

**Fourth Annual Michael Hintze Lecture in International Security  
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***The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to U.S. Power in Asia*  
Professor John Mearsheimer**

Professor John Mearsheimer, from the University of Chicago, is America's boldest and perhaps most controversial thinker in the field of international relations and an authority on US foreign policy and national security. His book, *The Israeli Lobby and US Foreign Policy*, which he co-authored with Stephen Walt of Harvard University aroused furious debate, and has been translated into 17 languages.

**Transcript**

It is a pleasure and an honor to be here at the University of Sydney to give the annual Michael Hintze Lecture in International Security. I would like to thank Alan Dupont for inviting me, and all of you for coming out this evening to hear me talk.

The United States has been the most powerful state on the planet for many decades, and has deployed robust military forces in the Asia-Pacific region since the early years of World War II. America's presence in your neighborhood has had significant consequences for Australia and for the wider region. This is how the Australian government sees it, at least according to the 2009 Defence White Paper: "Australia has been a very secure country for many decades, in large measure because the wider Asia-Pacific region has enjoyed an unprecedented era of peace and stability underwritten by US strategic primacy." The United States, in other words, has acted as a pacifier in this part of the world.

However, according to the very next sentence in the White Paper, "That order is being transformed as economic changes start to bring about changes in the distribution of strategic power." The argument here, of course, is that the rise of China is having a significant effect on the global balance of power. In particular, the power gap between China and the United States is shrinking and in all likelihood "US strategic primacy" in this region will be no more. This is not to say that the United States will disappear; in fact, its presence here is likely to grow in response to China's rise. But the United States will no longer be the preponderant power in your neighborhood, as it has been since 1945.

The most important question that flows from this discussion is whether China can rise peacefully. It is clear from the Defence White Paper—which is tasked with assessing Australia's strategic situation

out to the year 2030—that policymakers here are worried about the changing balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. Consider these comments from that document: “As other powers rise, and the primacy of the United States is increasingly tested, power relations will inevitably change. When this happens there will be the possibility of miscalculation. There is a small but still concerning possibility of growing confrontation between some of these powers.” At another point in the White Paper, we read that, “Risks resulting from escalating strategic competition could emerge quite unpredictably, and is a factor to be considered in our defence planning.” In short, the Australian government seems to sense that the shifting balance of power between China and the United States may not be good for peace in the neighborhood.

I would like to argue tonight that Australians should be worried about China’s rise, because it is likely to lead to an intense security competition between China and the United States, with considerable potential for war. Moreover, most of China’s neighbors, to include India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, Vietnam, and yes Australia, will join with the United States to contain China’s power. To put it bluntly: China cannot rise peacefully.

It is important to emphasize, however, that I am not arguing that Chinese behavior alone will drive the security competition that lies ahead. The United States is also likely to behave in aggressive ways, thus further increasing the prospects for trouble here in the Asia-Pacific region.

Naturally, not everyone will agree with my assessment of the situation. Many believe that China can rise peacefully, that it is not inevitable that the United States and a powerful China will have confrontational relations. Of course, they assume that China will have peaceful intentions and that welcome fact of life can help facilitate stability in this region, even though the underlying balance of power is expected to change dramatically.

I would like to examine three key arguments that are often employed to support this optimistic prognosis.

First, some claim that China can allay any fears about its rise by making it clear to its neighbors and the United States that it has peaceful intentions, that it will not use force to change the balance of power. This perspective can be found in the Defence White Paper, which states: “The pace, scope and structure of China’s military modernization have the potential to give its neighbors cause for concern if not carefully explained, and if China does not reach out to others to build confidence regarding its military plans.” In essence, the belief here is that Beijing has the ability to signal its present and future intentions to Australia and other countries in compelling ways.

Unfortunately, states can never be certain about each other's intentions. They cannot know with a high degree of certainty whether they are dealing with a revisionist state or a status quo power. For example, there is still no consensus among experts as to whether the Soviet Union was bent on dominating Eurasia during the Cold War. Nor is there a consensus on whether Imperial Germany was a highly aggressive state that was principally responsible for causing World War I. The root of the problem is that unlike military capabilities, which we can see and count, intentions cannot be empirically verified. Intentions are in the minds of decision-makers and they are especially difficult to discern. You might say that Chinese leaders can use words to explain their intentions. But talk is cheap and leaders have been known to lie to foreign audiences. Thus, it is hard to know the intentions of China's present leaders, which is not to say that they are necessarily revisionist.

But even if one could determine China's intentions today, there is no way to know what they will be in the future. After all, it is impossible to identify who will be running the foreign policy of any country five or ten years from now, much less whether they will have aggressive intentions. It cannot be emphasized enough that we face radical uncertainty when it comes to determining the future intentions of any country, China included.

A second line of argument is that a benign China can avoid confrontation by building defensive rather than offensive military forces. In other words, Beijing can signal that it is a status quo power by denying itself the capability to use force to alter the balance of power. After all, a country that has hardly any offensive capability cannot be a revisionist state, because it does not have the means to act aggressively. Not surprisingly, Chinese leaders often claim that their military is designed solely for defensive purposes. For example, the *New York Times* recently reported in an important article on the Chinese navy that its leaders maintain that it is "purely a self-defense force."

One problem with this approach is that it is difficult to distinguish between offensive and defensive military capabilities. Negotiators at the 1932 Disarmament Conference tried to make these distinctions and found themselves tied in knots trying to determine whether particular weapons like tanks and aircraft carriers are offensive or defensive in nature. The basic problem is that the capabilities that states develop simply to defend themselves often have significant offensive potential.

Consider what China is doing today. It is building military forces that have significant power projection capability, and as the Defence White Paper tells us, China's "military modernization will be increasingly characterized by the development of power projection capabilities." For example, the

Chinese are building naval forces that can project power out to the so-called “Second Island Chain” in the Western Pacific. And they also say that they are planning to build a “blue water navy” that can operate in the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. For understandable reasons, they want to be able to protect their sea-lanes and not have to depend on the American navy to handle that mission. Although they do not have that capability yet, as Robert Kaplan points out in a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, “China’s naval leaders are displaying the aggressive philosophy of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century U.S. naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, who argued for sea control and the decisive battle.”

Of course, most Chinese leaders think that their navy is defensively oriented, even though it has considerable offensive capability and will have much more in the future. Indeed, they refer to their naval strategy as “Far Sea Defense.” As Kaplan’s comments indicate, it seems almost certain that as the Chinese navy grows in size and capability, none of China’s neighbors, including Australia, will consider it to be defensively oriented. They will instead view it as a formidable offensive force. Thus, anyone looking to determine China’s future intentions by observing its military is likely to conclude that Beijing is bent on aggression.

Finally, some maintain that China’s recent behavior toward its neighbors, which has not been aggressive in any meaningful way, is a reliable indicator of how China will act in the decades ahead. The central problem with this argument is that past behavior is usually not a reliable indicator of future behavior, because leaders come and go and some are more hawkish than others. Plus circumstances at home and abroad can change in ways that make the use of military force more or less attractive.

The Chinese case is illustrative in this regard. Beijing does not possess a formidable military today and it is certainly in no position to pick a fight with the United States. This is not to say that China is a paper tiger, but it does not have the capability to cause much trouble in this region. However, that situation is expected to change markedly over time, in which case China will have significant offensive capability. Then, we will see how committed it is to the status quo. But right now we cannot tell much about China’s future behavior, because it has such limited capability to act aggressively.

What all of this tells us is that there is no good way to divine what China’s intentions will be down the road or to predict its future behavior based on its recent foreign policies. It does seem clear, however, that China will eventually have a military with significant offensive potential.

Up to now, I have been concerned with how an American or an Australian might assess China's future behavior. But to fully understand how China's rise will affect stability in the Asia-Pacific region, we must also consider what Chinese leaders can divine about future American behavior, by looking at its intentions, capabilities, and present behavior.

There is obviously no way China's leaders can know who will be in charge of American foreign policy in the years ahead, much less what their intentions toward China will be. But they do know that all of America's post-Cold War presidents, including Barack Obama, have stated that they are committed to maintaining American primacy. And that means Washington is likely to go to considerable lengths to prevent China from becoming too powerful.

Regarding capabilities, the United States spends more money on defense than all the other countries in the world combined. Moreover, because the American military is designed to fight all around the globe, it has abundant power projection assets. Much of that capability is either located in the Asia-Pacific region or can be moved there quickly should the need arise. China cannot help but see that the United States has formidable military forces in its neighborhood that are designed in good part for offensive purposes. Surely, when Washington moves aircraft carriers into the Taiwan Straits—as it did in 1996—or when it redeploys submarines to the Western Pacific, China sees these naval assets as offensive, not defensive in nature.

This is not to deny that most Americans, like most Chinese, think that their military is a defensive instrument; but that is not the way it looks when you are at the other end of the rifle barrel. Thus, anyone in China seeking to gauge American intentions by assessing its military capabilities is likely to think it is a revisionist state, not a status quo power.

Lastly, there is the matter of America's recent behavior and what that might tell us about future U.S. actions. As I said earlier, past actions are usually not a reliable indicator of future behavior, because circumstances change and new leaders sometimes think differently about foreign policy than their predecessors. But if Chinese leaders try to gauge how the United States is likely to act down the road by looking at its recent foreign policy, they will almost certainly conclude that it is a war-like and dangerous country. After all, America has been at war for 14 of the 21 years since the Cold War ended. That is 2 out of every 3 years. And remember that the Obama administration is apparently contemplating a new war against Iran.

One might argue that this is all true, but the United States has not threatened to attack China. The problem with this argument is that American leaders from both the Democratic and Republican

parties have made it clear that they believe the United States, to quote Madeleine Albright, is the “indispensable nation” and therefore it has both the right and the responsibility to police the entire globe. Furthermore, most Chinese are well aware of how the United States took advantage of a weak China by pushing forward the infamous “Open Door” policy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chinese officials also know that the United States and China fought a bloody war in Korea between 1950 and 1953. It is not surprising that the *Economist* recently reported that, “A retired Chinese admiral likened the American navy to a man with a criminal record ‘wandering just outside the gate of a family home’.” It seems that this is a case where we should be thankful that countries usually don’t pay much attention to a potential rival’s past behavior when trying to determine its future intentions.

What all of this tells us is that the future security environment in the Asia-Pacific region will revolve around China and the United States, and each of those great powers will have a military with significant offensive capability and unknowable intentions.

There is one other factor that matters greatly for future Sino-American relations. There is no centralized authority that states can turn to for help if a dangerous aggressor threatens them. There is no night watchman in the international system, which means that states have to rely mainly on themselves to ensure their survival. Thus, the core question that any leader has to ask him or herself is this: what is the best way to maximize my country’s security in a world where another state might have significant offensive military capability as well as offensive intentions, and where there is no higher body I can turn to for help if that other state threatens my country? This question—more than any other—will motivate American as well as Chinese leaders in the years ahead, as it has in the past.

I believe there is a straightforward answer to this question and that all great powers know it and act accordingly. The best way for any state to ensure its survival is to be much more powerful than all the other states in the system, because the weaker states are unlikely to attack it for fear they will be soundly defeated. No country in the Western Hemisphere, for example, would dare strike the United States because it is so powerful relative to all its neighbors.

To be more specific, the ideal situation for any great power is to be the hegemon in the system, because then its survival would almost be guaranteed. A hegemon is a country that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states. In other words, no other state has the military wherewithal to put up a serious fight against it. In essence, a hegemon is the only great power in the system.

When people talk about hegemony these days, they are usually referring to the United States, which they describe as a global hegemon. I do not like this terminology, however, because it is virtually impossible for any state—including the United States—to achieve global hegemony. The main obstacle to world domination is the difficulty of projecting power over huge distances, especially across enormous bodies of water like the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

The best outcome that a great power can hope for is to achieve regional hegemony, and possibly control another region that is close by and easily accessible over land. The United States, which dominates the Western Hemisphere, is the only regional hegemon in modern history. Five other great powers have tried to dominate their region—Napoleonic France, Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union—but none succeeded.

The United States, it should be emphasized, did not become a hegemon in the Western Hemisphere by accident. When it gained its independence in 1783, it was a weak country comprised of 13 states running up and down the Atlantic seaboard. Over the course of the next 115 years, American policymakers worked unrelentingly in pursuit of regional hegemony. They expanded America's boundaries from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans as part of a policy commonly referred to as "Manifest Destiny." Indeed, the United States was an expansionist power of the first order. Henry Cabot Lodge put the point well when he noted that the United States had a "record of conquest, colonization, and territorial expansion unequalled by any people in the nineteenth century." Or I might add the twentieth century.

But America's leaders in the nineteenth century were not just concerned with turning the United States into a powerful territorial state. They were also determined to push the European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere, and make it clear to them that they were not welcome back. This policy, which is still in effect today, is known as the "Monroe Doctrine." By 1898, the last European empire in the Americas had collapsed and the United States had become a regional hegemon.

States that achieve regional hegemony have a further aim: they seek to prevent great powers in other geographical regions from duplicating their feat. A regional hegemon, in other words, does not want peer competitors. The United States, for example, played a key role in preventing Imperial Japan, Imperial Germany, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union from gaining regional supremacy. Regional hegemons attempt to check aspiring hegemons in other regions, because they fear that a rival great power that dominates its own region will be an especially powerful foe that is essentially free to roam around the globe and cause trouble in their backyard. Regional hegemons prefer that

there be at least two great powers located together in other regions, because their proximity will force them to concentrate their attention on each other rather than the distant hegemon. Furthermore, if a potential hegemon emerges among them, the other great powers in that region might be able to contain it by themselves, allowing the distant hegemon to remain safely on the sidelines.

The bottom line is that for sound strategic reasons the United States labored for more than a century to gain regional hegemony, and after achieving that goal, it has made sure that no other great power dominated either Asia or Europe the way it dominates the Western Hemisphere.

What does America's past behavior tell us about the rise of China? In particular, how should we expect China to conduct itself as it grows more powerful? And how should we expect the United States and China's neighbors to react to a strong China?

I expect China to act the way the United States has acted over its long history. Specifically, I believe that China will try to dominate the Asia-Pacific region much as the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. For good strategic reasons, China will seek to maximize the power gap between itself and potentially dangerous neighbors like India, Japan and Russia. China will want to make sure that it is so powerful that no state in Asia has the wherewithal to threaten it. It is unlikely that China will pursue military superiority so that it can go on the warpath and conquer other countries in the region, although that is always a possibility. Instead, it is more likely that Beijing will want to dictate the boundaries of acceptable behavior to neighboring countries, much the way the United States makes it clear to other states in the Americas that it is the boss. Gaining regional hegemony, I might add, is probably the only way that China will get Taiwan back.

A much more powerful China can also be expected to try to push the United States out of the Pacific-Asia region, much the way the United States pushed the European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere in the nineteenth century. We should expect China to come up with its own version of the Monroe Doctrine, as Imperial Japan did in the 1930s. In fact, we are already seeing inklings of that policy. Consider that in March, Chinese officials told two high-ranking American policymakers that the United States was no longer allowed to interfere in the South China Sea, which China views as a "core interest" like Taiwan and Tibet. And it seems that China feels the same way about the Yellow Sea. Last week the U.S. and South Korean navies conducted joint naval exercises in response to North Korea's alleged sinking of a South Korean naval vessel. Those naval maneuvers were originally planned to take place in the Yellow Sea, which is adjacent to the

Chinese coastline, but vigorous protests from China forced the Obama administration to move them further east into the Sea of Japan.

These ambitious goals make good strategic sense for China. Beijing should want a militarily weak Japan and Russia as its neighbors, just as the United States prefers a militarily weak Canada and Mexico on its borders. No state in its right mind should want other powerful states located in its region? All Chinese surely remember what happened in the last century when Japan was powerful and China was weak. Furthermore, why would a powerful China accept U.S. military forces operating in its backyard? American policymakers, after all, express outrage whenever distant great powers send military forces into the Western Hemisphere. Those foreign forces are invariably seen as a potential threat to American security. The same logic should apply to China. Why would China feel safe with U.S. forces deployed on its doorstep? Following the logic of the Monroe Doctrine, would not China's security be better served by pushing the American military out of the Asia-Pacific region?

Why should we expect China to act any differently than the United States has over the course of its history? Are they more principled than Americans are? More ethical? Are they less nationalistic than Americans? Less concerned about their survival? They are none of these things, of course, which is why China is likely to imitate the United States and attempt to become a regional hegemon.

And what is the likely American response if China attempts to dominate Asia? It is crystal clear from the historical record that the United States does not tolerate peer competitors. As it demonstrated over the course of the twentieth century, it is determined to remain the world's only regional hegemon. Therefore, the United States can be expected to go to great lengths to contain China and ultimately weaken it to the point where it is no longer a threat to rule the roost in Asia. In essence, the United States is likely to act toward China similar to the way it behaved toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

China's neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region are certain to fear its rise as well, and they too will do whatever they can to prevent it from achieving regional hegemony. Indeed, there is already substantial evidence that countries like India, Japan, and Russia, as well as smaller powers like Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam, are worried about China's ascendancy and are looking for ways to contain it. India and Japan, for example, signed a "Joint Security Declaration" in October 2008, in good part because they are worried about China's growing power. India and the United States, which had testy relations at best during the Cold War, have become good friends over the past decade, in large part because they both fear China. Just last month, the Obama administration,

which is filled with people who preach to the world about the importance of human rights, announced that it was resuming relations with Indonesia's elite special forces, despite their rich history of human rights abuses. The reason for this shift was that Washington wants Indonesia on its side as China grows more powerful, and as the *New York Times* reported, Indonesian officials "dropped hints that the group might explore building ties with the Chinese military if the ban remained."

Singapore, which sits astride the critically important Straits of Malacca and worries about China's growing power, badly wants to upgrade its already close ties with the United States. Toward that end, it built the Changi Naval Base in the late 1990s so that the U.S. Navy could operate an aircraft carrier out of Singapore if the need arose. And the recent decision by Japan to allow the U.S. Marines to remain on Okinawa was driven in part by Tokyo's concerns about China's growing assertiveness in the region and the related need to keep the American security umbrella firmly in place over Japan. Most of China's neighbors will eventually join an American-led balancing coalition designed to check China's rise, much the way Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and even China, joined forces with the United States to contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

I would like to discuss in more detail how I think China's rise will affect Australia in particular. There is no question that geography works to Australia's advantage; it is located far away from China and there are large bodies of water separating the two countries. Australia, of course, faced a similar situation with regard to Imperial Japan, which helps explain why the Japanese military did not invade Australia when it went on a rampage across the Asian-Pacific region in December 1941.

One might be tempted to think that Australia's location means that it has little to fear from China and therefore it can stay on the sidelines as the balancing coalition to contain China comes together. Indeed, the 2009 White Paper raises the possibility that "an Australian government might take the view that armed neutrality was the best approach in terms of securing its territory and people." This is not going to happen, however, because China—should it continue its rapid rise—will eventually present a serious enough threat to Australia that it will have no choice but to join the American-led alliance to contain China. I would like to make three points to support this claim.

First, please remember that we are not talking about the threat posed by today's Chinese military, which does not have a lot of power projection capability and is not much of a danger to its neighbors. We are talking about how Australians will think about China after it has undergone two more decades of impressive economic growth and has used its abundant wealth to build a military that is filled with highly sophisticated weaponry. We are talking about a Chinese military that comes close to rivaling the U.S. military in terms of the quality of its weaponry. That Chinese military, however,

should have two important advantages over its American counterpart. It should be larger, maybe even much larger, since China's population will be at least three times bigger than the U.S. population by the middle of this century. Furthermore, the United States will be at a significant disadvantage in its competition with China, because the American military will be projecting its power across 6,000 miles of ocean, while the Chinese military will be operating in its own backyard. In short, China is likely to have far more offensive military power in 2030 than it has in 2010.

Second, although Imperial Japan did not launch an amphibious assault against Australia in 1942, it seriously contemplated that option, and decided against it not only because of the difficulty of the operation, but also because Japan thought that it had an alternative strategy for dealing with Australia. Specifically, it felt that it could use its control of the Western Pacific to effectively blockade Australia and neutralize it. Although that strategy failed, we should not lose sight of the fact that Imperial Japan was a grave threat to Australia, which is why Australia enthusiastically fought alongside the United States in World War II.

Third, Chinese strategists are going to pay serious attention to Australia in the years ahead, mainly because of oil. China's dependence on imported oil, which is already substantial, is going to increase markedly over the next few decades. Much of that imported oil will come out of the Middle East and most of it will be transported to China by ship. For all the talk about moving oil by pipelines and railroads through Burma and Pakistan, the fact is that maritime transport is a much easier and cheaper option. The Chinese, of course, know this and it is one reason why they are planning to build a blue water navy. They want to be able to protect their sea-lanes that run to and from the Middle East.

China, however, faces a major geographical problem in securing those sea-lanes, which has significant implications for Australia. Specifically, there are three major water passages that connect the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Otherwise, various Southeast Asian countries separate those two large bodies of water. That means China must have access to at least one of those passages at all times if it hopes to be able to control its sea-lanes to and from the oil-rich Middle East.

Chinese ships can go through the Straits of Malacca, which are surrounded by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, or they can go further south and traverse either the Lombok Strait or the Sunda Strait, both of which cut through Indonesia, and both of which bring you out into the open waters of the Indian Ocean just to the northwest of Australia. China, however, is not likely to be able to get through the Straits of Malacca in a conflict with the United States, because Singapore, which is

closely allied with Washington, sits astride that passageway. This is what Chinese strategists call “the Malacca dilemma.” Therefore, China has a powerful incentive to make sure its ships can move through the two main openings that run through Indonesia.

This situation almost certainly means that China will maintain a significant military presence in the waters off the northern coast of Australia and maybe even on Indonesian territory. China will for sure be deeply concerned about Australia’s power projection capabilities, and will work to make sure that they cannot be used to shut down either the Lombok or Sunda Straits or threaten China shipping in the Indian Ocean. The steps that China takes to neutralize the threat that Australia poses to its sea-lanes—and remember, we are talking about a much more powerful China than exists today—will surely push Canberra to work closely with Washington to contain China. In short, there are serious limits to how much geography can shield Australia from an expansive China.

The picture I have painted this evening of what is likely to happen if China continues its impressive economic growth is not a pretty one. Indeed, it is downright depressing. I wish that I could tell a more optimistic story about the prospects for peace in the Asia-Pacific region. But the fact is that international politics is a nasty and dangerous business and no amount of good will can ameliorate the intense security competition that sets in when an aspiring hegemon appears in Eurasia. And there is little doubt that there is one on the horizon. Thank you.