

---

# Clash of the Titans

Is China more interested in money than missiles? Will the United States seek to contain China as it once contained the Soviet Union? Zbigniew Brzezinski and John Mearsheimer go head-to-head on whether these two great powers are destined to fight it out.

---

BY JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER, ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI

OCTOBER 22, 2009

---

## **Make Money, Not War** – *By Zbigniew Brzezinski*

Today in East Asia, China is rising — peacefully so far. For understandable reasons, China harbors resentment and even humiliation about some chapters of its history. Nationalism is an important force, and there are serious grievances regarding external issues, notably Taiwan. But conflict is not inevitable or even likely. China's leadership is not inclined to challenge the United States militarily, and its focus remains on economic development and winning acceptance as a great power.

China is preoccupied, and almost fascinated, with the trajectory of its own ascent. When I met with the top leadership not long ago, what struck me was the frequency with which I was asked for predictions about the next 15 or 20 years. Not long ago, the Chinese Politburo invited two distinguished, Western-trained professors to a special meeting. Their task was to analyze nine major powers since the 15th century to see why they rose and fell. It's an interesting exercise for the top leadership of a massive and complex country.

This focus on the experience of past great powers could lead to the conclusion that the iron laws of political theory and history point to some inevitable collision or conflict. But there are other political realities. In the next five years, China will host several events that will restrain the conduct of its foreign policy. The 2008 Olympic Games is the most important, of course. The scale of the economic and psychological investment in the Beijing games is staggering. My expectation is that they will be magnificently organized. And make no mistake, China intends to win at the Olympics. A second date is 2010, when China will hold the World Expo in Shanghai. Successfully organizing these international gatherings is important to China and suggests that a cautious foreign policy will prevail.

More broadly, China is determined to sustain its economic growth. A confrontational foreign policy could disrupt that growth, harm hundreds of millions of Chinese, and threaten the Communist Party's hold on power. China's leadership appears rational, calculating, and conscious not only of China's rise but also of its continued weakness.

There will be inevitable frictions as China's regional role increases and as a Chinese "sphere of influence" develops. U.S. power may recede gradually in the coming years, and the unavoidable decline in Japan's influence will heighten the sense of China's regional preeminence. But to have a real collision, China needs a military that is capable of going toe-to-toe with the United States. At the strategic level, China maintains a posture of minimum deterrence. Forty years after acquiring nuclear-weapons technology, China has just 24 ballistic missiles capable of hitting the United States. Even beyond the realm of strategic warfare, a country must have the capacity to attain its political objectives before it will engage in limited war. It is hard to envisage how China could promote its objectives when it is acutely vulnerable to a blockade and isolation enforced by the United States. In a conflict, Chinese maritime trade would stop entirely. The flow of oil would cease, and the Chinese economy would be paralyzed.

I have the sense that the Chinese are cautious about Taiwan, their fierce talk notwithstanding. Last March, a Communist Party magazine noted that "we have basically contained the overt threat of Taiwanese independence since [President] Chen [Shuibian] took office, avoiding a worst-case scenario and maintaining the status of Taiwan as part of China." A public opinion poll taken in Beijing at the same time found that 58 percent thought military action was unnecessary. Only 15 percent supported military action to "liberate" Taiwan.

Of course, stability today does not ensure peace tomorrow. If China were to succumb to internal violence, for example, all bets are off.

If sociopolitical tensions or social inequality becomes unmanageable, the leadership might be tempted to exploit nationalist passions. But the small possibility of this type of catastrophe does not weaken my belief that we can avoid the negative consequences that often accompany the rise of new powers. China is clearly assimilating into the international system. Its leadership appears to realize that attempting to dislodge the United States would be futile, and that the cautious spread of Chinese influence is the surest path to global preeminence.

**Better to Be Godzilla than Bambi** – *By John J. Mearsheimer*

China cannot rise peacefully, and if it continues its dramatic economic growth over the next few decades, the United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war. Most of China's neighbors, including India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, and Vietnam, will likely join with the United States to contain China's power.

To predict the future in Asia, one needs a theory that explains how rising powers are likely to act and how other states will react to them. My theory of international politics says that the mightiest states attempt to establish hegemony in their own region while making sure that no rival great power dominates another region. The ultimate goal of every great power is to maximize its share of world power and eventually dominate the system.

The international system has several defining characteristics. The main actors are states that operate in anarchy — which simply means that there is no higher authority above them. All great powers have some offensive military capability, which means that they can hurt each other. Finally, no state can know the future intentions of other states with certainty. The best way to survive in such a system is to be as powerful as possible, relative to potential rivals. The mightier a state is, the less likely it is that another state will attack it.

The great powers do not merely strive to be the strongest great power, although that is a welcome outcome. Their ultimate aim is to be the hegemon — the only great power in the system. But it is almost impossible for any state to achieve global hegemony in the modern world, because it is too hard to project and sustain power around the globe. Even the United States is a regional but not a global hegemon. The best outcome that a state can hope for is to dominate its own backyard.

States that gain regional hegemony have a further aim: to prevent other geographical areas from being dominated by other great powers. Regional hegemons, in other words, do not want peer competitors. Instead, they want to keep other regions divided among several great powers so that these states will compete with each other. In 1991, shortly after the Cold War ended, the first Bush administration boldly stated that the United States was now the most powerful state in the world and planned to remain so. That same message appeared in the famous National Security Strategy issued by the second Bush administration in September 2002. This document's stance on preemptive war generated harsh criticism, but hardly a word of protest greeted the assertion that the United States should check rising powers and maintain its commanding position in the global balance of power.

China is likely to try to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. Specifically, China will strive to maximize the power gap between itself and its neighbors, especially Japan and Russia, and to ensure that no state in Asia can threaten it.

It is unlikely that China will go on a rampage and conquer other Asian countries. Instead, China will want to dictate the boundaries of acceptable behavior to neighboring countries, much the way the United States does in the Americas. An increasingly powerful China is also likely to try to push the United States out of Asia, much the way the United States pushed the European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere. Not incidentally, gaining regional hegemony is probably the only way that China will get back Taiwan.

Why should we expect China to act differently than the United States? U.S. policymakers, after all, react harshly when other great powers send military forces into the Western Hemisphere. These foreign forces are invariably seen as a potential threat to American security. Are the Chinese more principled, more ethical, less nationalistic, or less concerned about their survival than Westerners? They are none of these things, which is why China is likely to imitate the United States and attempt to become a regional hegemon. China's leadership and people remember what happened in the last century, when Japan was powerful and China was weak. In the anarchic world of international politics, it is better to be Godzilla than Bambi.

It is clear from the historical record how American policymakers will react if China attempts to dominate Asia. The United States does not tolerate peer competitors. As it demonstrated in the 20th century, it is determined to remain the world's only regional hegemon. Therefore, the United States will seek to contain China and ultimately weaken it to the point where it is no longer capable of dominating Asia. In essence, the United States is likely to behave toward China much the way it behaved toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

**Nukes Change Everything** – *Zbigniew Brzezinski responds.*

As an occasional scholar, I am impressed by the power of theory. But theory — at least in international relations — is essentially retrospective. When something happens that does not fit the theory, it gets revised. And I suspect that will happen in the U.S.-China relationship.

We live in a very different world than the one in which hegemonic powers could go to war without erasing each other as societies. The nuclear age has altered power politics in a way that was already evident in the U.S.-Soviet competition. The avoidance of direct conflict in that standoff owed much to weaponry that makes the total elimination of societies part of the escalating dynamic of war. It tells you something that the Chinese are not trying to acquire the military capabilities to take on the United States.

How great powers behave is not predetermined. If the Germans and the Japanese had not conducted themselves the way they did, their regimes might not have been destroyed. Germany was not required to adopt the policy it did in 1914 (indeed, German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck followed a very different path). The Japanese in 1941 could have directed their expansionism toward Russia rather than Britain and the United States. For its part, the Chinese leadership appears much more flexible and sophisticated than many previous aspirants to great power status.

**Showing the United States the Door** – *John J. Mearsheimer responds.*

The dichotomy that you raised between theory and political reality is an important one. The reason that we have to privilege theory over political reality is that we cannot know what political reality is going to look like in the year 2025. You mentioned that you traveled to China recently and talked to Chinese leaders who appear to be much more prudent about Taiwan than the conventional wisdom has it. That may be true, but it's largely irrelevant. The key issue is, What are the Chinese leaders and people going to think about Taiwan in 2025? We have no way of knowing. So today's political realities get washed out of the equation, and what really matters is the theory that one employs to predict the future.

You also argue that China's desire for continued economic growth makes conflict with the United States unlikely. One of the principal reasons that China has been so successful economically over the past 20 years is that it has not picked a fight with the United States. But that logic should have applied to Germany before World War I and to Germany and Japan before World War II. By 1939, the German economy was growing strongly, yet Hitler started World War II. Japan started conflict in Asia despite its impressive economic growth. Clearly there are factors that sometimes override economic considerations and cause great powers to start wars — even when it hurts them economically.

It is also true that China does not have the military wherewithal to take on the United States. That's absolutely correct — for now. But again, what we are talking about is the situation in 2025 or 2030, when China has the military muscle to take on the United States. What happens then, when China has a much larger gross national product and a much more formidable military than it has today? The history of great powers offers a straightforward answer: China will try to push the Americans out of Asia and dominate the region. And if it succeeds, it will be in an ideal situation to deal with Taiwan.

**America's Staying Power** – *Zbigniew Brzezinski responds.*

How can China push the United States out of East Asia? Or, more pointedly, how can China push the United States out of Japan? And if the United States were somehow pushed out of Japan or decided to leave on its own, what would the Japanese do? Japan has an impressive military program and, in a matter of months, it could have a significant nuclear deterrent. Frankly, I doubt that China could push the United States out of Asia. But even if it could, I don't think it would want to live with the consequences: a powerful, nationalistic, and nuclear-armed Japan.

Of course, tensions over Taiwan are the most worrisome strategic danger. But any Chinese military planner has to take into account the likelihood that even if China could overrun Taiwan, the United States would enter the conflict. That prospect vitiates any political calculus justifying a military operation until and unless the United States is out of the picture. And the United States will not be out of the picture for a long, long time.

**It's Not a Pretty Picture** – *John J. Mearsheimer responds.*

If the Chinese are smart, they will not pick a fight over Taiwan now. This is not the time. What they should do is concentrate on building their economy to the point where it is bigger than the U.S. economy. Then they can translate that economic strength into military might and create a situation where they are in a position to dictate terms to states in the region and to give the United States all sorts of trouble.

From China's point of view, it would be ideal to dominate Asia, and for Brazil, Argentina, or Mexico to become a great power and force the United States to concentrate on its own region. The great advantage the United States has at the moment is that no state in the Western Hemisphere can threaten its survival or security interests. So the United States is free to roam the world causing trouble in other people's backyards. Other states, including China of course, have a vested interest in causing trouble in the United States' backyard to keep it focused there. The picture I have painted is not a pretty one. I wish I could tell a more optimistic story about the future, but international politics is a nasty and dangerous business. No amount of good will can ameliorate the intense security competition that will set in as an aspiring hegemon appears in Asia.

***Like this article? Read an unlimited amount of articles when you [Subscribe to FP Premium](#) now 20% off.***