Is China’s rise a threat? Offensive realists see rising China as a main cause of global instability in the 21st century. Because all states seek security through power maximization, China will clash with the United States for regional hegemony in Asia. But critics of the offensive realist view emphasize common interests, global institutions, and domestic constraints, particularly since China’s rapid growth makes the country more open to and dependent on the global economy. This study compares these competing approaches to China’s growth and regional stability and develops hypotheses based on four factors that could influence China’s interaction with other nations: China’s own level of economic power, its growth rate, whether a potential antagonist is allied with the United States, and whether the two countries have a territorial dispute. Then it conducts a logit analysis of China’s military aggression against Asian states and major powers in the post-Mao period. The results show that China’s growing power has encouraged its initiation of military conflicts, and that Beijing has become aggressive against its opponents in territorial disputes, but not more so against America’s Asian allies than against other countries. The findings suggest that China’s continued rise will likely contribute to its firm position in the South and East China Seas and its resolute protection of core strategic and economic interests.

Key words: China’s rise, military aggression, US alliance, territorial dispute, Asian security.

Introduction

China is still growing. So what? The answer is unclear. Many international relations scholars have debated the effect of China’s growing power on international...
relations at least since the 1990s. On one hand, offensive realists see rising China as a main cause of global instability in the 21st century. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has made efforts to consolidate its own unipolar system and has been concerned with preventing anti-US coalition-building by other major powers. Despite the relative lack of visible balancing behaviors against Washington, offensive realists still argue that the unipolar system will face serious challenges, or perhaps even be replaced, due to the actions of major powers such as China. Looking through this lens, we can predict that the rising dragon will be a revisionist challenger and may even be willing to risk conflict with the status-quo hegemon. Because all states seek security through power maximization, China can be expected to clash with the United States over hegemony in Asia. Although Chinese officials currently say that they seek not hegemony but coexistence, offensive realists insist that this preference is not fixed but will evolve along with China’s capability.

However, some interpreters disagree with the realists’ gloomy vision, instead emphasizing common interests, global institutions, and domestic constraints. China’s rapid growth makes itself open to and dependent on the global economy. Major powers and Asian neighbors seek to exploit China’s rise as an economic opportunity for production, sales, and investment. Accordingly, Beijing today has much more extensive shared interests with other major powers than did Berlin before World Wars I and II or Moscow during the Cold War. In addition, we have seen the creation of an increasing number of inter-governmental or trans-governmental organizations through which states monitor each other and punish

1. For an example of debates over China’s rise and its implications, see Zbigniew Brzezinski and John J. Mearsheimer, “Clash of the Titans,” Foreign Policy, 146 (January/February 2005), pp. 46–49.

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rule-breakers. The liberalist/institutionalist view leads us to expect that China’s growth will deepen Asia’s economic interdependence, thereby increasing international stability and regional integration. According to this perspective, we should be worrying not about China’s rise but about fear of the rise.

Who is right: the offensive realists or their critics? Given that China is expected to continue growing and eventually equal the United States in terms of the size of its economy, will we also see China become internationally more aggressive? The purpose of this study is to compare two views of China’s growth and aggression and test them rigorously. By examining China’s military aggression in the post-Mao period, we argue that China has become more aggressive as it has gained greater economic capability. In particular, China has become more hostile to its opponents in territorial disputes. This finding provides some support for the offensive realists’ position that greater China will be more aggressive.

In the rest of this paper, we first focus on four factors related to China’s foreign and military policies – current power itself, power growth rate, whether other countries have alliances with the United States, and the existence of territorial disputes – and develop four hypotheses. We then conduct a logit analysis of China’s military behaviors to test the hypotheses and report its results. Lastly, we summarize the findings, discuss possible objections, and suggest topics for further study.

**China’s Rise and Asian Security**

*Offensive Realists and Their Critics*

China’s economic growth has attracted much attention. Is it a threat? Some scholars and pundits have argued that China’s assertive foreign policies are aimed at revising the US-led international order. In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, China seemed to expand its sphere of influence, risking confrontations with major and neighboring states. Beijing responded to the recent International Tribunal’s judgment on the South China Sea dispute by saying that it “does not accept or recognize” the decision, which is “invalid and has no binding force.”

Is China prepared to risk military conflicts with Asian countries and the United States in its quest for expanded influence? To this question, offensive realists and their opponents offer two competing answers.

According to offensive realists, China’s increased capability has made and will make the country seek to achieve greater influence and revise the regional order. The offensive realists consider it natural and unsurprising that China has changed its foreign policy strategy from Taoguangyanghui, in which its primary goal was

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economic growth, to Yousuozuowei, or maximizing its own strategic and territorial interests; they further anticipate that China will not shy away from serious conflict with its neighbors and even with the United States. From the perspective of offensive realism, all states are revisionists or potential revisionists because they seek regional hegemony in order to survive in an international anarchy. China is not an exception to this rule but wants to do what it can, not what it must. So if China continues to grow, it will inevitably desire more power rather than restraining itself.

But other experts disagree with offensive realists, arguing that China’s rise does not require a new regional order. Although China now has the second largest economy, its GDP per capita is far behind that of major states, and its social ills, such as inequality and corruption, are still severe. Accordingly, China is more likely to focus on its internal problems, to prefer exploiting rather than attempting to replace the current international order, and to seek cooperative rather than conflictual policies toward the United States, a global hegemon. Indeed, little evidence exists for China’s assertiveness. Some argue that, because China’s policies are simply interest-oriented, Beijing cannot be regarded at this time as assertive or revisionist. Although Beijing sometimes cannot avoid conflict with Washington, it keeps suggesting diplomatic solutions for the conflicts that arise, rather than escalating them through military options or harsh provocations.

Nevertheless, China has had more troubles and crises with its neighbors and with the United States during the last decade. How can we explain this? The

8. Since the US economy’s recent recovery, more voices have been arguing that American superiority over China will continue, mainly due to the United States’ military capabilities, technology, and soft power. See, for example, Joseph S. Nye, Is the American Century Over? (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); Michael Beckley, “China’s Century? Why America’s Edge Will Endure,” International Security, 36-3 (2011/12), pp. 41–78.
clashes might result from multiple factors. We aim to analyze whether China’s growth or its strategic and territorial relationships have affected its behaviors. Indeed, war has been a common phenomenon in China’s history. The country experienced about 3,700 internal or external wars from 1100 B.C. to 1911; the Ming dynasty waged an average of 1.12 wars per year with non-Chinese powers;12 and the People’s Republic of China engaged in 118 military conflicts from 1949 to 1992.13 However, it should be noted that more conflicts do not necessarily imply more aggression. China might be dragged into conflicts that were initiated by others. As a result, this study focuses on conflict initiation rather than conflict participation. In the following sections, we develop four hypotheses about China’s growth and its initiation of military conflict and then conduct statistical analyses to test them.

China’s Growth and Military Conflict

China’s economic and military capabilities have grown rapidly during the last four decades. After taking off during the economic reforms of the late 1970s, its economy’s real annual growth rate was around 10 percent from 1985 to 2010. Although a downturn occurred in the wake of the Tiananmen Square protest of 1989, the Chinese economy’s subsequent rebound was much more significant than that of any other developing or developed state, as shown by the change in China’s share of world GDP from 1.7 percent in 1992 to 14.8 percent in 2015. As a percentage of US GDP, China’s GDP rose from 17.3 percent in 2005 to 60.5 percent in 2015.14 In 2014, China’s purchasing power parity–based GDP, at $18,082bn, surpassed that of the United States ($17,348bn), although China remains second in nominal GDP. Moreover, China’s economic sphere is expanding through the internationalization of its currency (the renminbi) and the initiation of China-centered economic integration, such as Yidai Yiru (One Belt, One Road).

China’s military power is also growing with its economy. Its defense budget has increased by double-digit rates since 1989 and is around $140bn according to the Chinese government’s 2016 report.15 However, many Western experts

believe that China’s real defense budget may be twice as large as the official one, which includes only expenditures for military equipment, training, and personnel expenses, but not those on research and development, high-tech weapons, and other investments. For example, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute estimates China’s 2015 military spending at $214.79bn.\(^{16}\) Indeed, China has made considerable investments in high-tech weapons and military modernization and has achieved some progress in intercontinental ballistic missiles, nuclear submarines, aircraft carriers, and intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance (ISTAR).\(^{17}\)

In response, worries about China’s rise have emerged among its neighbors and the United States. Especially since the 2008 global financial crisis, many pundits and scholars have described Beijing’s economic and military policies as revisionist and as pursuing its own interests and preferences, even at the risk of conflict with the United States.\(^{18}\) In the wake of the financial crisis, Wen Jiabao, then China’s premier, criticized the US-led financial system as an “unsustainable model of development, characterized by prolonged low savings and high consumption,”\(^{19}\) and Zhou Xiaochuan, then governor of the People’s Bank of China, proposed replacing the US dollar as an international reserve currency.\(^{20}\) In 2010, China carried out a military exercise in response to the South Korea–US joint military drill after North Korea’s sinking of the South Korean warship, Cheonan, stopped the shipment of rare earth elements and minerals to Japan during the increasing tension over the Diaoyu or Senkaku Islands, and threatened to sanction American companies responsible for producing arms that the United States was selling to Taiwan. Increasingly, observers characterize China’s foreign policy behaviors as assertive in nature and consistent with its aim to reestablish Sino–US relations in accordance with China’s growing power and status.\(^{21}\) Actually, serious discussion among Chinese scholars regarding the


need for a strong military and the inevitability of revisionist foreign policy began as China was still en route to becoming a great power.²²

The advent of Xi Jinping has exacerbated concerns about China’s rise. In his acceptance speech upon becoming the Chinese communist party’s general secretary, Xi stressed “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” evidencing a desire to overcome the nation’s “history of humiliation” since the Opium War and to recover its prestige and glory.²³ As part of his vision of foreign relations, President Xi suggested Xinxing Daguo Guanxi (New Model of Major Power Relationships), emphasizing Sino–US cooperation and coexistence with recognition of core interests. This approach suggests an interest in reshaping, rather than simply participating in, an international order mainly led by the United States. China’s emerging assertiveness was well represented in Yazhou Xin Anquanguan (New Asian Security Concept), introduced by President Xi’s address at the 2014 Conference for Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, which asserted the need for Asian states to take responsibility for their own security.²⁴

New developments in China’s military strategy are also notable. Recently, Beijing has strengthened its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy in order to protect its core interests, including Taiwan, from interference by external forces, such as the United States. More specifically, the A2/AD entails changes in military plans and strategies for air, maritime, submarine, space, and cyber warfare. For example, the People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) has decided to develop long-range mission capabilities and high-tech equipment, such as anti-satellite weapons.²⁵ The People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) aims to expand its scope of influence from the first island chain, connecting Okinawa, Taiwan, and the Philippines, to the second island chain, connecting Guam and Saipan. In this regard, PLAN has declared a territorial sea baseline and air defense identification zone (ADIZ), has conducted regular patrols of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, and has constructed artificial islands in the South China Sea, among other activities. Such military expansions present challenges to the US-led regional order that has existed in Asia since the end of World War II.

Thus, it is worthwhile to test whether and how China’s power affects its aggression. We measure China’s power in terms of both its current status and its growth

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rate. Although many realists do not distinguish between current power and power growth in predicting China’s foreign behaviors, we can pose two different hypotheses involving power and aggression, as follows:

**Hypothesis 1a (H1a) (Current power):** As China’s power increases, the country becomes more aggressive toward others.

**Hypothesis 1b (H1b) (Power growth):** As China’s power growth rate increases, the country becomes more aggressive toward others.

### China’s Growth and Regional Stability

Another important question concerns China’s potential targets. Even if we accept the premise that a stronger China will be more aggressive, we do not expect that all states will be China’s military opponents. Due to their conflictual issues with the anti-status quo major power, some Asian states are more likely targets. Surrounded by 15 countries on a 22,000-km land border and by six countries on an 18,000-km maritime border, a revisionist China cannot avoid conflicts with neighbors or major powers, including the United States, Russia, Japan, and India, but can be expected to adopt differentiated policies toward these countries. Beijing will prefer to bring some states into its own orbit and to expand the China-led order against others that are unwilling to accommodate its core interests. Which states will experience conflict with a strong China? We suggest two primary factors that will affect China’s aggression: (i) alliance with the United States; and (ii) territorial disputes.

First, there is little doubt that to become a regional hegemon, China must seriously weaken the US-led regional alliance network. The United States has increasingly strengthened its military and economic policy of restraining, if not containing, China, at least since the late 1990s when China began to increase its regional influence in the wake of the Asian financial crisis and stressed its interests on the issues of Taiwan and the South and East China Seas. Spurred by the perception of the “China threat,”26 Washington has sought to consolidate and expand its hub-and-spoke alliance system. It has ratified the 1997 US–Japan defense guidelines and has supported Japan’s efforts to become a normal military power, institutionalized trilateral relationships in the region (Korea–US–Japan and US–Japan–Australia), reestablished the US–Philippine alliance through its presence at military bases and its joint exercises in the South China Sea, and deepened strategic and military relationships with its non-allies in Asia, such as Vietnam and Indonesia. Also, Washington aims to institutionalize its own Asia–Pacific

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economical order through the Trans-Pacific Partnership and multilateral institutions, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and APEC. To prevent Beijing’s rise as an economic hegemon, Washington is adapting its liberal economic order and making other countries “play the rules that America and our partners set, and not the other way around.”

Amidst the United States’ pivot toward Asia, China has also pursued expansion in the economic and military spheres, sometimes risking conflict with US allies. Most strikingly, it is playing a leading and crucial role in multilateral institutions, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank. Strategically, Beijing’s moves are designed to assure Asian states of its willingness and capabilities as a major power and to weaken the encircling net led by the United States. Indeed, China has made efforts toward military revolution and conventional buildup, extending its operational area to the Indian and western Pacific Oceans and maintaining its military superiority against Taiwan despite the Cross-Strait economic interdependence. However, Asian states have tended to gravitate toward the US network even though they benefit from their economic ties with China. Rather than simply bandwagoning with the new regional power, they are trying to maintain a balance between the two great powers or play along with the long-time external balancer without harming their security and economic interests. This means that without weakening US influence in Asia, China cannot become a leading state, but only a major partner of the dominant power. This is why Beijing has begun to harshly respond to US allies – Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea – on issues of territorial sovereignty and missile defense systems, repeatedly asserting its own prerogatives.

Another factor in China’s military aggression is its core interests. Since the 2008 global financial crisis, China has increasingly emphasized *Hexin Liyi* (core interests) as represented in the increasing frequency of this term’s occurrence in *People’s Daily*, the official paper of the Chinese Communist Party, rising from three uses in 2003 to 95 in 2008 and 325 in 2010. At the first US–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (2009), Dai Bingguo, then China’s State Councilor, defined the core interests as: (i) its fundamental systems and national security; (ii) sovereignty and unification; and (iii) steady and stable development of its economy and society. This description indicates a remarkable extension of the

term’s scope from its earlier definition, which focused mainly on Taiwan and Tibet. Although the precise meaning of Beijing’s core interests is still debated, many agree that Beijing is less likely to acquiesce on issues of territorial sovereignty than to confront its territorial opponents.

In fact, China’s stance on territorial issues has strengthened since its emphatic declaration of its core interests. The recent response by Beijing to the International Tribunal’s judgment favoring the Philippines shows the rising power’s stubbornness in cases of territorial disputes.30 While Beijing occasionally had military conflicts even with major powers, such as the Soviet Union and India, during the Cold War,31 it became more aggressive toward its neighbors on territorial issues. In the 2010 Diaoyu/Senkaku crisis with Japan, China broke the principle of joint development (Gezhi Zhengyi Gongtong Kaifa; Lay the Disputes aside and Exploit Together). It not only carried out diplomatic offensives and encouraged anti-Japan demonstrations but also stopped exporting rare earth elements, declared the ADIZ, and held military displays, arousing fears regarding a possible clash between the historical regional rivals. In the 2012 dispute with Manila over Scarborough Shoal (Huangyandao), Beijing refrained tourists from visiting the Philippines and strengthened its quarantine of agricultural products. While affirming that it opposes “the bullying of small countries by big countries,” China also insisted that “small countries should not make unreasonable demands”32 and has escalated its confrontations with Southeast Asian countries and the United States in the South China Sea.33 In addition, there is a high likelihood that China will have border conflicts with India, Vietnam, and Myanmar. In some cases, China’s border issues have been resolved peacefully.34 But its current emphasis on territorial sovereignty could affect its approach to future border conflicts by making it harder for China to back down in a territorial crisis.

Accordingly, it is worthwhile to examine whether China has become more aggressive toward US allies or toward its opponents in territorial disputes. We argue that Beijing has made and will make efforts to weaken the US-centered alliance

system and to protect its core interests. This argument can be tested by considering the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 2a (H2a) (US alliance):** China is more aggressive toward US allies than toward others.

**Hypothesis 2b (H2b) (Territorial disputes):** China is more aggressive toward its opponents in territorial disputes than toward others.

### Empirical Analysis

**Research Design**

How do we know whether China’s growing power changes its behavior in the foreign policy realm? To test the above hypotheses, we examine China’s practice of initiating militarized conflicts with Asian states and major powers after the death of Mao Zedong, when it began to reemerge.\(^35\) Many international relations scholars have studied the initiation of military conflict to examine whether, when, and how states are aggressive, although some have observed that conflict initiation can occasionally be a response to others’ aggressive intention or a strategy chosen to prevent future aggressions. Using the Militarized Interstate Disputes dataset, which provides information on four types of military action (military threat, military display, use of force, and war),\(^36\) we measure the dependent variable: China’s first military action against a particular state in a given year (yes coded 1, otherwise 0). The dataset contains 55 initiations of militarized conflict by China against Asian and major countries: 22 from 1976 to 1989 and 33 from 1990 to 2001.

The independent variables are: (i) China’s general or economic power; (ii) China’s growth in general or economic power; (iii) alliance with the United States; and (iv) territorial issues with China. China’s general power is measured by using the six variables of the Correlates of War’s (COW) National Material Capabilities dataset: military expenditures, military personnel, energy consumption, iron and steel production, total population, and urban population, whereas China’s economic power is measured with the two specifically economic variables in the dataset, energy consumption and iron and steel production. China’s power growth was calculated by subtracting the power score in year \(t–5\) from that in year \(t–1\) and then dividing it by the power score in year \(t-5\). These variables of China’s power and its growth are measured relative to all states as well as to

\(^35\) The major powers are France, Germany (1991 and following), Japan (1991 and following), Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. We use the Correlates of War’s list of major powers, at <http://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/state-system-membership> (searched date: 22 July 2016).

Asian states. There is a 1-year time lag between the power-related variables and the dependent variable in order to reduce concerns about reverse causality. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate China’s general and economic power relative to all states and to Asian states, respectively. In both comparisons, China’s economic power has risen more markedly since the 1970s than its general power. Despite an increase since the late 1960s, China’s general power relative to Asian neighbors did not fully regain its 1960 level until the 2000s.

The second independent variable refers to whether China and its neighbor had an ongoing territorial issue in a given year. For this, we have used the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) dataset v1.1, which provides information on territorial claims, river claims, and maritime claims between two states. This variable was coded as 1 if a territorial issue existed and as 0 otherwise. The third independent variable concerns whether an Asian state was allied with the United States. Relying on the COW’s Formal Alliance v4.1, we code the variable as 1 if there was a defense pact and as 0 if not.

Since multiple factors affect conflict initiation, four control variables are included in the model. We do not argue that China’s overall power and territorial disputes and its relationship with the United States are the only factors that affect its military aggression. We have also taken into account dyad-level factors related to military, economic, and geographic relations between China and its potential target. The first is China’s power relative to its potential target. Using the COW’s

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National Material Capability dataset, we divided China’s Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) score by the sum of China’s and its potential target’s CINC scores in a given year. We expect that China is more likely to initiate a conflict when its relative power is greater because its expected cost and risk are lower.

Next, we measure economic dependence by dividing a potential target’s dependence on China by China’s dependence on the potential target, using the COW’s Bilateral Trade dataset v.3.0.\(^{39}\) State A’s dependence on state B is quantified as the bilateral trade share of state A’s total trade. We can expect that when a potential target is economically more dependent on China, it is more likely to become a military target due to its greater sensitivity and vulnerability to the rising dragon.

Also, we controlled for how China and its potential target shared a land or water border (coded as 1 if land border, 2 if 1–12 miles of water, 3 if 13–24 miles of water, 4 if 25–150 miles of water, 5 if 151–400 miles of water, or 6 if otherwise) and the distance in miles between Beijing and the potential target’s capital. Having a common border and a shorter distance between capitals should contribute positively to conflict initiation. As Carter and Signorino suggest for statistical analyses of binary dependent variables with cross-national time series datasets,\(^{40}\) the number of non-conflict years (Peace Years), its square, and its cube are included in the statistical model, but they are not included in Table 2 to save space. The descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1.

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### Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Max.</th>
<th>Skewness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
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<td>1989.11</td>
<td>7.57</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiation</td>
<td>1,180</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Power (relative to all states)</td>
<td>1,180</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Power Growth (relative to all states)</td>
<td>1,180</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.63</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic Power (relative to Asian states)</td>
<td>1,180</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Power Growth (relative to Asian states)</td>
<td>1,180</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Territorial Issue</td>
<td>1,180</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Ally</td>
<td>1,180</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative Power</td>
<td>1,180</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic Dependence</td>
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<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contiguity</td>
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<td>Distance</td>
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<td>Peace Years</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>82.00</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
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</table>
**Results and Discussion**

We conduct logit analyses of China’s initiation of military conflict from 1976 to 2001 (Table 2: Models 1 & 3) but also rare event logit analyses because the binary dependent variable is heavily skewed to zero (Table 2: Models 2 & 4). Generally speaking, the results of the statistical analyses provide strong support for the hypotheses about economic power itself and territorial disputes (H1a, H2b) and weak support for those regarding economic power growth and US alliance (H1b, H2a) (see Table 2).41 As China’s economic power grows, whether it is assessed relative to all states or only Asian states, its likelihood of initiating conflict increases in a statistically significant way (H1a). As offensive realists argue, China’s economic power had a positive effect on its foreign aggression during the period from 1976 to 2001 (Models 1, 2, 3, 4). China’s economic power growth rate also shows a positive but insignificant effect on conflict initiation when measured relative to all states (Models 1 & 2). But the effect of rapid growth on conflict initiation becomes negative, not positive, and negative in the model when China’s power is measured relative to Asian states (Models 3 & 4). This means that when China was rising rapidly compared to its regional neighbors, it was less aggressive toward Asian neighbors and major powers.

In support of H2b, the effect of territorial disputes on conflict initiation is positive and significant in Models 1, 2, 3, and 4. Not surprisingly, China was more prone to using military options against its opponents in territorial disputes than against other nations. Many international relations scholars argue that territory is a major reason why states fight each other, because it cannot be easily divided and often possesses symbolic and religious meanings.42 China and its opponents are not an exception to this rule.

However, in contrast to H2a, China was not more aggressive toward US allies than toward other countries. Whether its opponent had a defense pact with the United States did not affect China’s decision to initiate military conflict. This implies that China did not seek a direct military confrontation with the United States during the period from 1976 to 2001. Because this finding is about China’s behaviors during the second half of the 20th century, however, it does not directly contradict the offensive realists’ expectation that China will challenge the United States in the future when the two nations are equal in power, at least in East Asia.

41. We do not find statistically significant effects of China’s general power and general power growth on its initiation of military conflicts. Due to space limitations, we do not report this result.
Table 2. (Rare Event) Logit Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Logit</td>
<td>Rare Event Logit</td>
<td>Logit</td>
<td>Rare Event Logit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Power</td>
<td>20.216 **</td>
<td>18.586 **</td>
<td>7.953</td>
<td>8.288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(relative to all states)</td>
<td>7.953</td>
<td>8.288</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Power Growth</td>
<td>1.127</td>
<td>1.152</td>
<td>1.523</td>
<td>1.684</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(relative to all states)</td>
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<td>1.684</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic Power</td>
<td>31.44 ***</td>
<td>29.194 ***</td>
<td>9.298</td>
<td>8.623</td>
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<tr>
<td>(relative to Asian states)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(relative to Asian states)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Territorial Issue</td>
<td>1.64 ***</td>
<td>1.504 **</td>
<td>1.761 ***</td>
<td>1.621 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Ally</td>
<td>0.419</td>
<td>0.422</td>
<td>0.601</td>
<td>0.73</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relative Power</td>
<td>0.628</td>
<td>0.527</td>
<td>0.614</td>
<td>0.513</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic Dependence</td>
<td>-0.685</td>
<td>-0.619</td>
<td>-0.346</td>
<td>-0.315</td>
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<tr>
<td>Border</td>
<td>1.387</td>
<td>1.321</td>
<td>1.378</td>
<td>1.326</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic Dependence</td>
<td>3.644</td>
<td>3.347</td>
<td>3.478</td>
<td>3.065</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>0.146</td>
<td>0.098</td>
<td>0.142</td>
<td>0.099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>-4.91E-4</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
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</table>

(Continues)
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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.526</td>
<td>1.347</td>
<td>2.952</td>
<td>2.884</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
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<td>Long-Likelihood</td>
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<td>-145.122</td>
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<td>BIC</td>
<td>386.819</td>
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<td>373.62</td>
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Note: Statistical significance level:
*P < 0.10.
**P < 0.05.
***P < 0.01.

Peace Years, its square and its cube are omitted to save space.
Among the four control variables, Distance has a significant effect on conflict initiation in Models 1 and 3. However, the other three variables – Relative Power, Economic Dependence, and Contiguity – do not affect China’s military aggression in a statistically significant way.

Next, we illustrate the prediction of China’s initiation of military conflict against a non-US ally. As China’s share of global economic power changes from 0.05 to 0.35, its probability of conflict initiation against a territorial dispute opponent increases from 0.01 to 0.81, and its probability of conflict initiation against a non-territorial dispute opponent increases from 0.002 to 0.45 (see Fig. 3). Although this prediction derives from China’s past military behaviors, we can draw two implications: (i) China’s economic power has some positive effects on its military aggression; and (ii) China’s territorial dispute opponents are likely targets of the rising power.

**Summary and Implications**

Offensive realists are right: China’s growth has destabilized regional stability in the post-Mao period. Our statistical analysis of China’s initiation of military conflict shows that its economic power has had significant and positive effects. In addition, China was more aggressive toward its territorial dispute opponents, although the United States’ Asian allies were no more likely to be military targets than other Asian states. In short, China’s greater power made the country more assertive, rather than cooperative, toward Asian states and major powers.

43. Based on the Model 1, we calculated predicted probabilities. All other variables – Relative Power, Economic Dependence, Border, Distance, and Peace Years – are set at their medians.
This leads us to expect that China will maintain its current uncompromising and firm position in the South and East China Seas if its economic rise continues. Also, China’s growth will accelerate its resolute protection of core interests in strategic and economic matters.

Two objections are possible to the argument presented here regarding China’s growth and aggression. First, some may argue that a stronger China was dragged into more conflicts with foreign actors. China’s rise to become a major power might not have changed its goals and strategies as much as it increased the emergence of conflict-laden issues. As it is now connected more deeply and extensively with foreign actors, China will face more international issues, and some conflict will be unavoidable. However, as explained earlier, this study’s dependent variable was not conflict involvement but conflict initiation. Of course, there have been some historical cases of over-balancing, as seen in European countries before World War I. But this study shows that China has become more prone to conflict initiation as it has gained greater economic capability.

Second, some may question the proposed relation between conflict initiation and regional stability. China might, for example, become more prone to low-intensity conflict but not to high-intensity conflict. According to this view, China’s growth could increase some tensions but still not seriously destabilize regional stability. Whereas Germany’s growth drove Europe into two world wars, China might not pursue the German route but might instead seek its own pathway to a peaceful rise. We agree that there is little probability of an all-out war between China and other major powers, but the absence of all-out war does not imply regional stability. Many international rivalries, such as those between the United States and the Soviet Union or between South and North Korea, have presented serious threats to the participants even though direct high-intensity military conflicts have not occurred. Even low-intensity sources of conflict, such as military threat and military displays, can seriously harm regional stability, especially when they happen repeatedly.

Asian states and major powers should be cautious in dealing with China and its growing assertiveness. Many offensive realists strongly suggest containment policies. But there should be serious concerns about spiral effects and security dilemmas, many defensive realists argue, as these dynamics produced World War I through “chain-ganging” or “over-balancing.” For this reason, some prefer a more balanced approach to the rising power, referred to as “balancing without

containment”45 or “congagement.”46 Also, the complex interdependence between China and other states has made it impossible for us to live without the engine of the world economy, thereby intensifying concerns as to how to engage the rising dragon peacefully and beneficially. The future of China and other states cannot be expected to involve perfect harmony, but a situation characterized by general cooperation will yield better outcomes for all than when opposing states fight each other fiercely.

Future studies of China’s aggression should pay more attention to the rising power’s regime type and the presence of domestic unrest. Particularly since the 1990s, many international relations scholars have studied and debated democratic peace theory and diversionary war theory. Most now agree that democracies do not fight each other, but their arguments differ as to the effects of democracy and autocracy on foreign policy and international security. How does China’s one-party authoritarian system affect its foreign and military policies? What effect will China’s political reform have on its relation with Asian and major states? Recent studies argue that authoritarian leaders adopt different foreign policies depending on their style of personal influence (e.g., personalist vs non-personalist) and past experience (e.g., military vs civilian background),47 and that authoritarian governments exploit but are also affected by public opinion.48 These considerations imply that even if no full democratic transition occurs in China, its political system will play a crucial role in shaping Chinese foreign relations.

In addition, China’s social and political stability will be another key factor in explaining and predicting China’s foreign behavior. A traditional theory of diversionary war (scapegoat theory) insists that domestically embattled leaders seek to ensure their political survival by initiating international conflicts and creating rally-round-the-flag effects.49 Other studies of diversionary conflict argue that domestically troubled states tend to target certain types of states, such as rising powers and territorial dispute opponents,50 and that authoritarian leaders are more likely than democratic ones to rely on this diversionary tactic.51 Considering the widening gaps in China between rich and poor, between city and country, and

between east and west, many experts have suggested that Chinese leaders’ main current concern is domestic unrest. How does social unrest affect political leaders’ decisions in foreign and military affairs? What effects will a growing challenge to the Chinese Communist Party have on China’s foreign relations? More attention should be paid not only to whether China is domestically stable but also to how its domestic situation shapes future policies toward Asian neighbors and major powers.

References


Brzezinski, Zbigniew, and John J. Mearsheimer, “Clash of the Titans,” Foreign Policy, 146 (January/February 2005), pp. 46–49.


