asian security system. China has been more assertive not only in its long contentious territorial disputes with Japan, but recently also in the South China Sea. The 2014 Sino-Vietnamese standoff demonstrated that Southeast Asian states have posed skeptical or even negative attitudes towards China.⁹

5 For background on the intention debate, see, Sebastian Rosato, "The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Winter 2014/2015): 48-88.

6 Christensen, *The China Challenge*, 242.

7 *Ibid.*, 245.

8 *Ibid.*, 40.

9 Shannon Tiezzi, "Can China and Vietnam Overcome Their Territorial Disputes?," *The Diplomat*, Oct 27, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/can-china-and-vietnam-overcome-their-territorial-disputes/>

Christensen, differing greatly from the conventional analysis of balance-of-power and balance-of-threat theories, does not touch much on addressing how states perceive China. Rather, he believes that East Asia today is not divided between opposing systems. This new perspective provides a unique lens to observe East Asia today. As he states, “almost all important actors in the region besides China and Russia are either formal U.S. allies or security partners.”¹⁰ Christensen’s novel view of the balance of power is unique in that he views the system itself as highly interdependent. This new perspective also challenges Waltz’s theory that a multipolar system would lead to instability.¹¹ But one counterargument is that although the United States is not relying on other Asian states to survive, and economic ties bind Asian states closer, it does not seem that Asian states have as a consequence developed a positive view on China. More importantly, they occasionally challenge China by their naval forces. Christensen may also overlook the degree of nationalism in South East Asia, where people are pushing their governments to respond aggressively to China, even in spite of strong economic ties. Economic dependence in this sense may not spillover to the security arena.

International Institutions and Co-operations

Christensen, in the chapter “This Time Should Be Different, China’s Rise in a Globalized World,” states that “rarely seen in the developing world, China has built a vibrant economy that has pulled hundreds of millions out of poverty,” and “China has opened itself up to international investment, international trade, and transnational production to such a degree that China is essentially playing by our (the United States’) rules.”¹² In this regard, “China’s willingness to help maintains the international order from which it so benefits.”

This analysis contributes to the current debate to rebut the zero-sum game in international relations. He quotes Stephen Brooks’ argument that “transnational production and FDI in manufactures rely on complex supply chains and expanded intra-industry trade,” and “now be difficulty for many countries to prosecute weapons procurement from enemy countries or from noncombatant third countries.”¹³ Going back to the case of China, trade within Asia has been dominated by China since 1990. As he states, “all things being equal, the contemporary economic realities should prove a major force for peace.”¹⁴

10 Christensen, *The China Challenge*, 51.

11 See, Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (US: McGill Hill, 1976).

12 Christensen, *The China Challenge*, 37-62.

13 *Ibid.*, 31.

14 *Ibid.*, 48.

Christensen also addresses the incentive of China to partake in international regimes. In the chapter, “Global Governance: The Biggest Challenge of All,” he makes an interesting point by employing the United States’ lens to look at the issues, writing,

“when the other great powers seek cooperation from China on international security and humanitarian, economic, environmental problems, China can undercut the efforts without even intentionally doing so.”¹⁵

This new perspective is the core contribution to his theory in which non-zero sum game provides alternative peaceful resolution of the rise of China. In other words, “the United States wishes China well.”

Hegemonic War and Shaping the Choices of China

Contradictory to offensive realist predictions, Christensen believes that the instance of the rise of China is different. He rebuts the pessimistic views by stating that those theories predicting hegemonic war between China and the United States are all drawing from case studies of the 19th and the 20th centuries. He advocates that “regional and global institutions also help ameliorate tension,” and suggests “great powers have no incentive and no credible threat to invade and occupy each other as they had in the past.”¹⁶ Simply put, Christensen believes that it is more likely that the rise of China will not lead to hegemonic war.

As the world today is highly interconnected, China’s efforts in dealing with global issues is a must. Christensen suggests that not only should the United States reaffirm its Asian alliance, but it should also help shape the choices of China. Simply speaking, the United States should encourage China to cooperate in those areas that would benefit both sides, such as climate change, non-proliferation of weapons, while avoiding involvement in the territorial disputes among East Asian states. In this regard, Christensen believes that in a non-zero-sum game perspective, the rise of China would not bring war. Nonetheless, while his argument is novel and thoughtfully argued, Christensen does not mention what would happen if the United States does not engage with China, or act to “shape the choices of China”—whether this unilateral action will increase the chance of war.

Conclusion

¹⁵ Ibid., 120.

¹⁶ Ibid., 290.

By and large, Christensen's work, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of China*, contributes to the long debate over the rise of China. His work provides ample analysis based on historical sources, providing up-to-date information to shed light on the understanding of China's threats and bringing new light to different longstanding debates about the rise of China. I highly recommend this work to all graduate students and scholars interested in Chinese foreign policy.