

Paths to War and Peace in a Post-American World

By **Brandon Valeriano and John Vasquez**

Post-American Challenges

Political scientists often avoid predicting the future of international relations and with good reason. Nevertheless, the question of the future is critical for the United States, especially if Zakaria is correct that the United States will reach its apex and be challenged by ‘the rest’ in the not too distant future. Even if it is not surpassed, he argues, we are entering a post-American world. Such predictions are not new. The fear of decline was much more prevalent after the Arab oil embargo and proved wholly premature.¹

It is questionable whether there will be a significant decline of American power. Whether Zakaria’s prediction about U.S. decline is correct, however, we will leave to others. What is clear is that no state has remained the number one forever; even Rome fell. Our concern here is whether transitions of leadership or power transitions necessarily entail war. We want to look at which specific states might pose a power transition and whether such transitions make war between the ‘old’ hegemon and the rising challenger inevitable. Based on previous theoretical and empirical analyses, we seek to identify the likely paths to war and paths to peace that might occur if a transition materializes.

War and the ‘Rise of the Rest’

The ‘rise of the rest’ is a perplexing problem for international relations scholars. Many have tackled the issue of transitions in the past.² Power transition theory³ typically sees a power

¹ See Russett’s 1985 dissent from the prevailing mood, Russett, Bruce M. *The Mysterious Case of Vanishing Hegemony: Or, Is Mark Twain Really Dead*, International Organization, Vol. 39, No. 2, 1985, pp. 207-232.

² Organski, A.F.K., and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980; Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981; Tammen, Ronald L, Jacek Kugler, Douglas Lemke, Allan Stam III, Carole Alsharabati, Mark A. Abdollahian, Brian Efirid, and A.F.K. Organski, *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century*. New York: Chatham House, 2000; Thompson, William R. ed., *Systemic Transitions: Past, Present, and Future*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

transition (or even a rapid approach) between the leading state and a rising ascendant state as a necessary condition for a major power war. Only if both states are completely satisfied with the status quo, as allegedly the U.S. and the United Kingdom were in the early 20th century, can war be avoided. Such a theory raises concerns that China and the U.S. might go to war sometime in the future.⁴

Zakaria is particularly concerned with China passing the U.S., but some think this is improbable.⁵ If economic innovation and advances in science and technology are the key to transitions, then a unified Europe is a more likely challenger and in some areas has already surpassed the U.S.⁶ If transitions pose a risk of war, we think a complete analysis would minimally look at the following potential transitions: EU-U.S., China-U.S., China-EU, and India-China.⁷ For reasons of space, we will focus on Zakaria's concern with a China-U.S. transition and whether this might increase the risk of war and how.

The steps-to-war theory⁸ provides a perspective for understanding when the risk of war is greatest in any future power transition. The theory holds that issues and how they are handled are the central driving factor bringing about interstate war. Issues of a territorial nature are particularly divisive and prone to conflict due to their intractability and symbolic nature.⁹ Unlike the realist perspective that Zakaria takes, what brings about war and rivalry is not power rankings

³ Organski and Kugler, 1980.

⁴ See Levy, Jack S., 'Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China,' In Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng (ed.) *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2008, pp. 11-33.

⁵ See Chan, Steve, *China, the U.S. and the Power Transition Theory: A Critique*. London: Routledge, 2008.

⁶ On possible splits between the U.S. and Europe, See Kupchan, Charles A., *The End of the American Era: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Knopf, 2002.

⁷ See Vasquez, John A. 'Whether and How Global Leadership Transitions Will Result in War: Some Long-Term Predictions from the Steps-to-War Explanation.' In W. R. Thompson (ed.) *Systemic Transitions: Past, Present, and Future*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 131-160.

⁸ See Senese, Paul D. and John A. Vasquez, *The Steps to War: An empirical study*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

⁹ Vasquez, John A. and Brandon Valeriano, 'Territory as a Source of Conflict and a Road to Peace,' In Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kremenyuk, and I. William Zartman (eds.) *Handbook of Conflict Resolution*, London: Sage Publications, 2009, pp. 193-209.

per se, but grievances that states have with each other. Power plays a role, but at the margins. The key is the kind of issues states have with each other and how they deal with them. According to the theory, the issues that are most likely to escalate to war if handled with the use of force are territorial disputes.

Looking at future transitions from this theoretical perspective, power transitions can be divided into those that occur in the context of territorial grievances and those that occur in the absence of such grievances. In the latter, there are no territorial disputes that would raise the grievance threshold close to war. In contrast, the former are apt to end up in rivalry and even war, if parties resort to power politics to handle their territorial disputes. The use of threats and force to settle territorial disputes in one's favor, the making of alliances to gain support and augment power, and building up one's military (all realist prescriptions) increases threat perception, hostility, and the probability of war.¹⁰

Using the steps-to-war theory we can trace out three potential scenarios during the rise of China and the rest. The first, and most peaceful, is when the transition dyad has no territorial disputes and is not engaged in a long-standing rivalry. In this case, China and the U.S. do not fight over direct territorial questions and have avoided a series of threatening crises that foster animosity and entrench their positions. The transition is peaceful because there are no outstanding territorial issues, and the states avoid the use of threatening actions, such as alliances and arms buildups that can activate the security dilemma. We believe that Zakaria's rosiest prediction would occur only in this scenario. He alludes to the path taken by Britain when the U.S. was passing it. Zakaria states: "London made one critical decision that extended its influence by decades: it chose to accommodate itself to the rise of America rather than to contest

¹⁰ See Senese and Vasquez, 2008 for some evidence on this pattern.

it.”¹¹ This choice facilitated a peaceful transition between hegemonic leaders. Zakaria suggests that China will peacefully take the reigns as long it is focused on economic-market questions and questions of political dominance. The fallen power (U.S.) and its ally (India) will continue to exert influence if the transition occurs in a similar manner as the Britain-U.S. transition that occurred between 1890 and 1914. If territorial disputes are avoided, but the two states still engage in power politics, then any rivalry that emerged in this scenario would most apt be over ideological and/or positional issues similar to the Cold War rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

The second scenario is one in which the U.S. and China engage in a direct rivalry over territorial issues. This path is the most dangerous, but it is also the most unlikely since at present the two states have no direct territorial questions, in that neither side claims any territory held by the other.

The third scenario is one in which the transition dyad, the U.S. and China, become involved in a territorial dispute through a third party. This third scenario is dangerous and troubling in that it brings territorial disputes onto the agenda of the two parties. Allies and various partners such as Taiwan could drag the two states into direct competition and rivalry.¹² A repeat of the Strait crisis of 1995-96, where the U.S. deployed the USS Nimitz to protect Taiwan, could lead to an armed confrontation. Taiwan is the most likely partner to bring this scenario about with war arising from U.S. attempts to protect Taiwan from attack. However, other issues like Tibet or supporting India in a border war with China have a similar potential, although each is less salient. To reduce the probability of war, the U.S. needs to avoid such indirect territorial disputes with China. Overall, there are two obvious paths to peace—avoid becoming entangled

¹¹ Zakaria, p. 177.

¹² Zakaria, p. 124; See also Fravel, M. Taylor, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

with allies who have territorial disputes with China or try to settle them peacefully before someone tries to handle the issue with the use of power politics.

Settling Territorial Conflicts among 'the Rest'

Territorial disputes have given rise to about half the interstate wars fought since 1816.¹³ As Zakaria notes, Taiwan is a pressing concern for China. On most issues, China has been content to 'hide its light under a bushel' and not press its power position.¹⁴ "This policy of noninterference and non-confrontation mostly persists. With the exception of anything related to Taiwan..."¹⁵ Issues are important and cannot be ignored as a mechanism for conflict as Zakaria often does. Zakaria's story of Nehru's shift to a more realistic foreign policy¹⁶ in the context of war with China in 1962 underlines the importance of solving territorial questions. Territorial issues like Taiwan, Kashmir, and Tibet will linger until resolved bilaterally or by some multilateral institution.

If the steps-to-war theory is correct, the settlement of territorial disputes are important not only for the U.S. and China, but for the peace of the world generally. Indeed, the rise of the rest is apt to create several neighborhood power transitions that may go to war because of serious territorial disputes. Zakaria recognizes that border disputes may occur,¹⁷ but does not realize how central these are to war and peace. Here the key to peace is the creation of institutions and conflict resolution practices that can settle territorial disputes.

Regardless of relations between the U.S. and China, territorial issues are apt to be a pressing concern for many states in "the rise of the rest." They should be settled before they drag states into conflict, as territorial conflicts have for centuries. Any potential decline of the

¹³ Vasquez and Valeriano, 2010, p.9.

¹⁴ Zakaria, p. 105.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 149.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 232.

U.S. need not leave the future of conflict management to the new hegemon or the ‘rest’. Any decline of the U.S. could be managed carefully so the norms of peaceful conflict resolution become standards of behavior in the post-American world. As Zakaria notes (but fails to elaborate), “[peace] will only be possible if Washington can show that it is willing to allow other countries to become stakeholders in the new order.”¹⁸ Contrary to what Zakaria suggests,¹⁹ the international order established by the U.S. needs more than expansion and repair; it requires a reconfiguration of purpose and intent around the importance of the divisive issues most apt to result in war—territorial boundaries and irredentism. Of course, territorial disputes are not a necessary condition for war, so wars can still arise from other grievances, especially if handled through the use of power politics. Nonetheless, successfully managing territorial disputes can eliminate an entire class of the most prevalent wars.

A problem with Zakaria’s notion of the ‘post-American World’ is its focus on the utility of all forms of power and the belief that multilateral institutions²⁰ and international law cannot be effective in preventing conflict during times of systemic change because they do not reflect power realities. As Zakaria notes, “Economics is not a zero-sum game – the rise of other players expands the pie, which is good for all – but geopolitics is a struggle for influence and control.”²¹ This central flaw misconceptualizes the solutions to the ‘problem’ of American decline and the rise of the rest.

Our position is that the goal for the U.S. should not be to hold onto its unipolar position with all its might and power, but to create lasting institutions, structures, and norms that will endure past this unipolar moment. Such an order should be organized by constructing

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁹ Zakaria, p. 232.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 38.

²¹ Ibid., p. 44.

multilateral institutions that can adjudicate territorial disputes and ameliorate the traditional power politics path to conflict since these factors are the typical causes of discord in international affairs.

If other countries ('the rest') are allowed to participate in the construction of the means to prevent future conflicts and rivalries, the post-American world does not have to look at all bleak. In fact, a post-American world can be characterized by preventive diplomacy that might be beneficial to all, not just the U.S. and China.²²

²² See also John A. Vasquez and Brandon Valeriano, *A Classification of Interstate War*, *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 72, No. 2, 2010, pp. 292-309.