**Great power politics: A rationalist theory of historical and cultural context**

**A Precis**

Michael F Joseph

Assistant Professor of Political Science

University of California, San Diego.

mfjoseph@ucsd.edu

**One Page Summary:**

The rise of China is the United States’ greatest security challenge. Critics argue that US presidents have repeatedly mis-managed it. During the 1990s, presidents were criticized for cautiously hedging as China rose rapidly. More recent presidents were criticized for shifting to strategic competition too quickly, and without adequate preparation. Were these good policies, or failures caused by individual and bureaucratic forces? If US policy is a failure, it is a failure that appears frequently through history. Many important cases start with a long period of cautious hedging as a revisionist power (a Challenger) rapidly rises, instigates crises and takes territory. Then relations suddenly change. In some cases, great powers reach a stable compromise (e.g. the Anglo-American peace circa 1904). In other cases, status quo powers (Defenders) suddenly realize that the Challenger’s motives are vast, and abruptly shift to competition. This shift drives devastating events such as the Cold War and the World Wars. The pattern of great power relations suggests China is one case of a causal process that needs explaining: in cases of enduring great power relations, what explains long periods of hedging in the face of shifting power and repeated demands, and either a sudden shift to all-out competition, or a stable peace?

I develop a theory to explain the instances and timing of great power competition. My theory starts with two classic strategic problems: shifting power (Powell 1999) and uncertainty about motives (Glaser, 2010, Waltz, 1979). But I get different predictions from past theories because I enrich the foreign policy motives that states can hold. Using an informal description of several formal models, I argue that enduring great power rivalries unfold in one of two ways: delayed competition or delayed peace. How they unfold depends on the Defender’s threat perceptions that form in response to the Defender’s knowledge of the Challenger’s historical and cultural context, and the Challenger’s motivations, and costly and costless signals. My mechanism illuminates: (1) why Defenders are reassured by the Challenger's cheap-talk diplomatic promises that the Challenger's motives are limited; (2) why Defenders are willing to make repeated concessions even as the Challenger rapidly militarizes and takes territory; (3) punctuated (rather than gradual) changes in Defenders' beliefs about the Challenger's strategic motives; and (4) why some cases end in competition following a specific demand while others end in a stable peace after many local crises.

I support my theoretical predictions with a mixed-methods empirical design. I use:

* An elite survey experiment with 93 national security professions who work at the CIA, State Department, DoD and elsewhere.
* An analytical narrative of Anglo-Soviet relations at the Cold War’s onset that partly draws from over 10,000 primary source documents collected from four archives.
* A medium-n analysis of 14 great power rivalries since 1850.

I dedicate an entire chapter to understanding *modern US-China relations*. The chapter includes:

* 200+ short interviews with China-watchers in Washington DC.
* Longer interviews with 7 former NSC principles and a CIA Dept. Director.
* A comprehensive analysis of declassified estimates of China, memoirs of US policy-makers and reports on US-policy towards China

The novel evidence sheds light on the trajectory of the US’s China policy. It also explains why presidents from different parties, with different experiences and world views (such as Biden and Trump) pursued remarkably similar policies; and resolved ongoing debates about US intelligence estimates. Finally, I use my theory to predict the grim future of Sino-American relations and recommend policies that will help us manage the coming period of Sino-American competition.

**Book Synopsis.**

The book is broken into three sections. Section 1 (introduction and chapter 1) lays out the puzzle, define the strategic setting I study, and review what the existing literature says about it. Section 2 reveals my conceptual innovations surrounding motives and historical context (chapter 3) and explores the strategic implications of that context for great power relations (chapter 4). Section 3 presents 3 kinds of evidence to support the predictions from section 2.

Section 1: The Puzzle

Since Carr wrote the 20 Year’s Crisis (1939), scholars have justifiably obsessed over 14 cases of great power competition. Most books are motivated by the World Wars, the Cold War, and the Anglo-American peace. Case research also focuses on the Great Game, Russo-Japanese conflict or the Napoleonic wars. Scholars continue to study the same 14 cases for two reasons. First, they are important. They involve powerful states that make repeated, and interconnected choices over several years. They end in either the most devastating events in human history, or enormous territorial transfers that determine who governs hundreds of millions of people.

Second, the patterns of competition and peace these cases produce puzzle us. For example, in 1823 President Monroe declared that the United States would remove European powers from the Americas over the next century. This demand for 20% of the world's land mass was followed by rapid economic growth and militarization, and several military crises. Consistent with existing research into power transitions, Britain realized that the US would make revisionist demands (e.g. Powell, 1999). But against these predictions, competition never came. Instead, the British conceded at Venezuela, then Alaska, before forging a special friendship in 1907. Different still, in 1932 British elites were uncertain if Hitler was a “madman'' bent on world domination, or if he sought limited objectives. In the early 1930s, Hitler rapidly militarized, orchestrated the assassination of the Austrian Chancellor, and took the Rhineland. Rationalist scholars predict that violent actions cause mistrust (Glaser, 2010; Kydd, 2005), and this mistrust should trigger conflict (Waltz, 1979). But this is not what happened. Instead, Hitler allayed Britain's fears through private diplomacy. He argued that militarization was necessary to take a few valuable concessions but promised that his intentions were limited. It was only after Hitler violated the Munich Agreement, 5 years later, that British elites inferred that Hitler held vast aims. This inference triggered competition.

Why do the cases with the fastest rates of shifting power end peacefully? When cases do end in competition, why does it take so long to realize that the Challenger’s motives are vast in the face of repeated costly military actions? Why does costless diplomacy reassure when costly military choices signal expansive intentions? If this sort of behavior is not rational, why did the US repeat it by trusting China, and even facilitating China’s rise, as China rapidly militarized and instigated crises during the 1990s and 2000s?

Section 2: The Argument:

We can better understand cases of great power rivalries if we enrich how we understand state-motives. Scholars have long known that historical and cultural context matters (e.g. O’Neill, 1999). But because historical context is case-specific it is hard to draw general insights from it. In chapter 3, I develop a structured way to analyze historical and cultural context in any one case. This method yields generalizable predictions about how great powers form and change their threat perceptions that translate across cases.

I theorize that a Challenger's specific foreign policy objectives depend on a combination of their intrinsic foreign policy motives—which I call a principle—and their historical context. For example, states that prioritize ethno-nationalism (one principle) covet different concessions than states that prioritize security, prestige or uniting historical borders. Depending on the principle, the specific territories, institutions and normative issues that a state cares about the most depend on its history and culture. For example, states that want to restore their historical borders care about territories they historically controlled.

I assume that Challengers can be motivated by one of many principles, and each principle implies that the Challenger holds a *specific* set of core interests. I assume that Defenders are uncertain about the Challenger's true principle. Thus, they do not know which, and how many, core interests the Challenger holds. However, Defenders have a lot of information about the Challenger's history and culture and can use that information to learn the Challenger's true principle over time.

By appreciating that there are many reasons that states can hold limited aims, I illuminate new information problems, and new mechanisms for forming threat perceptions in world politics. I call these mechanisms *qualitative inferences*. They are *qualitative* because Defenders update their beliefs about the Challenger's motives based on how specific demands (a demand for Austria, not Poland) correspond to a principle, and not the scope of these demands or rates of militarization (a demand for half, not three quarters of Austria). Like existing signaling theories, when Challengers make costly demands for a specific issue they reveal that they care about that issue. But unlike other signaling theories, the inference that the Defender draws about the scope of the Challenger's motives depends on the specific issue that the Challenger signaled they cared about.

Consider what this means for US estimates of China. American policy-makers believe that inferring “Chinese intentions is the single most difficult and important task we face.''[[1]](#footnote-1) The CIA could easily assess that Taiwan provided China with enormous historical and nationalistic benefits but fewer security benefits.[[2]](#footnote-2) When China first intervened in Taiwan, the CIA made inferences about China's long-term motives based on its understanding of what principles could drive China to contest Taiwan.[[3]](#footnote-3) From this inference, the CIA extrapolated to assess other territories China would and would not contest in the future.[[4]](#footnote-4) The CIA's future estimates were moderated through this understanding. Thus, the intelligence community was not alarmed by China's coercive behavior over Tibet, or Taiwan in the 1990s, or China's decision to brutally suppress those who protested the communist party because all of these actions were consistent with a nationalists motivation.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Of course, the US and China are locked in a strategic dynamic. We know that revisionist powers face strategic incentives to understate the scope of their intentions. We believe that these incentives make costly signaling difficult, and render private diplomacy useless (Glaser, 2010). Can qualitative inferences survive in the complex strategic environment of world politics? In chapter 4, I develop a strategic theory that captures how threat perceptions form and change given the unique incentives to misrepresent that arise during great power rivalries. Drawing from an analysis of several formal models that represent a reassurance game (Powell, 1996 is closest), I argue that rivalries can unfold in one of two ways: delayed competition or delayed peace. Which way they unfold depends on how the Challenger uses diplomacy and the Challenger’s true motivating principle.

The mechanism works as follows. Early on, Challengers with expansive and limited aims face different incentives. Challengers with expansive care less about which concessions they receive first because they care about many different issues. However, they want to under-state the scope of their motives to avoid competition for as long as they can. Challengers with limited aims each value a small set of specific issues. They face strong incentives to coordinate so that they receive the most valuable concessions first. Unlike past coordination theories, the Challenger’s diplomacy reveals a principle (e.g. Nationalism) that motivates her demands, and not a list of issues she claims to care about (Taiwan, Tibet, Uganda). Because diplomacy appeals to a reason for revision, it sets an expectation about the total set of issues that the Challenger will want as the interaction unfolds. By locking in this expectation, Challengers can exploit diplomacy to partially overcome incentives to under-state the scope of their motives for many periods.

How the Challenger justifies her demands at the beginning has important implications for patterns of competition later on. Each principle implies that the Challenger cares about specific issues and territories. Once she has captured those issues and territories, she either makes another demand and reveals her initial justification was dishonest, or accepts the status quo forever. Challengers with expansive aims make another demand and the Defender infers that their motives are more extensive than originally claimed. This revelation triggers competition.

Applying the strategic logic to Anglo-German bargaining, Hitler used diplomacy to explain he was motivated by ethno-nationalism, and therefore would only demand Germanic territories. This message was costless, but it altered how the British interpreted Hitler's future behavior. The British did not update their beliefs following the Austria (1934) and Rhineland (1936) crises because the British knew that Germans lived in these territories, and realized that these demands were consistent with Hitler's declared motives. However, when they observed Hitler demand the Slavic parts of Czechoslovakia, they assessed that this was outside what ethno-nationalist Hitler would seek. Thus, they ruled out that Hitler would stop once he captured territories populated by Germans. This, realization drove them to competition.

Section 3: The Evidence

I test my predictions using a multi-method research design. At the broadest level, I make predictions about the instances (i.e. which cases end in competition) and timing (i.e. when a case ends in competition, when should we see competition) of competition. I test these top-line predictions through a medium-*n* analysis of all great power rivalry dyads since 1850 (my case universe is very similar to Allison, 2017). I show that my theory has remarkable explanatory power across all cases. I also show that it compliments existing explanations because it explains many of the cases that scholars of power struggle to explain.

I provide precise, causal evidence for my threat perception mechanism using a survey experiment with over 100 real-world national security elites. Subjects work at the CIA, Congress, and the Department of Defense, among other places. I simulate a war game exercise that randomly assigns a Challenger’s declared principle and the historical context that surrounds the territory that the Challenger fights for. National security elites infer that the Challenger holds vast aims if the Challenger’s decision to fight is inconsistent with a declared principle. But subjects are optimistic that the Challenger’s aims are limited if the Challenger fights for an issue that fits the principle declared during a diplomatic meeting.

I trace my causal mechanism through a critical but under-studied case: British assessments of Soviet motives at the onset of the Cold War. The case will interest historians because it draws from primary source research from 4 different archives and engaged the historical studies on British estimates of Soviet intentions between 1939 and 1947.

Finally, I show that my theory well explains US policy and intelligence about China. The case analysis relies on extensive elite interviews, an analysis of declassified materials and published reports. It reveals new insights about US perceptions on China’s intentions. It also contests arguments about the role of presidents in these policies. For example, critics attribute policies during the 1990s to presidential experiences and relationships. But what they fail to acknowledge is the remarkable consistency in policies between presidents from different parties and with different professional backgrounds and world views. This is especially stark when we think about continuity between presidents Biden and Trump. My structural explanation can explain long periods of continuity, and the punctuated shift from the period of hedging to more recent competition. The case also provides novel policy implications about the future of Sino-American relations.

**Contributions to Academic Research:**

The primary audience for this book is international relations researchers. At the broadest levels, I ask: what explains the instances and timing of competition during great power rivalries? Other rationalist books that address similar questions are the classic books in our discipline, including Waltz (1979), Mearsheimer (2001), Glaser (2010), Gilpin (1981), Organski (1983), Powell (1999), Lake (2009) and Monteiro (2014). My theory advances these foundational works in four ways. First, I develop a comprehensive theory that integrates constructivist, domestic and normative insights about state motives (e.g. Wendt 1999; Crescenzi, 2018) into a rationalist model of great power competition. Second, and because I theorize about motives in detail, I am the first to provide clear predictions about the timing of competition in these cases. In contrast, Glaser (2010), Organski (1983), and others explain the structural conditions under which competition is more likely to arise but stop short of making predictions about whether or when competition will happen. Third, my theory is remarkably accurate at explaining critical cases that past theories struggle with.  Finally, my book is written informally, which makes it accessible to a large audience, but builds on several formal models, which makes it easier to build on and interrogate in a systematic way.

I also provide a rationalist theory of threat perceptions that speaks to scholars across distinct debates in intelligence and perceptions (Rovner, 2011; Zegart 2011, Jervis, 1976, Yarhi-Milo, 2014; Friedman, 2019), costly and costless signaling (Kydd, 2005; Slantchev, 2011; Glaser, 2010, Trager, 2017; Crescenzi, 2018), and power transitions as the causes of competition (Copeland, 2015; Powell, 1999; Spaniel, 2019; Weisiger, 2013, Allison, 2017).[[6]](#footnote-6) My insights are valuable for each debate on its own terms. For example, I clarify why how rationalist states should interpret military actions. I clarify that rationalist inferences are far more nuanced than existing theories expect because one state interprets another’s costly and costless actions in the context of the other’s history and culture. But my case material and other evidence illuminates how individual-level variation in analytical frames and world views can drive variation in inferences. I also explain how shifting power creates pressures for great power competition, but also opportunities for signaling trust. But the major value of the book is to illustrate how each of these different forces interact with each other to generate relative simple predictions about the trajectory of great power relations.

Outside of international relations, my argument appeals to scholars in comparative politics and social identity politics and psychology because it celebrates the rich social and cultural context that forms state preferences (Finnemore, 1996; Renshon, 2017). For example, I shed light on an active debate about the consequences of nationalism, and ethnic identity in state behavior (Powers, 2022; Mylonas 2013). Finally, my case analysis of Anglo-Soviet relations will interest historically minded scholars. The early Cold War set in motion the longest period of Great Power competition. But this period is much less studied than Detente, or the end of the Cold War. I use my theory to explain the importance of this period, then help clarify British reasoning during this period using a detailed analysis of archival documents.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Works Cited**

Allison, G. T. (2017). *Destined for war : can America and China escape Thucydides’s trap?* Scribe Publications.

Michael Beckley. (2018). *Unrivaled*. Cornell University Press.

Timothy W. Crawford. (2021). *The Power to Divide*. Cornell University Press.

Crescenzi, M. (2018). *Of Friends and Foes*. Oxford University Press.

Carr, E. H. (1939). The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939. Harper & Row.

Fearon, J. (1995). Rationalist Explanations for War. International Organization, 49(03), 379.

Finnemore, M. (1996). *National Interests in International Society*. Cornell University Press.

Friedman, J. A. (2019). *War and chance : assessing uncertainty in international politics*. Oxford University Press.

Gilpin, R. (1983). War and Change in World Politics (Vol. 1983).

Glaser, C. L. (2010). Rational Theory of International Politics.

Haas, M. (2022). *Frenemies*. Cornell University Press.

Holmes, M. (2018). Face-to-Face Diplomacy. Cambridge.

Jervis, R. (1989). The Logic of Images in International Relations.

Kydd, A. H. (2005). Trust and Mistrust in International Relations. Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press.

Lake, D. A. (2009). Hierarchy in international relations. Cornell University Press.

Paul MacDonald, & Joseph Parent. (2021). *Twilight of the Titans*. Cornell University Press.

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). The Tragedy of Great Power Politics. New York: Norton.

Monteiro, N. (2014). Theory of Unipolar Politics. Cambridge University Press.

Mylonas, H. (2013). The politics of Nation Building. Cambridge University Press.

O’Neill, B. (1999). Honor, Symbols, and War. University of Michigan Press.

Organski, A. F. K., & Kugler, J. (1980). The War Ledger.

Powell, R. (1999). In the Shadow of Power:

Powers, K. (2022). Nationalisms in International Politics, Princeton University Press.

Renshon, J. (2017) Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics. Princeton University Press.

Rovner, J. (2011). Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence. Cornell University Press.

Shifrinson, J. (2023). *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*. Cornell.

Trager, R (2017). Diplomacy: Communication and the Origins of International Order

Waltz, K. N. (1979). Theory of international politics. Reading, Mass: McGraw-Hill.

Wendt, A. (1999). Social Theory of International Politics. Cambridge University Press.

Weisiger, A. (2013). *Logics of war*. Cornell University Press.

Yarhi-Milo, K. (2014). Knowing the adversary : leaders, intelligence, and assessment of intentions in international relations.

Zegart, A. (2011). Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence. Cornell University Press.

1. Quote from my interview with former CIA Director for Analysis, Mark Lowenthal. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Special National Intelligence Estimate (100-12-58) *Probable Developments in the Taiwan Straits Crisis* p1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. SNIE (100-4-59) *Chinese Communist Intentions and Probable Courses of Action in the Taiwan Strait Area* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. SNIE (13-3-61) *Chinese Communist Capabilities and Intentions in the Far East.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I conjecture that had China fought for Uganda, the CIA would have drawn a different inference. The reason is that China's historical and cultural connection to Uganda is different. While this point seems obvious, it is not captured in rationalist theories of great power competition. Therefore, we have no appreciation for how historical and cultural context influences learning during great power rivalries. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I am only citing notable books. But these are each large and active debates in academic journals. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Recent social science accounts of the Cold War onset include Kydd (2005) and Holmes (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)