

Rivalry in the Offing

John J. Mearsheimer

History shows that powerful states on the rise often fight wars with other major powers. Does this mean that a rising China is destined to end up in an intense security competition, maybe even a war, with its neighbors and the United States?

Many American and Chinese strategists say no. Some argue that China has a “Confucian culture” which is inherently passive, while others maintain that the economies of China and its potential rivals are too closely intertwined to allow them to fight a war. The economic costs would be too great. Still, others claim that shared dangers of international terrorism or global warming will foster enough Sino-American cooperation to dampen future rivalry. Even nuclear weapons are cited as a potential force for peace in Asia.

But these optimists are likely to be proved wrong. An increasingly powerful China will seek to become the most powerful state in Asia and dominate that region the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. China is unlikely to pursue regional hegemony so that it can conquer other Asian countries, the way Japan did between 1931 and 1942. It is more likely that Beijing will want to be in a position where it can dictate the rules of behavior to its neighbors, as the United States does in the Western Hemisphere. A rising China is also likely to try to push America out of Asia, similar to the way the United States pushed the European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere.

China is likely to pursue regional hegemony for sound strategic reasons. In a world where states cannot be certain about the intentions of other states, and where there is no higher authority they can turn to when threatened by another state, the best way to survive is to dominate your immediate surroundings and make sure that no other great power duplicates that feat in another region. A rival state that dominates its own region will be an especially powerful foe that is free to cause trouble in your backyard. That is why the United States sought hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, and spent the 20th century helping prevent Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union from achieving hegemony in Europe or Asia.

This same logic implies that the United States will try to prevent China from becoming a hegemon in Asia. Beijing’s neighbors – to include India, Japan and Russia – are likely to help America contain China, leading to intense security competition between Washington and Beijing. War between the United States and China is not inevitable, but Asia is likely to be a dangerous region in the decades ahead.

John J. Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago.

See: http://www.chinasecurity.us/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=80