5.
THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AT SIXTY: IS IT RISING?[1]

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One of the long-time goals of Chinese foreign policy has been to "catch up" with the great powers. Whether this desire came, or comes, from the historical memory of the century of humiliation (in which case humiliation will be extirpated when China has a "rich state and a strong army"), or from Mao Zedong's desire to catch up with and possibly surpass the industrialized states in terms of raw material power, or from the contemporary drive to revive (复兴) the Chinese people and nation through policies of "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development" (和平崛起 / 和平发展), closing the perceived gap in power between China and the most powerful states has long been a driver in Chinese foreign policy.

In American policy and pundit circles, this drive to catch up is often seen as a challenge to U.S. primacy. Although there are debates over the degree to which China's "rise" should be considered a threat to U.S. interests, the drive animates a great deal of the military planning in the U.S. Department of Defense and broader policy establishment. In the U.S. academic world, analysis of this drive is often framed in terms of a power transition, whereby the probability of instability increases as a revisionist rising state challenges the interests of the status quo hegemonic state.

The problem is that in all of this discourse about catching up, reviving, rising, or emerging (and there are many euphemisms used more or less interchangeably)—whether it comes from Chinese nationalists, Maoists, Dengists, post-Dengists, or the governments, media, or academy in other countries—there is no consensus on how one would know whether China is rising relative to the dominant state in the system, the United States.

As a result, there are no rigorously derived expectations or forecasts about when and in what arenas of power China will catch up with the United States. The absence of common measures and indicators makes it difficult to compare China's rise with that of other states in the past, and therefore difficult to assess the potential consequences.

The media, pundit, and scholarly literature on China is all over the place when it comes to explicit and implicit definitions of "rising." There are at least seven definitions that one can find in contemporary discourse:

1. Historical: Simply put, China is more powerful than it was in the past. This measure does not compare Chinese power with that of other states, but rather with itself.
2. Visibility: China or Chinese entities (often assumed to be directed in some fashion by the leadership) are present and/or more active in more issue areas and more places around the globe than in the past.
3. Influence: Chinese policy and/or Chinese entities are impacting the lives of more ordinary people and economic and political actors around the globe than in the past.
4. Threat to the hegemon's interests: China has an improved ability to interfere with and reduce U.S. military dominance in the Asia-Pacific region compared to in the past.[2]
5. Size (or amount of material power capabilities): China is narrowing the relative and/or absolute gap in power between it and the United States.
6. Threat to the hegemonic order: China presents an increased challenge to the dominant norms and institutions that govern international and transnational interactions.

We focus on definitions five and six because these are, perhaps, the most commonly used or implied notions of "rising." We find that depending on which definition one uses, one comes to different conclusions about whether or not China is rising, has risen, or will rise.

Take definition five, for instance: "size." This definition can be further subdivided into numerous indicators to measure change in the size of Chinese power vis-à-vis the United States. One indicator of rising power, often used in quantitative international relations studies, is a state's share of world power capabilities compared to that of the hegemon. If we use this metric and the Correlates of War data, however, the PRC already caught up with the United States in the early 1980s (see Figure 1). (This indicator, however, includes total population as an element of state power, leading, some contend, to over-estimations of Chinese power.)

Using instead the Correlates of War iron and steel production figures, we see that Chinese material power began to catch up with the United States in the 1960s, and surpassed it in the 1990s (see Figure 2).

Using another material indicator of the degree to which a hegemon's power is challenged by other states, however, returns a very different result. This

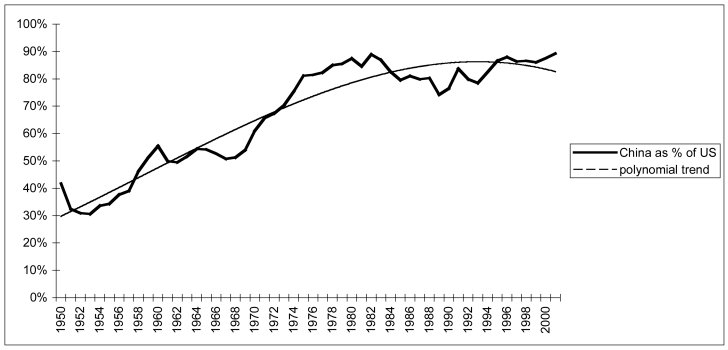

Figure 1: China's Share of the World's National Capabilities as a Percentage of the U.S. Share

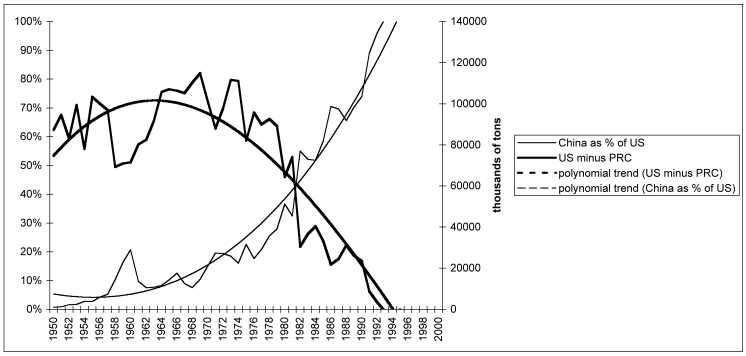

Figure 2: China's Iron and Steel Production as a Percentage of U.S. Production, and the Absolute Difference between U.S. and Chinese Production

indicator, called the "largest drop-off rule," argues that a contending power is that state for which the difference between the hegemon's power and that state's power (here measured by GDP) is smaller than the difference between that state and the next-largest state's power (see Figure 3). Using this indicator, it appears that China has never been a contender to challenge the United States.

Another commonly used material indicator of power is relative size of GDP. Even though China's growth rate has been consistently around or above 10 percent for many years now, whereas the U.S. rate has been considerably lower, China began its economic growth at a much lower level of development. Thus, even as the size of its economy has grown as a percentage of the U.S. economy, the absolute difference in size of GDP between China and the United States continues to expand in favor of the United States (see Figure 4). Depending on the

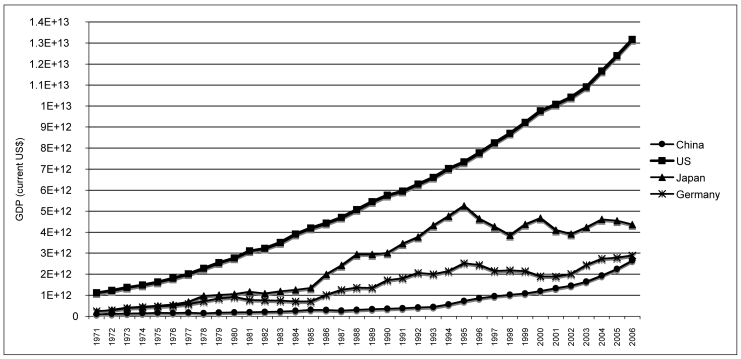

Figure 3: Largest Drop-Off Rule and Contenders for Hegemony

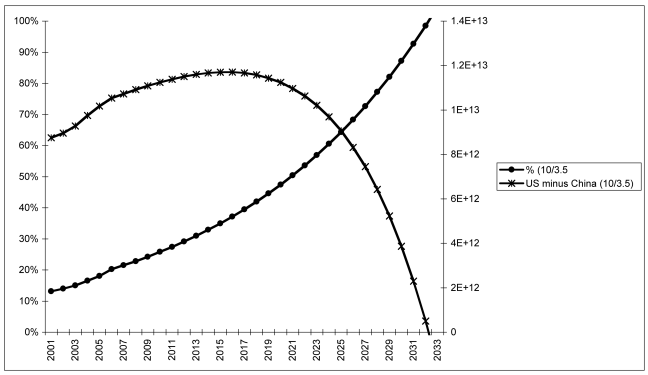

Figure 4: Trends in Relative and Absolute Difference between U.S. and Chinese GDP

relative growth rates, there will come a time when this absolute gap begins to close and China will genuinely begin to "catch up" with the United States (see Figure 5). But we are not there yet. At this point in time, then, China is rising in relative terms (the size of its economy as a percentage of the size of that of the United States), but not in absolute terms (shrinking the gap in size).

This pattern essentially shows up not only in the economic data on China and the United States, but in U.S.-China comparative military spending as well (see Figure 6). China's spending as a percentage of U.S. spending is climbing, whereas the absolute gap between the two is still growing in favor of the United States. At very high numbers of military spending for both countries, this difference between relative and absolute power trends will not matter much.[3] But for the moment, the tens of billions of dollars more of military spending available to the United States each year does plausibly translate into military technical advantages for the United States.

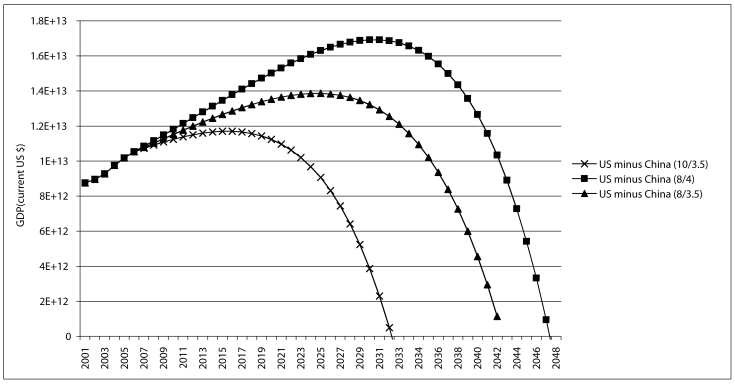

Figure 5: Absolute Difference in the Size of U.S. and Chinese GDPs: Three Scenarios

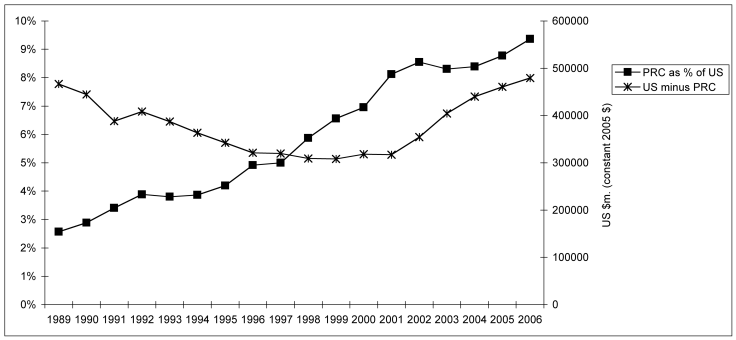

Figure 6: Trends in the Relative and Absolute Difference between U.S. and Chinese Military Spending (Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute)

In short, as one goes through the various ways in which "rising" has been conceived, it turns out that there is no consistent answer about when China began to rise, how fast it is rising, and when (or even if) it will catch up to and surpass the United States.

What about the sixth definition whereby China could be considered to be rising if it were increasingly able to threaten or challenge the "international order" established by the United States after World War II? This is another common trope, especially in U.S. discussions of the intentions likely to govern China's rise. Even some Chinese analysts use this definition in their own internal discussions about whether China is satisfied or dissatisfied with the U.S.-dominated international system.

This definition leads, however, to the problem of defining the current international order. Some international institutions and international norms work at

cross-purposes (e.g., sovereignty versus regulation of the global free-trade regime). So China might support some elements of this order while opposing or merely acquiescing to others. Developing a balance sheet of support and opposition with the aim of coming to an overall conclusion about the level of China's satisfaction depends on how much one weights the importance of different elements of this order to its overall robustness. For instance, it is probably more important for the longevity of the U.S.-dominated order that China is a member of all the major international economic institutions than the fact that it maintains good bilateral ties with Zimbabwe, Venezuela, or Cuba. There is room for debate, of course, but the point is that so far there has been no systematic effort to develop such a balance sheet. And even if there were, a dynamic, macro-historical perspective would surely indicate that since the end of the Maoist period, the PRC has become more, not less, supportive of the U.S.-determined order. The story of China's interactions with international institutions, for instance, is a story of a rather dramatic increase in China's engagement with institutions that regulate interstate relations, not a rejection of them (see Figure 7).

There is also the question of whether opposition to elements of the international order is the same as opposition to the hegemon's interests. The power transition literature generally assumes—as do many Americans—that U.S. behavior and the key norms of the international order are synonymous. Yet it is clear that some elements of this order have been opposed by U.S. policy and practice. In some cases, therefore, China has challenged U.S. interests while also upholding elements of international order (e.g., insisting that international efforts to resolve interstate disputes be sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council, rather

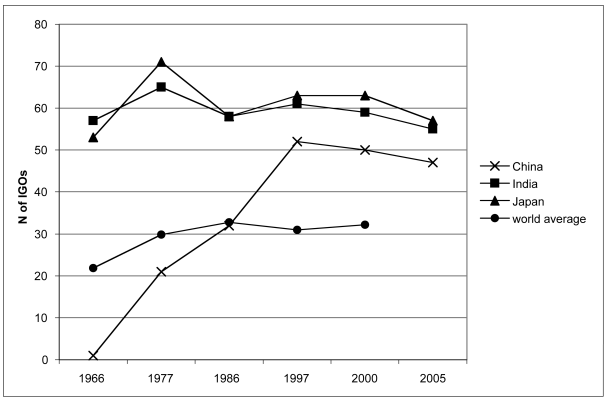

Figure 7: Trends in China's Membership in International Governmental Organizations

than unilaterally by the United States or U.S.-dominated coalitions of the willing). In some cases, U.S. opposition to the dominant norms of the system has had Chinese support, as with joint U.S. and Chinese opposition to international efforts to control small arms trafficking, eliminate the death penalty, or set up an International Criminal Court.

In sum, different indicators of "rising" lead to different conclusions about China's ability to catch up with the dominant state in the system, the United States (see Table 1). By our rough "back of the envelope" calculation for the "historical," "visibility," and "influence" definitions, China can uncontroversially be said to be rising. As for the "threat to core interests" definition, it is unclear how much China's development of an anti-access or area denial capability fundamentally changes the U.S. ability to project power and defend its interests in Asia. As the Chinese note, for every sword there is a shield, and for every shield there is a sword. The most dramatic potential threat to U.S. military operations in the region—a fully deployed anti-ship ballistic missile capability—is still some time off, and the United States is not standing still in developing countermeasures.

As for the variants of the "size" definition, unpacked in previous sections, relative indicators generally suggest China is rising, whereas absolute difference indicators suggest "not yet." Finally, concerning the "threat to international order" definition, the above discussion demonstrates that it is unclear whether China's approach to the major norms and institutions of the post-World War II American-dominated international order (to the extent that it exists, and acknowledging the contradictions among many of these norms) constitutes a challenge, an acceptance, or something in between. Smart people have argued for each.

Despite the widespread disagreement on material definitions and indicators about how to define and measure China's "rise," there is one definition by which there is almost no controversy and for which the verdict is unanimous that China

Table 1: Summary of Definitions of "Rising"

Definition of "rising"	**Is China "rising"?**
Historical	Yes
Visibility	Yes
Influence	Yes
Threat to the hegemon's core security interests	Unclear
Size	
as a proportion of the hegemon's power	Yes
closing the absolute gap in the hegemon's power advantage – "catching up"	No (not yet)
Threat to the hegemon's order	No?

is, in fact, rising: contemporary discourse. This leads us to a seventh definition: an inter-subjective definition. The vast majority of American, Chinese, and global commentary assumes without question that China is rising. As Figures 8 and 9 demonstrate, there has been a sharp rise in the number of references to "China rising" across both the English- and Chinese-language media discourse.

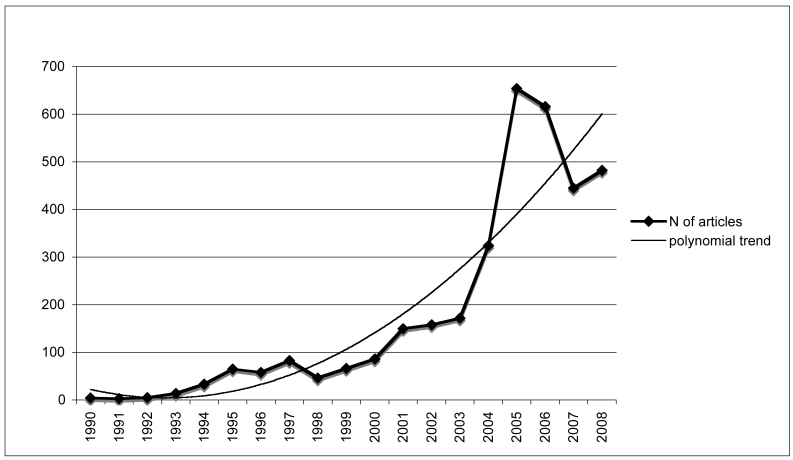

Figure 8: Frequency of Articles Referencing "Rising China"
(Source: LexisNexis General News)

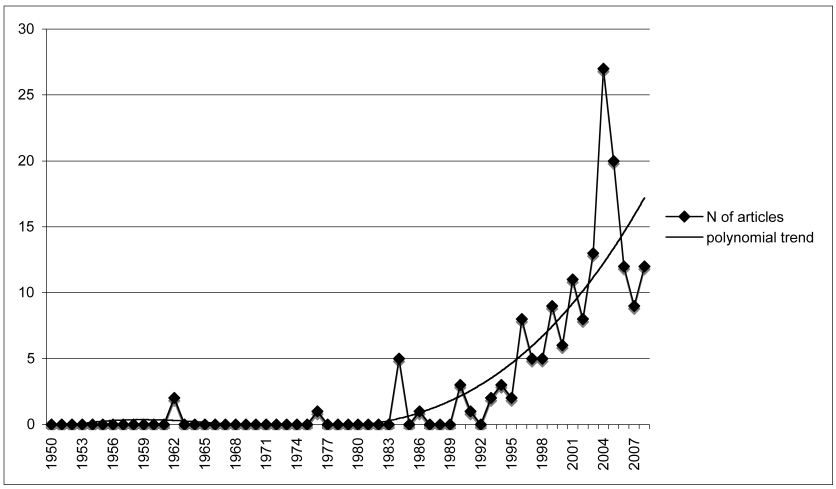

Figure 9: Frequency of Articles Referencing "China's Rise" (中国的崛起) in the *People's Daily*

Why does this discourse matter? In the context of the inconclusiveness of the range of other indicators cited here, these figures suggest that there may be a disjunction between material indicators of rising and inter-subjective estimates. This suggests, in turn, that what matters most for predicting the future trajectory of U.S.-China relations is not the numbers on the balance sheet, but what leaders in the United States and China believe to be the case, because they will act according to these beliefs.

If this is the case, then analyzing the interaction of U.S. and Chinese perceptions of rising Chinese power is important for understanding the prospects for conflict and cooperation in the relationship. As a preliminary analytical exercise, one can conceive of a minimum of four logical outcomes in the interaction of U.S. and Chinese leadership perceptions of China's rise (see Table 2).

One possibility is that the two sides agree that China is indeed rising (regardless of whether it is or is not rising according to the definitions outlined earlier). This may give rise to an acute security dilemma, as the United States adopts diplomatic and military strategies designed to defend its hegemonic status, whereas China adopts what it believes are defensive strategies designed to prevent the United States from constraining or preventing China's rise. Security dilemma dynamics are difficult to dampen, but in principle they are amenable to credible information about the intentions of the two sides.

Another possibility is that the U.S. side believes China is rising, whereas Chinese leaders do not. This could lead to American responses intended by the United States to manage China's rise that Chinese leaders believe to be an overreaction to their vulnerable status. Perhaps even more than in a security dilemma, Chinese leaders are likely to interpret the stronger American side's aggressive response as an unjustifiable existential threat, aimed at suppressing China's future development and security.

A third possibility is that U.S. leaders do not perceive a dramatic rise in Chinese power, whereas Chinese leaders believe their power is indeed rising.

Table 2: Interactions between American and Chinese Inter-subjective Understandings of China's Rise.

		Does the rising power think it is rising?	
		Yes	**No**
Does the hegemon think the rising power is rising?	**Yes**	*acute security dilemma dynamics*	*hegemon over-reacts; self-fulfilling prophecy*
	No	*status inconsistency drives rising power policy*	*satisfaction with status quo*

China might then perceive that the United States is denying—whether the United States is witting or not—China's desired status. If so, status inconsistency dynamics could then drive China's response, resulting in a renewed effort to use China's accretion of power to close the gap between its deserved and ascribed status. Chinese actions would be designed to "get the attention" of the United States, but could provoke a confrontation.

A final possibility is that neither side sees China's power as rising relative to the United States. For the United States, this would signal China's essential satisfaction with the uneven distribution of power. For China, this would signal U.S. acceptance of China's existence, its internal political system, and its external interests. This would, of course, be the most benign outcome.

The evidence about discourse on both sides suggests that the first possibility is more likely to capture the current U.S.-China relationship than the other three. This is not to suggest that security dilemma dynamics are unavoidable. Voices on both sides believe that these dynamics can be mitigated. Sometimes these arguments point to the constraining effect of economic interdependence, where mutual economic benefit trumps any and all of the conflict dynamics possible in the first three outcomes. Sometimes these arguments suggest that the environmental, social, and legitimacy problems currently faced by China, combined with post-9/11 and post-financial crisis limits on American hegemony, will essentially move the relationship closer to the last possibility. The empirical question is which of all these discourses is likely to dominate the decision-making processes in each country in the coming years.

ENDNOTES

1. For a fuller development of the arguments in this paper, see Sheena Chestnut and Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is China Rising?" in Eva Paus, Penelope Prime, and Jon Western, eds., *Global Giant: Is China Changing the Rules of the Game?* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

2. Some American analysts worry that China is beginning to develop technologies that could challenge U.S. technological and economic dominance, and that—linked to organizational innovation—may improve China's ability to exploit the next revolution in military affairs to the disadvantage of the United States. Some point, for example, to the potential for Chinese anti-ship ballistic missiles to neutralize U.S. aircraft carrier operations, which are at the heart of U.S. power projection in the Pacific.

3. We thank Alex Liebman for this point.