

Back to Bipolarity

Jennifer Lind

How China's Rise Transformed the Balance of Power

From fears of a “missile gap” and a rapidly growing Soviet economy, to “Japan as Number One” and China’s rise, observers of international politics routinely debate the endurance of U.S. power in the face of rising challengers. Today is no exception—after four decades of China’s economic rise, scholars and policy-makers dispute the nature of the emerging system. Some say that unipolarity endures, that China will not become a “superpower” capable of overtaking the United States, or that Chinese power has peaked.¹ By contrast, some see China as a peer competitor and the United States’ “pacing challenge.”² Still others view the world as multipolar, pointing to Indian economic growth, Russian resurgence, and the emergence of other influential middle powers.³

Jennifer Lind is an Associate Professor of Government at Dartmouth College, an Associate Fellow at Chatham House, London, and a Faculty Associate at the Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies at Harvard University.

The author is grateful for generous and helpful feedback from Stephen Brooks, Jeffrey Ding, Jeffrey Friedman, Yusaku Horiuchi, Jason Lyall, Michael Mastanduno, Cullen Nutt, Andrew Payne, Barry Posen, Daryl Press, Øystein Tunsjø, Benjamin Valentino, and William Wohlforth. The author also thanks the anonymous reviewers as well as students and faculty at University of Notre Dame, University of Oxford, and Texas A&M University for valuable comments.

1. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China’s Rise and the Fate of America’s Global Position,” *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Winter 2015/16), pp. 7–53, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00225; Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World’s Sole Superpower* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015). On “peak China,” see Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2022).

2. “Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy,” U.S. Department of Defense, March 28, 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/28/2002964702/-1/-1/1/NDS-FACT-SHEET.PDF>. Arguing for bipolarity is Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostuctural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021); Xuetong Yan, “Emerging Bipolarity in the Current Global Order,” *China-US Focus* (blog), <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/emerging-bipolarity-in-the-current-global-order/>; Cliff Kupchan, “Bipolarity Is Back: Why It Matters,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (October 2021), pp. 123–139, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.2020457>; Xuetong Yan, “2019 Nian Kaiqile Shijie Liangji Geju” [The bipolar world begins in 2019], *Contemporary International Relations*, No. 1 (2020), pp. 6–8.

3. Emma Ashford and Evan Cooper, “Yes, the World Is Multipolar: And That Isn’t Bad for the United States,” *Foreign Policy*, October 3, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/05/usa-china-multipolar-bipolar-unipolar/>; Qin Yaqing, “Shijie zhixu de biange: Cong baquan dao baorong xing duobian zhuyi” [The transformation of the world order: From hegemony to inclusive multi-

Understanding the balance of power is critical. Great powers matter as a category because as they compete for influence and control, their activities powerfully affect global political stability, prosperity, and international order. The number of great powers matters, too. Scholars argue that different configurations of power (i.e., uni-, bi-, or multipolarity) bring different levels and types of dangers,⁴ and transitions in the balance of power raise the risk of crises and wars.⁵ Furthermore, arguments about polarity are often nested within broader foreign policy debates. Today in the United States, for example, some commentators advocate for the United States to arm Ukraine and Israel, whereas others urge Washington to prioritize its attention and resources on the superpower competition in Asia and require greater burden sharing by its allies.⁶

Although understanding polarity and the balance of power is vital, academic and popular debates exhibit significant discord about how to define and measure power and how much power a great power needs.⁷ Observers fre-

lateralism], *Asia-Pacific Security and Maritime Studies*, No. 2 (2021), pp. 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.19780/j.cnki.2096-0484.20210318.001>. For a contrary view, see: Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “The Myth of Multipolarity: American Power’s Staying Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 18, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china-multipolarity-myth>; Jo Inge Bekkevold, “No, the World Is Not Multipolar,” *Foreign Policy*, September 22, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/22/multipolar-world-bipolar-power-geopolitics-business-strategy-china-united-states-india/>.

4. Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics*; Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014); William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 5–41, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228899560031>.

5. On power transition, see: Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3rd ed (New York: Free Press, 1988); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

6. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial*; Elbridge A. Colby, “America Must Face Reality and Prioritise China over Europe,” *Financial Times*, May 23, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/b423aa65-b9cb-4ba5-9c7d-f67dc289a18f>; J. D. Vance, “The Math in Ukraine Doesn’t Add Up,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/12/opinion/jd-vance-ukraine.html>.

7. The literature on power and great power is vast. See, for example: Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*; Brooks and Wohlforth, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers”; Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004); Jack S. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System: 1495–1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

quently debate great power rise and fall without identifying a threshold at which a state can be said to have joined the great power ranks.

What is the balance of power today? To contribute to this—and future—debates, this article creates a method for comparing national power. I use an inductive approach that relies on an agreed-upon list of great powers in previous international systems (1820–1990). I use this list to empirically validate common metrics of measuring power and identify thresholds that a country needs to surmount in order to join the great power ranks. Finally, I use this method to assess the contemporary balance.

This exercise yields three key findings. First, the historical analysis reflects significant imbalances in the global balance of power. Great powers often trailed the leading state substantially in terms of national capabilities: for example, with only a quarter or a third of the leading state's gross domestic product (GDP). Those countries nonetheless competed vigorously against other great powers and the leading state. Notably, the Soviet Union managed for decades to sustain a security competition that consumed the diplomatic and military energies of the United States, despite having only about 44 percent of U.S. GDP at the Soviet peak. Debates about China catching up or surpassing the United States thus use the wrong benchmark. Great powers need nowhere near parity with the leader to challenge it politically and militarily.

Second, the contemporary international system has shifted into bipolarity. Over the past two decades, China has risen to become a great power and a superpower. On the metrics validated here, China possesses capabilities as strong as—or far stronger—than those of typical great powers throughout history. China is thus capable of engaging in a serious security competition or war against the system's most powerful state. In fact, China is a superpower: one of the strongest countries in the world, with a large gap between it and the next most powerful state. On most metrics, China exceeds the Soviet Union at its peak, and the two countries share notable similarities in their great power portfolios. If the USSR was a superpower then, China is one today. The world is bipolar.

Third, today's international system has *two* great powers, not more, as commentators often assert.⁸ Japan and Germany possess great power economic capabilities but appear unlikely to build the military power required to put them

8. Ashford and Cooper, "Yes, the World Is Multipolar"; Paul Poast, "The Signs of a Multipolar World Are All around Us," *World Politics Review*, May 26, 2023, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/multipolarity-us-vs-china-russia-superpower-hegemony/>.

in the great power ranks. India and Russia sit close to the economic thresholds but far below the threshold for military expenditure. These four countries are highly influential regional powers—but great powers they are not.

Findings from this article have important implications for international politics. First, the shift to bipolarity explains the deterioration in U.S.-China relations, which increasingly reflect the hyper-vigilant, hyper-competitive character of a bipolar competition. Superpower China will want to protect its global interests—interests that will often clash with those of the United States. Beijing will continue to advance its vision of international order for numerous issues (e.g., conflict resolution, human rights, international development and finance, peacekeeping, technology standards, and trade).⁹

Bipolarity will also likely transform U.S. grand strategy and alliances. The onset of unipolarity in the 1990s led the United States to expand its foreign policy ambitions, while many U.S. allies reduced their military capabilities.¹⁰ The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in particular, grew increasingly lopsided in terms of leadership and resources. Now, as the international system has shifted into bipolarity, observers are questioning the sustainability of a U.S. grand strategy designed for a unipolar era.¹¹

This article develops these arguments as follows. I begin by describing how political scientists conceptualize and measure power. I next introduce a method for comparing national power, which, when used with data from historical systems, validates metrics for measuring power and identifies a threshold at which a rising state has joined the great power ranks. Section three applies this method to the contemporary system. Observers often argue that several trends (e.g., demographic, economic, and political) are slowing China's

9. Elizabeth Economy, "China's Alternative Order: And What America Should Learn From It," *Foreign Affairs*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-alternative-order-xi-jinping-elizabeth-economy>; Nadège Rolland, ed., *An Emerging China-Centric Order: China's Vision for a New World Order in Practice*, NBR Special Report 87 (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2020), https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr87_aug2020.pdf; Michael J. Mazarr, Timothy R. Heath, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *China and the International Order* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018); Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walter, *China, the United States, and Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

10. Joseph S. Nye Jr., "The Case for Deep Engagement," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1, 1995, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1995-07-01/case-deep-engagement>; Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Vintage, 2004).

11. See, for example, Colby, *The Strategy of Denial*; Stephen Wertheim, "The Price of Primacy: Why America Shouldn't Dominate the World," *Foreign Affairs*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-02-10/price-primacy>. Also see Rachel Rizzo and Michael Benhamou, "Europeanize NATO to Save It," *Defense One*, June 11, 2024, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2024/06/europeanize-nato-save-it/397299/>.

economic growth and will weaken it geopolitically and militarily.¹² I discuss this debate in the penultimate section. I argue that regardless of slowing growth, and regardless of whether it overtakes the United States, China is already capable of engaging in a serious security competition with it. Barring domestic political upheaval, China will remain a great power and a formidable geopolitical competitor into the foreseeable future.

Debating Power and Polarity

Scholars and political leaders have long distinguished great powers for their outsized role in international politics. Robert Gilpin argues that great powers “establish and enforce the basic rules and rights that influence their own behavior and that of the lesser states in the system.”¹³ Historically, competition among the great powers led them to pursue imperialism, extraction, and colonization that inflicted vast suffering.¹⁴ Great powers fight wars that kill thousands, hundreds of thousands, or millions of people around the world. In the aftermath of wars, great powers draw borders and write rules of international order.¹⁵ Great powers vie for territory and influence, directly and indirectly.¹⁶ They subvert one another; they create spheres and buffers; they cultivate protégés, which they support materially and diplomatically;¹⁷ and they sub-

12. Brands and Beckley, *Danger Zone*; Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, “The End of China’s Rise: Beijing Is Running Out of Time to Remake the World,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 1, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-10-01/end-chinas-rise>.

13. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, p. 30. Also see: Kyle M. Lascurettes, *Orders of Exclusion: Great Powers and the Strategic Sources of Foundational Rules in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Rolland, *An Emerging China-Centric Order*; Jeffrey W. Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

14. Howard W. French, *Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War* (New York: Liveright, 2021); Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law* (New York: Cambridge, 2005).

15. Lascurettes, *Orders of Exclusion*; Legro, *Rethinking the World*; Stacie E. Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Ikenberry, *After Victory*.

16. Allison, *Destined for War*; Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015); Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

17. On protégés, see: David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Roseanne W. McManus and Keren Yarhi-Milo, “The Logic of ‘Offstage’ Signaling: Domestic Politics, Regime Type, and Major Power-Protégé Relations,” *International Organization*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (Fall 2017), pp. 701–733, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818317000297>.

vert uncooperative governments or support coup plotters in countries of strategic interest.¹⁸ Great powers “have an ongoing drive to expand their economic and commercial power spheres beyond their borders,” which they do by building navies and other power-projection forces.¹⁹ Although scholars expected the onset of nuclear technology to dampen great power competition, it continues apace.²⁰

The number of great powers in the world matters; scholars argue that unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar systems bring different levels and types of dangers.²¹ Some say that multipolar systems (three or more great powers) are the most unstable because they have the highest number of great powers, which increases the importance, fluidity, and uncertainty of alliance-making.

Bipolar systems, by contrast, feature two great powers.²² Hans Morgenthau argues that during the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union were “superpowers” (relative to the European great powers) because they had the strongest national capabilities in the world, and because of the vast gap between their power relative to the “next in rank.”²³ These two superpowers—with different domestic political systems, ideologies, and views of international order—presided over alliance systems and regional orders.²⁴

On great power subversion, see William C. Wohlforth, “Realism and Great Power Subversion,” *International Relations*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2020), pp. 459–481, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117820968858>.

18. Lindsey A. O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018). On coups and irregular war, see: Amanda Taub, “Coups Are on the Rise. Why?,” *New York Times*, September 13, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/13/world/europe/interpreter-coups-web.html>; Jacob Shapiro and Liam Collins, “Great Power Competition Will Drive Irregular Conflicts,” *War on the Rocks*, April 8, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/04/great-power-competition-will-drive-irregular-conflicts/>.

19. Dale C. Copeland, *A World Safe for Commerce: American Foreign Policy from the Revolution to the Rise of China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024).

20. Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

21. Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics*; Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World”; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Barry R. Posen, “From Unipolarity to Multipolarity: Transition in Sight?,” in G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 317–341.

22. William T. R. Fox, *The Super-Powers: The United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union—Their Responsibility for Peace* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1944); Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics*.

23. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), pp. 324–326. Also see Posen, “From Unipolarity to Multipolarity,” p. 321; Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics*, chap. 2.

24. Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers*; Fox, *The Super-Powers*; Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1944).

Scholars view bipolar systems as more stable because they lack the fluidity and miscalculation associated with multipolarity.²⁵ But superpowers, argues Barry Posen, are obsessed with each other's actions and with maintaining a favorable balance of economic, military, and technological power. All these traits, Posen writes, make bipolarity highly competitive: "a system of chronic overreaction."²⁶ In the Cold War, the two superpowers competed for allies and influence and viewed the other's gains as losses.

The third type of system, unipolarity, characterized the international system after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Some scholars suggest that a system with a single great power is the most stable of the three types. According to William Wohlforth, the unipole deters balancing and reduces the risk of war through miscalculation because it is easy for potential challengers to perceive its dominance.²⁷ Other scholars, however, warn that with its significant power advantage, the unipole may be tempted to frequently use force against smaller countries.²⁸ Because a shift to bipolarity or multipolarity would bring different dangers, it is vital to understand how the rise of China or other countries may have altered the international system.

DEFINING POWER—AND GREAT POWER

The concept of power is often central to both foreign policy questions and international relations theories. The policy community, comments J. Dana Stuster, probably spends too little time thinking about a definition of great power, but "the academic community has arguably done too much," producing a vast literature with proliferating definitions.²⁹ Indeed, the literature on

25. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 168.

26. Barry R. Posen, "Emerging Multipolarity: Why Should We Care?," *Current History*, Vol. 108, No. 721 (2009), p. 349, <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2009.108.721.347>. On the periphery in bipolarity, see Michael C. Desch, "The Keys That Lock Up the World: Identifying American Interests in the Periphery," *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Summer 1989), pp. 86–121, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538766>.

27. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World."

28. Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer 2000), pp. 5–41, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228800560372>. On the unipole's "freedom to roam," see Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*.

29. J. Dana Stuster, "Who Are You Calling a Great Power?," *Lawfare* (blog), Brookings Institution, January 15, 2023, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/who-are-you-calling-great-power>. For superb overviews of how to conceptualize and measure power, see Ashley J. Tellis et al., *Measuring National Power in the Postindustrial Age* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2000), https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1110.html; Michael Beckley, "The Power of Nations: Measuring What Matters," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Fall 2018), pp. 7–44, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00328; Beckley, *Unrivaled*; Brooks and Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers";

national power is immense.³⁰ Scholars debate whether to conceptualize power as a country's ability to produce desired outcomes or to define and measure power as a set of capabilities a state possesses.³¹

Scholars advocating the latter discuss a range of material as well as nonmaterial capabilities. For material factors, scholars typically emphasize population size, economic wealth, technological capabilities, and military might.³² Military power stems from both conventional and nuclear forces.³³ Although material power is clearly important in great power competition and war-fighting, scholars note that battlefield performance is driven as much by the "software" of war-fighting as by "hardware."³⁴ Nonmaterial sources of power include a country's organizational capacity, national unity, moral leadership, status, or soft power—a state's ability to get what it wants through attraction and emulation.³⁵

Scholars also debate how "great" a great power must be. For example, Jack Levy looks for a "high level of military capabilities relative to other states" and expects great powers to have "relative self-sufficiency with respect to secu-

Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

30. On defining and measuring great power, see Michael J. Mazarr, *The Societal Foundations of National Competitiveness* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA499-1.html; Beckley, *Unrivaled*; Beckley, "The Power of Nations"; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*; Tellis et al., *Measuring National Power*; Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System*.

31. William C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Beckley, *Unrivaled*.

32. Mazarr, "The Societal Foundations of National Competitiveness"; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*; Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, ed. Hedley Bull and Carsten Holbraad (Leicester, UK: Leicester University Press; London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1978); Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

33. On nuclear weapons and military power, see: Glenn H. Snyder, "Balance of Power in the Missile Age," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1960), pp. 21–34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24355525>; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 128–133.

34. Jason Lyall, *Divided Armies: Inequality and Battlefield Performance in Modern War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020); Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Risa A. Brooks and Elizabeth A. Stanley, eds., *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

35. On moral leadership, see: Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Wight, *Power Politics*. On soft power, see Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004). On legitimacy, see Goddard, *When Right Makes Might*. On status, see: T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Thomas J. Volgy et al., eds., *Major Powers and the Quest for Status in International Politics: Global and Regional Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

arity.”³⁶ John Mearsheimer writes that a great power has “sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world.”³⁷ Paul Kennedy requires a great power to “[hold] its own against any other nation.”³⁸ Nuno Monteiro contends that a great power must be able to “engage unaided in sustained politico-military operations in at least one other relevant region of the globe beyond its own on a level similar to the most powerful state in the system.”³⁹ In sum, scholars disagree about both the ingredients of power and how much of it a great power needs.

MEASURING POWER

Debates about power and great power also offer a variety of metrics for measuring the elusive concept of power. A method often used in the power transition literature is the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC).⁴⁰ This influential project relies on six indicators of demographic, economic, and military power. Though the index captures the vital dimension of a country’s scale, scholars note that it omits a country’s level of sophistication—in human capital, governance, organization, technology, and so forth.⁴¹ Thus, since the information age, the index has yielded dubious codings of the balance of power.

International relations scholars commonly rely on a handful of metrics to compare national power. To measure a country’s overall demographic and economic scale, scholars often assess its aggregate *GDP*.⁴² This metric is regularly and (for most countries) reliably measured by international organiza-

36. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System*, pp. 15–16.

37. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 5.

38. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, p. 539.

39. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*, p. 44.

40. J. David Singer, “Reconstructing the Correlates of War Dataset on Material Capabilities of States, 1816–1985,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1988), pp. 115–132, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050628808434695>; J. David Singer and Melvin Small, “The Composition and Status Ordering of the International System: 1815–1940,” *World Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1966), pp. 236–282, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009697>.

41. On the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC), see Carsten Rauch, “Challenging the Power Consensus: GDP, CINC, and Power Transition Theory,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2017), pp. 642–664, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1336389>. CINC codes the Soviet Union as overtaking U.S. power in the 1970s—just as the Soviet Union’s failure to keep up with the technological cutting edge was accelerating its decline. Similarly, CINC puts China near parity with the United States in the 1980s, a conclusion few would support. CINC also ranks India in 2007 as the world’s third-largest power, far ahead of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom; again, few experts would endorse this coding.

42. On conceptual and other problems with GDP, see Diane Coyle, *GDP: A Brief but Affectionate History*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015). For discussion, see: Beckley, *Un-*

tions.⁴³ Angus Maddison's project estimates GDP dating back hundreds of years.⁴⁴ For eras that predate GDP data, other scholars use proxies (e.g., energy consumption) to approximate a country's economic power.⁴⁵

Scholars argue that although GDP captures a country's aggregate economic scale, it fails to capture a country's economic sophistication. In other words, a large GDP might be the result of a huge population producing at subsistence levels. Such a country would likely lack the human capital, organization, technological skill, and surplus wealth (wealth above what is consumed) for discretionary spending such as military expenditure.⁴⁶ So GDP used alone risks overestimating the power of poor, populous countries. Arguing that attributes such as organizational capacity and surplus wealth are key components of national power, analysts often use *GDP per capita* as a proxy for a country's level of sophistication.

Michael Beckley argues that "gross" indicators such as CINC scores or GDP neglect to consider many important costs.⁴⁷ "A country with a big population," Beckley writes, "might produce vast output and field a large army, but it also may bear massive welfare and security burdens that drain its wealth and bog down its military, leaving it with few resources for power projection abroad."⁴⁸ Because both GDP and *GDP per capita* capture key dimensions of power, Beckley and other scholars recommend multiplying the two metrics together: *GDP x GDP per capita* (what I call the "composite" metric).⁴⁹

What about measuring military power? States might possess both conven-

rivalled; Brooks and Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers"; Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Spring 2011), pp. 7–44, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00034. On the interchangeability of GDP with CINC, see Rauch, "Challenging the Power Consensus"; Organski and Kugler, *The War Ledger*.

43. On problems with national accounting in authoritarian regimes, see Jeremy L. Wallace, *Seeking Truth and Hiding Facts: Information, Ideology, and Authoritarianism in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

44. Angus Maddison, *The World Economy: Historical Statistics* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003); Rauch, "Challenging the Power Consensus," p. 647.

45. See, for example, Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.

46. Brooks and Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers"; Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*; Therese Anders, Christopher J. Fariss, and Jonathan N. Markowitz, "Bread before Guns or Butter: Introducing Surplus Domestic Product (SDP)," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (2020), pp. 392–405, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa013>.

47. Beckley, "The Power of Nations"; Beckley, *Unrivaled*.

48. Beckley, "The Power of Nations," p. 19; Anders, Fariss, and Markowitz, "Bread before Guns or Butter."

49. Beckley, *Unrivaled*, p. 19; Paul Bairoch, "International Industrialization Levels from 1750 to 1980," *Journal of European Economic History*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Fall 1982), p. 282.

tional and nuclear capabilities for war-fighting.⁵⁰ The most compelling analyses of a state's ability to project power identify specific countries and analyze interactively their ability to prevail in a given mission against each other.⁵¹ But when comparing countries' military power in a general sense, scholars typically reach for two common metrics related to the projection of conventional military power: a country's *military expenditure* and number of *mobilized military personnel*. Scholars warn, however, that these indicators do not capture a country's technological sophistication or battlefield effectiveness.⁵²

A Method for Comparing National Power

International relations scholars and policymakers evince little agreement about how to define or measure a key variable in international politics, but, as Edward Vose Gulick writes, "statesmen . . . must measure power, regardless of the primitive character of the scales at their disposal."⁵³ This article contributes to current and future debates by creating an inductive method for comparing national power. To be clear, I neither define power nor offer new metrics for measuring it.

I begin with a list, generated by historians and political scientists, of great powers in different historical systems (1820–1990).⁵⁴ This list reflects a "high scholarly consensus on the composition of this oligarchy," as well as consensus about historical periodization.⁵⁵ I take this list as ground truth: These are the great powers, according to scholars' assessments of myriad great power attrib-

50. Nuclear weapons bolster a country's defense and war-fighting capabilities, but they are not sufficient for great power. On the primacy of conventional military forces in the balance of power, see Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 128–133.

51. On campaign analysis, see Rachel Tecott Metz and Andrew Halterman, "The Case for Campaign Analysis: A Method for Studying Military Operations," *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Spring 2021), pp. 44–83, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00408. On war-gaming, see Erik Lin-Greenberg, Reid B. C. Pauly, and Jacquelyn G. Schneider, "Wargaming for International Relations Research," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2022), pp. 83–109, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661211064090>.

52. Mark Souva, "Material Military Power: A Country-Year Measure of Military Power, 1865–2019," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 60, No. 6 (2023), pp. 1002–1009, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221112970>.

53. Edward Vose Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power: A Case History of the Theory and Practice of One of the Great Concepts of European Statecraft* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955), p. 27.

54. Melvin Small and J. David Singer, *Resort to Arms: International and Civil Wars, 1816–1980* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1982); J. David Singer and Melvin Small, *The Wages of War, 1816–1965: A Statistical Handbook* (New York: John Wiley, 1972).

55. Small and Singer, *Resort to Arms*, p. 45. For a summary of scholars' identifications of the great powers, see: Vesna Danilovic, *When the Stakes Are High: Deterrence and Conflict among Major Powers*

Table 1. Great Powers and Leading States, 1820–1990

System	Great powers	Leading state
1820–1850	Austria, France, Prussia, Russia, United Kingdom	United Kingdom
1860–1890	Austria, France, Italy, Prussia, Russia, United Kingdom	United Kingdom
1900–1940	Austria (to 1918), France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia/ Soviet Union, United Kingdom, United States	United States
1950–1990	China, France, Germany, Soviet Union, United Kingdom, United States	United States

utes (material and nonmaterial). For each system I also note the country that scholars perceive as the leading state (see table 1).⁵⁶

I assess a country's national capabilities as a ratio relative to those of the leading state. Thus, the GDP metric is the ratio of a great power's GDP to the leading state's GDP. For the systems in which the United States was the leading state, I evaluate France's GDP ratio, for example, as France's GDP to U.S. GDP (see table 2).

With this method I make two contributions. First, it shows which of the metrics that scholars commonly use do a good job of approximating the list of countries that scholars believe to be great powers. For example, if GDP is a good measurement of great power, it should reliably re-create the list of great powers—in other words, the countries on that list should have large GDPs. If using the metric adds other countries that are not on the list, this suggests it is a flawed metric. For economic power, I assess three metrics: GDP, GDP per

(Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System*; Wight, *Power Politics*. Also see Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, pp. 154, 199. There is less agreement about which states constitute the great powers after 1950, when scholars started to distinguish superpowers from great powers. Kenneth Waltz excludes the European powers after 1945, leaving the two superpowers as the only great powers. Furthermore, some scholars (e.g., J. David Singer and Melvin Small; Jack Levy) regard China as a great power, whereas others (Kenneth Waltz; A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler) leave China off the list. The method in this article contributes to this debate.

56. The list of great powers on which this study relies was published during the Cold War, thus I have included data to 1990. Including data beyond 1990 yields nearly identical results. Although scholars generally identify the leading state of the system, this was not clear for 1820. Paul Kennedy argues that Russia dominated the European great power system militarily but “was losing ground in an alarming way.” Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, p. 170. Britain eclipsed Russia economically during the industrial revolution and brought its technological advantages to the battlefield. Russia fell behind technologically, leading in great part to its defeat in the Crimean War. Based on its higher composite score, I code the United Kingdom as the leading state for 1820 and 1860.

Table 2. Ratios for Comparing National Power

Metric	Metric formula
GDP ratio	great power GDP / leading state GDP
GDP per capita ratio	great power GDP per capita / leading state GDP per capita
Composite ratio	great power GDP \times GDP per capita / leading state GDP \times GDP per capita
Military expenditure ratio	great power military expenditure / leading state military expenditure
Military personnel ratio	great power military personnel / leading state military personnel

capita, and the composite metric of GDP \times GDP per capita. For military power, I assess two metrics: military expenditure and military personnel. To perform well, a metric should reliably re-create the list of great powers while excluding non-great powers.

To be clear, these metrics are proxies for power—not definitions of power. The metrics that I assess all relate to a country's material power, but as noted, I offer neither a material nor nonmaterial definition of power; I offer no definition of power at all. Rather, my approach is inductive: I use agreed-upon lists of great powers in historical systems to assess which metrics reliably reconstruct those lists. When I conclude that the composite metric is a sound metric, that only means it is a good proxy for the highly multifaceted concept of power. Future research should explore which other metrics (including non-material ones) perform well in re-creating these historical systems. For example, scholars sometimes measure a country's status using metrics related to diplomatic representation (i.e., a country's sending and receiving of diplomats of different ranks).⁵⁷ Scholars can validate other metrics related to nonmaterial or soft power using the method presented here.

A second contribution from this analysis is that it identifies a threshold for great power. Debates about great power rise often assert that a country is a great power or is no longer a great power, or that it is catching up with or faces a large gap vis-à-vis a more powerful state. Yet such discussions often lack a threshold at which a country can be said to have reached the great power ranks. By inductively identifying a threshold for great power, this arti-

57. Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

cle improves the field's understanding of the dynamic process of great power rise and decline. Understanding thresholds for great power also helps with retroactive analyses of international politics, as scholars continue to study how changes in the balance of power affect the likelihood of war and other phenomena.⁵⁸ The concept of a threshold also informs contemporary debates. Has China joined the great power ranks? Has it declined out of them? Do other countries (e.g., India, Japan, Russia) exceed the threshold for great power? A method that enables us to see those countries' positions vis-à-vis great power thresholds—and on which metrics they are stronger or weaker—significantly enhances our understanding of world politics.

I use data from the previous historical systems to generate “dyad-decades” (a ratio of a given great power to a leading power calculated each decade). For GDP and GDP per capita data, I use economic data from Maddison's historical dataset.⁵⁹ I assess how much power a typical great power has relative to a leading state. Thus, I use the data to find what I call the “normal range” (i.e., the second and third quartiles) and the median of national capabilities among great powers. In other words, I measure how much power countries in the middle 50 percent of the distribution possess.

RESULTS: ECONOMIC POWER

I first share results related to economic power. Data from 1820 and 1860–1990 yielded seventy-six dyad-decades. Table 3 shows the normal range and the median scores for great powers according to economic metrics. Since 1820, the typical great power had a GDP within 17–45 percent of the leading state's GDP, with a median of 27 percent. The median GDP per capita among great powers was 59 percent of the leader's. The historical record thus shows that the threshold for great power is low in terms of GDP, higher for GDP per capita, and very low (8 percent) for the composite metric.

As noted, one test of the validity of these metrics is whether they distinguish between great powers and non-great powers. To check this, I used the three economic metrics to compare the great powers (1) with all other countries, and

58. Allison, *Destined for War*; Kori Schake, *Safe Passage: The Transition from British to American Hegemony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Daniel M. Kliman, *Fateful Transitions: How Democracies Manage Rising Powers, from the Eve of World War I to China's Ascendancy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

59. Angus Maddison, *Contours of the World Economy 1–2030 AD: Essays in Macro-Economic History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Maddison's data are expressed in constant 1990 Geary-Khamis or international dollars (adjusted for purchasing power parity). For the contemporary era, I supplement with data from the International Monetary Fund's World Economic Indicators, adjusted to 1990 constant purchasing power parity (PPP) international dollars.

Table 3. Economic Strength of Great Powers vs. Leading State

	Normal range (%)	Median (%)
GDP ratio	17–45	27
GDP per capita ratio	38–70	59
Composite ratio	8–28	15

SOURCE: Data from Angus Maddison, *Contours of the World Economy 1–2030 AD: Essays in Macro-Economic History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

NOTE: These numbers are based on economic data from 1820 and 1860–1990. 1830–1850 are excluded because of sparse data availability.

(2) with middle powers, using data from 1820, 1870, and 1900–1990. This generates 969 observations (dyad-decades); results are in figure 1. The axis along the bottom of each panel represents the leading state: that is, 0–100 percent of the leading state’s capabilities on that measure. This figure shows that two of the three metrics—GDP and the composite metric—successfully distinguish between great powers and other countries. As the middle panel shows, GDP per capita shows significant overlap among great powers, middle powers, and all non-great powers.

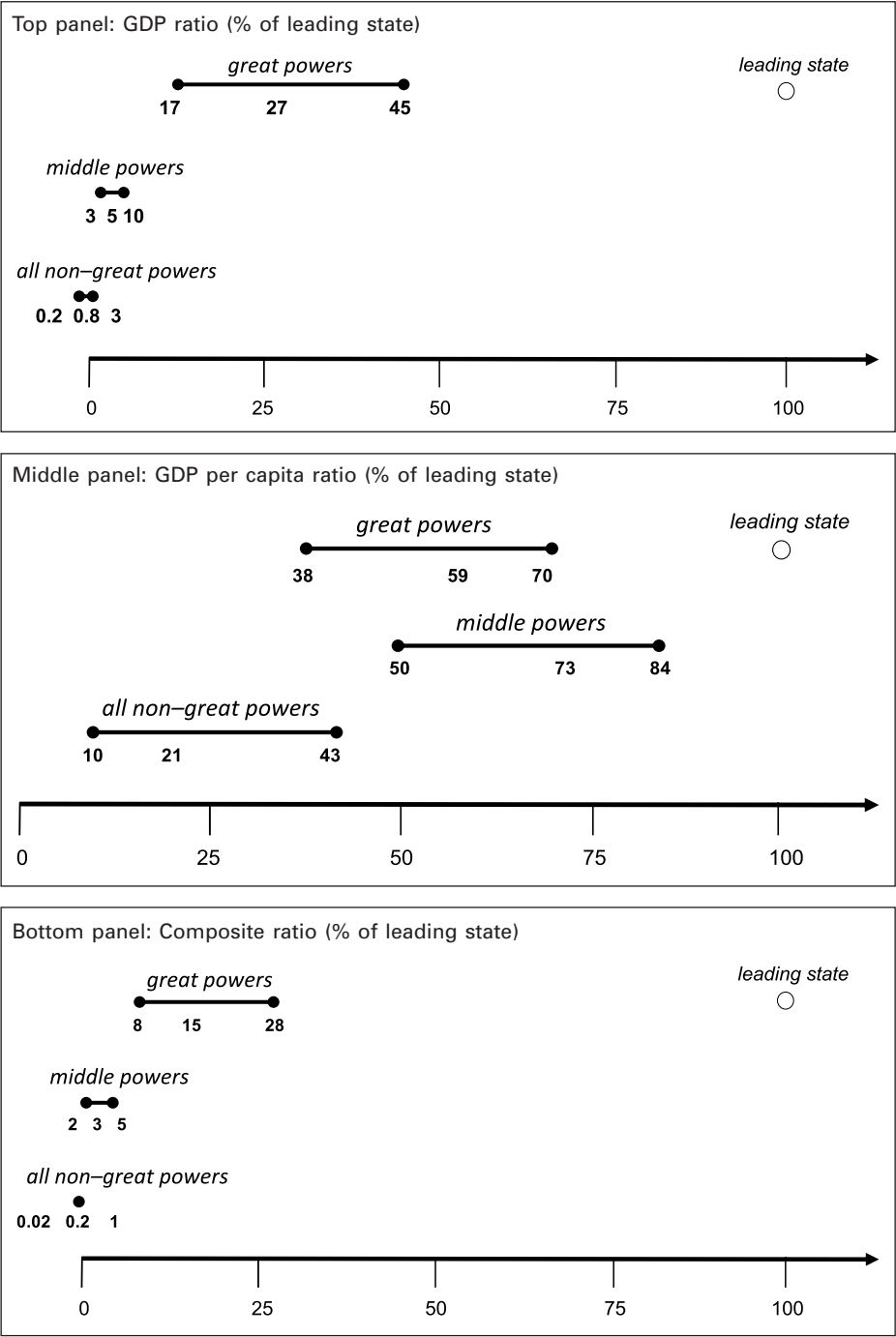
PROBLEMS WITH THE GDP PER CAPITA METRIC. This analysis shows that GDP per capita, which is commonly referenced in debates about great power, is not a sound metric for this purpose. To compare national capabilities, scholars understandably want to capture not just a country’s aggregate economic scale but also its technological sophistication, organizational competence, and so forth. Scholars argue that GDP per capita correlates with such factors, and countries with higher GDPs per capita will have greater “surplus” or “mobilizable” wealth that can be devoted to geopolitical and military competition.⁶⁰

The metric, however, suffers from several problems. First, as shown in the middle panel of figure 1, GDP per capita does not distinguish great powers from other countries. Consequently, many countries have *high* GDPs per capita but *are not* great powers.⁶¹ The reverse is also true; countries sometimes have *low* GDPs per capita but *are* great powers—that is, they can develop the requisite cutting-edge technology to compete with other great powers. For example, in the years before World War II, the GDP per capita for Japan was below or at the low end of the normal range of 38–70 percent. But scholars recognize Japan as a great power that effectively mobilized and deployed a massive military

60. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 62–63.

61. For an excellent discussion, see: Beckley, *Unrivaled*; Beckley, “The Power of Nations.”

Figure 1. Great Powers vs. Other Countries



SOURCE: Data from Maddison, *Contours of the World Economy*.
NOTE: The data are from 1820, 1870, and 1900–1990. The years covered were driven by data availability.

and fielded advanced weapons technology.⁶² The Soviet Union, too, had a GDP per capita that peaked at 37 percent, and indeed was lower for most of the Cold War. Yet in the early Cold War, the USSR led the world in chemistry, mathematics, and physics, produced world-class space and nuclear technologies, and Soviet scientists won numerous Nobel prizes.⁶³ Soviet leaders funded technological activities by depriving their people of the basic products that support a middle-class lifestyle. In sum, income gaps are not determinative in great power competition if the trailing country can produce the leading technologies of the day.

As a metric of national power, GDP per capita also suffers from logical problems. For example, the metric is a proxy for a state's technological sophistication. But the metric offers a national average, which obscures a country's highest level of technological performance. This obfuscation is most misleading in countries with significant regional heterogeneity, such as the USSR in the 1950s. In such cases, a country might simultaneously have many poor people as well as sectors that produce cutting-edge technology. The use of GDP per capita would bring down the national average, obscuring technological sophistication in parts of the economy. In sum, although scholars understandably seek a measurement of a country's level of sophistication, GDP per capita is a flawed metric both logically and (as this article shows) empirically.

RESULTS: MILITARY POWER

As described earlier, I evaluate the extent to which two metrics—military expenditure and military personnel—capture great power military capabilities. Data from historical systems (1820–1990) resulted in ninety-two dyad-decades, yielding the results shown in table 4. These data show that the median great power spent about half of the leading state's military expenditure, and historically raised much larger armies. That is, both leading states (the United

62. Mark R. Peattie, *Sunburst: The Rise of Japanese Naval Air Power, 1909–1941* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007); John Jordan, *Warships after Washington: The Development of Five Major Fleets 1922–1930* (Barnsley, UK: Seaforth, 2011); Carl Boyd and Akihiko Yoshida, *The Japanese Submarine Force and World War II* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012); Michael C. Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

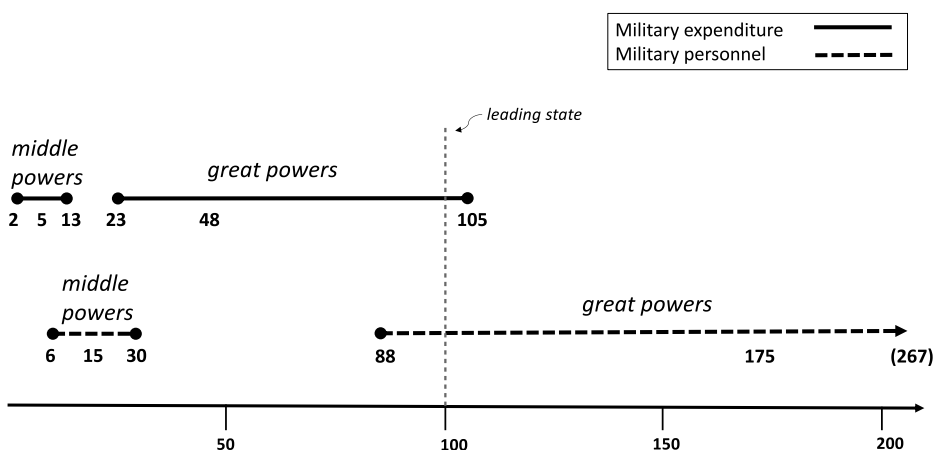
63. Loren R. Graham, *What Have We Learned about Science and Technology from the Russian Experience?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Loren R. Graham, ed., *Science and the Soviet Social Order* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Hiroshi Ichikawa, *Soviet Science and Engineering in the Shadow of the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

Table 4. Military Strength of Great Powers (% of Leading State), 1820–1990

	Normal range (%)	Median (%)
Military expenditure	23–105	48
Military personnel	88–267	175

SOURCE: Correlates of War Project, National Material Capabilities (NMC) Data, Version 5.0, 2010, <https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/national-material-capabilities/>.

Figure 2. Military Ratios, Great vs. Middle Powers (% of Leading State), 1820–1990



SOURCE: Data from Correlates of War Project, 2010.

Kingdom in the nineteenth century and the United States thereafter) raised smaller armies than other great powers.

These military metrics perform well in differentiating great powers from middle powers, as shown in figure 2. Whereas great powers spent 23–105 percent of the leading state's military expenditure, middle powers spent much less (2–13 percent). Similarly, middle powers raised vastly smaller armies.

These metrics also differentiate great powers from latent powers: countries with large populations and strong economic capabilities whose governments choose not to mobilize substantial military forces.⁶⁴ For example, Japan's economic development after World War II propelled the country past the thresh-

64. On latent powers, see Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 55.

old for great economic power. In 1980, Japan's composite score was 32 percent (well past the great power median of 15 percent). But Japan's military expenditure and military personnel (6 percent and 12 percent, respectively) were far below the thresholds for great power. Contemporary Germany, too, exceeds the threshold for great economic power, but its low level of military spending has kept it out of the great power ranks (as discussed below).

In sum, the inductive method introduced in this article relies on agreed-upon balances of power to evaluate metrics for measuring power and identify thresholds for great power. The military metrics, as well as the GDP and composite metrics, accurately replicate the balance of power and differentiate great powers from other countries. GDP per capita, however, is a flawed metric in debates about relative national power.

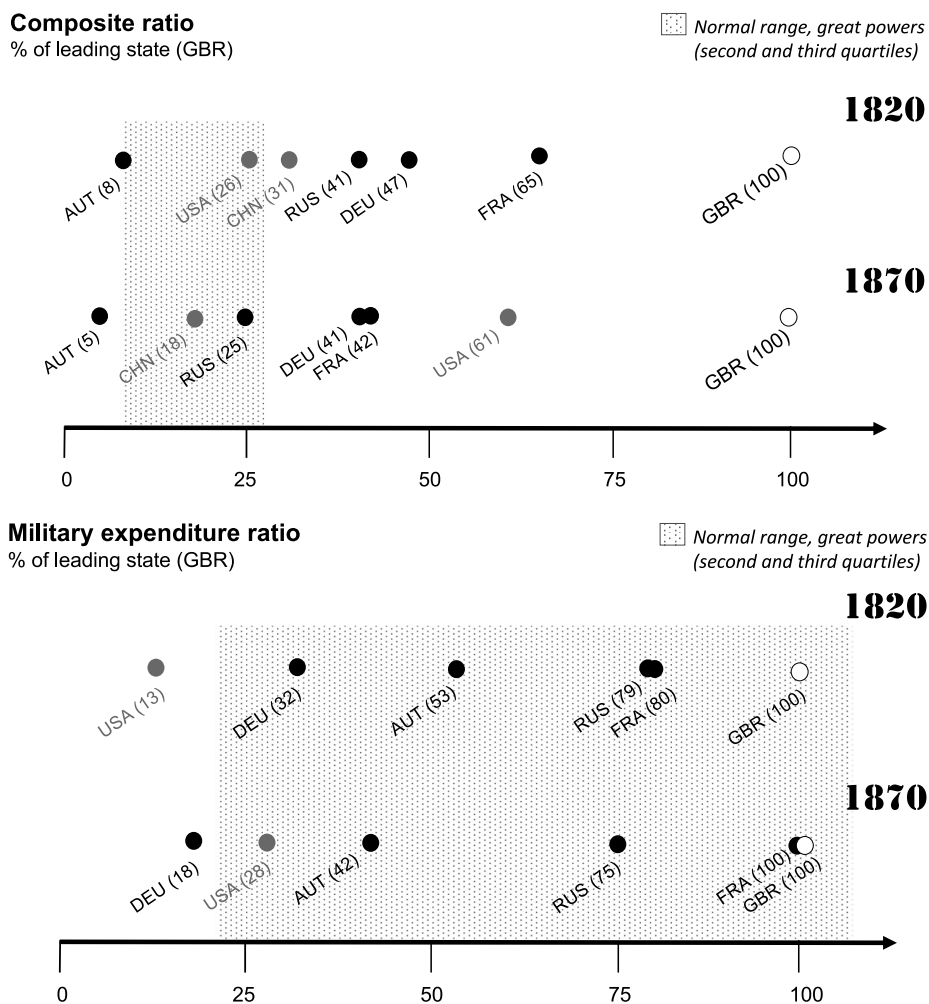
CAPTURING HISTORICAL SYSTEMS

The following figures show the balance of power re-created by two metrics (the composite ratio and the military expenditure ratio) across multiple Historical systems. Figure 3 depicts the balance of power in the nineteenth century, and figures 4 and 5 show the balance of power in the twentieth century. Black circles denote countries that all appeared on the list of great powers; I include a few (in gray) that are absent from those lists. White circles denote leading states.

In each figure, the axis equals 100 percent of the leading state's power. The shaded zones indicate the normal range for great powers (i.e., the second and third quartiles, as noted in tables 3 and 4). States to the left of that normal range sit below the threshold for great power, whereas states to the right of it exceed the normal range (and thus are unusually strong on that dimension).

Critics might wonder whether the variables that I show capturing great power status in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries still measure countries' capabilities today. One might argue that economic and military power have both changed, and thus the measures and thresholds derived from previous systems have little relevance in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the ingredients for an advanced economy have evolved substantially over time. A highly skilled workforce was not a requirement for becoming a world-class economy in the nineteenth century, but it is in 2024. My analysis merely assumes that economic might—whatever its sources—remains the foundation of power in international politics. The state draws on its economy to buy weaponry, to coerce, sanction, and bribe other countries, and thus to exert geopolitical influence. The weaponry required to compete militarily obviously varies

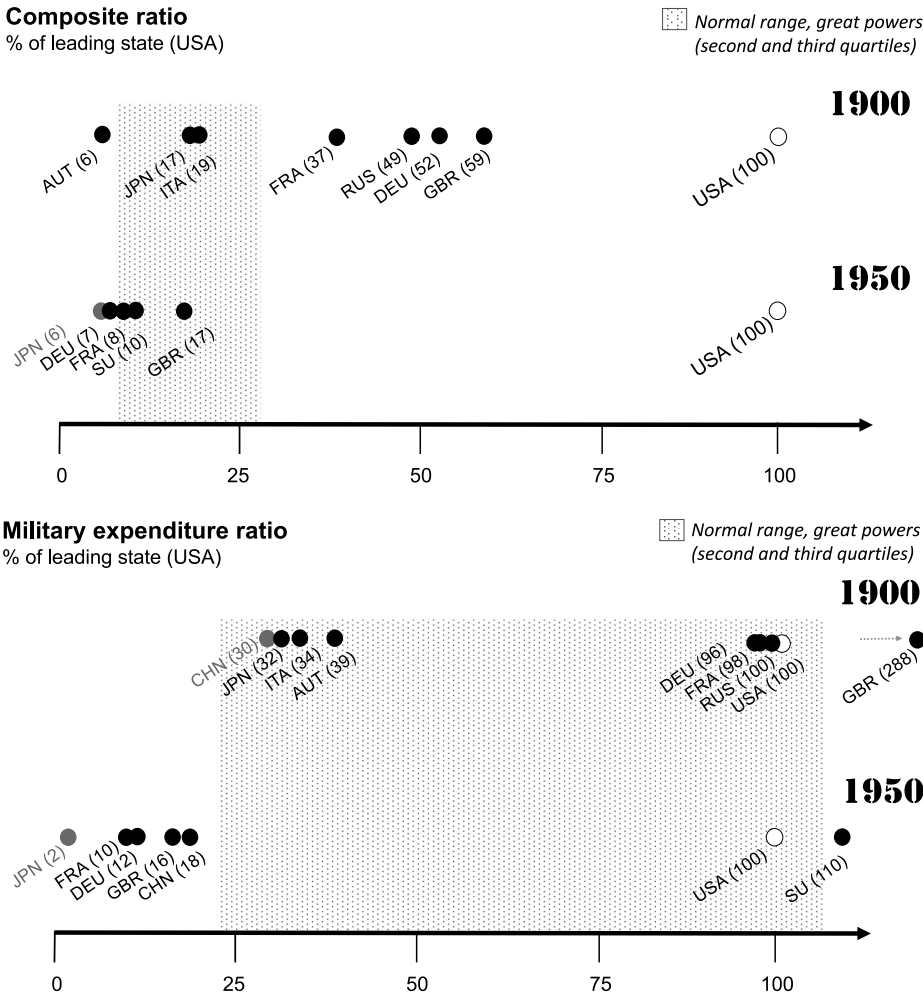
Figure 3. International Systems of the Nineteenth Century



SOURCE: Data from Maddison, *Contours of the World Economy*.

NOTE: Gray circles denote countries that were not on the list of great powers. White circles denote leading states. China military data not available for the nineteenth century.

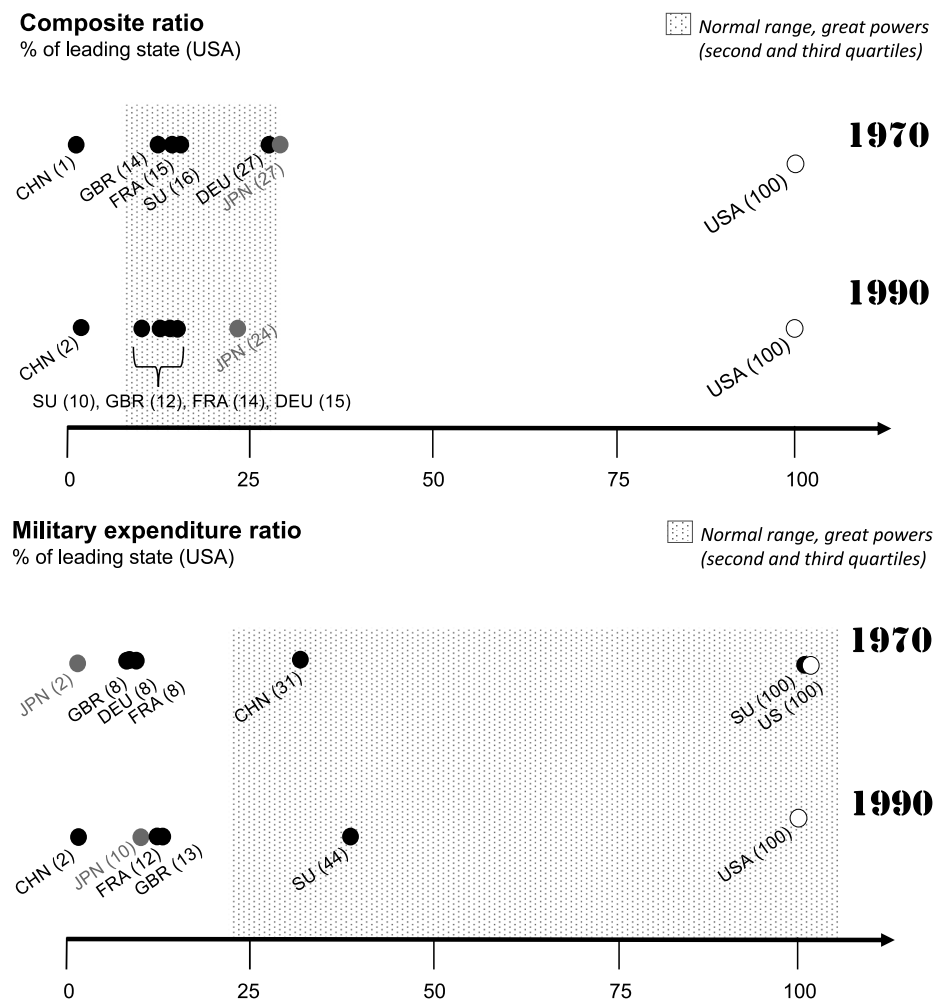
Figure 4. International Systems of the Early Twentieth Century



SOURCE: Economic data from Maddison, *Contours of the World Economy*. Military data from *Correlates of War Project*, 2010.

NOTE: Gray circles denote countries that were not on the list of great powers. White circles denote leading states. SU is an abbreviation for Soviet Union.

Figure 5. International Systems during the Cold War



SOURCE: Economic data from Maddison, *Contours of the World Economy*. Military data from Correlates of War Project, 2010.

NOTE: Gray circles denote countries that were not on the list of great powers. White circles denote leading states. SU is an abbreviation for Soviet Union.

dramatically from the nineteenth century to the present. But the underlying relationship—between a country’s economic power and its ability to buy cutting-edge military weaponry and other tools of statecraft—remains valid.

The Contemporary Balance of Power

In this section I use the metrics to assess the current balance of power. Observers variously argue that China is a great power trailing the United States, a superpower peer competitor, or a country in decline. People describe the world as unipolar, bipolar, and (referring to India and Russia), multipolar. The method created in this article informs this debate.

CHINESE ECONOMIC POWER

China’s economic growth since the 1980s has shocked the world. After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initiated economic reforms in 1979 and improved its political relations with the West, the economy grew at about 10 percent per year until 2018. China’s economy doubled in size every eight years during the 1979–2018 period.⁶⁵ As a result, the size of China’s economy has overtaken that of the U.S. economy (measured in GDP adjusted for purchasing power parity, which accounts for lower prices in China). In nominal or market terms, China has the world’s second-largest GDP after the United States. The method introduced in this article shows that China’s economic capabilities already *well exceed* not only the median but the normal range for a great power. Table 5 situates China relative to previous great powers.

Figure 6 shows China’s relative economic power compared with previous great powers and with the leading state (the United States). In terms of economic capabilities, China (indicated by the star) far exceeds the normal range (indicated by the solid lines) for great powers.

This method makes important contributions to debates about China’s relative power. Without a threshold, observers cannot assess if China is not yet a great power, has already become a great power, or is in decline. For example, using the composite metric, Beckley argues that “China lags far behind the United States.”⁶⁶ China indeed trails the United States (even after updating

65. Data in this paragraph are from Wayne M. Morrison, “China’s Economic Rise: History, Trends, Challenges, and Implications for the United States,” CRS Report RL33534 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 25, 2019), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33534>.

66. Beckley, “The Power of Nations,” p. 44.

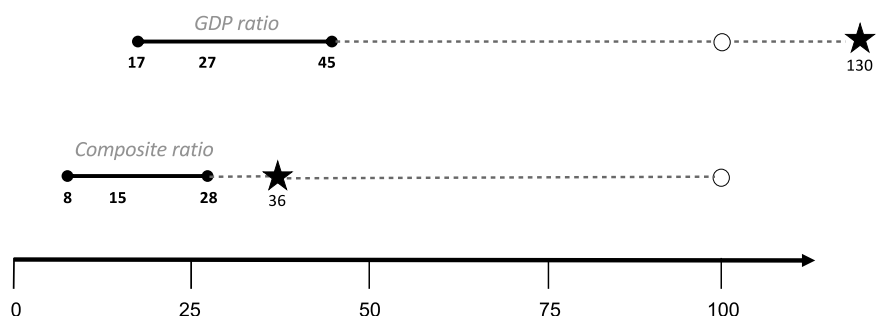
Table 5. Economic Measures of the Contemporary System (% of Leading State)

	China (2023)	Normal range, great powers (%)	Median, great powers (%)
GDP ratio	130	17–45	27
Composite ratio	36	8–28	15

SOURCE: Maddison, *Contours of the World Economy*; IMF World Economic Outlook (2023), <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2023/October>.

Figure 6. China's Contemporary Economic Power (% of Leading State)

★ China ○ USA (leading state)

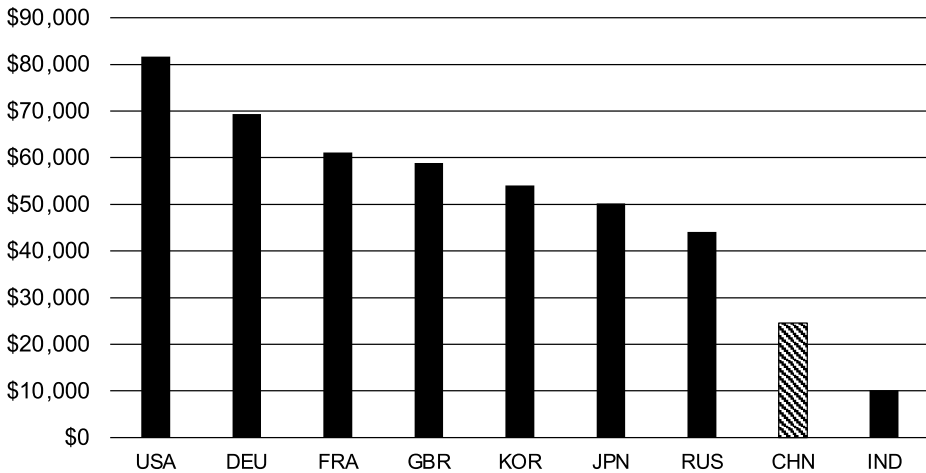


SOURCE: China's economic data from IMF World Economic Outlook (2023).

NOTE: IMF data adjusted to 1990 international dollars (int. \$US). Solid line indicates normal range (second and third quartiles) for great powers.

Beckley's 2011 data); on the composite metric, China has 36 percent of U.S. economic power. Critically, however, my analysis shows that according to this metric, the median great power only had 15 percent of the leading state's power. China's score of 36 percent should thus be interpreted not as reflecting a dramatic gap between U.S. and Chinese capabilities, but rather as indicating that China is well past the great power threshold, and indeed more economically powerful than most of the great powers since the nineteenth century. Thus, by definition, China has the capability to engage in a dangerous competition with the leading state.

Figure 7. Contemporary GDP per Capita Compared



SOURCE: World Bank, World Development Indicators (2023), <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>.

NOTE: Values are adjusted to PPP (current international \$).

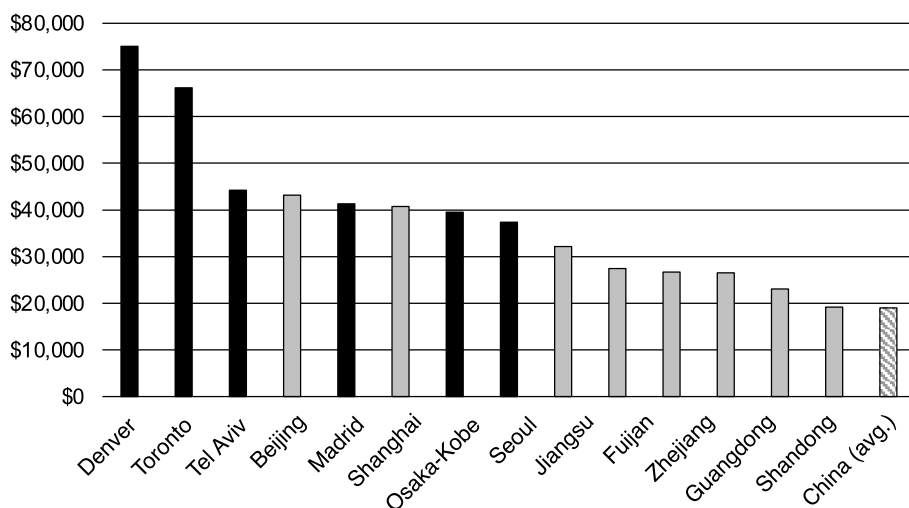
INTERPRETING CHINA'S GDP PER CAPITA. China's GDP per capita (about \$24,500 adjusted for purchasing power parity) is much lower than that of the United States and the world's other leading economies (figure 7). Observers of China's relatively low GDP per capita sometimes infer a large capabilities gap between China and the United States and other advanced economies. For example, arguing that "most of the country is still very poor," Salvatore Babones concludes, "The idea that China poses a serious economic (and thus military) challenge to the United States is simply preposterous."⁶⁷

But China's GDP per capita tells us little about its ability to compete geopolitically against the United States. To be sure, analysts are correct when they argue that low GDP per capita reflects a lower standard of living relative to other countries. But this article shows that GDP per capita is a poor indicator of relative national power for several reasons.

First, the problem of GDP per capita obscuring regional heterogeneity is particularly glaring in China's case. China's southeastern coastal provinces (near

67. Salvatore Babones, "Yes, China Is Lying about the Size of Its Economy," *National Interest* (blog), March 22, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/yes-china-lying-about-size-its-economy-135107>.

Figure 8. Contemporary GDP Per Capita, Select Chinese Provinces and Municipalities



SOURCE: National Bureau of Statistics, China (2023), accessed September 22, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Chinese_administrative_divisions_by_GDP_per_capita#2023_data.

NOTE: Values are displayed in 2023 nominal \$US.

Hong Kong and Taiwan) benefited the most from the country's export manufacturing push and have much higher levels of development relative to interior provinces. There are multiple Chinas: hundreds of millions of people who live in a low GDP per capita society, and hundreds of millions of others who live at a level comparable to developed countries. Of course, even the most developed Chinese cities lag the world's wealthiest urban areas. But assessing China's GDP per capita as low obscures the much higher GDP per capita in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, where a country-size population (i.e., about 50 million people) lives (see figure 8).

To put it differently, the GDP per capita statistic encourages us to think of China as a country with 1.4 billion Belarusians (i.e., a country near China in GDP per capita rankings). But it is more accurate to say that China is comprised of many Belaruses, several poorer Tajikistans, and a South Korea.

CHINA'S TECHNOLOGICAL CAPABILITIES. Readers might wonder to what extent the method in this article captures a country's technological capabilities—a vital dimension of great power.⁶⁸ As noted, the non-technological metrics

68. On the importance of technology in great power competition, see for example: Jeffrey Ding,

successfully re-create the balance of power among what were the world's most technologically advanced countries.

Other assessments support the view that China has emerged as a technological leader.⁶⁹ In the past decade, on a variety of metrics used to measure national innovative capacity, China has become one of the world's most advanced countries.⁷⁰ For example, China ranks highly in high-technology exports, human capital, patenting, R&D spending, and scientific research.⁷¹ "China has built the foundations to position itself as the world's leading science and technology superpower," argued a 2023 report from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, "establishing a sometimes stunning lead in high-impact research across the majority of critical and emerging technology domains."⁷² This and other research points to China and the United States as the two global leaders in emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology, and green technologies.⁷³ China is also successfully adapting to U.S. export controls aimed at depriving China of cutting-edge semiconductor technology, making significant progress in that sector as well as in the technologies that depend on it.⁷⁴

Technology and the Rise of Great Powers: How Diffusion Shapes Economic Competition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024); Mazarr, "The Societal Foundations of National Competitiveness"; Brooks and Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers"; Tellis et al., *Measuring National Power*; Karen A. Rasler and William R. Thompson, *The Great Powers and Global Struggle, 1490–1990* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

69. "China Has Become a Scientific Superpower," *Economist*, June 12, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2024/06/12/china-has-become-a-scientific-superpower>; Dan Wang, "China's Hidden Tech Revolution: How Beijing Threatens U.S. Dominance," *Foreign Affairs*, February 28, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-hidden-tech-revolution-how-beijing-threatens-us-dominance-dan-wang>; Graham Allison et al., *The Great Tech Rivalry: China vs. the U.S.* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 2021); Robert D. Atkinson and Caleb Foote, *Is China Catching Up to the United States in Innovation?* (Washington, DC: Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, 2019), <https://itif.org/publications/2019/04/08/china-catching-united-states-innovation>.

70. Jennifer Lind, *Half-Vicious: Smart Authoritarianism and the Rise of China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2025).

71. Ian Clay and Robert D. Atkinson, *Wake Up, America: China Is Overtaking the United States in Innovation Output* (Washington, DC: Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, 2022), <https://www2.itif.org/2023-us-v-china-innovation.pdf>; Wang, "China's Hidden Tech Revolution."

72. Jaime Gaida et al., "ASPI's Critical Technology Tracker: Sensors and Biotech Updates," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, September 22, 2023, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/critical-technology-tracker>.

73. Allison et al., *The Great Tech Rivalry*; Atkinson and Foote, *Is China Catching Up to the United States?*

74. On the weakness of the control regime, see: Tim Fist, Lennart Heim, and Jordan Schneider, "Chinese Firms Are Evading Chip Controls," *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/21/china-united-states-semiconductor-chips-sanctions-evasion/>; Raffaele Huang, "The Underground Network Sneaking Nvidia Chips into China," *Wall Street Journal*, July 2, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/tech/the-underground-network-sneaking-nvidia-chips-into-china-f733aaa6>; "America's Assassination Attempt on Huawei Is Backfiring," *Economist*, June 13,

Given numerous U.S. strengths, analysts argue that China will struggle to overtake the United States in terms of innovation.⁷⁵ Yet a key insight of this article is that “catching up” or “overtaking” are the wrong benchmarks. China need not do either; as one of the world’s most technologically advanced countries, it has the ability to engage the United States in a punishing great power competition.

CHINESE MILITARY POWER

While watching China’s economic rise, observers debated whether a great power China would accept the international order or emerge as a “revisionist” state.⁷⁶ Scholars disaggregate different facets of international order (e.g., security order, global governance, human rights) and note that rising powers might accept international order on some dimensions while challenging others.⁷⁷ This article shows one dimension of Chinese revisionism: the military balance of power.⁷⁸ China’s economic rise and military buildup have shifted the balance of power from unipolarity to bipolarity. In this respect, China’s behavior departs notably from two other rising powers after World War II: Japan and (West) Germany. Both countries developed significant latent power, yet neither challenged the status quo military balance.

Measuring Chinese military power is challenging, even according to the

2024, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2024/06/13/americas-assassination-attempt-on-huawei-is-backfiring>; “Huawei’s Mate 60 Pro Phone Shows Large Step Toward Made-In-China Parts,” *Bloomberg*, September 7, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-09-07/huawei-s-mate-60-shows-large-step-toward-made-in-china-parts>.

75. Ding, *Technology and the Rise of Great Powers*; Yuen Yuen Ang et al., “China’s Low-Productivity Innovation Drive: Evidence from Patents,” *Comparative Political Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140231209960>; Adam Segal, *Advantage: How American Innovation Can Overcome the Asian Challenge* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

76. On this debate, see: Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Denny Roy, “Hegemon on the Horizon? China’s Threat to East Asian Security,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 149–168, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539151>; Jeffrey W. Legro, “What China Will Want: The Future Intentions of a Rising Power,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (September 2007), pp. 515–534, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592707071526>; Alastair Iain Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?,” *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Spring 2003), pp. 5–56, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803321951081>.

77. Alastair Iain Johnston, “China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing’s International Relations,” *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Fall 2019), pp. 9–60, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00360.

78. Scholars argue that China is seeking to transform international order on several other dimensions as well. See Rolland, *An Emerging China-Centric Order*; Gregorio Bettiza and David Lewis, “Authoritarian Powers and Norm Contestation in the Liberal International Order: Theorizing the Power Politics of Ideas and Identity,” *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (October 2020), pp. 559–577, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz075>; Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy and the Displacement of American Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

seemingly straightforward metrics used in this article. Analysts note that Beijing's defense accounting differs from the method used by the United States and NATO; that Beijing does not report all of its defense expenditures; and that the nominal statistics analysts typically use to discuss defense expenditures understate China's capabilities because it pays many of its expenses (notably salaries of military personnel) in local currency. If China's military expenditure were adjusted for purchasing power parity, it would increase "by well over \$100 billion."⁷⁹ Furthermore, the China Coast Guard—actively involved in interstate territorial disputes—organizationally sits under the control of the People's Armed Police, an internal security agency whose funds are not reflected in the military budget.⁸⁰

But we do our best, despite what Gulick calls the "primitive character of the scales at [our] disposal."⁸¹ As depicted in figure 9, China lies within the normal range for great powers for both military expenditure (at 32 percent) and military personnel (153 percent). Scholars correctly point out that China is far from matching U.S. military capabilities.⁸² But as this article argues, even though a great power may trail the leading state significantly, by definition it can engage the leading state in dangerous security competitions and wars. According to the military metrics evaluated here, China is a great power capable of doing both.

CHINA'S MILITARY RISE. Qualitative assessments of Chinese military capabilities support the finding that China has become a great power. The CCP embarked on a major military modernization effort starting in the 1990s, downsizing its massive and antiquated army and expanding its maritime capabilities.⁸³ This modernization built formidable Chinese conventional mili-

79. Matthew P. Funaiole et al., "Understanding China's 2021 Defense Budget," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 5, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-chinas-2021-defense-budget>; "What Does China Really Spend on Its Military?," *ChinaPower* (blog), Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://chinapower.csis.org/military-spending/>, accessed April 15, 2022. Also see Wallace, *Seeking Truth and Hiding Facts*.

80. Andrew S. Erickson, Joshua Hickey, and Henry Holst, "Surging Second Sea Force: China's Maritime Law-Enforcement Forces, Capabilities, and Future in the Gray Zone and Beyond," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (Spring 2019), pp. 10–34, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26607132>.

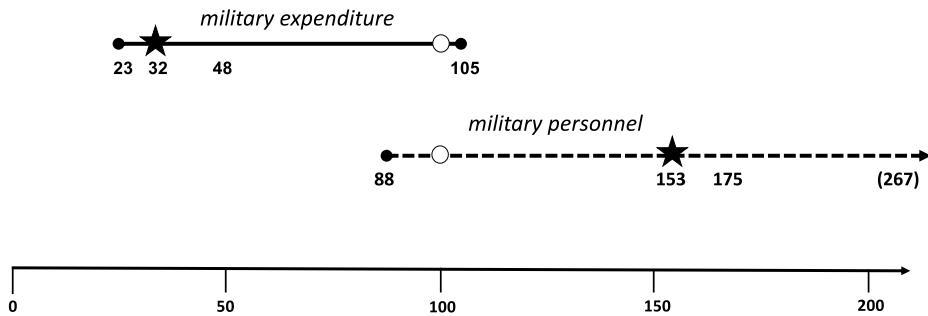
81. Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power*, p. 27.

82. Barry R. Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003), pp. 5–46, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803322427965>; Beckley, *Unrivaled*; Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*.

83. Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR300/RR392/RAND_RR392.pdf; David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

Figure 9. China's Contemporary Military Power (% of Leading State)

★ China ○ USA = leading state



SOURCE: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database* (2023), <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

NOTE: The solid and dotted lines indicate the normal ranges for great powers. Medians are 48 (military expenditure) and 175 (military personnel).

tary forces, created the connective tissue that increases the lethality of conventional military power, and gave China a world-class nuclear arsenal.

First, China has transformed its conventional military capabilities, particularly in air, naval, and precision strike. In a short period, the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) has transitioned from flying MiG-21s to building and flying fifth-generation stealth J-20s. Over time, the PLAAF shifted to "a more expansive role encompassing both defensive and offensive operations at greater distances from China's land borders."⁸⁴ The People's Liberation Army Navy has become the world's largest in terms of tonnage and has commissioned four aircraft carriers and sophisticated destroyers for blue-water operations throughout the region. China's conventional ballistic missile force is unmatched in the world, giving China the ability to precisely strike targets throughout Asia.⁸⁵

2003); M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

84. Caitlin Campbell, "China's Military: The People's Liberation Army (PLA)," CRS Report R46808 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 4, 2021), p. 26, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46808/3>.

85. Ibid.

Second, China has developed the connective tissue that makes conventional forces more lethal. This includes a global intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance system that relies on the largest global constellation of satellites controlled by any country other than the United States.⁸⁶ Researchers describe China as a peer competitor of the United States in cyber and electronic warfare capabilities.⁸⁷ China has also invested in battlefield command and control, including advanced airborne warning and control aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles.⁸⁸ In space, “The United States is once again facing a singularly prominent contender—this time China,” writes Saadia Pekkanen, which has “expanding dual-use capabilities in space, and a demonstrable will to lead in space affairs.”⁸⁹

Third, China has transformed itself from a third-rate nuclear power—whose nuclear forces could barely guarantee an assured retaliation capability—to one of the world’s three leading nuclear states.⁹⁰ China’s nuclear arsenal is growing faster than any other arsenal in the world. Its quantitative growth is matched by breakthroughs in delivery systems—potentially including hypersonic missiles and fractional orbital bombardment systems—that would give China meaningful advantages in the emerging nuclear competition.⁹¹

Although China’s military power has undoubtedly grown, could its forces

86. On China’s push for “informatization,” see Oriana Skylar Mastro, *Upstart: How China Became a Great Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 76–77. Also see Audrey Decker, “Chinese Satellites Are Breaking the U.S. ‘Monopoly’ on Long-Range Targeting,” *Defense One*, May 2, 2024, <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2024/05/new-chinese-satellites-ending-us-monopoly-ability-track-and-hit-long-distance-targets/396272/>.

87. See, for example, Julia Voo et al., “National Cyber Power Index 2020: Methodology and Analytical Considerations” (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, September 2020), <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/37372389>.

88. Mastro, *Upstart*, p. 11.

89. Saadia M. Pekkanen, “Unbundling Threats: Balancing and Alliances in the Space Domain,” in Saadia M. Pekkanen and P. J. Blount, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Space Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), p. 186, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197582671.013.12>.

90. On China’s previous nuclear weakness, see Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The New Era of Counterforce: Technological Change and the Future of Nuclear Deterrence,” *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Spring 2017), pp. 9–49, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00273; Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The End of MAD? The Nuclear Dimension of U.S. Primacy,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Spring 2006), pp. 7–44, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2006.30.4.7>. On the transformation of China’s arsenal, see U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, Annual Report to Congress (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2022), p. 98, <https://www.defense.gov/Spotlights/2022-China-Military-Power-Report/>; SIPRI *Yearbook 2024: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/yb24_summary_en_2_1.pdf.

91. Timothy Wright, “Is China Gliding toward a FOBS Capability?,” *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.iiss.org/en/online-analysis/online-analysis/2021/10/is-china-gliding-toward-a-fobs-capability/>.

fight effectively? Russia's stumbles during its 2022 invasion of Ukraine spotlighted the vital "software" of war-fighting, related to the skill of personnel, morale, information flows, jointness, and logistics.⁹² Chinese leaders worry about what they call "peace disease": the fact that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has not fought a battle since 1979 and has never fought the kinds of joint operations that a war against Taiwan would require.⁹³ Toward the goal of improving PLA war-fighting capabilities, Chinese leader Xi Jinping in 2015 ordered major military reforms.⁹⁴ Additionally, multiple rounds of reforms of the defense industry have improved the efficiency and quality of this previously inefficient sector.⁹⁵

Serious questions remain about the PLA's war-fighting abilities against the formidable U.S. military. Indeed, great powers have historically varied significantly in their military effectiveness. Nonetheless, by building great power military forces, China has put itself in the game. Its heavy investments in air and naval power, precision strike, satellites and other surveillance systems, and burgeoning nuclear arsenal have shifted the regional military balance such that the United States would have great difficulty projecting effective military force into East Asia during a war.⁹⁶

92. Lawrence Freedman, "Why War Fails: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and the Limits of Military Power," *Foreign Affairs*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2022-06-14/ukraine-war-russia-why-fails>; Lonnie D. Henley, *Civilian Shipping and Maritime Militia: The Logistics Backbone of a Taiwan Invasion*, China Maritime Report No. 21 (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2022), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/21/>; also see Will Mackenzie, "Commentary: It's the Logistics, China," *National Defense*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2020/6/10/its-the-logistics-china>.

93. "Xi Jinping Worries That China's Troops Are Not Ready to Fight," *Economist*, November 6, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2023/11/06/xi-jinping-worries-that-chinas-troops-are-not-ready-to-fight>. See also David Sacks, "What Is China Learning from Russia's War in Ukraine?," *Foreign Affairs*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-05-16/what-china-learning-russias-war-ukraine>.

94. Phillip Charles Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/Chairman-Xi/Chairman-Xi.pdf>; Zhang Jian, "Towards a 'World Class' Military: Reforming the PLA under Xi Jinping," in Jane Golley, Linda Jaivin, and Paul J. Farrelly, eds., *China Story Yearbook: Power* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2019), pp. 218–236.

95. Richard A. Bitzinger, "Reforming China's Defense Industry," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 39, Nos. 5–6 (2016), pp. 762–789, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2016.1221819>; Tai Ming Cheung, "Dragon on the Horizon: China's Defense Industrial Renaissance," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2009), pp. 29–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390802407418>.

96. For a recent analysis that suggests Chinese power is growing, see Nicholas Anderson and Daryl G. Press, "Projecting Land-Based Air Power into East Asia: The Struggle to Defeat A2AD," paper presented at the International Studies Association 2023 Annual Convention, March 15–18, 2023, Montréal, Canada. Also see Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard*; Evan

CHINA'S AMBITIONS AND NONMATERIAL POWER

This article's assessment of China as a great power is also supported by non-material factors. First, as many scholars predicted, China's ambitions and assertiveness have risen along with its material capabilities. This is a significant change from the 1990s, when Chinese leaders proclaimed a "peaceful rise" and scholars noted Beijing's reassuring behavior.⁹⁷ Today, however, "it is now difficult to deny that Beijing seeks to be the predominant power of Asia and wants to exercise a veto over the most important military and geopolitical actions of other countries."⁹⁸ China's Coast Guard, as well as military aircraft and naval vessels, venture into neighbors' territorial waters or disputed areas, using intimidation and force.⁹⁹ The CCP's national security narrative envisions "a fully developed, rich and powerful nation" with "world-class military forces" by 2049—a nation that has "reunited" territories lost during the "Century of Humiliation."¹⁰⁰ Acquiring these territories would likely require the use of force against Taiwan and China's neighbors over disputes in the South China Sea.

As China's material power has grown, so too has its status and influ-

Braden Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Spring 2014), pp. 115–149, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00160.

97. Zheng Bijian, "China's Peaceful Rise to Great Power Status," *Foreign Affairs*, September 1, 2005, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2005-09-01/chinas-peaceful-rise-great-power-status>; Evan S. Medeiros and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's New Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs*, November 1, 2003, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/asia/chinas-new-diplomacy>.

98. Michael J. Mazarr, "The Looming Crisis in the South China Sea: To Avoid a Conflict with China, America Needs a Clearer Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, February 9, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/looming-crisis-south-china-sea>.

99. Yimou Lee, "China Steps Up Grey-Zone Warfare to Exhaust Taiwan, Defence Report Says," Reuters, March 6, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-steps-up-grey-zone-warfare-exhaust-taiwan-defence-report-says-2024-03-07/>; Mazarr, "The Looming Crisis in the South China Sea"; Alessio Patalano, "What Is China's Strategy in the Senkaku Islands?," *War on the Rocks*, September 10, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/what-is-chinas-strategy-in-the-senkaku-islands/>; "Trends in China Coast Guard and Other Vessels in the Waters Surrounding the Senkaku Islands and Japan's Response," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), January 18, 2022, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page23e_000021.html; Sebastian Strangio, "Philippines Calls Out Dangerous Chinese Actions near Disputed Shoal," *Diplomat*, March 28, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/philippines-calls-out-dangerous-chinese-actions-near-disputed-shoal/>.

100. Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017, p. 16, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf; Graham Allison, "What Xi Jinping Wants," *Atlantic*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/what-china-wants/528561/>; John Feng, "Xi Jinping Says China to Become Dominant World Power within 30 Years," *Newsweek*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/xi-jinping-says-china-become-dominant-world-power-within-30-years-1605848>.

ence.¹⁰¹ China's currency has grown more influential in international trade and finance.¹⁰² Diplomatically, as Oriana Skylar Mastro notes, China doubled its memberships in international institutions from 1990 to 2010. It has become a leader in the United Nations, normalized relations with twenty-eight countries during the 1990s, and "went from diplomatic isolation to having as much diplomatic and political power on the world stage as the United States (by some measures, slightly more)."¹⁰³ Beijing is actively asserting leadership over technological standards,¹⁰⁴ human rights,¹⁰⁵ peacekeeping and conflict resolution,¹⁰⁶ and economic development.¹⁰⁷ China's leadership—its presentation of itself as an alternative to the "hegemonist" United States—has strong appeal in many countries.¹⁰⁸ Thus, China's nonmaterial power has grown with its material capabilities.

101. Xiaoyu Pu, *Rebranding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019); Yong Deng, *China's Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

102. Keith Bradsher, "China's Renminbi Is Approved by I.M.F. as Main World Currency," *New York Times*, November 30, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/01/business/international/china-renminbi-reserve-currency.html>.

103. Mastro, *Upstart*, p. 10. Also see G. John Ikenberry and Darren J. Lim, *China's Emerging Institutional Statecraft: The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Prospects for Counter-Hegemony* (Washington, DC: Project on International Order and Strategy, Brookings Institution, 2017), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/chinas-emerging-institutional-statecraft.pdf>.

104. Tim Rühlig, "Chinese Influence through Technical Standardization Power," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 32, No. 139 (2022), pp. 54–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2022.2052439>; Doshi, *The Long Game*; Valentina Pop, Sha Hua, and Daniel Michaels, "From Lightbulbs to 5G, China Battles West for Control of Vital Technology Standards," *Wall Street Journal*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/from-lightbulbs-to-5g-china-battles-west-for-control-of-vital-technology-standards-11612722698>.

105. Andrea Worden, "China Deals Another Blow to the International Human Rights Framework at Its UN Universal Periodic Review," *China Change*, November 25, 2018, <https://chinachange.org/2018/11/25/china-deals-another-blow-to-the-international-human-rights-framework-at-its-un-universal-periodic-review/>; Malin Oud, "Harmonic Convergence: China and the Right to Development," in Rolland, *An Emerging China-Centric Order*, pp. 69–85.

106. Xinyu Yuan, "The Chinese Approach to Peacebuilding: Contesting Liberal Peace?," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 7 (2022), pp. 1798–1816, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2074389>.

107. Peter Ferdinand, "Westward Ho—the China Dream and 'One Belt, One Road': Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping," *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (July 2016), pp. 941–957, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12660>; Shahar Hameiri and Lee Jones, "China Challenges Global Governance? Chinese International Development Finance and the AIIB," *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 3 (May 2018), pp. 573–593, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiy026>.

108. Suisheng Zhao, "Projections of China's Soft Power in the New Century: Reconstruction of the Traditional Chinese World Order," in Ying Zhu, Kingsley Edney, and Stanley Rosen, eds., *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: China's Campaign for Hearts and Minds* (London: Routledge, 2019); Emrah Yildirimcakar and Zhaoying Han, "China's Soft Power Strategy in the Middle East," *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2022), pp. 199–207, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2022.2041309>.

CHINA THE SUPERPOWER

Some observers argue that even if China has become a great power, the United States occupies a category all of its own: a superpower with a profound economic, technological, and military lead, and command of the global “commons.”¹⁰⁹ This view rests on the claim that a great power must have rough parity with the leader to compete effectively against it. It also rests on a definition of a superpower as having attributes China lacks (e.g., regional hegemony, global power-projection capabilities, a large network of allies).¹¹⁰ In this skeptical view, China—a great power, not a superpower—will be unable to compete effectively against the United States.

By contrast, this article argues that China is a superpower and the world is bipolar. The historical data show that wide gaps in capabilities, and the possession of very different kinds of power, are common among great powers. As Joshua Shiffrin notes, “Throughout history, great powers have never been thought of as quantitative peers.”¹¹¹ Even superpowers show significant disparity in national capabilities. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was weaker than the United States on some dimensions, as China is today. At its peak, Soviet GDP was only 37 percent of U.S. GDP. “Polarity,” observes Posen, “is not synonymous with equality. . . . The Soviet Union was only barely in the league of the United States for most of the cold war in terms of economic capacity, yet we think of the era as a bipolar order.”¹¹²

This analysis also supports that view that the best way to define a superpower is not through various attributes it possesses. Øystein Tunsjø shows

109. Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, “Why China Has Not Caught Up Yet: Military-Technological Superiority and the Limits of Imitation, Reverse Engineering, and Cyber Espionage,” *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Winter 2018/19), pp. 141–189, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00337; Brooks and Wohlforth, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers”; Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*; Christensen, *The China Challenge*; Michael Beckley, “China’s Century? Why America’s Edge Will Endure,” *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Winter 2011/12), pp. 41–78, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00066; Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers*. On distinctions within the great power category, see: Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*; Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*, pp. 42–47; Danilovic, *When the Stakes Are High*. Also see Posen, “Command of the Commons.”

110. William T. R. Fox created the idea of superpower after World War II. See Fox, *The Super-Powers*. Both Fox and Monteiro, for example, define superpowers as having extra-regional power projection capabilities. See Fox, *The Super-Powers*; Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*. Tunsjø describes and assesses several hypothesized attributes of a superpower; see Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics*, chap. 2.

111. Joshua Shiffrin et al., “The Long Unipolar Moment? Debating American Dominance,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 17, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/responses/long-unipolar-moment-american-dominance#the-end-of-the-american-era>.

112. Posen, “Emerging Multipolarity,” p. 348.

that regional hegemony, global military capabilities, alliance systems, or nuclear weapons do not by themselves capture the concept of a superpower.¹¹³ Instead (following Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz), he argues that a superpower is best measured by the distribution of capabilities. That is, superpowers both possess some of the strongest material capabilities in the system and significantly outdistance the capabilities of the next most powerful state. “The United States and the Soviet Union,” Tunsjø writes of the Cold War, “were not only top-tier powers because of their preponderant capabilities but also because of their relative superiority over Great Britain, the third-ranking power.”¹¹⁴

In analyzing the distribution of capabilities, this article shows that today the international system has two superpowers, China and the United States: They have preponderant capabilities within the system, and their capabilities significantly outdistance those of the next most capable state. Figures 10 and 11 depict the contemporary balance. Aside from the leading state (United States), China is the only country that meets the threshold for great power on all economic and military dimensions in this study. The world is bipolar.

COMPARING TWO BIPOLAR SYSTEMS. A comparison with another superpower in a previous bipolar era, the Cold War, also supports the finding of a bipolar system today.¹¹⁵ As noted, scholars routinely characterize the Cold War as a bipolar system with two superpowers: the Soviet Union and the United States. Today, China exceeds the Soviet Union on almost every dimension of national power. China has vastly stronger economic capabilities than the Soviet Union ever did. China lags the Soviets only for military expenditure, but, importantly, China spends an estimated 1.7–2 percent of its GDP on defense (relative to the Soviet Union, which spent a punishing 12–14 percent).¹¹⁶ If competition with the United States grows, China has tremendous resources on which to draw to create more military power. Figure 12 shows how today’s China and the Soviet Union (at its 1970 peak) compare across four metrics.

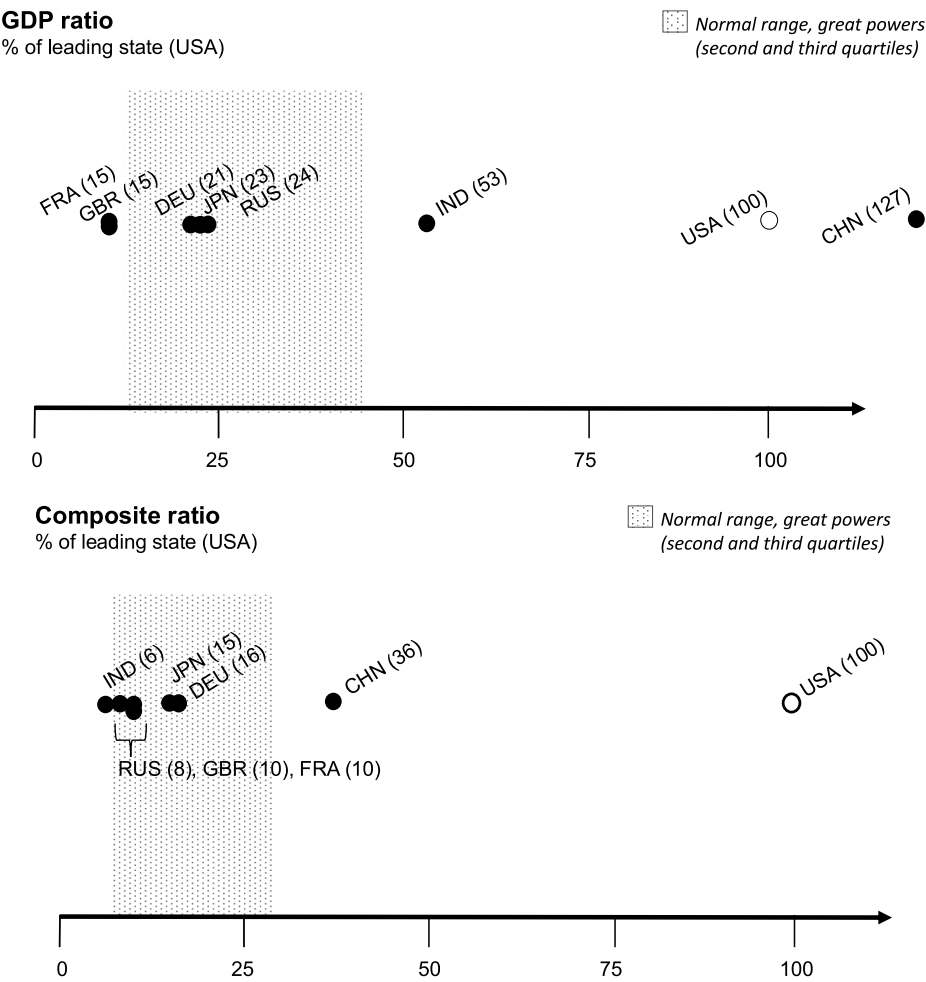
113. Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics*, chap. 2; Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 2nd ed.; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

114. Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics*, p. 28; Kupchan, “Bipolarity Is Back.”

115. Also on this point, see analysis in Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics*, chap. 4.

116. Soviet figures are from Franklyn D. Holzman, “Soviet Military Spending: Assessing the Numbers Game,” *International Security*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Spring 1982), p. 78, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538679>. Estimates of Chinese military spending are from M. Taylor Fravel, George J. Gilboy, and Eric Heginbotham, “Estimating China’s Defense Spending: How to Get It Wrong (and Right),” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer 2024), pp. 40–54, <https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/54043>; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2023*, <https://doi.org/10.55163/CQGC9685>.

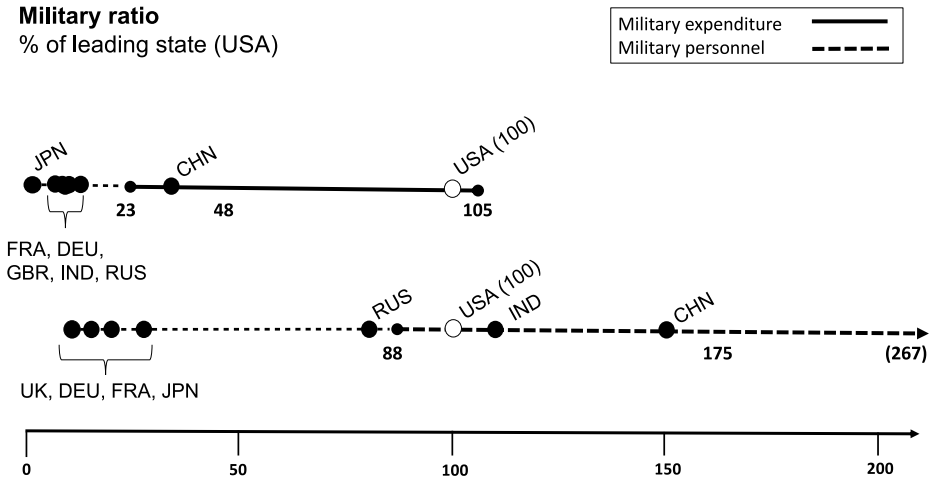
Figure 10. Contemporary Economic Balance of Power



SOURCE: World Bank, World Development Indicators (2023).

The Cold War also illuminates how weaker great powers compete against stronger ones. The Soviet Union, like China today, did not plan to confront the United States around the world; it had a large, regionally focused military with inferior global power-projection capabilities relative to the United States. For example, the Soviets lacked the capacity to contest the United States in ei-

Figure 11. Contemporary Military Balance of Power



SOURCES: Data from *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*, 2023; "International Comparisons of Defence Expenditure and Military Personnel," *The Military Balance*, Vol. 124, No. 1 (2024), pp. 542–547, <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/tmib20/current>.

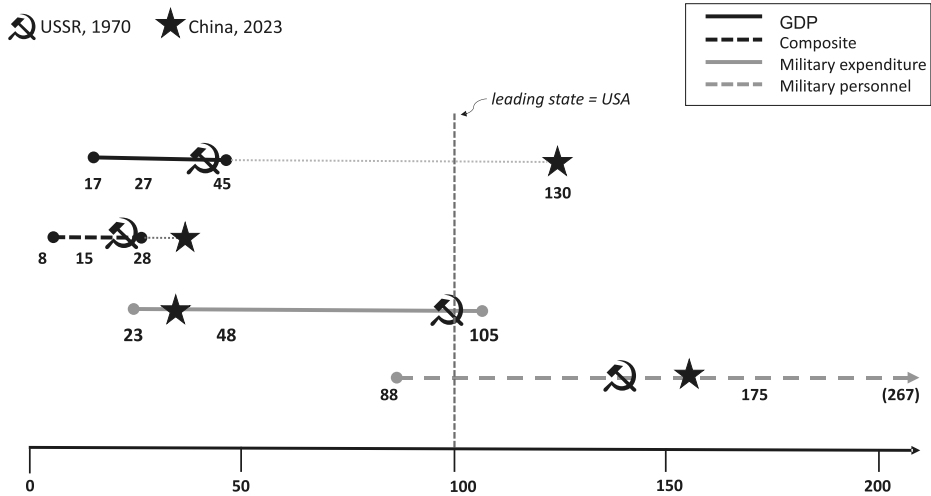
ther an air battle over the Mediterranean or a surface fleet battle in the Atlantic. The United States controlled the commons then, as it would later.¹¹⁷

The Soviets competed with the United States across the globe not by projecting conventional military power, but through soft power and statecraft. The Soviets encouraged the spread of communist ideology in the developing world and sought to discredit the United States and liberalism through "active measures" that shaped the information environment.¹¹⁸ These included "control of the press in foreign countries; outright and partial forgery of documents; use of rumors, insinuation, altered facts, and lies; use of international and local front organizations; clandestine operation of radio stations; exploita-

117. Posen, "Command of the Commons."

118. David Salvo and Andrew Andell, "The Active Measures Orchestra: An Examination of Russian Influence Operations Abroad," German Marshall Fund, accessed December 2022, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/active-measures-orchestra-examination-russian-influence-operations-abroad>. Also on Soviet influence operations, see Ashley Deeks, Sandra McCubbin, and Cody M. Poplin, "Addressing Russian Influence: What Can We Learn from U.S. Cold War Counter-Propaganda Efforts?," *Lawfare* (blog), Brookings Institution, October 25, 2017, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/addressing-russian-influence-what-can-we-learn-us-cold-war-counter-propaganda-efforts>.

Figure 12. Comparing Cold War and Contemporary Superpowers (% of Leading State)



SOURCES: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, 2023; *The Military Balance* (2024); Correlates of War Project, 2010.

NOTE: Figure compares Soviet and Chinese capabilities, respectively, against the capabilities of the leading state (USA).

tion of a nation's academic political, economic, and media figures as collaborators to influence policies of the nation."¹¹⁹ Moscow supported communist leaders worldwide by providing them with economic aid and military assistance against rebels.

China's strategy today is similar.¹²⁰ Mastro argues that China rejected "the wholesale emulation of US military power" because its military goals are largely regional and because it risked backlash from the U.S. hegemon. Mastro quotes Jiang Zemin, former general secretary of the CCP, as noting that China had to "do some things but not other things, catch up in some places but not

119. Quoted from Salvo and Andell, "The Active Measures Orchestra."

120. Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009); Doshi, *The Long Game*; Colby, *The Strategy of Denial*; Thomas P. Cavanna, "Unlocking the Gates of Eurasia: China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Implications for U.S. Grand Strategy," *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (July 2019), <https://tnsr.org/2019/07/unlocking-the-gates-of-eurasia-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-and-its-implications-for-u-s-grand-strategy/>; Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017), <https://www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-eurasian-century-political-and-strategic-implications-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>.

other places.” As a result, “Chinese military thinkers settled on developing capabilities to exploit US vulnerabilities . . . in Chinese military parlance, to ‘develop what the enemy is afraid of’ or ‘assassin’s mace’ capabilities.”¹²¹ Thus, China has focused on building a powerful, regionally focused military (as well as a large and growing nuclear arsenal).

Like the Soviet Union, China competes with the United States by relying on significant nonmaterial instruments of power. China enjoys the status of a UN Security Council seat. China has exerted powerful ideological influence around the world, previously by exporting Maoism¹²² and more recently by promoting ideas about state capitalism, respect for sovereignty, and “anti-hegemonism.” In the words of China’s Foreign Ministry, “The United States has developed a hegemonic playbook to stage ‘color revolutions,’ instigate regional disputes, and even directly launch wars under the guise of promoting democracy, freedom and human rights. . . . It has taken a selective approach to international law and rules, utilizing or discarding them as it sees fit, and has sought to impose rules that serve its own interests in the name of upholding a ‘rules-based international order.’”¹²³

Such ideas resonate in many countries, notably authoritarian ones that U.S. regime change efforts have antagonized. To spread these ideas, the CCP’s United Front Work Department uses propaganda to mute criticism of China, celebrate Chinese accomplishments, and discredit the United States and its partners.¹²⁴ China also supports autocratic leaders all over the world by bringing local and central government officials to China for education programs, and by promoting “smart city” technology sales and training.¹²⁵ As the world’s leader in key technologies of control, such as facial and voice recognition, China’s toolkit for influencing operations and exporting authoritarianism far exceeds that of the Soviet Union.¹²⁶

121. Mastro, *Upstart*, p. 81.

122. Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (London: Bodley Head; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019).

123. “U.S. Hegemony and Its Perils,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, MFA News, February 20, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230220_11027664.html.

124. Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, eds., *China’s Influence and American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2019).

125. Charles Edel and David O. Shullman, “How China Exports Authoritarianism: Beijing’s Money and Technology Is Fueling Repression Worldwide,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-09-16/how-china-exports-authoritarianism>; Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Erica Frantz, and Joseph Wright, “The Digital Dictators: How Technology Strengthens Autocracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-02-06/digital-dictators>.

126. Ray Wang and Gerry Groot, “Who Represents? Xi Jinping’s Grand United Front Work, Legiti-

In sum, scholars characterize the Soviet Union as a superpower and the Cold War as a bipolar competition. If the Soviet Union was a superpower then, China is one today. Just as China is currently weaker than the United States on some dimensions of power, so was the Soviet Union then. Yet despite gaps in its national power, the USSR absorbed the full national security energies of the United States in a four-decade-long security competition. The Cold War divided the globe into rival camps, shadowed the world in the threat of nuclear war, and fueled proxy wars that killed tens of millions of people. That was the kind of competition waged by the Soviet Union—and that is the level of competition of which China is already capable.

The Future Balance

The bipolar distribution of power could shift for a few different reasons. I examine two arguments: (1) because of slowing growth, China will be increasingly unable to compete against the United States, and (2) the system will soon be (or is) multipolar.

CHINESE ECONOMIC DECLINE?

China's slowing economic growth has touched off a debate about the country's future.¹²⁷ I clarify this debate and how it relates to great power competition with three points.

SLOWING GROWTH? Many observers doubt China's future economic capabilities because of its slowing growth. But China's future as a great power does not depend on it sustaining high rates of growth. China's economic slowdown was both predictable and predicted. Fast-growing economies always slow down after they reach about the middle-income level; after years of high growth, annual rates will slow to about 1–2 percent.¹²⁸ Such a transition would

mation, Participation and Consultative Democracy," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 27, No. 112 (2018), pp. 569–583, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1433573>; Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*.

127. For optimistic arguments about China's economic power, see Nicholas R. Lardy, "China Is Still Rising: Don't Underestimate the World's Second-Biggest Economy," *Foreign Affairs*, April 2, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china-still-rising>; C. Fred Bergsten, *The United States vs. China: The Quest for Global Economic Leadership* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022). On China's geopolitical challenge regardless of an economic slowdown, see Evan S. Medeiros, "The Delusion of Peak China: America Can't Wish Away Its Toughest Challenger," *Foreign Affairs*, April 24, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/delusion-peak-china-united-states-evan-medeiros>.

128. Lant Pritchett and Lawrence H. Summers, *Asiaphoria Meets Regression to the Mean*, Working Paper 20573 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2014), <https://www.nber.org/papers/w20573>; Barry Eichengreen, Donghyun Park, and Kwanho Shin, *Growth Slow-*

reflect a success, not a failure, for China.¹²⁹ When debating China's future, the question is not whether China can overcome its various challenges to sustain 6 or 7 percent growth. No country at this developmental stage has ever sustained such growth and nor will China. Rather, the question is whether China will successfully settle into a sustainable range of 1–2 percent growth.

ECONOMIC HEADWINDS? Some observers are skeptical of China's future economic strength because they argue that various tailwinds that supported China's rise are shifting to disadvantageous headwinds. Demographics is one;¹³⁰ indeed, Chinese demographics have shifted in an unfavorable direction as more and more workers age out of the labor force without enough younger workers to replace them.¹³¹ Furthermore, observers warn that China's future growth will slow because of decades of heavy investment and the risk of "two severe and intertwined crises—the downward spiral in its property market and the looming risks from trillions of dollars of hidden debt accumulated by local governments."¹³²

Such headwinds are precisely the reasons why catch-up growth invariably slows, and why Chinese growth is slowing now. Favorable demographics boosted growth in twentieth-century rising economies (e.g., Japan, South Korea, Taiwan), but as their societies aged, unfavorable demographics damp-

downs Redux: New Evidence on the Middle-Income Trap, Working Paper 18673 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, January 2013), <https://www.nber.org/papers/w18673>.

129. On why input-based growth slows, see Alwyn Young, "The Tyranny of Numbers: Confronting the Statistical Realities of the East Asian Growth Experience," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 110, No. 3 (August 1995), pp. 641–680, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2946695>; Paul Krugman, "The Myth of Asia's Miracle," *Foreign Affairs*, November 1, 1994, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1994-11-01/myth-asias-miracle>.

130. Tim Dyson, *Population and Development: The Demographic Transition* (London: Zed Books, 2010); David Bloom, David Canning, and Jaypee Sevilla, *The Demographic Dividend: A New Perspective on the Economic Consequences of Population Change* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003).

131. On Chinese demographic trends and their causes, see: Liyan Qi and Ming Li, "The One-Child Policy Supercharged China's Economic Miracle. Now It's Paying the Price," *Wall Street Journal*, July 11, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/china/china-population-slowing-economy-7ff938e5>; Alexandra Stevenson and Zixu Wang, "China's Population Falls, Heralding a Demographic Crisis," *New York Times*, January 16, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/16/business/china-birth-rate.html>; Gideon Rachman, "Lousy Demographics Will Not Stop China's Rise," *Financial Times*, May 3, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/ae51b1bf-4c45-4c8b-8e41-16d2112bc549>; Mei Fong, *One Child: The Story of China's Most Radical Experiment* (New York: Oneworld, 2016).

132. Jason Douglas and Rebecca Feng, "China's Economy Is in Trouble. Xi Jinping Has Other Priorities," *Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/china/chinas-economy-is-in-trouble-xi-jinping-has-other-priorities-c1933b34>; Logan Wright, "China's Slow-Motion Financial Crisis Is Unfolding as Expected," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 21, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-slow-motion-financial-crisis-unfolding-expected>; Brad Setser, "Beijing's Debts Come Due: How a Burst Real-Estate Bubble Threatens China's Economy," *Foreign Affairs*, August 30, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/beijing-debts-come-due-china-economy>.

ened growth. China also enjoyed a demographic “dividend,” which has shifted to a demographic “penalty” as China’s society ages.¹³³ Furthermore, other rapidly rising economies—Japan, South Korea, and the United States in the nineteenth century—experienced financial crises that depressed growth. Today, those countries are among the world’s richest and most technologically advanced.

THE MIDDLE-INCOME TRAP. A third and related argument is whether China can surmount the “middle-income trap.” Observers debate whether China’s GDP per capita will reach the high-income category or will stagnate, as has happened for most high-growth economies.¹³⁴ Optimists might note that economic growth beyond middle income correlates with high levels of human capital, which China has created in abundance.¹³⁵ Pessimists note China’s stagnating productivity levels (as measured by “total factor productivity”) and argue that several of Xi Jinping’s policies will dampen future growth.¹³⁶ Importantly, however, income categories graft poorly onto the balance of power.

China’s future as a great power does not depend on a successful transition to the high-income category. To begin with, the World Bank’s GDP per

133. Leaders also have a variety of tools that they can use to address this issue, notably raising China’s young retirement age. See: Jennifer D. Sciubba, *8 Billion and Counting: How Sex, Death, and Migration Shape Our World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2022); Arthur R. Kroeber, *China’s Economy: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). The CCP has indeed raised the retirement age; see Kelly Ng, “China Raises Retirement Age for First Time Since 1950s,” BBC.com, September 13, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62421le4j6o>.

134. “China May Soon Become a High-Income Country,” *Economist*, February 4, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2022/02/04/china-may-soon-become-a-high-income-country>; Mickey D. Levy, “China Is about to Fall into the Middle-Income Trap,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 26, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/middle-income-trap-china-xi-jinping-real-estate-ccp-congress-gdp-manufacturing-11666815892>; Shekhar Aiyar et al., *Growth Slowdowns and the Middle-Income Trap*, IMF Working Paper WP/13/71 (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2013), <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2013/wp1371.pdf>; Homi Kharas and Harinder Kohli, “What Is the Middle Income Trap, Why Do Countries Fall into It, and How Can It Be Avoided?,” *Global Journal of Emerging Market Economies*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2011), pp. 281–289, <https://doi.org/10.1177/097491011100300302>; Alejandro Foxley and Fernando Sossdorf, *Making the Transition: From Middle-Income to Advanced Economies* (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/wps/ceip/0023178/f_0023178_18967.pdf.

135. Eichengreen, Park, and Shin, “Growth Slowdowns Redux.”

136. On policy shifts under Xi Jinping, see: Li Yuan, “What China Expects from Businesses: Total Surrender,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/19/technology/what-china-expects-from-businesses-total-surrender.html>; Lingling Wei, “Xi Jinping Aims to Rein in Chinese Capitalism, Hew to Mao’s Socialist Vision,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 20, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/xi-jinping-aims-to-rein-in-chinese-capitalism-hew-to-maos-socialist-vision-11632150725>; Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); David Shambaugh, *China’s Leaders: From Mao to Now* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021); Susan L. Shirk, *Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

capita threshold for high-income countries—\$13,205 for 2023—has little connection to the GDP per capita of the world’s most economically and technologically advanced countries, such as Germany (\$53,970) and Japan (\$39,039).¹³⁷ More importantly, as this article demonstrates, GDP per capita is a poor measurement of great power. The Soviet Union never reached the high-income level but was nonetheless a profoundly dangerous superpower competitor. To be sure, China’s ability to *overtake* the United States would require China to raise its GDP per capita (although given that China’s population is four times larger than that of the United States, China would not require parity). But China need not overtake the United States economically or militarily to engage it in a dangerous security competition.

THE EMERGENCE OF MULTIPOLARITY?

Today one commonly hears that the international system has evolved into a “new multipolar world.”¹³⁸ Emma Ashford and Evan Cooper are undoubtedly correct when they argue that “a variety of capable, dynamic middle powers . . . will help to shape the international environment in coming decades.”¹³⁹ But this is a separate issue from polarity (i.e., the number of great powers). How likely is the emergence of one or more great powers?

GERMANY AND JAPAN. Figures 10 and 11 show that the world currently has two latent powers: Germany and Japan. Both countries exceed the median great power economic capabilities (27 for GDP, 15 for composite ratio). Yet because of their grand strategic choices, they fall short of the great power thresholds for military capabilities. As figure 11 shows, the thresholds for the military metrics are 23 percent for military expenditure and 88 percent for military personnel. Japan and Germany are well below both thresholds: 5 and 7 percent, respectively, for military expenditure, and 18 and 14 percent, respectively, for military personnel.

The system might shift into multipolarity if either country chooses to mobilize greater levels of military power. But doing so would require each to

137. For FY 2023, the World Bank put the high-income threshold at \$13,845. As of October 2024, China is at \$13,400. Data from World Bank, World Development Indicators, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.CD?locations=>.

138. Marc Champion, “The New Multipolar World Mimics the U.S. at Its Worst,” *Bloomberg*, January 19, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2024-01-19/iran-russia-china-aggression-shows-multipolar-world-mimics-the-us-at-its-worst>; Gideon Rachman, “A ‘Multipolar’ World Defies the ‘Rules-Based’ Order,” *Financial Times*, January 19, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/5a1a5d17-d37b-4242-8241-d81daa7467fc>; Yaqing, “Shijie zhixu de biange.”

139. Ashford and Cooper, “Yes, the World Is Multipolar.”

dramatically depart from its prevailing grand strategy, which appears highly unlikely.¹⁴⁰ Motivated by growing regional threats, both countries have announced modest increases in defense spending.¹⁴¹ Yet Germany walked back this plan, and Japan may do so as well.¹⁴² The Japanese public opposes tax hikes to pay for increased defense spending, which may force the government to borrow in order to fulfill promised increases.¹⁴³ But with debt at 263 percent of its GDP, Japan is already the most indebted among the world's developed economies.¹⁴⁴ Even if Germany and Japan fulfilled these modest increases, both countries would remain below the great power threshold.

RUSSIA. Some observers argue that the international system is multipolar because Russia is a great power. As figures 10 and 11 show, Russia sits at the low end of the normal range for the composite metric and below the normal range for both military expenditure and military personnel (particularly the former). Thus, Russia is not a great power—a conclusion further supported by its inability to militarily defeat a non-great power (Ukraine).¹⁴⁵ Russia's power is

140. Tom Phuong Le, *Japan's Aging Peace: Pacifism and Militarism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021); Andrew L. Oros, *Japan's Security Renaissance: New Policies and Politics for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). On Germany's grand strategy, see: Ulrich Speck, "First Insights into Germany's Future Foreign Policy," German Marshall Fund, November 29, 2021, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/berlin-monthly-dispatch-november-2021-first-insights-germanys-future-foreign-policy>; Judy Dempsey, "Judy Asks: Is Germany Discovering Strategy?," Carnegie Europe, February 11, 2015, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2015/02/judy-asks-is-germany-discovering-strategy>; Josef Joffe, "No Threats, No Temptations: German Grand Strategy after the Cold War," in Bertel Heurlin, ed., *Germany in Europe in the Nineties* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), pp. 259–272.

141. Jennifer Lind, "Japan Steps Up: How Asia's Rising Threats Convinced Tokyo to Abandon Its Defense Taboos," *Foreign Affairs*, December 23, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/japan/japan-steps>; Maria Sheahan and Sarah Marsh, "Germany to Increase Defence Spending in Reponse to 'Putin's War'—Scholz," Reuters, February 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/germany-hike-defense-spending-scholz-says-further-policy-shift-2022-02-27/>.

142. Hans von der Burchard and Gabriel Rinaldi, "Germany Backtracks on Defense Spending Promises Made after Ukraine Invasion," *Politico*, December 5, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-backtracks-on-defense-spending-promise-warns-about-delays-ukraine-war/>.

143. Sheila A. Smith, "Financing Japan's Defense Leap," *Asia Unbound* (blog), Council on Foreign Relations, December 14, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/financing-japans-defense-leap>.

144. Leika Kihara and Tetsushi Kajimoto, "Japan's Debt Time Bomb to Complicate BOJ Exit Path," Reuters, February 10, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/japans-debt-time-bomb-complicate-boj-exit-path-2023-02-10/>.

145. On Russia, see: Zack Cooper, "Bad Idea: 'Great Power Competition' Terminology," *Defense360*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 1, 2020, <https://defense360.csis.org/bad-idea-great-power-competition-terminology/>; "Should U.S. Foreign Policy Focus on Great Power Competition? *Foreign Affairs* Asks the Experts," *Foreign Affairs*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2020-10-13/should-us-foreign-policy-focus-great-power-competition>; Brooks and Wohlforth, "The Myth of Multipolarity."

also reduced by its dependence on natural resource exports, a human capital crisis, corruption, and other economic maladies.¹⁴⁶ Although Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that whichever country leads in AI will “become the ruler of the world,” Russia lags in the frontier technologies that will likely drive future economic growth and military power.¹⁴⁷ Still, experts caution against underestimating Russia—a warning validated by its territorial revanchism. Russia is an energy superpower; it amplifies China’s “counter-hegemonic” narrative against the U.S.-led international order; it subverts the United States, other democracies, and NATO; and it bolsters authoritarian regimes.¹⁴⁸ Russia is not a great power—but it is nonetheless a regional power with significant national capabilities.

INDIA. Observers sometimes argue that India is or will soon be a great power in a multipolar world. Although India indeed ticks many of the boxes for great power, this article shows that it currently sits outside the great power ranks.¹⁴⁹ Figures 10 and 11 show that India exceeds the great power threshold on two of the four ratio metrics (GDP and military personnel). But it remains below the great power threshold for the composite and military expenditure metrics: 6 percent and 8 percent, respectively.

Optimists can point to a variety of signs that India will develop a great power economy and technological base. Its advantageous demographics cre-

146. Andrei Kolesnikov and Denis Volkov, “The Coming Deluge: Russia’s Looming Lost Decade of Unpaid Bills and Economic Stagnation,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 24, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/09/the-coming-deluge-russias-looming-lost-decade-of-unpaid-bills-and-economic-stagnation>; Martin Russell, “Seven Economic Challenges for Russia: Breaking out of Stagnation?,” (Strasbourg, France: European Parliamentary Research Service, July 2018), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2018/625138/EPRS_IDA\(2018\)625138_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2018/625138/EPRS_IDA(2018)625138_EN.pdf).

147. “Vladimir Putin Wants to Catch Up with the West in AI,” *Economist*, February 8, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/business/2024/02/08/vladimir-putin-wants-to-catch-up-with-the-west-in-ai>; Matthew Brummer and Jennifer Lind, “The Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Balance of Power,” paper presented at the International Studies Association 2022 Annual Convention, Nashville, TN, March 2022.

148. Kathryn Stoner, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Jeffrey Mankoff, “Russia in the Era of Great Power Competition,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (2021), pp. 107–125, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970905>; Andrew Radin, Alyssa Demus, and Krystyna Marcinek, *Understanding Russian Subversion: Patterns, Threats, and Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2020), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE331.html>.

149. Analyzing India as a potential great power are Sumit Ganguly and William R. Thompson, *Ascending India and Its State Capacity: Extraction, Violence, and Legitimacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); Sumit Ganguly, ed., *India as an Emerging Power* (London: Frank Cass, 2003); Alyssa Ayres, *Our Time Has Come: How India Is Making Its Place in the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

ate the potential for significant economic growth.¹⁵⁰ Technologically, India has gained strength on several innovation metrics (particularly related to human capital), including in frontier technologies.¹⁵¹ India has benefited from shifts in global supply chains and technology transfer from the United States, which views India as a valuable partner vis-à-vis Beijing.¹⁵² It is also important to note that in 1990, my analysis shows that China's composite score was 2 percent (see figure 5)—yet China crossed the great power threshold of 8 percent only twelve years later. Japan experienced a similar leap in its economic power in 1960–1970, when its composite score jumped from 6 to 21 percent. A lot can change in a decade.

India's rise to great power status remains contingent on several policies and reforms. Capitalizing on favorable demographics requires policies to improve infrastructure, expand the manufacturing sector, raise human capital levels, and reduce discrimination (and violence) against girls and women to increase female labor force participation.¹⁵³ India also has significant ground to cover in the military realm. Its defense spending ranks at 10 percent (see figure 11), which is far from the normal range for great power military expenditure (23–105 percent). Raising this percentage would require both continued economic growth and major changes in India's strategic thinking.¹⁵⁴ In sum, the most

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152. Dylan Loh, "India and ASEAN Rise in Supply Chain Priority, Global Survey Shows," *Nikkei Asia*, May 9, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Supply-Chain/India-and-ASEAN-rise-in-supply-chain-priority-global-survey-shows>; Hemant Taneja and Fareed Zakaria, "The U.S.–India Relationship Is Key to the Future of Tech," *Harvard Business Review*, April 17, 2023, <https://hbr.org/2023/04/the-u-s-india-relationship-is-key-to-the-future-of-tech>.

153. Rajesh Nigam, "Strong Infra Crucial for Growth," *Hindu Times*, June 10, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/real-estate/strong-infra-crucial-for-growth/article65463230.ece>. Also see: Arvind Subramanian and Josh Felman, "Why India Can't Replace China: The Barriers to New Delhi's Next Boom," *Foreign Affairs*, December 20, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/why-india-cant-replace-china>; "Women's Participation in Indian Workforce Low Due to Gender Discrimination—Oxfam," Reuters, September 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/womens-participation-indian-workforce-low-due-gender-discrimination-oxfam-2022-09-14/>; Sushrut Desai, "Gender Disparity in Primary Education: The Experience in India," *UN Chronicle*, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/gender-disparity-primary-education-experience-india>; Geeta Pandey, "Rising Crimes against Indian Women in Five Charts," *BBC.com*, September 13, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-62830634>.

154. Manjari Chatterjee Miller, *Why Nations Rise: Narrative and the Path to Great Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

likely cause of a shift to multipolarity will result from the continued rise of India. Yet the country is not yet a great power, and its future economic growth and military rise are contingent on policy choices. The world is bipolar, for now.

Conclusion

“Let me tell you something,” President Barack Obama told Congress during his 2016 State of the Union address, “the United States of America is the most powerful nation on Earth,” he said. “Period. Period. It’s not even close.” In case anyone did not get the message, Obama repeated “it’s not even close” two more times, while the audience applauded.¹⁵⁵ But was it close? And how close must a country get to the United States to challenge it in a great power competition? This article contributes to such debates by creating an inductive method for comparing national power, both to validate common metrics and to establish thresholds for great power capabilities.

This method has shown, first, that thresholds for great power are far lower than many scholars assume. The balance of power is often highly uneven among great powers—even between superpowers. Countries that engaged other great powers in dangerous security competitions often had far inferior material capabilities.

Second, China is either *within* or *well past* what constitutes the historical normal range for great powers. In fact, in contrast to the argument that the United States enjoys a substantial lead, I find that China today is a superpower whose capabilities on most dimensions exceed those of the Soviet Union at its Cold War peak. Third, contrary to assertions that the world remains unipolar or has shifted into multipolarity, this article has shown that the world is bipolar. India and Russia are indeed influential regional powers, and India’s continued rise may, in the medium term, shift the system into multipolarity. As of 2024, though, the system is bipolar.

The shift from a unipolar, U.S.-dominated system to a bipolar system has important implications for international politics. Engaged in a security competition with a superpower rival, China has both the motivation and the re-

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sources to shape international politics in ways that protect its interests. Indeed, Beijing already supports authoritarian leaders in a variety of ways, contributing to a global trend of democratic decline.¹⁵⁶ China's contestation of human rights and other norms is transforming multilateral institutions' activities and agendas.¹⁵⁷ China's political and economic support has already affected the balance of power in the Russo-Ukrainian War and strengthens Iran vis-à-vis the United States and Europe.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, China has transformed the balance of power in East Asia, which elevates the risk of war over Taiwan and creates the risk of war and nuclear escalation between China and the United States.¹⁵⁹ By threatening U.S. regional power projection, China's great power rise calls into question the credibility of U.S. security guarantees of its regional allies and threatens the alliance system at the core of current U.S. grand strategy. After 1990, the shift from bipolarity to unipolarity transformed U.S. foreign policy and international politics. Today, the shift from unipolarity to bipolarity makes another transformation likely.

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159. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*; Allison, *Destined for War*; Caitlin Talmadge, "Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Spring 2017), pp. 50–92, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00274; Oriana Skylar Mastro, "The Taiwan Temptation: Why Beijing Might Resort to Force," *Foreign Affairs*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-06-03/china-taiwan-war-temptation>; Anderson and Press, "Projecting Land-Based Air Power into East Asia."