LESSONS FROM THE PAST: POWER TRANSITIONS AND THE FUTURE OF U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS

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Introduction

The 1897 Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, the United Kingdom’s longest reigning monarch, should have marked the new apex of British power. The United Kingdom was indisputably the world’s economic leader, boasting the world’s largest navy and wealthy colonies spanning six continents. Yet a shadow of threat grew from a continental power, which had rapidly increasing population, navy, economy, and imperial designs that could threaten the United Kingdom’s position as the world’s dominant power.

Those familiar with European history naturally assume the rising power mentioned above refers to Germany, but this description is equally fitting for the United States during the same time period. With a history of animosity and increasing suspicion between them, the United Kingdom and the United States would eventually become allies in World War I while Germany and the United Kingdom fought a protracted war for European and global power that was not truly concluded until the fall of the Third Reich in 1945. Both the eventual friendship between the United States and the United Kingdom and conflict between the latter and Germany were not historical certainties. This begs the question: why did Germany become the enemy of the United Kingdom while a rising power of perhaps even greater threat – the United States – became the United Kingdom’s ally?

Throughout history, rising powers have often come into armed conflict with dominant powers.\(^1\) In some cases, however, the rising power and dominant power do not go to war. The predominant school of thought used to explain these phenomena is power transition theory. According to power transition theory, since the United States and the

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\(^1\) Generally speaking, the dominant power is one that is the clear leader economically, militarily, and politically. Rising powers are those whose capabilities or power in each of these three categories is growing.
United Kingdom resolved their differences amicably and did not fight each other during or after the power transition, the United States was clearly a satisfied rising power that acquiesced to the system established by the United Kingdom. Germany, which eventually fought the United Kingdom in World War I, did so because it remained a dissatisfied rising power. Yet why or how one rising power (the United States) becomes satisfied and another (Germany) does not has not been adequately discussed in power transition literature. Tammen et al. simply state that the United States was satisfied with the United Kingdom’s international system; therefore, there was no need for war, while Germany’s dissatisfaction made war nearly inevitable.

In order to address this theoretical gap, this paper will review appropriate historical case studies to establish the determinative factors between peaceful and conflictual power transitions. Specifically, it will examine the somewhat acrimonious and eventually conflictual rise of Germany after unification in 1871 vis-à-vis the United Kingdom. For the contrasting case, this paper will then examine the relatively peaceful rise of the United States during much of the same period, also vis-à-vis the United Kingdom. These two are especially appropriate for this study since they have each been given a great deal of attention from both historians and international relations theorists. After reviewing these historical cases, this paper will establish key factors in determining peaceful or conflictual power transition to draw implications for appropriate cases in the future.

**Literature Review**

A great deal of literature has been written on topics related to this research. International relations theorists have spent much time and effort seeking to answer why
war occurs. Realists, liberals, constructivists and others in their various incantations have all offered explanations of why states or actors begin wars, and often only by implication the inverse, or why wars do not occur. These theories typically take one or more of three levels or images – individual, state, and systemic. This paper will focus on the systemic level.

If the study of international relations is really about change in the international system, and the shift from a state of peace to one of war is the focus of this change, then most existing explanatory theories of international relations fall short. Most of these theories are static and do not give satisfactory explanation to the changing dynamics in the international system and how these shifts cause war, but rather explain only the conditions that permit war to occur.

Classical realism, for instance, suggests that states are warlike due to the inherent bellicosity of man and a lack of an overarching mechanism to ensure peace in the international system. Structural realists such as Kenneth Waltz (1979) focus on the latter, claiming an anarchic international system is the primary cause. Yet both are permissive factors; as Jack Levy (1998) and others have pointed out, the innate aggressiveness of man and the lack of a stabilizing force in the international system may permit war to occur, but they are insufficient in explaining why two or more countries go from a state of peace to one of war when peace is in fact more common than war. Realists also

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generally believe a state of power balance creates better stability (either in a bipolar or multipolar setting), whereas great power disparity leads to war.\footnote{Hegemonic stability theory is of course an important exception.}

Liberals have traditionally focused on economic interdependence, international law, institutional norms and other shared behavior that otherwise “connect” states together and prevent war from occurring. While these liberal theories explain the conditions necessary for war, i.e. lack of connectivity, they too fail in explaining why wars occur when they do. In sum, realist and liberal-institutionalist theories are relatively static in their explanation of international relations and offer permissive factors of war rather than causal factors.

Constructivists argue that ideas and perception are important factors that are underappreciated by realist and liberal theories.\footnote{Some scholars point to constructivist theories of perception and ideas, rather than kinship ties, for US-UK détente at crucial junctures. However, the perception of similarity or shared ideas of representative government, etc., were not enough to prevent the American Revolution or the War of 1812.} Proponents argue that ideas and identities shape states and thus events. Perception and ideas are obviously important factors in human relations on any scale; however, a constructivist theory on the causes of war based on these factors is lacking.

In contrast, power transition theory explains not a snapshot of the international system but the underlying shifts in the system that can lead to war.\footnote{The genealogy of power transition theory begins with the study of hegemony. From this, two broad families of thought – realist and systemic – each birthed two derivations. The systemic school of thought focuses on Long Cycle Theory (George Modelski) and World Economy Theory (Immanuel Wallerstein), while the realist school focuses on hegemonic stability theory (Robert Keohane) and power transition theory (A.F.K. Organski).} Theories on rising powers and power transitions have received considerable attention from scholars (Paul Kennedy 1987, John Mearsheimer 2003, A.F.K. Organski 1958, Ronald Tammen et al.)
Specifically, power transition theory holds that war is likely when a challenger approaches power parity with the dominant actor. A.F.K. Organski, in his seminal work, World Politics (1958), argued that systems with two comparable powers are inherently unstable because rising powers will tend to be dissatisfied with the systems upheld by dominant powers. The views of Organski’s followers contrast with the balance-of-power school of thought (focused around Kenneth Waltz’s Theory of International Politics (1979) and Robert Gilpin’s War and Change in International Politics (1981)), which theorizes that states of comparable power counterbalance until parity is reached. According to these structural realists, bipolar systems are relatively stable, whereas power transition theory finds power parity to be the most dangerous stage of development. Organski has been followed by subsequent power transition theorists (Tammen et al. 2000) who have attempted to amend power transition theory to the changing realities and complexities of the twenty-first century. Yet, scholars of this school have paid insufficient attention to the question of why a rising power may or may not be dissatisfied with the dominant power’s international order.

Both case studies have received intense scrutiny from historians, political scientists, and international relations scholars. Much has been written on the rise of Germany during the late nineteenth century (Christopher Clark 2000, Giles MacDonough 2000, Robert Massie 1991) and the relative decline of the United Kingdom during this time period (Paul Kennedy 1987, Lawrence James 1994 and Niall Ferguson 2002). The arguments of Clark and MacDonough focus on Germany’s imperial ambitions as well as a perceived need to catch up to other “established” powers. Massie, on the other hand,

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7 This is merely a sampling of innumerable authors who have explored these subjects.
argues in part that Kaiser Wilhelm’s own feelings of physical inadequacy due to his deformed arm and constant belittling at the hands of relatives actually had much to do with his desire to compete with his British relatives, including Queen Victoria. The arguments of Kennedy, James, Ferguson and many others as to why Britain came into conflict with Germany range from realist theories of power conflict to Germany’s late arrival into the race for imperial conquest (and therefore inevitable collision with the United Kingdom).

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the ascension of the United States in the nineteenth century did not result in a serious threat of war with the United Kingdom, the dominant power of the time. Some argue that this was due to the close cultural and historical ties between the two (Ferguson 2002). Others argue that the United Kingdom was too preoccupied with the much closer – and therefore much more threatening – ascension of Wilhelm’s Germany or simply suffering from imperial overstretch (Piers Brendon 2008 & Ferguson 2002). Still others argue that the United Kingdom and the United States developed a friendly relationship due to a series of confidence-building measures and willingness on behalf of the dominant power (the United Kingdom) to leave the United States with spheres of influence in the Western Hemisphere and Asia (Stephen Rock 2000 & George Herring 2008).

Reviewing these two case studies from a power transition perspective, however, can add to this literature. Power transition theory can be a powerful explanatory tool, but as stated above, the theory contains gaps. An analysis of these two case studies can strengthen power transition theory by closing the gap of contributing factors to peaceful power transition. It can also help determine what factors determine satisfaction in a rising
power and how the dominant power can engender satisfaction in a rising challenger to avoid war. Furthermore, a more robust and explanatory power transition theory has contemporary relevance, as it can be applied to future cases of power transition.

Power Transition Theory

Power transition theory posits that war is more likely when the power of a rising state approaches that of the dominant state. Therefore, great imbalances in power are, in this view, recipes for peace and stability while balances of power or power parity are inherently unstable and dangerous. Although power transition theorists focus primarily on great powers (and therefore, great power conflict), the theory can also be applied to regional power dynamics. At a systemic level, the distribution of power is spread unevenly across the world, and is thus uneven between states in any given region. Therefore, power transition theory can be used to better understand power dynamics and the likelihood of war in a specific region or internationally.

Power transition theory requires a quantifiable definition of power itself to be useful in application to real world cases. The primary architects of the theory define power as the ability of a state to impose on or persuade another state to comply with its will. Power is achieved through the combination of a state’s population, this population’s economic productivity, and the ability of its government to mobilize the former two effectively and efficiently. Each of these three components is necessary for a state to reach great power status, and therefore, potentially challenge the dominant power.

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The theory hinges on the satisfaction of states with the international system. Dominant powers maintain their dominance by establishing systems that appeal to and gain the approval of other states, thereby creating a satisfactory status quo supported by agreeable states. The dominant state often must relinquish a degree of autonomy and control over the system to foster an environment of mutual trust and gain, thereby satisfying lesser powers that would otherwise be skeptical or hostile to a singularly dominant power. Satisfied states will support the dominant power in maintaining a mutual beneficial international system. By maintaining the satisfaction of other states with its own system, the dominant power is able to maintain the status quo peacefully (and arguably, more cheaply), rather than by constantly enforcing its will.

Proximate power parity between the dominant and rising states becomes dangerous when the rising state is dissatisfied with the status quo established by the dominant state. Whether this dissatisfaction stems from unequal treatment, historical enmity, ideological difference or some other issue, a rising power that is dissatisfied with the international system can – and according to power transition theory will – seek to challenge the status quo. In order to realistically and successfully make such a challenge, a dissatisfied state must be able to take on the dominant protector of the international order while being strong enough to bring weaker states into the new system.

Theorists argue whether the dominant state is more likely to attack the rising state or vice versa, but the majority of literature identifies the rising state as more likely to begin a conflict. The rationale is that since the rising state is dissatisfied with the system

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10 This conflicts with some scholars, such as Jack Levy’s findings in *Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War*, which says that the state that is dominant but declining in power relative to a rising
established by the dominant power, it is more likely to seek an aggressive overhaul of that system. This is done by making war on the dominant power, which is the protector of the status quo system.

The general theory has numerous shortcomings, however. This theory does little to explain wars of a dominant power attacking a much weaker power, or a much weaker power attacking a much stronger power.\textsuperscript{11} Power transition theory predicts conflict when two states reach proximate power parity, but measuring actual power or capability is by no means an exact science. The theory also does not clarify well between actual measures of power versus perceptions of an opponent’s power status. Organski and Kugler, for instance, note that Germany had clearly surpassed the United Kingdom in terms of power before World War I.\textsuperscript{12} Why then did the United Kingdom not strike while Germany was weaker? The same can be said for the United States. One answer may be that the United Kingdom still perceived itself as the dominant actor. Another possibility is the dominant power’s reluctance to initiate war, thereby disturbing the stability of the order it has established and worked to maintain. Still, the existing literature falls short in explaining these phenomena.\textsuperscript{13}

Most significantly power transition theory is insufficient in explaining cases of peaceful power transition. Organski himself identifies the peaceful rise of the United

\textsuperscript{11} Other theories, such as hegemonic stability theory, explain these phenomena.

\textsuperscript{12} Organski & Kugler (1981).

\textsuperscript{13} For excellent critiques of power transition theory, see Jack S. Levy, "Theories of General War." World Politics 37, 3 (April 1985) and John A. Vasquez, The War Puzzle Revisited (2007).
States vis-à-vis the United Kingdom as a unique outlier to power transition theory.\textsuperscript{14} Tammen et al. explain that peaceful power transitions are due to satisfaction on the part of the rising power, while dissatisfied rising powers are more war-like. Rising powers satisfied with the dominant power’s system will arguably maintain that system once they have replaced the previously dominant power. While this makes sense intuitively, it does not explain or leave room for the possibility of the dominant state being unwilling to give up power to the rising state, regardless of the satisfaction level of the ascending power. If the dominant state is willing to cede power to a rising satisfied power, what is to stop the rising state from becoming the dominant power and then changing the order to its liking? The literature does little to explain what breeds a satisfied rising power, other than sheer acceptance of the international order established by the dominant state. While this convergence of interest would certainly diminish reasons for conflict, a rising power could be only partially satisfied and therefore still conflictual.

Further, and most important for application to policymaking, the existing literature does little to explain how the dominant state can turn the rising power into a satisfied power. For instance, little research has been done exploring the role of confidence-building measures and ceding spheres of influence to potentially dissatisfied rising powers as a means of creating a satisfied state in terms of power transition theory. This hole in the literature is a significant gap and leaves little hope for policymakers to better navigate rising power-dominant power relations unless the theory can be fortified.

In addressing these shortcomings, a strengthened power transition theory can be a useful tool in evaluating relationships and helping understand why or when war might

occur between major powers. Further, understanding why some states are dissatisfied and how they can become satisfied is critical in any hope of avoiding major power conflict between a dominant and rising power. Identifying methods to turn a potentially dissatisfied rising power into a satisfied one will also provide policymakers with a framework to deal with rising powers. Strengthening power transition theory thus has very real policy implications, as it could be particularly useful in helping to evaluate the prospects of the next rising power in the international system such as China or India. In order to answer why power transitions lead to war and how states can be satisfied, this paper will first consider historical case studies.

*The Dominant Power: The United Kingdom*

Well before the time Germany became a nation-state and the United States had concluded its Civil War, the United Kingdom had established itself as the dominant power globally.\(^\text{15}\) Although the relatively small British islands had long been a player internationally, the home-grown Industrial Revolution created an economic juggernaut that financed the most powerful military force the world had seen.\(^\text{16}\) The British government capitalized on the country’s growing wealth and strength by exploring and colonizing new territories, promoting self-benefiting international trade and legal regulations, and challenging (and usually defeating) threats and rivals. While other European powers had developed and were expanding colonial efforts worldwide, it was

\(^{15}\) Although debated, many scholars point to the early nineteenth century as the beginning of Britain’s dominance.

\(^{16}\) Paul Kennedy. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. New York: Random House, 1987, p. 228. This point is illustrated by the fact that it was Britain’s relative economic decline that generated the most alarm amongst imperialists.
the United Kingdom that maintained the largest, most valuable and most well-run imperial system spanning six continents. It is no delusion to say that the British navy, without equal in the nineteenth century, patrolled the seven seas enforcing British writ, much as the navy of today’s dominant power – the United States – does.\(^\text{17}\)

Yet toward the end of the nineteenth century, the United Kingdom was losing power relative to rising states like the United States and Germany. Although Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897 was assembled to mark the apex of British power, many in the queen’s domain already felt the United Kingdom was on the decline. Rudyard Kipling, in celebrating the event, instead wrote the following elegy for the empire:

\begin{quote}
Far-called, our navies melt away;
On dunes and headlands sinks the fire;
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre.\(^\text{18}\)
\end{quote}

Indeed, the strains of funding a global military and navy and the pangs of imperial overstretch were commonly discussed in London at the time. Despite the fact that British defense expenditure was just over 2.5\% of net national product in 1898, the United Kingdom was fielding over 415,000 men in the army and navy, not including support of native armies.\(^\text{19}\) Capital investment in the United Kingdom itself was exceeded by British

\(^{17}\) The British navy also served the important function of laying underwater cables, creating the world’s first global communications system that further enabled the United Kingdom’s dominant position.

\(^{18}\) Rudyard Kipling. *Verse*. 130.

\(^{19}\) Niall Ferguson. *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*. London: Penguin Books, 2002. p. 204-206. British-supported native armies were often massive, as was the case in India, were Britain led 148,000 men.
investment in the Western Hemisphere alone going back decades.\textsuperscript{20} Two years later, in 1899, the United Kingdom became engaged in a protracted, bloody insurgency in Southern Africa against the Boers. For many scholars, this war marked the beginning of the empire’s permanent decline.\textsuperscript{21}

As the United Kingdom was suffering imperial overstretch and losing emigrants to her far-flung colonies and beyond, Germany and the United States were growing rapidly – both in terms of population and economically.\textsuperscript{22} The U.S. population had been increasing nearly twenty-five percent every decade since the Civil War, doubling from thirty-one million in 1860 to over sixty million by 1890.\textsuperscript{23} The unification of Germany in 1871 created a country one-third more populous than the United Kingdom – and continued outgrowing the latter.

By 1873, it was clear that both Germany and the United States were on course to overtake the United Kingdom economically. Due to British economic dominance, both rising powers necessarily invested in new techniques and inventions that quickly began to bear fruit and helped both pull ahead of the United Kingdom, which instead focused on fortifying traditional industries.\textsuperscript{24} From 1880-1900, Britain’s share of world manufacturing dropped from 22.9-18.5\%, while the United States’ share increased from


\textsuperscript{21} Fareed Zakaria. \textit{The Post-American World}. New York: Norton & Co., 2009. p. 172. As Niall Ferguson wrote in \textit{Empire}, “What Vietnam was to the United States, the Boer War very nearly was to the British Empire,” p. 229.

\textsuperscript{22} Ferguson, p. 211. Approximately 2.5 million British subjects left the home islands to other ends of the Empire between 1900-1914.

\textsuperscript{23} 1860 & 1890 U.S. Census.

14.7-23.6% and Germany’s grew from 8.5-13.2%. Although British production of coal, textiles, and ironware increased, the rising powers dominated the newer and increasingly important steel, chemicals, machine tools, and electrical goods industries.

Concomitant with economic and population growth, both countries were investing in modern navies. Between 1880-1900, American warship tonnage grew from 169,000 tons to 333,000, and German warship tonnage from 88,000 to 285,000 tons. Both rising powers had ambitious and domestically popular plans to build world-class navies, in part due to fears of British naval dominance. It was clear that both American and German power was increasing absolutely – and more importantly relative – to the United Kingdom’s.

The historical record shows that the United Kingdom began to view both rising powers as threats. British leadership of the time often referred to both the United States and Germany as potential enemies. Period popular culture often wove stories of German plans to invade England or overthrow the Empire. Although unthinkable now, the possibility of Anglo-American war was discussed commonly on both sides of the Atlantic. In the power transition environment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, neither British-American friendship nor British-German enmity was a foregone conclusion.

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26 Ibid. p. 228.

27 Ibid. p. 203.


Both Germany and the United States were at least partially dissatisfied with British dominance. Both were potential threats to the United Kingdom. Yet there was eventual British-American friendship coupled with British-German war, and not vice versa. As one scholar has written:

“In this regard, power transition theory is particularly deficient in explaining why Britain found Germany more of a threat than the US given America’s economic and naval capability. Why as Britain began to decline, did it choose to resolve its outstanding issues with rising nations, like the US (1895) and Japan (1902), and with old rivals, like France (1904) and Russia (1907), but was unable to settle accounts with Germany?”

Some may point to the physical distance between the United States and the United Kingdom as one reason for eventual amicable bilateral relations versus the physical proximity between the latter and Germany as a contributing factor toward conflict. While there seems little doubt that the physical proximity between the United Kingdom and rising Germany did in fact contribute to the likelihood of conflict between the two, the United Kingdom was truly a global power with significant interests in North America and the Western Hemisphere that could and did create conflict with the United States. In short, distance alone is not a sufficient explanation.

The United States, given its continental territory, established history of expansionism and phenomenal resource base, arguably presented the greater long-term challenge to British dominance. Germany, while rising in power at an impressive rate, also had to contend with various continental European powers of considerable power, including France and Russia, with a smaller endowment of land and resources. It is

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therefore instructive to explore why the United Kingdom grew closer to the United States and more conflictual with Germany.

Historians and others have argued that shared language and cultural affinity brought the United Kingdom and United States closer together. This argument seems to have been formulated after greater friendship between the two was established, as the two countries had a long history of conflictual relations and open war dating back to the American Revolution and continuing late into the nineteenth century.31 This bilateral history of conflict precludes the inevitability of closer relations due to kinship. These same historians also often fail to recognize that the hereditary leadership of both the United Kingdom and Germany were in fact kin. Kaiser Wilhelm was grandson to Queen Victoria (who reigned from 1837-1901), nephew to King Edward (who reigned from 1901-1910), and first cousin to King George (who reigned from 1910-through World War I). War occurred despite these family ties, whereas any feeling of kinship through blood between the United States and United Kingdom had been significantly diluted long before as the percentage of British-Americans decreased relative to other groups.32

While both Germany and the United States were potential threats, it seems that the United Kingdom was forced to choose between confronting one rising power while conciliating another. The British Empire had limits. "The simplistic remedy of increasing the defence budget until Britain’s navy and army were capable of satisfying all the

31 It was the British, after all, who fought their own colonists for eight years in the Revolutionary War, burnt down the White House and Congress in the War of 1812, sold weapons to the Confederacy, and provoked the United States in incidents throughout the period since independence, causing widespread Anglophobia in the United States.

32 Some scholars, such as Robert Massie, have taken the view that is was actually because of kinship ties and family jealousy that Germany and the United Kingdom fought each other.
demands which were placed up on them was financially impossible.”33 In addition to resource constraints, the dominant power was naturally concerned with potential threats worldwide. In 1895 alone, the United Kingdom grappled with the possible breakup of China following the Sino-Japanese war, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire due to the Armenian crisis, Russian moves toward India, French military campaigns in equatorial Africa, German meddling in southern Africa and the quarrel with the United States over a boundary issue in South America.34 The dominant power simply lacked the resources necessary to confront both rising powers at the same time, especially given its other imperial obligations.

Therefore, the United Kingdom may have chosen to confront Germany because it represented the closer and more existential threat. The rise of Germany upset the balance of power amongst the European states, setting off arms races and diplomatic struggles that eventually culminated in war, while German colonial ambitions threatened those of the United Kingdom – all reasons why the United Kingdom may have chosen to confront Germany. The rise of Germany alone was a threat to British dominance; the upsetting of the European balance of power threatened to dismantle the order the United Kingdom had established and sought to prolong. The United Kingdom was not necessarily concerned with the character of Germany, but rather Germany’s proximity to the United Kingdom and British interests. Had a hypothetical state like Germany risen on a different continent (as the United States did), the United Kingdom would likely not have viewed the rising power as such a threat. Alternatively, had a hypothetical state like the United


States risen in the center of Europe and challenged British interests in Africa, the United Kingdom would have likely viewed this rising power as a threat. To an extent, physical proximity between dominant and rising powers relates to the former’s threat perception of the latter.

The United Kingdom also may have confronted Germany because the dominant power felt it could defeat this rising challenger, whereas the United Kingdom may not have been able to defeat a rising United States. Most historians, such as Paul Kennedy and Niall Ferguson, would likely agree with this statement, as the sheer size and resources of the United States made the country the likely successor to the United Kingdom as the dominant power in the international system, whereas Germany and the United Kingdom were more evenly matched in terms of power capabilities. There is also a strategic element in support of this argument. A consolidated British naval force in the North Sea had a greater chance of using limited resources in defeating the growing German navy while maintaining the empire than being spread across the Western Hemisphere countering an American naval challenge.35

Conciliating both rising powers, from a power transition perspective, would have been untenable. Doing so would have spelled the end of British dominance. Conciliating the United States, which appeared more likely to uphold the British system should that rising power overtake the United Kingdom, made sense in light of the fact that Germany represented a revisionist power dissatisfied with the British system.36 Creating a satisfied

35 Paul Kennedy makes a similar calculation in The Rise and Fall of Great Powers., p. 227.

36 For instance, the United States supported Britain’s Open Door Policy in China, whereas Germany sought a return to exclusive economic zones.
Germany would have meant conceding the United Kingdom’s position as the world’s dominant power, not to mention specifically in Europe and southern Africa.

Whatever the precise combination of reasons, the United Kingdom chose to confront and counter Germany while conciliating the United States.\(^{37}\) The United Kingdom’s decision to ameliorate relations with the United States for the long-term was key to U.K.-U.S. rapprochement and eventual alliance. Although the United Kingdom had numerous disagreements with the United States spanning decades, the rising power of the United States (along with that of Germany) created a sense of urgency in London and elevated the importance of U.K.-U.S. relations.\(^{38}\)

The United Kingdom purposefully altered the course of British-American relations for a variety of reasons. Perhaps most important, the United Kingdom’s threat environment was quickly becoming more complicated. In addition to the rise of the United States and Germany, the United Kingdom faced growing threats from Russian expansionism in the Middle East and potentially India. France continued its historical enmity with the United Kingdom as the two quarreled over colonial possessions in North Africa and Southeast Asia.\(^{39}\) When U.K.-U.S. disputes over Venezuela broke out in 1895, Britain’s position was “scarcely endurable. France, Russia, Turkey, Germany and the

\(^{37}\) Although conciliate may be compared to appeasement, a word that hold very negative connotation in most circles, conciliation as foreign policy has long been used, and with considerable success. Stephen Rock’s *Appeasement in International Politics* provides excellent case studies and arguments for selective conciliation.


\(^{39}\) Rock, p. 31.
The United States were openly hostile." The United Kingdom could not afford to face two rising, dissatisfied powers at the same time. As stated earlier, Germany was both closer and more disruptive to British interests.

The United Kingdom also chose to conciliate the United States because of an unfavorable strategic position. Another British-American war would almost certainly threaten Canada; unlike during the War of 1812, the British felt that Canada could not be well-defended given the growing power to the south and British obligations elsewhere. While the United Kingdom maintained the greatest navy in the world, the United States was catching up rapidly. Any war with the United States would tie up costly naval resources in the Western Hemisphere to the detriment of British interests and security elsewhere. Given the United Kingdom’s threat environment, the British Admiralty was unwilling to divert resources to American waters. An Admiralty memorandum summed up not only the British navy’s view of a possible U.K.-U.S. war, but also its preferred method to deal with the United States:

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43 Rock, p. 32. The economic consequences of an Anglo-American war at the time would have been high for the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom depended heavily on both cotton for its textile mills and foodstuffs from the United States. In the mid- to late-1890s, the United Kingdom imported nearly seventy-five percent of its cotton and sixty percent of wheat and wheat flour from the United States.

44 Marder, p. 255.
“Generally, the more carefully this problem is considered, the more
tremendous do the difficulties which would confront Great Britain in a
war with the United States appear. It may be hoped that the policy of the
British Government will ever be to use all possible means to avoid such a
war.”  

Still, the United Kingdom made a conscious choice between Germany and the
United States. The threat represented by the United States was fairly low given Britain’s
overall threat environment. Whereas Germany represented a close neighbor perhaps
capable of dominating the European continent, the United States was a relatively distant
power that expressed interests in the Western Hemisphere. As opposed to the United
States, which rose in an entirely different hemisphere altogether, Germany rose in the
center of the old European state system, altering the position of “all of the existing Great
Powers of Europe.” Quite simply, the rise of Germany upset the European balance of
power for which both the United Kingdom and (ironically) Otto van Bismarck himself
had labored so carefully to maintain.

While Germany threatened important British colonies in Africa, the United States
quarreled with the United Kingdom over relatively minor boundary disputes in the
Americas. The United Kingdom could have chosen to confront Germany while
attempting to deter the United States, but, “this course of action was judged too risky by
other British leaders…[since] the Americans appeared strongly committed to their aims,”
not to mention the aforementioned resource constraints facing the British, making

46 With the exception of Canada, British interests in the Western Hemisphere were arguably much lower
than those in Europe, Africa, South and East Asia.
credible deterrence unlikely. However, if Germany did not rise at the same time as the United States, it seems probable that the United Kingdom would have had the resources and will to confront the United States. After all, the United States was challenging the dominant power. The presence of both rising powers on the minds of British leadership at the time was key to the United Kingdom’s strategic calculation.

British leaders instead sought to conciliate the United States in order to create a rising power satisfied with the United Kingdom’s international system. Stephen Rock notes that the United Kingdom may not have been able to keep up with the United States and thus began to seek ways that would, “enable them to preserve their most important interests” and that “the United States…seemed better suited to this role than any other power.” As power transition theory supports (and British leaders correctly guessed), a United States satisfied with the British system would (and eventually did) help defend that very system against a dissatisfied rising power, Germany. Removing the United States as a strategic threat allowed the United Kingdom to focus its economic, political, and military resources on other more pressing threats.

It seems probable that the United Kingdom saw Germany’s tenuous military situation (surrounded by France and Russia and the British navy) as a prime opportunity to keep the rising power down. This belief is borne out by the fact that the United Kingdom overcame disputes with France and Russia, allying with both in the Triple Entente against Germany by 1907. As former German Chancellor Prince Bernhard von Bülow wrote in his memoirs, the United Kingdom entered the war in part because it now

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48 Rock, p. 33.
49 Rock, p. 35.
had a pretext and favorable chance to “reduce to impotence the most powerful continental state” and therefore greatest challenger to Britain herself.\(^{50}\)

**Rising Challenger: Germany**

The rise of Germany was a long time coming. The various principalities and kingdoms of what became imperial Germany had existed in various states of fractious alliance and bickering warfare since the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire. The unification of Germany by Otto von Bismarck during the nineteenth century was nothing short of a political, diplomatic, and military coup – one that would create the greatest continental European power since Napoleon’s France. This fact became readily apparent to the dominant power, the United Kingdom.

Shortly after unification in 1871, Germany began a period of rapid economic growth as the Industrial Revolution began to sweep from its place of origin (the United Kingdom) and planted roots in continental Europe. After unification, the German population already was higher than the British home islands at thirty-nine million to thirty-one million; by 1913, the German population had nearly doubled to sixty-five million compared to Britain’s forty-six million.\(^{51}\) During the same time period, the United Kingdom’s GDP shrank (in relative terms) from forty percent greater than that of Germany to six percentage points smaller.\(^{52}\) Germany’s share of world manufacturing production grew from eight percent to fifteen percent, overtaking the United Kingdom in

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\(^{51}\) Ferguson, p. 240.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.
In 1880, Britain’s advantage in warship tonnage was seven-to-one over Germany; by 1914 it was narrowed to two-to-one. The Germans also quickly developed a large, well-equipped army. Prior to World War I, the United Kingdom could expect to mobilize approximately 733,500 men, while Germany could mobilize 4.5 million. Germany possessed all the components of a rising power, and thus, a potential threat to the dominant power.

According to power transition theory, since Germany and the United Kingdom were conflictual and eventually fought World War I, Germany was clearly a dissatisfied rising power butting up against the system established by the United Kingdom. Although scholars such as MacDonough wrote that while “It has often been said that the Germans were keen to fight a war for European hegemony…there was in reality no motivation, no planning, no programme of conquest…,” the simple fact that Germany was a dissatisfied, rising power was enough to create friction and eventually war between itself and the United Kingdom. However, German dissatisfaction with the British order was not necessarily predetermined. Both the United States and Germany were confident, expansionist powers. Unlike with the United States, German dissatisfaction was incited by the United Kingdom instead of being ameliorated.

It is clear that the conditions of potential German dissatisfaction were present as the country grew in power, as was the case with the United States. Breaking from the past,

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid. It should be noted that Germany’s dramatic military growth during this time period was not due to clairvoyant predictions of World War I. Most historical accounts point to unease and suspicion leading up to the war, but not absolute certainty in the minds of the British or German leadership as to where the threat lay or the inevitability of war generally.

when Bismarck had insisted that Germany was a “saturated power,” a euphemism for satisfied power, Kaiser Wilhelm sought to match Germany’s new sense of power and promise with results, announcing that Germany “had great tasks to accomplish outside the narrow boundaries of old Europe.” The German ruling elite “after 1895 also seemed convinced of the need for large-scale territorial expansion” with Chancellor Bülow declaring that “The question is not whether we want to colonize or not, but that we must colonize, whether we want it or not.” That most valuable territories were already claimed by other powers, however, caused resentment in Germany and calls in the German press for a redivision of the globe to better reflect current power realities, i.e., Germany’s rise. It is important to note, however, that the United States was also issuing aggressive statements like these at the same time. More importantly, these statements did not preordain German dissatisfaction; the dominant power, the United Kingdom, could have sought to accommodate Germany’s rise, thereby fostering German satisfaction. For reasons discussed above, this was not to be the case.

Considerable anti-German feeling grew in the United Kingdom in the years building up to World War I. The rapid rise of Germany, which prior to unification was seen as “a cluster of insignificant states under insignificant princelings,” had quickly upset the balance of power in Europe. The proximity of Germany to the United Kingdom – both in Europe and in terms of each power’s colonial efforts – raised concern in London.

56 As quoted in Kennedy. The Rise and Fall of Great Powers. p. 211.
57 Ibid.
While Germany’s economic growth and trade potentially threatened the United Kingdom’s economic superiority, perceived German meddling in British colonies, particularly in southern Africa, threatened the empire itself. Despite these perceived threats, it was the United Kingdom’s reactions that set the stage for German dissatisfaction, conflictual relations, and eventually, war. As will be discussed below, the dominant power’s treatment of both rising powers was instrumental in the satisfaction level of each. The United Kingdom’s reaction to Germany’s rise increased dissatisfaction in the rising power.

Over New Year’s 1895-1896, approximately six hundred irregulars under command of a British colonial statesman attempted to incite an uprising in the Boer republic of Transvaal amongst British expatriates. Officials in London denounced the attack, which was quickly squelched. However, as Germany was fairly sympathetic to the Boers, Kaiser Wilhelm sent a telegram of congratulations to Transvaal president Paul Kruger, noting that he was successful “without appealing to the help of friendly powers,” which the British saw as a not-so-subtle reference to Germany. Opinion in London quickly turned against perceived German meddling in and designs on British southern Africa. German shops and citizens were attacked in the United Kingdom, as the British press and leadership loudly condemned the perceived German threat. Yet instead of recognizing German interests in southern Africa, the British took the Kruger Telegram

60 The Boers, descended mainly from Dutch and German immigrants, had quickly been outnumbered in their own republic by primarily British immigrants coming from neighboring British colonies upon discovery of gold in the Transvaal in 1886.


62 MacDonough, p. 218.
incident as a pretext to draw a hard-line against German activity in the area, eventually leading to the Second Boer War (in which the German public became overwhelmingly supportive of the Boers against the British). Germany was effectively forced to concede southern Africa to the United Kingdom.\textsuperscript{63}

The fallout from the Kruger Telegram marked the beginning of firm British-German antagonism.\textsuperscript{64} Just over two weeks after the telegram, Kaiser Wilhelm gave a speech at a celebration marking Germany’s twenty-fifth anniversary, announcing his country’s admission to the club of world empires.\textsuperscript{65} Whatever sympathy for Germany’s imperial ambitions existed in the United Kingdom quickly evaporated, as leadership in London sought to contain and prevent German expansion. Boxed in continental Europe between France and Russia and prevented from gaining significant territories in the only remaining colonial frontier left, rising Germany was unable to gain a significant sphere of influence to match its growing power.

Further exacerbating German dissatisfaction, the United Kingdom focused reconciliation efforts at the time with France and Russia, seeking to build bulwarks against German expansion instead of attempting to conciliate and build confidence with Germany herself.\textsuperscript{66} Unable to expand in Europe, Germany was “confronted and affronted by Britain everywhere abroad,” forcing the rising power to settle on less desirable,


\textsuperscript{64} MacDonough, p. 218.

\textsuperscript{65} MacDonough, p. 220.

\textsuperscript{66} Ferguson, p. 241. The author correctly points out that this strategy explains why the British supported the French against the Germans over Morocco in both the Tangier (1905) and Agadir crises (1911), “despite the fact that formally the Germans were in the right.” Despite being the traditional defenders of “international law” and no great friend of the French, the United Kingdom made a calculated political move against rising Germany.
disparate territorial acquisitions in Africa and the South Pacific. When Germany wanted to divide China into exclusive economic zones, the United Kingdom fought diplomatically to keep an open door policy. As Germany developed interest in controlling Turkey, the United Kingdom worked to support the integrity of the Ottoman Empire for fear that German control of Turkey would threaten British naval and economic interests in the Mediterranean. Although the United Kingdom and Germany negotiated a degree of financial and political influence in Turkey, Germany was “not yet satiated” as Britain did not give Germany the control it wanted, thereby feeding German dissatisfaction. By all accounts, the United Kingdom was trying to slow Germany’s rise, predictably dissatisfying a young, confident growing power.

The United Kingdom did make an important concession with Germany regarding colonial territory. However, the term “trade” is more appropriate. In 1890, the two sides agreed in the Heligoland-Zanzibar Treaty to swap German-controlled Zanzibar for British controlled Heligoland, an island of strategic importance in the North Sea. The British got the better of the deal, however, as the treaty rested on Germany’s affirmation of British control of Uganda and what is now Kenya, solidifying the United Kingdom’s control of the full extent of the Nile and frustrating Germany’s expansion in East Africa.

67 Brendon, p. 198.

68 James, Lawrence. *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994. pp. 241-243. Ironically, the United Kingdom was forced to make concessions to Japan in order to maintain an open China, as British resources were diminishing relative to the country’s responsibilities.

69 James, p. 345.

70 Ibid.

71 James, p. 281.
beyond Tanzania.\textsuperscript{72} The British navy still menaced Germany in the North Sea despite German control of the island. Unsurprisingly, this minor trade, for which Britain was clearly the winner, did little to satisfy Germany or build confidence to the point of altering relations.

Perhaps the greatest manifestations of the German challenge to the United Kingdom lay in the ultimate symbol of British imperial might, the battleship. Germany’s naval build-up at the turn of the twentieth century caused great concern in British political circles, not to mention the Admiralty. In fact, the British threats toward Germany after the Kruger Telegram were used by Kaiser Wilhelm as a pretext to build a bigger navy in order to “protect increasing trade.”\textsuperscript{73} Admiral Tirpitz wrote to the Kaiser in 1899 that a growing German navy would “concede to Your Majesty such a measure of maritime influence which will make it possible for Your Majesty to conduct a great overseas policy.”\textsuperscript{74} It is clear from this desire both Germany’s intention to exercise influence in the world as a great power and also the likelihood of German dissatisfaction with the United Kingdom’s eventual attempt to counter German naval efforts through reallocating naval forces to the North Sea and its own naval build up. From 1880-1900, British warship tonnage nearly doubled, and incredibly doubled again by 1910.\textsuperscript{75} While U.S. shipbuilding was a factor, this dramatic British naval expansion was primarily directed at Germany.

\textsuperscript{72} James, p. 281.

\textsuperscript{73} MacDonough, p. 216.

\textsuperscript{74} Ferguson, p. 242.

\textsuperscript{75} Kennedy, \textit{The Rise and Fall of Great Powers}, p. 203.
The German naval attaché in London reported that the apparent naval rivalry between the two powers lay at the heart of their strained relations. Addressing this source of tension, Kaiser Wilhelm took the unprecedented step of writing to the First Lord of the Admiralty directly, attempting to assuage British concerns with German naval development. The letter had the opposite effect; “a rage of tub-thumping” commenced, including demands for two-to-one British naval parity and the First Sea Lord Josh Fisher suggesting a preventive attack on the German fleet while in port. Although the British and Germans each viewed the naval arms race as dangerous and entered into numerous discussions, both sides took hard-lines. The British demanded that the Germans stop or at least slow their naval buildup, while the Germans viewed their naval development as a matter of national honor and dignity, not to mention befitting of a growing power. In addition to creating dissatisfaction from a security perspective, the British were impugning the honor of a prideful and nationalistic rising power, further dissatisfying a nation that felt it was not given the respect befitting its new position in Europe.

The German threat was not merely a figment of British imagination. Germany represented a dissatisfied, rising power that by all accounts was projected to (and did eventually) overtake the United Kingdom in the early twentieth century. Statements from

76 MacDonough, p. 306.
77 Ibid.
78 MacDonough, p. 309.
German leadership made it clear that, “at some time in the future, Germany would demand radical changes in the world order.”\textsuperscript{79}

Germany was not necessarily predestined to fight the United Kingdom, however. Yet instead of seeking to resolve disputes diplomatically, build confidence between the two sides, or cede influence to rising Germany, the United Kingdom generally became stiffer in its relations with Germany. Although historians point out that the United Kingdom conciliated rising Germany in the 1880s when France and Russia were perceived as greater threats, by 1895 it became clear that Germany was the greater European threat and conciliatory offers ceased.\textsuperscript{80} There was also discussion between the two countries of potential Anglo-German alliance, but this concept never got far as the United Kingdom viewed Germany’s naval and colonial aims as intolerable threats to Britain herself. British leaders and the public became more antagonistic toward Germany, increasingly seeking to counteract and prevent German gains rather than conciliate the rising power.\textsuperscript{81} This pattern spiraled ever downward in German dissatisfaction and British-German enmity, ending in war.

\textit{Rising Challenger: The United States}

Although remarkably similar in many respects, the potential threat from a rising United States resulted in a very different outcome for both the rising and dominant powers. Since the former British colonies that formed the United States had successfully

\textsuperscript{79} James, p. 345.

\textsuperscript{80} Ferguson, p. 240.

\textsuperscript{81} In the meantime, British conciliation efforts were directed toward France and Russia, culminating finally in the Triple Entente in 1907.
concluded the Civil War, the United States rapidly became a rising power with the potential to overtake the United Kingdom.

Like imperial Germany, the United States quickly saw rapid economic growth post-reunification as industrialization took hold in the East and Americans expanded into the West. The country continued its expansionist “manifest destiny” post-Civil War policies, purchasing the Alaskan territory from Russia (thereby sandwiching the west coast of British Canada) and expanding westward beyond its continental borders (Hawaii, the Philippines, Guam). Influenced by Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan’s seminal *The Influence of Sea Power on History*, which credited strong navies for the rise of influential global powers like the United Kingdom, the United States rapidly developed a top-tier navy.\(^82\)

Although the United States and the United Kingdom were allies in fighting Germany in World War I, the United States was not predetermined to be satisfied with British leadership. Several key events helped turn the United States from a potentially dissatisfied to satisfied state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Having fought its War of Independence and two decades later the War of 1812 against the United Kingdom, Americans had a well-developed sense of Anglophobia. These concerns were exacerbated during the Civil War with the possibility of British involvement on behalf of the Confederacy and various other incidents during the nineteenth century.\(^83\) Tensions

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\(^82\) George C. Herring. *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. p. 303. Assistant Secretary of the Navy (and later President) Theodore Roosevelt was a friend of Mahan who shared the captain’s view on the importance of navies for growing powers. As president, Roosevelt ordered what became known as “The Great White Fleet” to circumnavigate the globe, the first such effort of its kind, effectively announcing U.S. ascension to great-power status as the fleet made twenty port calls on six continents.

\(^83\) Rock, p. 26. Other incidents included border disputes, fishing rights, and disagreements over trading rights, particularly in the United Kingdom’s preferential colonial system.
continued after the Civil War as the growingly confident and assertive republic chaffed against perceived transgressions by the British, primarily in the form of territorial disputes. Serious leaders and thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic openly discussed the possibility or even likelihood of yet another British-American conflict. This talk only increased as the United States continued to rise in power.

Yet unlike its treatment of Germany, the United Kingdom in the late nineteenth century began to engage in a series of diplomatic negotiations with the United States to resolve these tensions. The resolution of tensions not only removed pretext for future disagreements, but served to build confidence between the two states. These confidence-building measures established a pattern of working relations between the two countries, eventually building a modicum of trust as the two sides reached diplomatic and mutually acceptable resolutions to a number of hot-button issues that could have swung relations the other way. It is primarily a credit to the dominant power – the United Kingdom – that the outcome of these disputes ended not only amicably, but helped increase the satisfaction level of the United States with the British world order.

Key to this success were the British-American negotiations resolving border disputes in both South and North America. Beginning in 1895, the United States began to challenge British interests in the Western Hemisphere. Although initially opposed to such challenges, not least of which upon the legality on which the challenges rested (which was often British-formulated), the United Kingdom became increasingly conciliatory toward the rising power. It seems likely that part of the United States’ calculation on

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85 Salisbury to Paunceforte, November 26, 1895, *Congressional Record*, 54th Congress, 1st session, 28: 196-99.
when to pressure the United Kingdom was due to the perception of the United States’ own growing power vis-à-vis the United Kingdom.\textsuperscript{86}

Interjecting itself in a long-standing British-Venezuelan dispute over the latter’s border with British Guiana (now Guyana), the United States in 1895 invited the United Kingdom to submit the issue to international arbitration, citing the Monroe Doctrine as justification.\textsuperscript{87} British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury lectured the “upstart nation on how to behave in a grown-up world,” rejecting the offer.\textsuperscript{88} Unwilling to back down, President Grover Cleveland established a commission to investigate the boundary, stating that it was “the duty of the United States to resist, by every means in its power…the appropriation by Great Britain of any lands…we have determined of right belongs to Venezuela”.\textsuperscript{89} Talk of war “abounded” on both sides of the Atlantic.\textsuperscript{90}

Yet the United Kingdom, after initial repudiation, made a calculated decision to treat with the Americans. Instead of taking a hard line against the wishes of a rising power, thereby potentially feeding American dissatisfaction with the British system, the United Kingdom implicitly recognized the Monroe Doctrine and U.S. interests in South America by submitting the issue to arbitration. The primary motivation seems to be British awareness of its strained resources versus expanding threats and a desire to

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\textsuperscript{86} In an 1896 letter to the secretary of state, the American ambassador in London reported that the United Kingdom “has her hands very full in other quarters of the globe” and that consequently “the United States is the last nation on earth with whom the British people or their rulers desire to quarrel,” Bayard to Gresham, quoted in Robert McElroy, \textit{Grover Cleveland: The Man and the Statesman Part Two}. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2005. p. 178.

\textsuperscript{87} Olney to Bayard, July 20, 1895, \textit{Congressional Record}, \textit{54}\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} session, 28: 191-96.

\textsuperscript{88} Herring, p. 307-308.

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Congressional Record}, \textit{54}\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} session, 28: 191.

\textsuperscript{90} Herring, p. 308.
improve U.K.-U.S. relations. The dominant state’s concession to diplomatic negotiations brokered by the rising state not only injected trust and a measure of good will in the relationship, but illustrated a willingness on behalf of the United Kingdom to satisfy the desires of the United States in order to avoid conflict.

Similarly, a border dispute located between the Alaskan territory and the Canadian Yukon threatened to incite anti-British sentiment in the United States. When gold was discovered in the Yukon Territory in 1896, the Canadian government claimed its territory extended through parts of the Alaskan panhandle to the Pacific coast. The United Kingdom, which oversaw Canadian foreign policy at the time, initially supported Canada’s claims.

As such, U.K.-U.S. tension reached dangerous levels as miners from both sides claimed stakes, leading President Roosevelt to dispatch troops to the area in 1902 to maintain order.\(^{91}\) The dispute was finally adjudicated by a joint American-British-Canadian panel. The Americans and Canadians sided with the claims of their own countries, leaving the crucial vote to the British. Despite powerful incentives to protect the interests of Canada, the United Kingdom sided with the United States.\(^{92}\) Instead of enforcing its position as the dominant state in the international system or defending the interests of its protectorate, the United Kingdom acceded to U.S. claims. Again, the United Kingdom made a conscious choice to seek improved relations with the United States in order to reduce the likelihood that the rising power would become a hostile threat on Britain’s already full plate. This action further reduced tension between the two

\(^{91}\) Rock, p. 29.

\(^{92}\) Ibid.
powers and built confidence in the minds of the American leadership and public toward the intentions of the United Kingdom.

Perhaps the greatest factor in creating a satisfied rising power out of the United States was the United Kingdom’s concession of the Western Hemisphere. Formal British recognition of the Monroe Doctrine in 1896 represented a crucial step in strengthening U.K.-U.S. relations. By ceding the Western Hemisphere, the United Kingdom placated a great deal of the traditional Anglophobe sentiment in the United States while acknowledging growing American power and Washington’s self-perceived right to its desired sphere of influence. The United Kingdom was not ceding control of its interests or territories in the Western Hemisphere, but rather giving the rising power breathing room for its own imperial ambitions, which the dominant power perceived were not aggressively expansionist against its own territory at that time. Shortly after London recognized Washington’s protectorate over the Western Hemisphere, President Theodore Roosevelt announced what became known as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, justifying U.S. police action to secure its interests, further solidifying U.S. dominance in the region.

Further British recognition of a nascent American sphere of influence came in the push to build a Central American canal. The U.K.-U.S. Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850 prohibited the United States from unilaterally digging, fortifying, or controlling a canal. As “canal fever” grew in the United States, pressure increased to abrogate the treaty.

93 Rock, p. 27.

94 Formal acknowledgment of the Monroe Doctrine also had the useful effect of allowing the United Kingdom to remove its heretofore permanently stationed naval forces from the Western Hemisphere to more vital areas of interest, simultaneously further reducing American fears of British intentions.
There was little incentive in doing so for the British, as an American passage through Central America would give great strategic benefit to the United States, better enabling the rising power to become a continental force on both the Pacific and Atlantic, while diminishing traditional British seaborne power in the region. Yet in further recognition of growing American power, the United Kingdom agreed in 1901 to a new treaty allowing the United States to more firmly control the Western Hemisphere through what became the Panama Canal.\textsuperscript{95} In addition to the British policy of conciliating the United States, the British navy determined it could not both contest the canal against the American navy while fulfilling its numerous obligations elsewhere.

As demonstrated above, U.S. satisfaction with the United Kingdom’s international system was by no means predetermined. A history of British-American antagonism, Anglophobia, and a number of American challenges to British power in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century all demonstrated U.S. potential and real dissatisfaction with the dominant power. One of the key determinants in the trajectory of the British-American relationship during this key power transition period was the United Kingdom’s willingness to engage in confidence-building measures as well as recognizing (and in many senses, ceding) a sphere of influence critical to the United States’ growing ambition. For its part, the United States may have been receptive to British overtures in part due to a mutual fear of rising Germany and a desire to allow the United Kingdom to focus on this rising threat.\textsuperscript{96} It was clearly in the British interest to do so. As Stephen Rock writes:

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\textsuperscript{95} Rock, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{96} Kennedy, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers}, pp. 247-248.
\end{flushright}
“The British Government embarked upon its policy of appeasement in January 1896 with the short-term aim of resolving the crisis over the Venezuelan boundary. However, British statesmen quickly adopted a more ambitious, long-term goal: the amelioration of American hostility and the establishment of a stable, cooperative, Anglo-American relationship.”

Faced with the prospect of two continental-based, potentially dissatisfied rising powers, the United Kingdom chose to placate one while confronting the other. It seems that the United Kingdom was forced to choose challenging only one of the two rising powers due to the dominant power’s relative resource constraints. British leaders did not feel their country could confront two expansionist powers at the same time while maintaining their imperial system. The United Kingdom in part viewed Germany as the greater threat simply due to the very proximity of Germany to the United Kingdom. In a similar vein, the United Kingdom opposed German interest in valuable colonies because they potentially threatened neighboring British colonies. As evidenced by British fulfillment of alliance commitments in World War I, the United Kingdom was unwilling to grant Germany a sphere of influence in continental Europe.

In contrast, granting the United States several territorial concessions and greater influence in the Western Hemisphere was a relatively small price to pay in terms of British interests to satisfy a threatening rising power. This is especially the case in the face of another closer – and therefore more threatening – rising power. The confidence-building measures used by the British with the Americans may have been particularly effective because they were generally one-sided; the United States won on each issue

97 Rock, p. 30.

98 Although ultimately victorious, the United Kingdom’s confrontation of only one rising power in World War I nearly bankrupted the country and set the stage for the empire’s permanent decline.
with little or no reciprocal concession to the United Kingdom. This represents an important difference between British-German negotiations of the time, which were highly competitive and if ever resolved, typically a give-and-take process.

In both cases, however, it seems that the United States and Germany, recognizing the growth of their power relative to the dominant power (not to mention Britain’s distraction with numerous issues worldwide), pressed their advantage with United Kingdom. Due more to British threat perceptions of both rising powers than American negotiating skill, the United States emerged victorious in its efforts to gain concessions from the dominant power.

Had the threat of Germany not existed at the same time, the United Kingdom may have been less conciliatory with the United States and challenged the rising power in the Western Hemisphere. It appears, however, that the United Kingdom, despite its dominant position, was constrained to the point of being forced to choose which threat warranted confrontation. In other words, the United Kingdom recognized the danger of another dissatisfied, rising power in the United States and embarked on a concerted strategy to create a satisfied rising power in order to focus resources on the other dissatisfied, rising power. In so doing, it created not only a satisfied power, but a key ally that would serve to actually prolong British power itself against another rising power, Germany.

Lessons Learned

Knowing the conditions under which states in power transition go to war or remain at peace will help policymakers of one state (either the dominant or rising power) better deal with the other state in question. The onus, however, is primarily on the dominant power to take appropriate action to ensure that any rising power is satisfied.
After all, it is the dominant power that has established and is protecting an order and therefore has the most to lose.

The case studies above reveal several lessons regarding power transition threat perception and war. Although somewhat intuitive, the research shows that physical proximity between dominant and rising powers is important to threat perception. A rising power that is distant from the dominant power and does not challenge the latter’s strategic interests is likely to be seen as less threatening to the dominant power. A dominant power facing two rising powers may be forced to choose between conciliating (or if resources are sufficient, deterring) one, while confronting another. It also seems likely that rising powers, sensing their own growing power relative to the dominant power and the latter’s own resource constraints, will begin to press their position against the dominant power. This effect may be particularly strong when a dominant power faces two or more rising powers. Although further research is necessary in cases where the dominant power faced only a single rising power, these lessons can be instructive to future cases of power transition.

The case studies above also reveal two methods in building satisfaction and avoiding conflict when two rising powers contest a dominant one. The first is for the dominant state to select a successor, engaging in a series of confidence-building measures to reduce tensions and mutual suspicions in order to increase resources for potential war against the other challenger. Although perhaps intuitive, threat perceptions of a rising power can quickly disallow any room for political compromise and willingness to engage in confidence-building negotiations, particularly if the rising state is seen as aggressive and dissatisfied. As the United Kingdom did with the United States, the dominant power
may seek to satisfy a rising power that may eventually become the dominant power, thereby preserving to an extent the international system of the formally dominant power.

The second and perhaps most important element in building satisfaction and reducing the likelihood of conflict requires the dominant power to grant a sphere of influence to the rising power. This study suggests that power transition conflicts can occur because the dominant state is unwilling to cede its interests and control of the rising power’s sphere of influence to a degree acceptable by the rising power (or the rising power believes the dominant state will not cede control peacefully). Ceding spheres of influence obviously only works for rising powers that have limited aims. Aggressively expansionist states that seek global domination, such as Nazi Germany, are unlikely to be satisfied with just a sphere of influence.

Germany perceived that the United Kingdom was unwilling to grant the country greater influence either in Europe or Africa, its two desired areas of influence. While it is likely that the proximity of the United Kingdom and Germany created difficulty for leaders in London to consider yielding influence in Europe, it should be noted that as with any true dominant power, the United Kingdom held influence in areas of strategic importance all over the globe, including in the Western Hemisphere. The United Kingdom was willing to grant influence to the United States in this hemisphere in part because Africa and Europe were more important to Britain, while the dual threats of Germany and the United States meant British resources had to be focused on one rising power.

It seems unlikely that confidence-building measures alone would be sufficient to satisfy a rising power that has approached parity with the dominant power. It is, after all,
unnatural for a state not to use its power for influence or seek to gain from others. Similarly, it seems unlikely that a rising power that gains spheres of influence will become sufficiently satisfied with the dominant state’s system unless confidence between the two states exists. Additional research is needed to determine the strength of these two factors in contributing to a satisfied rising power, but the evidence in this paper points to their necessity. Simply put, both factors existed in U.K.-U.S. relations, and neither existed in German-U.K. relations.

The approximate period between 1895-1905 may have set the sides for World War I given the actions of the United Kingdom in satisfying one rising challenger while further dissatisfying another. It is important to note that the United Kingdom made a choice between approaches for each because of resource constraints and other factors, including threat perception. Scholars will need to conduct further research with other case studies to validate the findings of this paper. It is important to note that the conditions described above were unique in that the dominant power, the United Kingdom, faced two rising powers at the same time. Most power transitions are limited to a case of a single dominant power facing a single rising power. Still, the lessons derived from the specific cases above can be applied generally to other cases.

**Conclusion**

The lessons drawn from power transition theory and the case studies above can be used in future cases of power transition. However, any prediction of future relations between two states (such as the United States and a rising power like China) is educated guessing at best, as unforeseen circumstances are not only likely, but inevitable. Arguably, the next most likely case of power transition is between the People’s Republic of China
and the United States. Barring serious political or economic setbacks, China’s massive population coupled with the past thirty years of growth and subsequent momentum going forward make China the most likely potential challenger to U.S. dominance.

There is a significant body of literature examining the history and dynamics of U.S.-China relations, with much attention paid to forecasting the futures of the two powers. The literature roughly breaks down into three schools of thought regarding outcomes: relatively peaceful, interconnected, and mutually dependent (David Lampton 2008); increasingly hostile and conflictual (David Shambaugh 2005 and Richard Bush & Michael O’Hanlon 2007); and continued asymmetry due to Chinese failure to achieve great power status altogether, whether for demographic or political reasons (Minxin Pei 2008). Despite the relative wealth of literature on U.S.-China relations, not much work has been done applying the theories of Organski et al. to the case of rising China, with the important exception of Ronald Tammen et al. (2000). It is therefore useful to apply the lessons above to a potential (or likely) U.S.-China power transition.

The United States, as the world’s current dominant power across virtually any indicator, has held this position bilaterally since the end of World War II and unilaterally since the fall of the Soviet Union. Across the three factors of power: population, economic power, and political strength, the United States remains a formidable force. It is far and away the largest single economy and maintains the most powerful, mobile, and

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99 Importantly, most power transition theorists themselves point to the United States and China as the next most likely major power transition (Tammen, et al. 2000)

100 This assumption will require China to manage its various demographic, social, environmental and other problems without significantly affecting economic growth in a negative way. Some scholars, such as Minxin Pei, seriously doubt China’s ability to overcome these obstacles and reach great power status. Still, given the country’s thirty-plus years of consistent economic growth and success in controlling population growth, China must be considered the next most likely challenger to the United States.
technologically advanced military in the world. While the United States has enjoyed hegemony since the fall of the Soviet Union, the rapid ascent of the People’s Republic of China appear to put the United States and China on a collision course in terms of aggregate power measurements. According to power transition theory, this potential power convergence may lead to conflict and is thus of critical importance.

China, once considered the “sick man of Asia,” has made a dramatic rise since economic reforms were instituted in 1979. As with imperial Germany, post-Civil War United States, and a host of past rising powers, China’s rise began with dramatic economic growth that was later translated into increasing power across traditional areas. These have included military, political, diplomatic, and social indicators. While per person productivity in the United States is likely to remain ahead of China for many decades, China’s massive population ensures that even relatively small increases in per person productivity translate to massive economic gains nationally – and therefore, power (if harnessed correctly by the Chinese government).

It seems clear that the majority of U.S. political and military leaders, China experts, and the American public view China as a rising power. The degree to which these segments of American society view rising China as a threat to the United States varies significantly. Polling of Americans has found significant concern both with the perceived rise of China and the relative decline of the United States. Some, such as David Shambaugh, view China as the preeminent challenger to the United States while

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others, such as Minxin Pei, believe China’s structural and internal weaknesses will prevent China from becoming a significant threat to the United States. The U.S. military has for some time viewed China as the nearest peer competitor and has expressed serious concern over China’s military modernization and weapons acquisition programs. U.S. political leaders, from presidents to senators and beyond, have all expressed varied concerns of the rise of China.

While most indicators and experts point to China continuing to grow economically with concomitant increases in political, diplomatic, and military capabilities, most indicators and experts point to the United States maintaining a significant lead only in the military sphere. Even here, some defense experts and scholars point to China rapidly narrowing the gap in the traditional military advantage enjoyed by the United States by focusing on counterpoints to U.S. technological sophistication or asymmetric warfare.

The serious issue of contention between Sinologists and China watchers in the U.S. government and elsewhere is whether or not China will seek to disrupt the U.S. international order. In other words, is China a satisfied or dissatisfied rising power? China has certainly gained hugely from the present international order, enabling the country to use its massive labor resources to become an industrial and manufacturing goods powerhouse. The economic policies begun in the late 1970s in China and since continued with vigor have been specifically designed to tie the communist country into the U.S.-led economic order, and to great effect. China has vigorously sought and gained admission to virtually every international organization of major importance, from the World Trade Organization and International Monetary Fund to the World Bank and the
United Nations (including as a permanent member of the Security Council). It is important to note that each of these organizations was founded and continues to be supported by considerable U.S. leadership.

On the other hand, China has demonstrated sharp differences with U.S. dominance. The issue of sovereignty is of particular importance to the Chinese, who routinely lambaste the United States for “interfering” in the internal affairs of China and other countries. Whether this perceived interference comes in the form of U.S. military intervention in third countries, human rights reporting or complaints of currency manipulation in China, China is fiercely protective of the principle of sovereignty. This is especially the case with China’s territorial claims to Tibet and Taiwan. China has also criticized the United States for being hypocritical on economic development and the environment, citing the United States’ own abuse of the environment on its path to industrialization.

In sum, China has gained much from the U.S.-dominated international system, but it is unclear to what degree rising China will remain satisfied or dissatisfied. Much depends on the current dominant state, the United States, and how it treats China’s rise. Drawing lessons from the United Kingdom’s treatment of both rising Germany and the United States, it would be prudent for leadership in Washington to consider how best to ensure China’s satisfaction without excessively compromising U.S. interests.

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103 A counterargument is that China’s membership and leadership in these organizations could enable Beijing to alter the international order to its liking once becoming the dominant state.

104 The issue of China’s massive U.S. debt holdings raises an interesting question. Given the massive amount of U.S. holdings ($800 billion and counting), will the United States be forced to accede to China’s rise, or will China be forced to maintain the status quo — and thus, U.S. dominance — in order to maintain its own economic stability? The sheer amount of debt between the two states provides an interesting and perplexing issue of future study for power transition theorists.
Confidence-building measures between Washington and Beijing are a crucial step to better relations and the creation of a satisfied China. Building closer political and military links through regularized summits and conferences on issues of joint importance is a valuable, cheap method of confidence building.\textsuperscript{105} U.S. handling of the Taiwan and Tibet situations is of critical importance to building confidence with China. After a century of perceived humiliation, China sees foreign support of Taiwan and the Dalai Lama as designed to keep China from reclaiming its former territorial integrity and therefore becoming a great power. Washington must carefully manage both situations, but doing so deftly and gradually gaining Beijing’s confidence could help tilt China toward being a satisfied rising power.

Related to the issues of Taiwan and Tibet, the U.S. should also consider China’s likely desire for greater influence in its immediate neighborhood. While China is obviously sensitive to its territorial claims over Tibet and Taiwan, the United States should expect China to become more involved in East and Southeast Asian affairs as a regional power. This trend has already begun apace, with China taking a more active role in the Six Party talks and seeking greater collaboration with the Association of Southeastern Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The presence of large concentrations of U.S. military forces in South Korea and Japan will likely continue to be an issue of concern to China. Continuing global force realignment away from South Korea and encouraging China to take leadership on the

\textsuperscript{105} The U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue is one potential platform for confidence-building. Military contacts, however, have been something of a political football, as China has agreed to and later canceled military contact over perceived slights such as U.S. arms sales to Taiwan in January 2010. http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/China-cancels-military-exchanges-with-US-after-Taiwan-deal/articleshow/5517920.cms
North Korean issue, for instance, could illustrate to Beijing Washington’s recognition of China’s growing power and willingness to yield influence where appropriate.\textsuperscript{106} Besides longstanding claims to Taiwan and minor disputes about uninhabited islands, China has not made aggressive territorial claims of consequence enough to fear that allowing China greater influence in Asia will result in territorial expansion or political intimidation.\textsuperscript{107} If doing so resulted in Chinese aggression, U.S. policy could obviously be changed to respond appropriately. For now, however, it seems likely that a country as concerned with sovereignty as China will continue to respect the sovereignty of other countries.

On the other hand, China may only desire an economic sphere of influence in East and Southeast Asia. The trade-off for sharing political influence in the region with the United States is free riding off U.S. security commitments. China may decide for a period or an indefinite time that the cost of providing security and stability in the region (as any dominant power is want to do) is simply not worth the benefit of having premier political influence. The United States should also expect that other rising powers, such as India and Brazil, for example, will press their advantage in seeking concessions from the United States as the dominant power faces an increasingly diverse threat portfolio.

Creating confidence-building measures and yielding some influence will be difficult for the United States given its long-standing history in the region and support for Taiwan and Tibet, as well as traditional allies such as South Korea and Japan. Yet understanding that these two methods may be key to creating a satisfied rising China

\textsuperscript{106} This issue specifically, of course, is more likely to be welcomed in Beijing if China is ready to take such a role.

\textsuperscript{107} China did make some minorly aggressive moves in the South and East China Seas in the mid-1990s, but has since submitted its claims to regional arbitration and has engaged in bilateral and multilateral dialogue.
instead of a dissatisfied challenger will enable U.S policymakers to formulate strategy vis-à-vis China more appropriately. In the end, the United States may be unwilling to cede influence to rising China, whatever the cost may be.

Whether conflict more often occurs as a result of the dominant state attacking the rising state or vice versa, the incidence of power struggle in a situation such as will likely face the United States and China is high. A dominant state may feel strategically insecure and strike at the rising power while the former still feels it has the advantage. On the other hand, the rising state is more likely to bring conflict to the dominant state it sees as preventing its rise.

Yet not all cases of power transition have ended in conflict. Establishing the reasons why conflict occurs in some cases of power transition and not in others can help future dominant and rising powers better navigate their bilateral relations to avoid conflict. The lessons from the historical case studies and application to U.S.-China relations offer warning and methods for avoiding conflict in a host of potential situations. Regional power transitions, as well as other potential great power transitions in the future, can all be explained using power transition theory while possible conflict may be diffused using the methods identified in this paper.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


