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Global Power Transitions
How Oceans Facilitate Peaceful Power Transitions

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1 Introduction

Any student of international relations subscribed to the school of realism is very well aware that the struggle for power between countries and the wars resulting form it are a defining feature of the world. It is particularly pronounced whenever a rising power begins to challenge the incumbent dominant power of an international order. As the British scholar Edward H. Carr recognized in his 1939 book "The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939", during occasions of power transition, there exists the problem of "peaceful change (ed. 2016, p. 191-202)". Historically speaking, the convergence of power has led to war more often than not, going back to the oft-cited Thucydides Trap, which describes why the power transition between Athens and Sparta ended in war (see also Graham Allison, 2017). So, it is hardly surprising then that when China began to rise, it was increasingly connected to worrisome connotations.

Since the end of the Cold War and the fall of the USSR, the People's Republic of China's rise to prominence has been meteoric. Initially many notable scholars believed that this rise would remain peaceful. Princeton Professor G. John Ikenberry, for instance, was convinced that China would have an interest in upholding the liberal order, as it facilitated its rise to great power status (Ikenberry, 2011). Great power competitions and hegemonic wars were considered a thing of the past (Wohlforth, 1995). However, China has since risen to become the world's second-largest economy and arguably the second greatest power behind the US, with increasingly aggressive and ambitious foreign policies to reflect that. At the same time, the US suffered from a relative decline in power because of what can very well be described as imperial overstretch, a term popularized by Yale University historian Paul Kennedy in his book The Rise and Fall of Great Powers (1987). As a result, the unipolar global order, which has existed with the US as its sole pole since the fall of the USSR, is once again making way for a competition between two great powers.

This transition also resulted in a paradigm shift among scholars, the majority of which had, for the longest time, dismissed the possibility that China would attempt to overthrow the liberal rules-based international order (Layne, 2020). Questioning and analyzing the possibility of a peaceful Chinese rise has since become the focus of numerous research projects. But even before this shift, many realist scholars, most notably perhaps John Mearsheimer, claimed that China's peaceful rise would be improbable, if not impossible. At the very least, he believed a fierce security competition between the US and China to be inevitable (Mearsheimer, 2014; 2019). Historically, this claim seems to be supported by empirical evidence, as Graham Allison illustrated in his 2017 book "Destined for War"; most of the 16 power transitions identified by

Allison since the late 15th century escalated into a war between the rising and the dominant power.

However, some exceptions offer hope for a peaceful conclusion. Allison does list some examples where the power transition between the rising and dominant power remained primarily peaceful, most notably the power transition between the US and the British Empire at the turn of the 20th century. I intend to contribute to the discussion regarding the possibility of a peaceful rise of China by taking a closer look at some historical examples of power transition. In doing so, I seek to explain why some power transitions could remain peaceful while others ended in wars. For this purpose, I will be taking a closer look at two things: The participating country's geographic location, or more specifically, whether an ocean separates them, and whether the countries in question put an emphasis on sea power as opposed to land power, i.e., whether they were maritime powers or continental land powers. In other words, I will build upon Mearsheimer's (2001) concept of the stopping power of water and Levy and Thompson's (2010) findings regarding the historical differences in perception between continental powers and sea powers to explain why some power transitions are peaceful, while most result in a war. I will focus on two past power transitions in particular: The peaceful transition between the British Empire and the United States and the much less peaceful power transition between the British Empire and Imperial Germany.

I will proceed as follows. First, I will demonstrate why the current relationship between the US and China qualifies as a power transition and present a selection of predictions by notable scholars regarding the future of this relationship. Secondly, I will present a selection of approaches that explain why certain power transitions transpired peacefully and what I perceive to be their flaws. Third, using the works mentioned above by Mearsheimer and Levy and Thompson, I will formulate my theory, explaining under which conditions the power transition between two powers can happen peacefully. My hypothesis will focus on the importance of geography and the distinction between continental and sea powers and, unlike other theories, will be universally applicable, at least for transitions between modern states. In the fourth part, I will test my hypothesis using historical examples of power transition. This test is split into two parts: First, a more general summary of modern power transitions of the 20th century, based on Allison's (2017) selection, while explaining their outcome with my theory. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of both the late 19th/early 20th-century power transitions between the British Empire and the United States, as well as the British Empire and Imperial Germany. Once again, I will apply my theory to explain why the former of which happened peacefully while the latter ultimately resulted in the first World War. After demonstrating my hypothesis's

validity and explanatory power using historical examples, I will return to the contemporary Sino-American power transitions and apply my findings to it. I conclude that because of the separation by the Pacific Ocean, the geography is wholly unsuited for any large-scale conventional assault by either nation. Combined with the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence and the tendency for maritime powers to prioritize trade above conquest, war will be an improbable result of the Sino-American power transition. However, even if outright war might be unlikely, the fate of the global liberal international order is much less secure, as Washington's sensibilities as a maritime power increasingly clash with the ambitions of a continental power in the form of China. As tensions rise, economic interest might not be the force of peace it is often touted as. Finally, I will conclude with a summary of my findings.

2 Power Transition in the 21st century – The End of the End of History

The struggle for supremacy between several great powers, or as was the case in the latter half of the 20th century, two superpowers, had been a central and ever-present component of international relations throughout history. In response, scholars developed theories explaining the relations between the various powers and their propensity for conflict with one another. Among them, power transition theory sought to explain the origins of major wars with the development of the material power of states. However, after the end of the Cold War, this concept of great power competitions and realism as a whole was considered to be a relic of the past for many years (Wohlforth, 1995); by extension, the same was true for power transition theories. The unipolar moment with the US as the singular pole in the international order that followed the Cold War's conclusion and the fall of the Soviet Union was considered by many as the end of the great power competition, which had plagued humanity for millennia and resulted in innumerable wars.

In light of this development, some scholars, most notably Francis Fukuyama, were even so bold as to proclaim the "end of history." Fukuyama saw the emergence of the unipolar liberal order after the Cold War as "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government (Fukuyama, 1989, p.4)." However, even among those scholars that did not go quite so far, there was for the longest time a consensus that the liberal international order had supplanted the traditional great power politics. Looking at the developments shortly after the Cold War, it is easy to see why. After the fall of the iron curtain, democratization quickly spread to the former Soviet states. Additionally, the world and its economies grew increasingly globalized under the patronage of the US, which in turn resulted in increased interdependence between states. The resulting US-led unipolar liberal international order that had developed in the absence of an equal rival has gone on for longer than most anticipated, leading to what was initially coined as the unipolar moment to resemble more a unipolar era (Krauthammer, 2002). As a result, many called into question the relevance of the realist school of thought with its seemingly outdated focus on great power competition (Wohlforth, 1995). But as history has proved time and time again, every era must come to an end. With the recent rise of China, the era of the American unipolar moment seems to be coming to a close, and as the Sino-American relationship is increasingly reframed into a rivalry, the world seems to once again return to one of great power competitions. As such, realist and power transition theories are, once more, high in demand.

2.1 The Rise of China and the Return of Great Power Competition

With China's meteoric rise to great power status, particularly in recent years, many argue that unipolarity has or will soon come to an end to be once again replaced with a security competition between two great powers. Whether the end of the unipolar order has already arrived, or how close it is to happening, is subject to much debate in the field of international relations and political science in general, but it will not be the subject of this thesis. Hence I will only touch upon it briefly. No matter which side of the argument one might agree with, what can be said for certain, is that history did not end with the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent end of the Cold War.

In fact, the end of the Cold War was probably the catalyst for China's rapid rise to prominence. It profited the most, arguably even more than the United States themselves, from the liberal rules-based international order with its focus on open markets that the US started building in the early 1990s. This order was crucial for China's power growth. After all, the power of a state is defined as a combination of three elements, its population, the effectiveness of its political system in channeling its population's labor towards the advancement of national goals, and its economic productivity (Tammen et al., 2000). A high population is something China has always had, owed in part to its significantly large territory and in part to an explosive growth in population typical for developing nations. Nowadays, even after decades under the harsh and only recently abolished one-child policy, China has the largest population of any country in the world. Likewise, the effectiveness of the communist regime at extracting its population's labor has steadily been improving. However, it is the third element of power, the country's economic productivity, which was supercharged in its development by the liberal international order. That is because even though China was and still is far away from anything resembling a democratic nation (whether the label of a communist state is still applicable is a discussion for another time), the US was nevertheless eager to integrate it into this brave new globalized world. The reason for that can, in part, be found in the US's post-Cold War idealism, which caused it to ignore more skeptical and cautious opinions, most often coming from realist scholars like John Mearsheimer regarding China's integration into the international order. The US believed that by making China into a "responsible stakeholder" (Zoellick, 2005) within the international system, it would, in turn, have a vested interest in maintaining the system (Ikenberry, 2011). The hope was that this integration into the international economy would pave the way to economic and perhaps even political liberalization and democratization within China (Layne, 2020).

However, the hoped-for liberalization failed to materialize. On the contrary, China has doubled down on its authoritarian governance numerous times, most recently with the brutal suppression of the pro-democracy movement in the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong, formerly a British colony. Combined with the fact that the creation and upkeep of this liberal unipolar order were contingent on the significant economic cost by the liberal democracies, including the US as its sole pole, this critically undermined US unipolarity. An undemocratized China was able to profit greatly from the open international economy fueling its economic rise. At the same time, the US shouldered most of the cost (Mearsheimer, 2019), thereby further amplifying natural power transition mechanics that cause rising nations to benefit from higher growth rates (Gilpin, 1989). China thus rapidly rose to its present-day status as the world's second-largest economy and has, as of writing, already surpassed the US as the largest economy when measured by purchasing power parity (PPP) (World Bank, 2021). In short, China copied the US's approach to reaching great power status. It kept itself out of most foreign affairs – most notably, it did not wage any wars in faraway regions of the world – and focused almost exclusively on building a world-class economy. Simultaneously the US spends trillions of dollars on maintaining the liberal international order, as well as focusing on so-called second- and third-order challenges, such as terrorists, medium-sized war or peacekeeping and humanitarian aid operations, and thus jeopardized its long-term primacy (McArthur & Rasmussen, 2018; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016; Betts, 2014).

It was only relatively recently that the Chinese foreign policy began to change. As China became more secure in its economic power, it too began to develop national interests outside its sovereign borders and, backed by its powerful economy, is now increasingly getting in conflict with US national interest. This conflict can be observed mainly in East and Southeast Asia, where China's intentions can be summarized as pushing out US influence to establish itself as a regional hegemon, demonstrated most overtly in Beijing's claim of the South China Sea as China's territorial waters (Lobell, 2016). It is once again mirroring America's rise, during which it employed the Monroe Doctrine and removed European influences in the Americas. But China's ambitions are not just limited to Asia. As seen with such projects as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), it strives to be an alternative to the United States on a global scale. The result of both US and Chinese policies since the end of the Cold war is that for the first time in almost 30 years United States' position as the preeminent state of the world system is no longer uncontested.

Of course, the US did not passively observe this change in Chinese foreign policy. It prompted a paradigm shift in US policy as well, away from the previous attempts at integrating

China to containment measures in the form of the Obama administration's “pivot to Asia" that promised to reinforce America’s presence in the region (Lieberthal, 2011) and the Trump administrations so-called trade war, which intended to stifle the growth of the Chinese economy through trade sanctions. The US has also repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to its allies in the Asia Pacific region by coordinating several naval exercises in the South China Sea with its allies, including Japan, India, South Korea, and Australia (Choudhury & Moorthy, 2018; Reuters, 2019a). The US also has its warships regularly traverse the strait of Taiwan (Lague & Lim, 2019), thereby signaling to China that it would not cede its influence in the region without a fight. In the same vein, President Obama in 2012 rebuffed President Xi Jinping’s proposal for a “new form of great power relations,” in which the US and China would have respected each other’s spheres of influence. In China’s case, this would have included respecting its claims in the South China Sea, most notably Taiwan. Unsurprisingly, the Trump administration was equally opposed (Allison, 2017). All of the US’s measures served the purpose of maintaining the US’s position as the preeminent state in the international order. However, regardless of the measures taken by the US, most scholars argue that the US’s unipolar moment has already ended. With tensions once again on the rise between two competing great powers, this belief has at least some merit. As China's power and ambitions continued to grow, it becomes harder to argue against the existence of a power transition between the US and China. As far as I am concerned, the power transition between the US and China is already underway.

2.2 The Future of the Sino-American Relationship – Common Predictions

2.2.1 War and Peace

There is not a consensus among experts concerning how Sino-American relations will develop. Generally speaking, scholars tend to be spread across the entire spectrum of possibilities between a peaceful transition and the outbreak of a shooting war. On one end of the spectrum, many classic power transition theories predict an all-out war between the dominant state and an ascending state within the international order, because of the difference in size and the rising state’s rapid gains in power, as a consequence of the law of uneven growths (Gilpin, 1989, Organski & Kugler, 1980). In the current case, the United States and China would be the dominant and rising states, respectively, and a war reminiscent of the hegemonic wars of old is increasingly likely to occur as soon as power parity or a facsimile of it is achieved (Tammen et al., 2000). However, opinions vary on whether the rising power, inherently dissatisfied with the existing international order (Organski & Kugler, 1980) or the dominant power, motivated by fear of being outmatched without taking preemptive action (Copeland,

2000), would be the aggressor in such a war. More recent theories are less extreme concerning the prospect of war but nevertheless consider war a likely outcome of the Sino-American relationship. John Mearsheimer, perhaps the most famous and certainly one of the most insistent scholars arguing against the possibility of a peaceful Chinese rise, has written several papers and book chapters explaining why he does not believe in the possibility of a peaceful rise of China. According to him, the realist anarchic nature of international relations is simply too predisposed for conflict for a peaceful rise to be likely. The US would never tolerate a state becoming a peer competitor and would inadvertently feel threatened by this new challenger, whose motivation it can never truly know. He is, of course, not blind to the arguments against a war between great powers in the current times, most notably the existence of nuclear weapons, which make a preventive war unfeasible. He nevertheless argues that even if a shooting war can be avoided, at the very least an intense security competition would develop between the two nations, as the US would and should attempt to contain China's rise and thus weaken its capacity to establish itself as the regional hegemon of Asia (Mearsheimer, 2018; 2014; 2010; 2004; 2001).

Furthermore, as He (2017) pointed out, many scholars, especially among other offensive realists and power transitionists, concur with this sentiment of a high likeliness of war between the two countries as China continues to challenge the existing international order. Some even make it a question of when rather than if (Tammen and Kugler 2006; Chan 2008; Goldstein 2007). The historical track record of power transitions between great powers supports the assertions for the high likelihood of war. As Allison illustrated in his 2017 book "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?", 12 out of 16 power transitions in the last 500 years ended in an armed conflict. In a 2015 essay, Allison summarized two key drivers that push the US and China towards war as: "the rising power's growing entitlement, sense of its importance, and demand for greater say and sway, on the one hand, and the fear, insecurity, and determination to defend the status quo this engenders in the established power, on the other." Mastro (2019) reiterates this by identifying seven variables[1] determining the likeliness of war between China and the US and coming to the unfortunate conclusion that the more important of these variables point firmly to a confrontation. Other more nuanced versions of realism are a bit more optimistic. They claim that the structural forces driving major forces into conflict will be relatively weak, making the outcome of China's rise contingent on how the

[1] The variables in question are 1) the degree of dissatisfaction of the rising power; 2) economic interdependence; 3) institutional constraints; 4) the nature of the relevant domestic political systems; 5) existing alliances; 6) the existence of nuclear deterrence; 7) the sustainability of the rising power's growth.

US and Chinese leadership handle the situation, first and foremost (Glaser, 2015). At the very least, the end of the current liberal international order seems inevitable.

Predictions of peaceful integration of China into the established liberal order populated the other end of the spectrum. Most of these assume that China would either willingly join a preexisting order under US leadership because they could prosper within it (Glaser, 2015) or establish a new bipolar co-leadership of the liberal order as suggested by President Xi (Mastro, 2019, Allison, 2017). These theories generally originate from liberalist thinkers and thus argue that the far-reaching economic interdependence between the US and China would prevent any kind of war. After all, only dissatisfied nations challenge the status quo, while satisfied nations desire to uphold the status quo and thus seek cooperative solutions to enhance their economic and security gains (Tammen et al., 2000). Thus, any scenario involving a war, proponents of peaceful argue, would harm both parties' economic prospects, regardless of the eventual victor of a hypothetical US-China war. The unprecedented level of interdependence current experienced as a result of globalization certainly supports this stance.

Moreover, for years, the US and China have been each other's largest trading partners. Therefore, if both the US and China were to be satisfied with the current system – a reasonable assumption considering how much both countries continue to profit economically from the liberal international order – the relationship between the two can remain peaceful, even if China overtakes the US in power, as is projected to happen eventually (Tammen et al., 2000). The foremost example of such a peaceful power transition between two satisfied powers is the overtaking of Britain in the late 19th century (Tammen et al., 2000). While the opinions on the immediacy of such an overtaking between the US and China differ between scholars[2], China will, by virtue of its greater population and earlier level of development alone, eventually surpass the US. Provided it can sustain its growth, of course. But that is a different and very complex topic altogether. While there are reasonable doubts (Mastro, 2019), for the sake of argument, the sustainability of China's growth of China will be assumed for the rest of this thesis. In order to achieve a peaceful transition, the dominant US and the challenging China would have to realign their preferences over time to reduce the likeliness of the challenger declaring war on the dominant power, just as the US and Great Britain did in the 19th century (Tammen et al., 2000). More specifically, Charles Kupchan (2001 p. 8-9) claims three

[2] Wohlforth and Brooks (2016) for instance are not at all convinced that China is going to overtake the US any time soon, despite its dramatic economic growth. Rather they consider the US's position as the sole superpower secure, with China establishing itself as an "emerging potential superpower." This signals a shift from the unipolar order of 1+x to a more differentiated order of 1+1+x, wherein China is far more powerful than all remaining powers and has the potential to become a superpower but is still far from reaching parity with the US, let alone surpass it.

conditions must be met for a peaceful transition to be feasible. Firstly, both states must engage in a "sustained process of strategic restraint and mutual accommodation," paving the way for them to recognize each other as benign polities. Secondly, both powers must be in agreement "on the outlines of a new international order." Finally, both must be able to legitimize the agreements made regarding this new order.

Realists, however, are quick to retort that the states can never be certain of each other's intentions. As such, the dominant state could only react to the increasing power of a rising state with distrust (Mearsheimer, 2001). Likewise, national security will always trump economic considerations. In other words, should a state perceive a threat, real or not, against its survival, it will resort to war, no matter the (economic) cost (Mastro, 2019, Mearsheimer, 2001). Recent developments in international politics seem to confirm this claim. As Chinese foreign policy grows increasingly aggressive and ambitious, the US responds with retrenchment and containment policies. In other words, the preferences of great powers did realign, only not in a way that is conducive to peace. Territorial, military and economic competitions between the US and China are on the rise. Examples include Chinas territorial claim on most of the South China Sea, its attempts to contest US naval and aerial superiority through military advancements, as well as economic contestations in the form of competing international trade organizations (Lobell, 2016) and most recently even a trade war. As a result, theories of peaceful coexistence and cooperation seem to have, at least somewhat, fallen out of favor as tensions between the two states continue to rise. This stands in stark contrast to how it had been in the preceding decades, during which many leading American scholars had little concern that China would attempt to overthrow the liberal rules-based international order (Layne, 2020). While China seems to be quite satisfied with the globalized infrastructure of the liberal order, as seen during President Xi's speech 2017 in Davos, during which he reaffirms China's commitment to globalized multilateral trade (Xi, 2017), it seems to grow increasingly dissatisfied with its position within the order. Beijing has therefore been promoting the idea of a "New Type of Great Power Relations (Mastro, 2019 p. 32)" since 2012, with the express purpose of avoiding war and benefiting from cooperation.

However, the rhetoric has also grown more assertive. This has been especially noticeable in regard to territorial claims, which China insists are uncompromisable core interests (Mastro, 2019). It seems that China desires to establish itself as a world leader equal to the US with its own sphere of influence in Asia. Unfortunately, a China that has established itself as an equal player, or in other words a regional hegemon in Asia, is not in the US's interest. As stated before, regional hegemons do not want peer competitors as their existence would be detrimental

to their own security (Mearsheimer, 2001). Taking this into consideration, criticism of China's foreign policy has gotten louder as well. While the US would need to be ready to cooperate, China would have to rethink its policies and ambitions as well if they want to avoid an armed confrontation (Harris, 2021). Especially since Washington's response to China's new ambition was as Mearsheimer (2004) expected and shifted to containment in an effort to stifle China's economic growth and with it its hegemonic ambitions. These policies were met with limited success, however, and tensions continue to rise. The Trump administration even classified China as a strategic competitor across political, economic, military, and information domains (Mastro, 2019). Considering how divided US politics have become in recent years, it is a testament to the United States' desire to remain the only regional hegemon that opposition against China's rise is one of the few bipartisan topics left in Washington (Layne, 2020). In short, opinions are split as to whether China can continue to rise peacefully and what the future of the Sino-American relationship will entail, with an unfortunate trend towards an increased likelihood of an eventual confrontation.

2.2.2 Somewhere in between – a new Cold War?

Predictions of some kind of new Cold War have also been gaining in popularity, with even Mearsheimer (2019) now predicting a split of the international order into two separate and independent thick bounded orders led by the US and China, respectively. These would then be connected by a thin international order for the sake of facilitating smooth trade relations and military control agreements. But how exactly is a Cold War defined, aside from the lack of open military confrontations? Generally speaking, a Cold War develops when a state dissatisfied with the international order, a characteristic common among rising powers, is not yet sufficiently powerful to challenge the dominant power directly. Such a situation results in relations that are confrontational but stable. At the same time, cooperation is rare in this power constellation (Tammen et al., 2000). In the case of contemporary China, this would mean that cooperation between it and the US would diminish the more powerful China becomes. Signs of this can undoubtedly be seen in China's current foreign policies, but should this be seen as a precursor to a second Cold War? A new Cold War would certainly be the lesser of two evils if the alternative is a "hot" war. However, in the second edition of his book "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics," Mearsheimer (2014) remarked that a Sino-American competition would be more prone to escalating into an open war than the Soviet-American Cold War ever was. This is because the geography and the distribution of power between the two differ significantly. Whereas there was a clear bipolar divide in Europe between the American-dominated West and the Soviet-dominated East during the Cold war, the situation is much less clear-cut now when

looking at Asia. There are not just Chinese and American interests that matter. Even if China is by far the most powerful state and a potential hegemon in the region, the Far East is very much a multipolar system with multiple great powers, including the nuclear powers of India and Russia and the economic powerhouse that is Japan. None of them have an interest in allowing China to reach the status of a regional hegemon. The result is a region that can only be described as an unbalanced multipolarity, which is famously war prone (Mearsheimer, 2014).

There used to be significant resistance in the highest echelons of US governance against the notion that a new Cold War-like rivalry between the US and China is inevitable. In response to the introduction of a "new model of major power relations" by the then Vice President of China Xi Jinping in 2012, US Secretary of state Hilary Clinton, while not outright agreeing with the proposal, responded with the claim that the US and China are working towards achieving something unprecedented by answering the age-old question of "what happens when an established and a rising power meet (deLeon and Jiemian, 2014, p. 23)." A couple of years later, in 2016, the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel R. Russell reinforced the notion that the US has no interest in regressing to a "Cold War-like rivalry" dominated by a "zero sum struggle for supremacy, if not conflict (Lobell 2016, p. 36)." However, this position rapidly changed during the Trump presidency. And not just because it was the Republican Party in office. AS mentioned before, it is one of the few bipartisan issues remaining in Washington. The containment of Chinese power is now considered by both Republicans and Democrats the most critical foreign policy task for the United States and the "West" in general (Layne, 2020). The relationship between China and the US has fundamentally changed in recent years, or as the May 18th edition of the Economist in 2019 put it: "Today winning seems to involve the other lot's defeat – a collapse that permanently subordinates China to the American order; or a humbled America that retreats from the western Pacific. It is a new kind of cold war that could leave no winners at all (p. 9)." However, this assumption that the Sino-American rivalry would at worst deteriorate into a state akin to the Cold War that shaped the second half of the 20th century might be detrimental to the possibility of peace, as it creates the illusion that no policy decisions, no matter how aggressive, would lead to open war. This assumption is hazardous because, as mentioned above, the structural framework is much more volatile in Asia than it ever was in post-WW2 Europe. The question remains, what are the conditions in order for the power transition between the US and China to remain peaceful?

3 When are Power Transitions peaceful?

As illustrated by Allison (2017), in the last 500 years, power transition has resulted in war far more often than not. However, there are notable outliers, where the powers involved beat the odds and were able to facilitate peaceful power transition. I am far from the first to develop a theory explaining under which conditions peaceful transitions are possible. In the following section, I will present three of the most popular explanations for peaceful power transition. Namely the Shared Culture Theory, the Nuclear Deterrence, and Economic Interdependence. The last of which has become increasingly popular in recent years as a justification for a continued peace between the US and China. I will also demonstrate what role accommodation played across the different power transitions. However, as will become apparent, none of these approaches in isolation can explain every single peaceful power transition that transpired in the last 150 years, let alone the last 500 years, as analyzed by Allison (2017). In other words, while they are all convincing explanations for some instances of power transition, they all fail to be universally applicable, something I intend to rectify with my theory.

3.1 Examples of peaceful transitions and their explanations

When looking back at the last roughly 150 years of power transitions, there are two very high-profile examples of peaceful power transitions. These being the peaceful transition between the dominant British Empire and the rising United States at the end of the 19th century and the transition between the United States and the Soviet Union during the latter half of the 20th century. However, while both of these transitions transpired peacefully, the explanations of why war had been avoided differ between these two cases. Moreover, these explanations are to differing degrees unique to the two powers participating in the respective transitions and cannot simply be applied to other power transitions like the ongoing rivalry between the US and China to provide a suitable prediction as to whether the power transition will be peaceful.

3.1.1 Peace through Shared Culture – Power transition between the British Empire and the United States

The first of these two transitions, chronologically speaking, is the power transition between the British Empire and the United States. Throughout most of the 19th century, Britain was in a dominant position of power, much like the one the US has enjoyed since the end of the Cold War. The British Empire during this time was, for all intents and purposes, a global hegemon. Not only that, but Britain also decided to act as some sort of global peace maker, a role nowadays generally attributed to the US. This led to a century-long era of relative peace between Britain and the other great powers, famously referred to as Pax Britannica. “The sun

never sets on the British Empire" became a common phrase, describing both the empire's global reach and perpetuity of its status as the preeminent power in the international order. However, as time would show, the saying would be proven wrong on both accounts. Over the course of the 20th century, Britain steadily lost its far-flung territories around the globe and diminished in power. But even before the steady loss of colonies began, it had already conceded its dominant position. Its resources had been stretched thin by the threats posed by the rise of German, Russian and Japanese Empires to the balance in Europe, British India, and the British holdings in the Far East, respectively (Kupchan, 2010). Moreover, the Boer opposition to British rule in South Africa was a further drain on the Empire's resources. All of this resulted in London reconsidering its relations with the rising United States (Kupchan, 2010), which eventually led to a peaceful trade-off of the dominant position in the international order. Nowadays, Great Britain certainly remains one of the most powerful and influential counties in the world, with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, membership in the G7, and its own nuclear arsenal, but compared to the heights of its power, it is but a shadow of its former glory; often acting as a junior partner to the United States that took over the role as the dominant power of the international order.

It is somewhat ironic that it was the first of the British colonies to declare independence that would grow to become the power to succeed Britain at the top of the international order. According to the shared culture approach, this unique circumstance allowed the power transition between the two nations to transpire peacefully, even though one would have expected their tumultuous shared history to nurture resentment between them. After all, why shouldn't Britain have seen the treasonous colonies calling themselves the United States as nothing more than an arrogant upstart that had to be taught its place? Likewise, on the side of the Americans, a desire for payback against the British crown as the former oppressor would have been expected. Not only had British forces in 1812 occupied and set flame to the White House, but London later even supported the Confederacy during the American civil war (Zeren & Hall, 2016). To have these underlying resentments be a major cause for the escalation into war would have fit neatly into the narrative of the British-American relationship up to this point. However, this is not what happened. Instead, Britain relied on the diplomatic prowess of its leaders to satisfy the often-unreasonable demands of an ascending USA without compromising on vital British national interests. In what historians would later call the Great Rapprochement, they laid the groundwork for reconciliation and later even friendship between the two powers (Allison, 2017). It is to note that Britain did not make this decision lightly, yet it decided that a war with the rising USA would not be in their interest, as the chances of victory were slim and

the costs, regardless of the outcome, would be high. Instead, Britain decided to focus its attention on a more serious strategic threat closer to home, the rising German Empire (Allison, 2017). And in accommodating US ambitions, Britain's leaders were able to convince the American leadership of their shared interests, which made American assistance during WWI possible (Allison, 2017).

But why did Britain take its chance with the United States when it could have easily flipped its policy and accommodate the burgeoning German Empire while it went to war with the US? After all, the British and German royal families at the time were rather closely related, with the British King Georg V. and the German Emperor Willhelm II., for instance, being first cousins. As Kupchan (2010) posits, the shared cultural heritage, the convergence of social orders, and institutional restraint between the United States and the British Empire were the deciding factor that made a stable peace between them possible. Aside from the obvious use of the same language by both the US and Britain, they also shared the same political culture and liberal ideology. This meant that even if Britain were to lose its preeminent position in the international order, at least its values would remain dominant, with the US as their new patron (Allison, 2017). In other words, Great Britain allowed the peaceful overtaking by the United States because it did not threaten the structure of the international order (Tammen et al., 2000). This feeling of continuity would not have been the case if Germany had successfully taken the position of the dominant power of the international order. In direct comparison, it quickly becomes evident that the democratic United States with its free markets was much closer to the British system of liberal free-market constitutionalism than the autocratic, state-protected development of the German Empire (Brunnermeier et al. 2018). After having undergone democratization and liberalization, Britain was also much more compatible with the US on the societal level (Kupchan, 2010).

These similarities led to what can be best described as the prime case for a peaceful accommodation between a declining and a rising power. Both countries' emphasis on their cultural commonality and societal integration facilitated this peaceful power transition (Zeren & Hall, 2016). While there are differing opinions on whether a true common culture was ever successfully established (Zeren & Hall, 2016; Kupchan, 2010), the success of the cultural commonality narrative cannot be denied. As the words of Britain’s future Prime Minister Harold Macmillan made clear, Britain saw itself in the romanticized tradition of the ancient Greeks who passed on the stewardship of the western world to the Americans as the Greeks once did to the Romans. With this, he hoped to mollify British egos, claiming that they would continue to culturally influence and guide the Americans as the Greeks had done with the

Romans (Alastair Horne, 1988). The American rise to power was considered a common goal for both the US and Britain for the simple fact that it was preferable to any alternative (Kupchan, 2010). Every attempt was made to reduce rivalries as well as hide the weakness of the British position to ensure that a newly dominant America would be benign to Britain (Zeren & Hall, 2016). To further the idea of the British-American friendship, Britain also increased economic ties to the US, soon becoming its largest export market. Likewise, personal travel was made more accessible, and British press and media were linked to their American counterparts. Eventually, a narrative of friendship was adopted by elites on both sides of the pond, replacing discourses of hostility (Zeren & Hall, 2016). In what Stephen Rock (2000) describes as "a public relations campaign (p. 42)," the public discourse in America as well as Britain was instead shifted to focus first on the possibility of cooperation and then to the racial and cultural affinities between the two countries, which soon evolved into ideas of kinship and common heritage that framed a British-American war as something akin to fratricide and thus unthinkable (Zeren & Hall, 2016; Kupchan, 2010). But all this might not have been sufficient to ensure peace between the two powers if Britain's emphasis on cultural commonality had been purely pragmatic. However, this was not the case; British officials' belief in these ideas was sincere (Zeren & Hall, 2016; Kupchan, 2010). As Kupchan (2010) put it:

> "It was strategic necessity that prompted London to attempt reconciliation with Washington. But Britain's latent sense of kinship with America helps explain why London worked hardest to befriend the United States rather than other challengers (p. 110)."

By the dawn of the 20th century, the United States had supplanted the British Empire as the dominant power in the world. The two countries' relationship shifted to one of trusted allies, true friends, and perhaps even family. The prospect of a war with Britain was considered the "least of all possible conflicts," as illustrated by a study of the US General Staff (Dreisziger, 1979 p. 343), and when the Great War raged in Europe, the United States stood by its British allies. The Great Rapprochement was a rousing success that holds true until today. Under these prospects, one might come to understand why the British Prime Minister Chamberlain settled on a policy of appeasement when faced once again with a rising Germany in the 1930s, perhaps not understanding the unique circumstances that made the success of the Great Rapprochement possible.

The problem with the theory of shared culture as a universal explanatory approach is quite obvious. While it should not be denied that the shared culture between the US and Britain played a significant role in ensuring a peaceful transition, it was at the same time an incredibly unique

circumstance. The shared culture approach cannot be considered a universal explanation for peaceful transitions as the lack thereof does not automatically make war an inevitability. Although, to be fair, it never claimed to be. It nonetheless fails to offer an explanation to other peaceful transitions without a shared culture between the participating powers, most notably between the communist Soviet Union and the capitalist democracy of the USA. Likewise, even with the influence of globalization, the cultures of the US and China could not be more different, making the shared culture approach unsuited to predict the future of that particular relationship. However, some scholars believe this difference in cultures might be conducive to peace in the Sino-American power transition. They claim that, unlike western cultures, the Chinese culture, with its deep root in Confucianism, would be much less likely to cause a war. I concur with Mearsheimer (2014) that this theory does not possess a lot of merit, as the reality of Chinese foreign policy, both in terms of rhetoric and action, does not collaborate with the narrative of an inherently more peaceful China, neither in current times nor at any time in the past. Considering this, it is fair that a shared culture between the United States and China, or the lack thereof, will not be the independent variable critical to a peaceful transition.

3.1.2 Peace through Nuclear Deterrence – Power Transition between the United States and the Soviet Union

As mentioned previously, there was no meaningful shared culture to speak of between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Cold War was as much a war of ideology between the liberal democratic order of the US and the communist order the Soviets envisioned as it was a material arms race, yet this transition was also peaceful, insofar as there was no direct confrontation between both great powers. In retrospect, some scholars have even come to see the bipolar international system of the Cold War as one of the, if not the most stable international order. Bipolarity is still considered to be the power constellation least prone to war by some (Mearsheimer, 2001; Copeland, 2000). There were undoubtedly conflicts during the Cold War, most famously the wars in Korea and Vietnam as well as the near-miss that was the Cuban Missile Crisis, but there was never an official declaration of war between the Soviet Union and the United States nor have their forces ever officially met in battle. Rather both power blocs existed in an often-uneasy stalemate, competing for dominance in alternate dimensions such as technology and science. This peaceful rivalry continued up until the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s. There might be a European/American-centric bias at play here, but overall, the Cold War era is considered an era of long peace by western scholars, especially compared to the horrors of the World Wars. Using the shared culture approach as the reason for this era would not yield any results as to why the power transition remained peaceful.

Another aspect in which this transition differs is that it failed. The US successfully defended its dominant position in the system and left the transition stronger than ever before. Questions regarding how and why the rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union never escalated into an open conflict is probably one of the most researched international relations topics. Many theories have been developed to answer the question as to why the Cold War never turned hot.

One of the most popular and convincing explanations is the advent of nuclear weaponry during the tail end of WWII and builds upon classic balance of power theories. The nuclear deterrent theory posits that a war between two forces is unlikely if both have nuclear weapons. However, in order for deterrence to be effective, three conditions must be met: 1) no preventive war takes place during the acquisition period; 2) both countries possess second-strike capabilities; and 3) the nuclear arsenal must be secure from accidental or unauthorized use (Mastro, 2019). After the US and the Soviet Union successfully developed the A-Bomb and, more importantly, achieved second-strike capability, both sides found themselves in a stalemate. After witnessing the devastation caused by even the earliest iteration of nuclear weaponry in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the final months of WWII, both states wanted to avoid a nuclear strike on their home territories. This sentiment only grew as the nuclear arms race pushed the number of available nuclear warheads on both sides to ridiculous heights. The use of nuclear weapons became impossible because even if one state were to use a nuclear first strike to destroy its rival utterly, the other side would still have the ability to return the favor from beyond the grave. In other words, it became apparent that for all their might, nuclear weapons had little utility for conquest, as launching a direct attack would inflict costs to the aggressor that outweigh the benefits (Blagden, 2014). The constant fear of this mutually assured destruction (MAD) ironically resulted in a mostly peaceful period in human history, as neither side dared to push the other into a position where it might come to see the use of nuclear weaponry as the only viable option. In short, nuclear deterrence means that states are unlikely to launch a major war if both sides have nuclear weapons, as it would result in mutual destruction (Copeland, 2000). That is not to say that a nuclear world is devoid of security competitions or that traditional armies have become obsolete. While the war between great powers has become less likely, security competitions continue unabated. The Cold War has made that abundantly clear. The nuclear capacity of a country seems to have little influence on its relative power. Traditional armies, navies, and air forces continue to be the core ingredients of military power (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The People's Republic of China is also in possession of nuclear weaponry. It is therefore understandable that many believe the rise of China would at worse lead to a repeat of the Cold

war, as nuclear deterrence is still as effective as it had ever been, as the US's second-strike capabilities pose a powerful deterrent even if China becomes preponderant (Copeland, 2000). However, nuclear deterrence as an explanatory approach still fails to be universally applicable for the simple fact of how recent the development of nuclear weapons is. Nuclear deterrence obviously cannot be used to explain why the transition between the US and Great Britain was peaceful because it occurred decades before the concept of nuclear weaponry was first envisioned. Furthermore, nuclear deterrence is not unaffected by geographical distance. The closer the two powers participating in a transition are from each other, the less effective is nuclear deterrence. The risk of the nuclear fallout affecting one's own country, for example, due to a sudden shift in weather patterns, is too high for nuclear threats against a direct neighbor to be credible. Even in the case of the current Sino-American power transitions, some scholars question whether nuclear deterrence will be as effective as it was during the Cold war, mainly because Sino-American security competition will take place in Asia, a region much more conductive to war than Europe during the Cold War (Mearsheimer, 2014). Some also believe that China might not possess a secure second-strike, weakening the power of Chinese nuclear weapons to deter conventional conflict (Mastro, 2019).

Additionally, as mentioned above, Asia is a multipolar system, and the stakes are nothing short of enormous, as China means to establish itself as a regional hegemon (Mearsheimer, 2014). The presence of nuclear weapons certainly makes the prospect of preventive war by the US unfeasible, but a preventive war would have been unlikely even if China did not possess nuclear weapons. Chinas massive army would almost certainly necessitate the use of nuclear weapons on the side of the Americans. However, the resulting fallout alone basically forbids the use of nuclear weapons (Mearsheimer, 2014). Nuclear deterrence does offer a convincing reason why the US-Chinese power transition will remain peaceful because even without second strike capabilities of their own, the US would hesitate to use its nuclear arsenal, as the destruction and suffering would be too widespread to justify such actions. All of this is not to say that the nuclear arsenal of both superpowers during the Cold War was not an essential factor for the transition to remain peaceful. However, just like with the shared culture approach, nuclear deterrence cannot claim universal applicability. Additionally, I also believe that the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence is proportional to the geographic distance.

3.1.3 Peace through Interdependence? – Power Transition between the United States and the People's Republic of China

The most popular argument made in favor of continued peace and cooperation in the contemporary power transition between the US and China is based on the rather vague belief

that we live in an era of interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 2011). This assertion reflects the widespread feeling that international relations have changed into a reality where "calculations of power are even more delicate and deceptive than in previous ages (Hoffmann, 1975 p.184)" That is because there now exist high levels of interdependence between most states, including between the US and China, which make open conflict highly unattractive for both sides. In its ideal form of complex interdependence, interdependence has been labeled as "the opposite of realism" (Keohane & Nye, 2011 p. 19) as it conflicts with the basic realist assertion that states always feel threatened by each other and thus compete for security. Proponents of interdependence rhetoric argue that it reduces conflict of interests. States with deep and complex interdependence are thus free of the need to compete with each other as they all profit from said interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 2011). It is easy to see why interdependence is seen by many as the key for peace as a whole and peaceful power transitions specifically. Many liberal scholars believe this effect is more substantial now than it has ever been due to the increasingly globalized and interconnected world facilitated by the liberal international order.

Reality certainly seems to support this theory. Not only are the US and China among each other's greatest trading partners and have profited greatly from it, but they are also deeply economically intertwined with the other major powers in Asia. Any war would thus threaten the economic prosperity of these nations, regardless of the outcome (Mearsheimer, 2014). Few scholars would argue against the assertion that prosperity borne from economic interdependence is a powerful incentive for peace. Even Mearsheimer (2014) readily admits this to be the case, as leaders are greatly concerned about their country's prosperity. It is no wonder that economic accommodation in the form of integration of rising states and would-be challengers into the global economic order and thus the deepening of economic interdependence is considered to help facilitate peaceful power transition (Paul, 2016). Until recently, this theory seemed to hit the nail on the head. Since globalization connected the world's nations closer than ever before in history, there have been no major wars between economically linked countries, and security competitions were generally sparse.

However, this has changed in recent years. While there have not been any major wars, in part because of the US' continued military supremacy, security competitions have been on the rise. As mentioned before, China, in particular, has been increasingly aggressive in its foreign policy (Lobell, 2016), and Russia has been growing steadily bolder as well, mostly concerning its "adventurism in Ukraine" (Claar & Ripsmann, 2016 p. 172) and other regions between it and the EU. In retrospect, the peace brought onto by economic interdependence can just as easily be attributed to the very realist notion of the United States' undisputed position of power

in the 1990s and early 2000s and the increasingly tumultuous climate in international relations to the consequence of the relative waning of this power.

Another weakness of economic interdependence as an approach is that it has no historic precent of successfully facilitating a peaceful transition, unlike the preceding two theories. In other words, it is an unproven theory regarding power transition. An argument could perhaps be made for its positive influence in the power transition between Britain and the US, but there were virtually no economic ties between the two blocs during the Cold War. Realist scholars, in particular, doubt that economic interdependence alone will be enough of an incentive for China and the US to maintain peaceful relations. They believe that if push comes to shove and a state feels that its national security and perhaps even its survival is endangered, they will undoubtedly choose a military escalation instead of suffering the economic cost of conflict than the political costs of concessions (Mastro, 2019). Thus, the situation in Asia today may come to mirror the one in Europe before 1914, where economic interdependence and prosperity were not sufficient to prevent WWI (Mearsheimer, 2014). Additionally, the interdependence theory assumes three factors that cannot be guaranteed: 1) the prosperity a state gains from interdependence must be permanent; 2) states must not believe that a victory in a war would offer substantial economic and strategic benefits greater than those gained through interdependence; 3) states must not be able to fight wars without incurring significant economic costs (Mearsheimer, 2014).

There have been precedents of states choosing to go to war if they believe it will offer them substantial and strategic benefits. Japan's war of conquest in East and Southeast Asia during the second Sino-Japanese War and WWII was proof of that. While there was no interdependence as it is understood today between the Empire of Japan and the United States, Japan was very much dependent on the US for vital imports. "By 1939, Japan depended on the United States for 80 percent of its fuel products, more than 90 percent of its gasoline, more than 60 percent of its machine tools, and about 75 percent of its scrap iron (Taliaferro, 2016 p. 173 as per Barnhart, 1987)." Yet, it willingly risked sanctions by the US on these goods, believing the conquered territories and their resources worth the risk. Considering historical precedents like this, one cannot help to question how effective economic incentives are to prevent war.

The permanence of prosperity through interdependence is also an important factor. As Robert Gilpin (1989) quoted from Edward H. Carr's book "The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939", economic interdependence only helped to facilitate the relative peace of nineteenth-century Europe as long as there existed "continuously expanding territories and markets (p. 201)." During the initial stages of globalization, the liberal international order, too, could

continuously expand its markets by integrating states that were previously behind the iron curtain or otherwise stood under Soviet influence. China benefited extensively from this expansion. This increased economic globalization and deepening of interdependence helped to facilitate peace (Paul, 2016). As the world continued to globalize, however, the number of new markets gradually dried up. Suddenly the permanent growth of prosperity by all parties is no longer guaranteed.

As a consequence, tensions regarding questions of relative gains and other distributional issues grew. The idealistic assumption that the era of joint gains through interdependence would be free of distributional conflict has proven false. The age-old question of "who gets what" has once again moved to the forefront of trade negotiations (Keohane & Nye, 2011). The US, in particular, began worrying about whether other states like China profited more from the multilateral interdependence facilitated by liberal international order, which the US still pays the lion's share to maintain (McArthur & Rasmussen, 2018). Relative, not absolute gains have become the focal point, and the higher relative gains of China and its faster economic growth have caused the US to feel threatened for their economic dominance. What followed were numerous attempts by the last several US administrations to stifle China's economic growth before escalating into a trade war during the Trump administration, which unsurprisingly fostered rising tensions between the two trade partners. As Keohane and Nye (2011) warned, interdependence did not create a "brave new world of cooperation to replace the bad old world of international conflict (p. 9)". Its ability to facilitate a peaceful power transition by itself also needs to be put into question.

Like the previous two approaches, interdependence cannot be considered a universal variable that decides whether a power transition will be peaceful. It was nonexistent in the power transition between the US and the Soviet Union, and while one could argue that interdependence was in some form present and a factor during the UK-US transition – Britain did become Americas biggest export market (Zeren & Hall, 2016) – it was hardly extensive enough to be considered the deciding factor for the peacefulness of the transition.

3.2 Peace through Accommodation

Something that the shared culture approach and interdependence, and to a lesser extent even nuclear deterrence, have in common is the use of accommodation to facilitate peaceful transitions. Power transition can be conceptualized as windows of opportunity for dominant great powers to incite preventive wars against rising states (Van Evera, 2013). However, as shown in some of the examples above, a conflict between the dominant and the rising power is not inevitable; instead, the dominant great power might choose to accommodate the rising

power peacefully (Paul, 2016). There are many possible reasons why a state might decide to accommodate another. Accommodation is, therefore, less of a theory that explains why power transitions are peaceful but rather how peaceful transition can be facilitated. It is assumed that it is because of the dissatisfaction of rising powers with their place in the existing international order that they challenge the order and, as a result, endanger the peace (Tammen et al., 2000; Organski & Kugler, 1980). It, therefore, stands to reason that the most direct way of solving this problem and keeping the peace would be to accommodate the rising power. A satisfied state would have little incentive to upend the reigning international order. It is true that after the disaster that was Great Britain's appeasement policy towards Nazi Germany, appeasement and other forms of accommodation have to contend with certain negative connotations, but as Glaser (2015) puts it, not every rising power is led by Hitler and accommodation can be an effective policy tool for peace. During the peaceful power transition between Britain and the US, for instance, accommodation was an important tool for Britain to foster a friendly atmosphere with the US. Some scholars claim that the accommodation of rising powers into a meaningful international position, while exceptionally complicated, may be necessary to maintain a peaceful international order (Paul, 2016). The complexity of this endeavor stems from the need to adjust the status of the states involved. Accommodation must happen on several different levels: 1) the states must acknowledge each other's ideology and normative framework as legitimate; 2) both sides must accept territorial settlement both in terms of direct control and spheres of influences; 3) the rising power must be integrated into the interdependent global economic order; and 4) the rising power must be granted an appropriate position within the international institution of the order (Paul, 2016).

The problem with accommodation, aside from the obvious danger of it being abused if the rising state is indeed led by someone akin to Hitler, is that it might not be in the interest of the dominant state to accommodate and thus further strengthen the position of the rising state that will most likely challenge it for the dominant position in the system. For instance, unlike the British, however begrudgingly, acceptance at the end of the 19th century, the United States of today has not accepted the end of its predominance and has no interest in endearing itself to China so that it may act as a junior partner in a Chinese led order, mirroring the British relationship with the US after their power transition. Accommodating China by recognizing that it has a sphere of influence (Paul, 2016) and, for instance, stepping away from its commitments to Taiwan in a bid to appease China, as Glaser (2015) suggested, can therefore not be an option for Washington as it would only solidify China's nascent regional hegemony

in Asia. Something that a United States still bent on remaining the dominant force in the international order will want to avoid at almost all costs (Mearsheimer, 2001).

This reluctance is by no means a peculiarity of the US. On the contrary, most dominant powers throughout history had no interest in facilitating the rise of an equal power. As such it should come as no surprise that peaceful transitions through accommodations are rare, as established powers do not see the benefit in peacefully integrating rising powers might eventually supplant them (Paul, 2016). However, accommodation does not have to be equated to full acceptance of the rising challenger. Instead, it can also be conceptualized as an alternative to containment. Using this definition, accommodation is consistent with balancing strategies, as the exiting great powers accept and integrate the rising powers into the international order with the express purpose of limiting its growth and its ability to pursue (regional) hegemony (Claar & Ripsmann, 2016). Another goal of integrating the rising power can be to have it be invested in the incumbent international system and thus its continued existence, as was, for instance, America's hope, when it normalized relations with China and integrated it into the globalized open market (Zoellick, 2005). As Claar and Ripsmann (2016) summarize are, broadly speaking, three non-mutually exclusive reasons within the power transition literature as to why a dominant power might decide to accommodate a rising power:

> "(1) if the challenger is not perceived as threatening to the declining great power's core interests, at least over the short term; (2) if, though threatening, it represents less of a threat than other potential challengers; or (3) if the balance of domestic coalitional interests prefer to cooperate with the challenger (p. 152-153)".

In short, accommodation is a tool that dominant powers can employ to keep a power transition peaceful. However, there still exists an explanatory gap: When does the dominant power perceive the rising power as non-threatening or at least as less threatening, thus making accommodation and cooperation a preferable option?

4 A Universal Theory for peaceful power transitions

It can be said that all three of the discussed approaches have merit and have played, or might yet play, important roles in ensuring that power transitions can transpire peacefully. However, none of them can be used to adequately explain all previous power transitions, both those that remained peaceful and those that escalated into war. This chapter is dedicated to the formulation of a new theory for peaceful power transition. It has the notable feature of universal applicability. As such, it is able to explain the outcome of all power transitions in the last 150 years, both peaceful and war-torn. Additionally, the final outcome of the transition, meaning whether the rising state was able to pass the dominant state or whether the dominant state was able to defend its preeminent position, has no bearing on the theory's explanatory power.

I limit myself to roughly the past 150 years only because I believe that is the farthest one can look back and reasonably argue that a comparison between the different cases of power transition is viable. This timeframe includes the beginning of America's rise in the latter half of the 19th century and extends all the way to the ongoing rise of China today. Going further back would cause the discrepancies in technology and the cultural and political environment to become too big for direct comparison to have any merit. Some might argue that even my chosen timeframe is too long, but I think it is the furthest one can go in order to ensure a decent sample size of cases while keeping discrepancies at a minimum. With my chosen timeframe of approximately 150 years, it is at least a given that all participating powers are nation-states, ensuring a roughly similar cultural and political environment and that the navies of all powers consist primarily of self-powered ships not beholden to the whims of the weather and armed with what can reasonably be called modern weaponry, thus minimizing technological discrepancies. The second one is of central importance because my theory relies heavily on the presence of large bodies of water and humanity's command over them. For most of my empirical examples, the large bodies of water I refer to are oceans, but any body of water that makes the use of a navy to transport ground troops unavoidable (i.e., bodies of water that cannot reasonably be bypassed via a land route) qualify for my theory. While inland seas and rivers certainly pose difficulties for wartime troop movement, they can be overcome or avoided with comparative ease and thus do not qualify.

The basic idea behind the theory is simple:

H: If the two countries engaging in a power transition are located on different continents and are thus separated by a large body of water, the power transition itself is likely to be peaceful.

Many scholars state that the geographic proximity of countries plays a vital role for states evaluating the threat level of other states. There is widespread agreement among scholars for the assumption that states consider other states as less of a threat when they are far from each other (Claar & Ripsmann, 2016; van Evera, 2013; Toft, 2005). In addition to absolute distance, some scholars make a note of buffer states or specific types of terrain acting as natural barriers separating states as more substantial impediments for offensive movements (van Evera, 2013; Toft, 2005). For instance, Van Evera (2013) posits that conquest is more challenging when national borders coincide with oceans, lakes, mountains, wide rivers, dense jungles, trackless deserts, or other natural barriers. I agree with this assertion, but I go even further by focusing not just on the distance between rival powers, nor do I think that all of the listed terrain types are equally difficult to traverse. Not all terrains are equally difficult to traverse. I posit that specifically large bodies of water, such as oceans, are the most effective at minimizing the feelings of fear and threat that states illicit in each other and are thus most beneficial to peaceful power transitions.

What led me to this theoretical focus for my hypothesis is the inherent ability of oceans to inhibit conflict. This so-called stopping power of water has been noted by both Mearsheimer (2001) and, to a lesser extent, Levy and Thompson (2010), who used it to explain why states fear each other less when they are separated by oceans and why insular maritime states behave differently from continental powers, respectively. I build upon these two approaches to explain why oceans cause power transition to be peaceful. In short, my theory posits that power transition will be peaceful if the incumbent dominant power and the ascending power are on different continents and consequently most likely separated by an ocean. I believe that large bodies of water are a significant deterrence for conflict. Their stopping power is especially on full display when the aggressor state does not have access to a safe beachhead from which a ground invasion can be launched into enemy territory. Moreover, when the defender is in possession of a strong navy with perhaps even support from its air force, the stopping power is further improved and becomes an almost insurmountable barrier that causes great powers to seek other often peaceful alternatives rather than risking an amphibious assault on another great power.

The reason behind this is simple: “war is more likely when governments believe conquest is easy” (van Evera, 2013), and the reverse is just as true. If states believe war or conquest to be difficult other more peaceful methods will be employed. This has the effect that power transitions between rising and dominant states have a strong tendency to be peaceful if they are separated by an ocean. The reasons for that can be boiled down to two main arguments. The

first of which is Mearsheimer's (2001) assertion that there is an inherent difficulty in launching an invasion from across an ocean because of the stopping power of water. In other words, the existence of oceans leads to a clear advantage for the defenders that causes any would-be aggressor to hesitate (Blagden, 2014). As a result, powerful states on another continent are often less feared. This links up well with the second argument, initially made by Levy and Thomson (2010), according to which states are also less feared when they are maritime powers. States that are separated from all potential rivals by oceans are referred to as insular powers and often have the luxury to focus on naval power instead of land armies. They become maritime powers that act differently from conventional continental powers because they do not have to fear invasion by their neighbors. The general disposition towards naval powers is much more positive as they have fewer incentives and capabilities to begin a war, which in turn also makes balancing action against them far less likely. In addition, maritime powers are often focused on trade and thus make for popular allies (Levy & Thomson, 2010). Claar and Ripsmann's (2016) conditions for accommodation are also more easily met when an ocean separates the dominant and the rising power.

To summarize, my theory of the stopping power of water is made up of two components: 1) the physical difficulties posed by the geographical separation and 2) the influence that oceans have on the nature of a state. In the following section, I will illustrate these two arguments in-depth and explain why they support my theory that separation by large bodies of water facilitates peaceful power transitions.

4.1 The Physical Stopping Power of Water

As mentioned above, I posit that the geographic location of the participating countries plays a major role in determining whether a power transition between them will be peaceful. If there is a significant body of water separating the two, odds are that the power transition will be peaceful. This theory is based on Mearsheimer's (2001) assertion that large bodies of water act as significant barriers for any invading force. This stopping power of water seems to be the uniting factor between all peaceful power transitions, as I will show in chapter 5. For Mearsheimer, the stopping power of water is solely a physical obstacle and the central reason why there can never be a global hegemon, only regional hegemons, as large bodies of water significantly weaken a state's ability to project power abroad. It is also one of three aspects that affect the intensity of fear states feel towards one another. The other two ways being the availability of nuclear deterrence and the distribution of power among the state in the system, with mutual nuclear second-strike capabilities and bipolarity resulting in the least amount of

fear (Mearsheimer, 2001). Nuclear deterrence also profits from the increased distance between two rival powers, as only sufficient distance makes threats of nuclear strikes credible.

When determining threats to their survival, states balance against the offensive capabilities of potential rivals, not against their intentions, as states can never be certain of another's intentions (Mearsheimer, 2001). Offensive capabilities are separated into four types: independent sea power, strategic airpower, and nuclear weapons, and land powers, the last of which forms the dominant form of military power in the modern world. In other words, the most powerful states are the ones with the most powerful armies, thereby providing an estimate of the relative might of each state (Mearsheimer, 2001). However, the presence of water limits the level of power-projection possible with land forces, as the size of an army becomes irrelevant if it cannot safely reach the enemy (Mearsheimer, 2001). Mearsheimer (2001) also expands the logic of the quote by the famous British naval strategist Julian Corbett about how "great issues between nations at war – except of the rarest of cases –" are always decided by what damage armies can do to a country's "territory and national life, or else by the fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do (p. 86)" to airpower. Or in other words, the navy and the air force are most effective when acting as support to the land army. And while he believes that navies and air forces can also independently project power and do not just have to act as force multipliers for the army, he reiterates how central armies are for the war effort as

> "Neither independent naval power nor strategic airpower has much utility for winning major wars. […] Only land power has the potential to win a major war by itself (Mearsheimer, 2001 p. 86)."

Forcing an enemy to surrender only through bombardment and naval blockades is incredibly difficult (Mearsheimer, 2001). Therefore, the stopping power of water continues to play such a massive role no matter how advanced the state's military is. To win a major war between great powers, a state needs "boots on the ground," as the saying goes, and getting them there continues to be a serious challenge whenever the crossing of a large body of water is involved. While typically, it is trivial for states to transport ground forces across oceans via their navy. This changes drastically in war times when the ground forces need to be transported onto territory controlled by the enemy while also avoiding the enemy's attempts to sink the transport ships. In such scenarios, the side attempting an amphibious assault is always at a significant disadvantage, as the number of troops and the amount of firepower it can bring to bear is limited (Mearsheimer, 2001). The stopping power of water can be further amplified by an air force capable of ensuring control of the air above the sea, making landfall even more difficult

(Blagden, 2014). This fact shifts the favor even further towards defense as the defender's air force would have significantly shorter resupply routes for its airplanes. And the development of other technologies such as submarines and sea mines has made it even more precarious to reach the shore. At the same time, defending forces also profit from improved infrastructure technology, such as airplanes, railroads, and paved roads that allow for faster defensive troop deployment against the invader's amphibious assault (Mearsheimer, 2001).

In light of these circumstances, an obvious defense bias becomes apparent whenever a large body of water must be crossed. That is because according to the stopping power of water, the bigger the body of water separating states is, the less offensive capabilities they can bring to bear against each other. Thus, great powers separated by oceans fear each other less and are much less likely to go to war with each other due to that (Mearsheimer, 2001). Blagden (2014) concurs with the assessment that large bodies of water have considerable stopping power, as they make it difficult to threaten the territorial integrity and political autonomy. He bases this on the assertion of the offense-defense theory, which states that war (or in van Evara's (2013) words conquest) is less likely when conducting successful aggression is relatively difficult. In short, if technological and geographical conditions result in the two states involved in a dispute being simultaneously well-equipped to defend themselves but ill-equipped to conduct aggression, each side will be reassured and is thus less likely to attack the other (Blagden, 2014). Accordingly, he lists oceans at the top of defense favorable barriers, followed by mountain ranges, jungles, and (ice) deserts.

At first glance, this seems like an overly simplistic and somewhat unconvincing argument. After all, great powers also possess formidable navies in addition to their land forces, not to mention air forces. Likewise, military technology is always progressing. Something as simple as a body of water, no matter how large, could not possibly be such an insurmountable obstacle to military offensives that it forces great powers to seek out peaceful alternatives during precarious moments such as a power transition. Yet, the US did not seem to care about the supposed stopping power of water when it decided to enter either of the World Wars. I will go into how the oceans shaped both World Wars, as well as the other power transitions in the 20th century in detail in chapter 5. For now, suffice it to say that under closer inspection, it quickly becomes apparent how much of an influence the vast stretches of water had in both cases. In WWII, for instance, the stopping power asserted by the oceans was the reason why the American landing on D-Day was one of the bloodiest engagements on the western front, even though German forces were spread thin between two fronts, as well as why the US opted for

the use of nuclear weapons against a severely weakened Japan, thereby forcing Japan's capitulation, instead of attempting an invasion of the Japanese home islands.

Mearsheimer (2001) himself supports his theory with a short overview of the history of seaborne invasions, wherein he shows that there is no case of a great power launching an amphibious assault against territory that was well defended by another great power. Additionally, he shows that states that are the only great powers on a landmass, also referred to as an insular power as opposed to a continental one, and separated from other great powers through an ocean are much less likely to be invaded. He uses the US and the UK as examples of insular states that have never been invaded in contrast to the frequent invasions Russia and France have suffered (Mearsheimer, 2001); Japan, for instance, is just as viable an example. This further supports the theory that large bodies make invasions against well-defended great powers extremely difficult. As Blagden (2011) notes, the data provided by Levy and Thompson (2010) regarding balancing effort against naval powers[3] also directly supports the stopping power of water as a major obstacle to power projection efforts. Additionally, he also observes that amphibious assaults tend to only be targeted towards weaker states (Blagden, 2014). In other words, amphibious assaults are possible but difficult and rarely worth the risk against other great powers.

4.2 Limitations and criticisms against the stopping power of water

However, there are problems with the stopping power of water. Mearsheimer (2001) himself qualifies the limits to the stopping power of water. Specifically, he claims that the stopping power would be virtually nullified if, instead of being forced into a hazardous amphibious assault, a state could safely ferry its troops to the shores of an allied nation in the "backyard" of its rival. Layne (2002) counters that this is highly unlikely, as a regional hegemon would never allow a foreign power, perhaps a regional hegemon in its own right, to ferry its troops to a close-by nation without any opposition. I agree with this contention, as I think it is safe to assume that, for instance, the US would not have allowed Britain to land its troops in Canada without any opposition during their power transition at the end of the 19th century. It is more than likely that the US would have either preemptively invaded Canada, an eventuality for which the United States Department of War had made plans for well into the 20th century (see

[3] Levy and Thompson's (2010) statistical analyses of the last five centuries of the global maritime system shows that: "Great powers generally do not balance against the strongest sea power in the global system, even if it is increasing in strength (H1), and the probability of balancing declines further as the leading power assumes a stronger relative position (H2). Large balancing coalitions tend not to form against the leading sea power, and the probability of large coalitions decreases as sea powers grow stronger (H3). Instead, the stronger the leading sea power's relative position, the more likely that one or more great powers will ally with it (H4), and alliances with the leading sea power tend to be broader than are alliances against it (H5) (p. 35)."

War Plan Red (Lippert, 2015; Major 1998)), or it would have used its navy to sink the troop transports in transit.

In general, the geographical variable of Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism is a topic of much debate. Layne (2002) finds Mearsheimer's view on the stopping power of water perplexing. Mearsheimer seems to believe that the stopping power of water is what prevents the US from imposing its power on distant regions, but at the same time, it does not stop other powers from threatening US primacy in the Western Hemisphere. In reality, the opposite is the case. The US foreign policy has been one of projecting its power to distant regions for decades, while its status as an insular power allowed it to leverage the full power of water for its own protection (Layne, 2002). It is easy to see why some scholars like Toft (2005) claim that the stopping power of water argument prevents offensive realism from accurately depicting the decades-long American policy of foreign power projection. I have to agree that this section of Mearsheimer's theory is a bit contradictory, but the basis on which my theory builds on remains solid. Namely, water has significant stopping power and prevents great powers from actively seeking out armed conflicts with other great powers. However, as American foreign policy has shown, the barrier to force projection is far less formidable if aimed at weaker states.

Blagden (2014), on the other hand, questions Mearsheimer's assertion of the "universal primacy of land power (p. 55)". For him, the defending states themselves need powerful navies to prevent the aggressors from reaching their shores. He concurs with Friedmann (2001) and considers the ability to prevent an enemy from crossing the ocean, above all, as the source of the stopping power of water. In other words, for the stopping of water to exist, a powerful navy is required, thus invalidating the primacy of land power. I do not believe this to be accurate. Certainly, a powerful navy would help oppose an amphibious assault by sinking enemy ships before they can make landfall, but it is not necessary. Even if the enemy makes it to shore because of a lack of naval defenses on the opposing side, a well-armed and well-positioned defending land army would still have the advantage against an amphibious attacker, as ships can only transport and disembark a limited number of soldiers and equipment, thus creating a natural bottleneck. Blagden says it himself in a 2014 paper, "cross-ocean ground assaults […] are much easier to deny than to conduct (p. 56)." The offense-defense theory posits that this asymmetry results in conflict being less likely because successful aggression is difficult (Blagden, 2014).

I would also be remiss not to mention that because of the rarity of amphibious assaults, it is impossible to truly prove the defense bias of cross-oceanic conflicts. It might well be that the stopping power of water is a sort of reversal of the "cult of the offensive" that was prevalent in

pre-WWI Europe, where the offensive was believed to have a significant advantage over the defense. Fortunately, even if it is only perceived, a defense bias is much more conducive to peace. I believe my theory and the arguments for the preventive effects of oceans against war remain nonetheless compelling. After all, any theory of peace is inherently difficult to prove as peace itself is a non-event, and thus the reasons for it are always difficult to prove.

In light of these criticisms, I hence posit that the stopping power of water can be considered to be in full effect, only if a state does not have access to a beachhead in allied territory and the opposition is in possession of a strong navy with perhaps even further support from its air force. This is often the case whenever both sides of a potential conflict are great powers. A body of water then becomes an almost insurmountable barrier that causes great powers to seek other often peaceful alternatives rather than risking an amphibious assault on another great power. This has the aforementioned effect that power transitions between rising and dominant states are very likely to be peaceful if they are separated by a large body of water like an ocean. In other words, peace might simply result from both sides being unwilling to be the aggressor, as it is much easier to defend against a naval invasion than to successfully execute one. Both sides might simply end up daring the other to make the first move.

4.3 The (relative) benevolence of maritime powers

Related to the physical component of the stopping power of water, but distinct enough to warrant its own subchapter is the difference in behavior and perception between traditional continental powers and sea powers, which also influences whether power transition can happen peacefully. Even though naval strength was identified as the primary determinant of great-power success by the American naval strategist Captain Alfred T. Mahan in his 1890 book "The Influence of Sea Power upon History" (Allision, 2017), great sea powers, identifiable by their focus on their navy, are less likely to start a war of conquest than continental powers and are thus often considered benign and far less threatening than continental powers by contemporary great powers (Levy & Thompson, 2010; Blagden, 2014). This circumstance helps to explain the puzzle of how the United States could establish itself as the only superpower in the international order after the end of the Cold War without provoking a balancing coalition from the remaining great powers (Levy & Thompson, 2010). For a state to be a great maritime power, it needs to be able to dominate on the oceans. For that purpose, it requires a powerful navy. Although not to the extent of always controlling the entirety of the ocean. It must, however, be capable of controlling the strategically important sections whenever it wants to use them while having the capability to deny an enemy the ability to do the same. Such denial can be achieved

by destroying rival navies in battle or, a bit less destructively, by either blockading them in their pons or by denying them access to critical sea lanes (Mearsheimer 2001).

It is often, but not necessarily, insular powers that develop into maritime powers as they are by definition geographically removed from threats to their territorial integrity by rival powers (Blagden, 2011; Levy & Thompson, 2011). Their behavior reflects this. They can afford to focus the majority of their martial capabilities on their navy. In turn, they usually have a smaller army and thus possess less power to dedicate to invasion efforts, as navies are not well suited to conquest. They also have fewer reasons to initiate invasions or wars of conquest as they would rather have other great powers as trade partners (Levy & Thompson, 2010). They pose a significantly smaller threat to the territorial integrity of other states, thereby weakening the incentives of balancing against even the most powerful of maritime powers, even if, as a whole, they are more powerful than continental powers. Therefore, it is much easier for a predominant global maritime power to be perceived as benign, since sea power generates security without threatening others' overall political survival (Levy & Thompson, 2010; Blagden, 2014). In short, Levy and Thompson (2010) argue that alliance behavior on the global scale differs from how it has been in continental systems (like Europe for most of its history). A high concentration of sea power is associated with a lower likelihood of balancing by continental great powers as well as with fewer incentives to initiate wars, as maritime powers do not endanger the territorial and constitutional integrity of others (Levy & Thompson, 2010). This assumption is supported by their statistical analyses of the last five centuries of global maritime systems, which shows that the great maritime powers were rarely faced with balancing coalitions. Or, as Blagden (2014) put it, balancing actions are not taken solely as a reaction to an accumulation of power, but rather if a combination of conditions, including offensive capabilities, intentions, and geographical proximity, are met. For instance, the lack of geographical proximity of the US to most of its would-be rivals, the middling offensive capabilities of navies, and the lack of any overt intentions for conquest was enough to preclude both a balancing coalition and war.

As Mearsheimer (2001) would be quick to remind us, the intentions of a state can never be determined with 100% accuracy. A state's martial capabilities decide how dangerous others deem them to be and how much fear they illicit. However, even disregarding the benign intentions of maritime powers, the focus of their military capabilities on their navies makes aggressive wars of conquest highly unattractive, as navies are ill-suited for conquest. When not acting independently but in support of the army, navies can perform three power-projection missions, all three of which can be boiled down to ferrying services for ground troops and only differ in the level of opposition met. Mearsheimer (2001) categorizes them as 1) amphibious

assault, where the forces delivered by the navy are met with fierce resistance upon arrival and before a beachhead could be established; 2) amphibious landings, where the troops have ample time to establish a beachhead and engage the opposing forces further inland; and 3) troop transports, wherein the troops are delivered into safe territory controlled by allied forces. It goes without saying that the first is the most dangerous (Mearsheimer 2001). The troops must not only contend with rival forces but also with the full stopping power of water, which is why it is generally avoided unless the distribution of power weighs heavily in favor of the attacking side. The amphibious assault is, however, the most likely outcome if an invasion is launched as amphibious landings would require the defender to fail to erect coastal defenses in time, something that has to be considered unlikely in the current day and age. As previously established, paved roads and railroads have made it very easy for the defender to react in time. Troop transports into friendly yet enemy-adjacent territory would also be rare, as the opposition would try to prevent the success of such missions.

When used independently, on the other hand, there are two ways a navy can project power against another state. They can, for one, employ naval bombardment, usually on coastal cities or military targets, to coerce the adversary to change its policies in favor of the attacker. Alternatively, the navy can be used to perform a blockade in an effort to strangle a rival's economy and thereby force a surrender. Although Mahan refers to it as "the most striking and awful mark of sea power" (Kennedy, 1976 p.253) and while states will obviously suffer when their seaborne trade is severed, there has never been a blockade in modern history that forced a state to surrender, nor do blockades seem to have any significant adverse effects on the army of the state under blockade (Mearsheimer, 2001). In other words, no matter how powerful a state's navy is, in order to seriously threaten the survival of another state, a powerful army is required. Traditional maritime powers tend to be weaker in this department resulting in them being benign by default. Furthermore, in the rare cases that a maritime power has an equally powerful army, as is the case with the modern US, they are still faced with the difficulty of getting armies abroad onto enemy territory, as they are probably insular and thus isolated by oceans.

So, not only are continental powers less likely to balance against maritime powers, but maritime powers are also unlikely to instigate a war. This observation is further reinforced by the fact that continental powers are also more likely to ally with the leading maritime power (Levy & Thompson, 2010). That is because maritime states not only base their power on naval capabilities alone. They put a major focus on economic strength as well. As a result, the leading sea power is, more often than not, also the leading economic power within an international

order. In fact, the primary purpose their navies serve is the protection and expansion of their trade routes. Moreover, if a maritime power is in a position to do so, it will create and defend an international order that further protects its economic and naval dominance. Since the 20th century, this desire for dominance extends to air and space power as well, as the protection of the commons is integral to this continued dominance (Levy & Thompson, 2010). Importantly, this dominance of the markets and the seas rarely involves territorial infringements, thus keeping the fear of conquest in other powers at a minimum. Sea powers traditionally have shown little interest in involving themselves in continental disputes and are known for providing public goods to facilitate trade, making an alliance with them an easy choice for most continental powers (Levy & Thompson, 2010).

There are, however, exceptions to this rule. First of all, when faced with rising powers, leading maritime powers base their response to them on the rising power's commercial policy. Because of their oftentimes global trade networks, maritime powers have a tendency for liberal "open-door" policies as their foreign economic policy. There is likely to be cooperation between the dominant and the rising powers if their foreign commercial policies align, i.e., if both have a preference for a liberal "open-door" economic order (Lobell, 2001). If this is not the case and the dominant power sees a danger to its economic and national security interests in the foreign economic policy of the ascending power, it might decide to shift from accommodation and cooperation to containment (Lobell, 2001). Accommodating a non-liberal rising power with a conflicting foreign trade policy to the detriment of the liberal dominant power would signal its growing weakness while simultaneously giving the rising power the confidence and resources to assault the remaining global interests of the dominant power (Lobell, 2001). A rising power with a preference for a different commercial order is also more likely to cheat or renege on agreements to undermine the existing order (Lobell, 2001).

It is important to note that a state's foreign trade policy does not need to correspond with either its political system (a politically liberal, commercially imperial state, is just as possible as a politically autocratic, commercially liberal state) or its domestic trade policy (for instance a state might be protectionist at home while it imposes an open-door policy on regions it dominates). Additionally, the international economic orientation of a state can change over time, particularly during its decline (Lobell, 2001). Cooperation with a rising power that has a different foreign trade policy would be incredibly dangerous for a leading maritime power, as it endangers its economic primacy even as the stopping power of water protects its territorial integrity. Thus, it might decide to seek a confrontation if the opportunity presents itself. Alternatively, maritime powers might consider an amphibious assault to become necessary if

an aggressive continental actor accrues sufficient power to overcome the stopping power of water themselves, thus endangering the maritime power's own security (Blagden, 2014).

4.4 Criticisms against the benevolence of naval powers

There is a discussion, whether the difference in behavior and perception of maritime powers is genuinely because of their naval focus or whether it is simply the result of their status as insular powers. As Blagden (2011) notes, it is insular powers that tend to be great sea powers as they benefit from the absence of other great powers on their landmass. In fact, no leading sea power has also been a continental power since 1699 (Blagden, 2011). This is hardly surprising as continental powers need to focus on land armies first to secure their survival against rivals on the same landmass. Afterward, only the most successful of continental powers can afford to build up a significant naval presence, and even then, they rarely have the resources to match an insular power that can focus most of its resources on naval capabilities, as seen in the naval build-up race between Britain and Imperial Germany during the lead up to the first World War. Blagden (2011) questions whether it is really the focus on naval strength that makes maritime forces appear as benign and non-threatening or whether this perception is simply the result of maritime powers also being insular. This difference is important as states obviously cannot influence whether they are insular or not. Blagden (2011) himself states that insular powers need to acquire maritime capabilities to even have the option to conduct aggression. An insular state's attempts to build up a navy would therefore be considered threatening.

However, insularity does not guarantee that a state develops into a maritime power (Levy & Thompson, 2011). Access to a coast, independent of insularity, is the only thing necessary for becoming a sea power. Many strong insular states did not become maritime traders, most notably Japan during its centuries of isolationism (Levy & Thompson, 2011). Likewise, the presence of large neighbors has not always prevented non-insular coastal states from becoming maritime powers, as the Netherlands or Portugal have proved (Levy & Thompson, 2011). All in all, this shows that the relationship between insularity and a state's strategic orientations is probabilistic rather than deterministic; there exists an apparent variation in the relative emphasis on maritime versus continental orientations in coastal states. Sea powers might attract great power allies by creating global public goods, but it is their lack of territorial ambition in the home region that made sea powers less threatening than predominant land powers (Levy & Thompson, 2011). In other words, there have been benign maritime powers that did not have the luxury of insularity. Therefore, it is not solely a matter of insularity whether a state is considered a benign maritime power.

In summary, becoming a maritime power is a conscious decision, regardless of the geographical makeup. While it is easier and more desirable for insular power to archive, as it is the only way to facilitate at least some power projection, continental powers can also decide to orientate themselves towards a maritime focus. The only necessary condition is a coastal location.

4.5 Summary of the theoretical framework

In conclusion, the combination of the difficulties involved in successfully orchestrating an amphibious assault and the lack of both ground-based military capabilities and interests of maritime powers to even attempt territorial conquests leads me to posit that power transition between great powers have a strong tendency to remain peaceful when an ocean separates the participating parties. The theory assumes that peace is most likely when both the rising and the incumbent power are maritime powers, or at the very least possess significant naval capabilities, as maritime powers have a tendency to prefer liberal trade. Two maritime powers are thus more likely to have aligning foreign economic policies. A shift in the leadership of the international order would thus leave the order itself mostly unchanged, thereby increasing the chances for a peaceful transition as the dominant power would retain its economic prosperity. Additionally, sea power also minimizes the security dilemma because maritime forces enforce the stopping power of water while being simultaneously ill-suited as a tool for conquest. They also preserve economic openness; all the while being considered less threatening than ground forces. Furthermore, maritime powers have few incentives to be the aggressor in a war, as long as their economic prosperity is not threatened (Levy & Thompson, 2010, Lobell, 2001). Thus, sea power can be considered intrinsically more benign (at least in relative terms) and are likely to garner more allies than enemies (Blagden, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2001). They are therefore more likely to participate in a peaceful power transition.

The only constellation more likely to produce a peaceful power transition is between two landlocked continental powers separated by oceans without coastal access, simply because of a lack of capabilities from both sides to reach each other. However, as history has shown, this to be relatively rare; The dominant power has long since been a maritime power because of the superior capability for economic growth. So, for states to become powerful enough to become a rising contender, they also require significant naval capabilities for the purpose of power projection and, more importantly, economic prosperity. Therefore, most contenders are maritime powers – as was the case with insular powers like the US and Japan – or they attempt to build up their naval capacities throughout their rise despite their continental nature, as can be observed with continental powers like Imperial Germany and the current efforts of China. In

the following chapter, I endeavor to illustrate how an application of my theory can explain the different outcomes of the various power transitions that happened in the 20th century, as well as offer valuable insights into the future of the Sino-American power transition.

5 Power Transitions in the 20th century – Testing the Theory

5.1 Case Selection – an overview of the last 150 years of power transition

As mentioned in the previous chapter, my selection of power transition cases will be limited to the last roughly 150 years. I believe this timeframe offers the best balance between an acceptable level discrepancy in terms of socio-political and technological differences while also providing a sufficiently high sample size of power transitions to reasonably facilitate a qualitative comparison between them. Including the ongoing power transition between the US and China, there are a total of six power transitions in the timeframe between the late 19th century and today. I base my selection on Allision's (2017) own analysis on power transition but use slightly stricter selection criteria as I will only analyze power transition where the position of the incumbent dominant power within the international order is endangered. For this reason, I excluded the inner-European power transition between the dominant England and France and the newly reunified Germany, which began in the 1990s. In chronological order, these power transitions are:

- between the British Empire and the United States,
- between the British Empire and Imperial Germany,
- between Nazi Germany and the United States
- and concurrently between Imperial Japan and the United States,
- between the Soviet Union and the United States,
- and finally, the contemporary transition between the People's Republic of China and the United States.

Even with a relatively limited number of transitions, it is, of course, impossible to analyze all of them in appropriate depth in the context of this thesis. Which is why I will instead use this subchapter to offer an abridged overview of all the power transitions, wherein I will briefly illustrate how my theory of the stopping power of water decisively influenced the outcome of each of them. I then dedicate the subsequent subchapters to provide an in-depth analysis of two power transitions (the ones between the British Empire and the United States and the British Empire and Imperial Germany) to prove once again that it was the stopping power of water that dictated whether the power transition was peaceful or not. Likewise, the potential outcome of

the present-day power transition between the US and China will receive its own dedicated chapter.

When looking at the five completed power transitions, two of them (USA vs. Britain and USA vs. the Soviet Union) have been peaceful while the other three ended in a war (Britain vs. Germany, the USA vs. Germany, and the USA vs. Japan). It becomes immediately apparent that all of these transitions involved large bodies of water in one form or another, yet 60 percent of them escalated to war. Does that mean my theory has already been falsified? I do not believe this to be the case. My theory is a fair bit more nuanced than saying the presence of water always leads to a peaceful transition. Allow me to demonstrate by going through each transition individually. First, the power transition between the then incumbent British Empire and the rising United States, this case seems quite clear cut: the great powers were separated by the Atlantic Ocean, and thus the power transition was peaceful, as predicted by my theory. In reality, the effects of the Atlantic Ocean were a bit more complicated than just the physical separation it offered. There were several factors derived from the presence of an ocean that were conducive for a peaceful power transition, but more on that below. Likewise, the reasons behind the escalation to war that resulted from the power transition between Britain and Imperial Germany despite their separation by the North Sea and why it nevertheless complies with my theory will be explained in a subsequent section. For now, suffice it to say that it was not solely the comparatively smaller size of the North Sea and the English Channel that was responsible for the war.

But before that, allow me to briefly illustrate two power transitions that happened concurrently and together made up both theaters of the Second World War. The rise of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan and their respective power transition with the US. Why were neither of these transitions peaceful when both rising countries were separated from the dominant US by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, respectively? Especially considering the pacifying effect, the Atlantic had on the British-American transition. Allision (2017) lists the European Theater of the Second World War as a power transition between Germany and the other great European powers Britain, France, and the Soviet Union since Germany's main goal was supremacy over Europe both on land and on the seas. I cannot entirely agree with this categorization. While Germany’s goal was undoubtedly regional hegemony in Europe, which can be considered a local form of power transition, the global power transition itself was still very much between the US and Germany. Had Germany successfully overcome the multipolar system on the continent and thereby become the regional hegemon of Europe, it could have rivaled the US in power. And as previously established, regional hegemons do not want peer

competitors (Mearsheimer, 2001). Thus, one would have expected the US to have intervened much earlier. Instead, because of the stopping power of water, the US decided to pass the buck of balancing against a rising Germany to the other European powers (Toft, 2005) and only entered the war after a direct attack by fellow axis power Japan on Pearl Harbor. Even then, the US only officially declared war against Japan. It was actually Germany's declaration of war against the United States soon after that finally pulled the US into the European war and allowed President Roosevelt to implement a Germany-first strategy (Taliaferro, 2012).

When Washington finally joined the war, the difficulty of amphibious assaults made itself very known, as America had to land its forces in continental Europe. Even against an enemy that was already stretched thin by a war on two fronts and with the assistance of British and other allied forces, the landing of American forces in Normandy, better known as Operation Overlord, was one of the most hard-fought and bloody allied victories of the western front. And the operation happened under the conditions outlined by Mearsheimer (2001) that maximize the odds for a successful amphibious assault. Germany, at this point, was both an enemy on the verge of catastrophic defeat and one that was defending a vast expanse of territory (Mearsheimer, 2001). One can only imagine what would have happened if the German forces did not have to focus on two fronts. It is safe to say that in this instance, the stopping power of water cannot be denied, even if it was not enough to prevent a war between the rising German Third Reich and the dominant United States.

Furthermore, in keeping with German traditions during its rise, Nazi Germany rearmed itself primarily as a continental land power. Germany was on a quest for more *Lebensraum* and started the war with the express purpose of territorial expansion (Allison, 2017; Beevor, 2012; Kennedy, 1987). This dichotomy in nature compared to the maritime USA further weakened the stopping power of water and spurred on the confrontation between the two powers. All that said, the reluctance displayed by the US as a result of the stopping power of water was extensive. I do not believe that it would not be too far-fetched to claim that in a counterfactual reality, wherein Japan decided against the raid on Pearl Habor, the US might have decided to stay out of the war in the "old world" altogether. Assuming, however unlikely, that this would have allowed for a German victory, the US might have then found itself forced into an arrangement with a regional hegemon whose ideology was antithetical to its own, similar to what had happened in the Cold War.

The case for US restraint in the Pacific Theatre due to the stopping power of water is even stronger. There were no great powers that the US could have passed the buck to in Asia, yet they were still hesitant to intervene directly against the rise of Imperial Japan. For the longest

time, the US tried to deal with Japan by putting it under heavy sanctions in a way that is similar if more far-reaching to Washington's recent containment policy against China. Like China today, Japan challenged the regional order in Asia established by America's Open-Door policy (Allision 2017). The US became increasingly convinced that Japan was planning on "redrawing the map of Asia to exclude the west (Storry, 1979 p. 159)". Japan intended to create the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, thereby promoting economic and cultural unity without Western influences. The United States interpreted the purpose of this Co-Prosperity Sphere as the facilitation of an "autarkic economic development through territorial expansion" and thus considered it not just predatory (Taliaferro, 2016 p. 173) but also threatening towards American interests in the area. The parallels with China's current foreign policy in the South China Sea are once again evident, even if China has yet to display any overt desires for territorial expansion (aside from Taiwan). Faced with a rising power, whose foreign trade policy was incompatible with their own, it made further cooperation unfeasible for Washington, resulting in a policy of containment.

However, it was actually Tokyo, made desperate by Washington's increasingly severe sanctions and culminating in an embargo on the desperately needed oil, that initiated military hostilities against the US. Those hostilities are well within the scope of my theory, as the infamous attack on Pearl Harbor was "only" an air raid and not an amphibious assault. Japan had no plans for invading Hawaii; they simply wanted to keep the US out of the war by preemptively destroying the US's Pacific Fleet as a sort of "knockout blow" (Allison, 2017). That, however, was a disastrous miscalculation. As it turned out, bombardment is not just unsuited for convincing an enemy to surrender (Mearsheimer, 2001), it is equally bad at convincing them to stay out of a conflict altogether, especially if most of the enemy fleet survived the attack, as was the case during the attack on Pearl Habor. While it did allow Japan to conquer the resource-rich territories in Southeast Asia and Dutch East Indies and opened the way for several great tactical victories against America and Britain, the successes were short-lived. As a reaction to the brazen attack on Pearl Harbor, the US declared war on Japan which led to its almost complete destruction in 1945 (Allison, 2017). It subsequently also entered the war against Nazi Germany, as the two nations were allied. Taliaferro (2016, 2012) even argues that the Roosevelt administration purposefully let the relations with Japan escalate to justify joining the war against Germany in Europe. While the Pacific Theatre was mainly a naval engagement, the casualties on both sides were horrendous whenever ground forces were deployed. So much so that when the US leadership was faced with the prospect of invading the home islands of a, at this point, severely weakened Japan, they instead opted to use nuclear

weaponry to force Japan into unconditional capitulation. Proving once again how powerful the stopping power of water weighed into American considerations during the second world war.

However, there is an argument to be made about how Japan's aggressive wars in the Asia-Pacific region seemingly go against my theory. Japan is, after all, an insular state and had to overcome the stopping power of water over and over again in their conquests of Asia. However, despite its nature as an insular power, Japan was not maritime trade-focused power. Additionally, Japan faced no great powers in Asia, only weaker powers, and was thus able to act like a land-locked continental power (Toft, 2005; Mearsheimer, 2001). Japan, most notably, also used Korea as a beachhead for the Japanese campaigns in northern China, thereby circumventing the need for amphibious assaults. All the while, the European colonial powers had their hands full defending their homelands against German aggression, as was the case with France and Britain, or, in the case of the Netherlands, were a maritime power with no meaningful armies to defend colonial holdings, to begin with. Thus, Japan had mostly free reign as the stopping power of water was severely weakened by the lack of martial capabilities of their opposition, both on land and on the sea. Even China, for all its size and historical supremacy, posed little threat. Then known as the Republic of China, it had stumbled from crisis to crisis since the Opium wars and was in no position to meaningfully oppose the highly industrialized Japanese forces. The Japanese occupation of large parts of China that followed can be considered the culmination of what is now referred to as China's century of humiliation, which still affects China's foreign policy today (Kaufmann, 2010).

For the sake of brevity, I omitted a lot of the complexities surrounding the American entry into the Second World War, but I am convinced that the central role the insular nature of the US played in it remains valid, nonetheless. In short, the US has shown remarkable restraint during the rise of both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. More so than it would have if there had not been oceans separating it from its would-be rivals. One must only look at the date of the US's entry into WWII to see how hesitant the US was about the prospect of fighting overseas wars. This is a testament to my theory and the stopping power of water as a whole. Even when the rising power has a radically opposing ideology and the aggressor of a war that spanned an entire continent, history has shown that the dominant power will still hesitate. In the case of the US, war was only declared after it suffered a direct attack on its own sovereign territory. It is highly doubtful that the US would have shown the same restraint if a country like Mexico had been the one on the rise. My theory is even valid if one subscribes to the "back door to war" thesis, wherein the Roosevelt administration was eager to join the war but required and thus engineered an inciting incident to justify it (Taliaferro, 2012; first formulated by Tansill, 1975).

I posit that the need for an excuse to fight overseas wars only proves the potency of the stopping power of water, and I argue that something less devastating than Pearl Harbor might not have been enough to convince Congress.

My theory of how stopping the power of water prevents power transitions from escalating into an open conflict is on full display in the transition between the US and the Soviet Union. The relationship between the two was marked by numerous crises (even proxy wars) and economic, scientific and ideological competition. However, in the end, it did remain peaceful if sometimes severely strained. There was never a hot war between the two countries at the center of the transition. Only this time, the argument for peace was further exacerbated by the existence of nuclear weapons. This pushed the offense-defense balance further towards a defense advantage. Combined with the strenuous and ultimately short-lived alliance with the US following the resolution of WWII, these circumstances allowed the Soviet Union to successfully rise to become a regional hegemon, splitting the world into two spheres of influence between the two superpowers. As mentioned above, China has since suggested a similar arrangement but has thus far been rebuffed by the United States (Allison, 2017).

The stopping power of water and the threat of nuclear deterrence forced the US to accept the Soviet Union as a peer competitor. Both sides tried to outdo each other in other realms to claim global supremacy of not just their country but also their ideology, a parallel that also becomes increasingly important to the Sino-American relationship. During this period aptly named the Cold War, the two growing superpowers employed anything short of open warfare to not fall behind their rival. Many point to nuclear deterrence as the source for the two countries' mutual recognition of constraints on competition which paved the way for them to attack each other using everything aside from direct conflict (Allison, 2017; Toft, 2005). And while the influence of nuclear deterrence cannot be denied, I argue that nuclear deterrence was only as effective as it was thanks to the physical separation by both the Atlantic and the Pacific. In the end, the stopping power of water was essential in ensuring that the US did not resort to direct military intervention against their new rival. Especially early on when the Soviet nuclear second-strike capability was not yet assured and the USSR, and most of Europe for that matter, was still recovering from the death and destruction inflicted by WWII.

The US kept up this restraint even as the Soviet Union began to challenge the US both technologically by launching the first satellite (Sputnik in 1957) and the first human (Juri Gagarin in 1961) into space, as well as economically when its industrial production rapidly rose to 173 percent over prewar level by 1950. Likewise, the official annual economic growth of the USSR averaged 7 percent between 1950 and 1970, which caused many in the US to fear that

the Soviet Union might eventually rival or even surpass them (Allison, 2017). Once again, drawing a parallel to the ongoing situation between the US and China. While the USSR was never able to make economic preeminence a reality, it did manage to overtake the US in two key areas: military spending and production of iron and steel, both in the early 1970s (Allison, 2017). It undoubtedly worried US leadership, yet a combination of nuclear deterrence and the stopping power of water made war unfeasible. Some will certainly argue that it was solely nuclear deterrence that prevented open hostilities.

However, I believe this to be a gross oversimplification as nuclear deterrence would have been far less effective if the geographic distances involved had been shorter or at least easier to traverse. Without the stopping power of water posing as such a difficult barrier to cross, a conventional war between the two powers would have been feasible if both powers act rationally. Rational powers are more likely to accept defeat in war and perhaps even subjugation as preferable to the mutual destruction resulting from resorting to nuclear weaponry. Nuclear deterrence theory itself also operates on the assumption that both sides are rational. Otherwise, it also cannot function properly as an irrational power might just launch a nuclear warhead regardless of the consequences. There have been conventional conflicts during the Cold War that proved that states are reluctant to use nuclear weaponry, even if they were on the losing side. The most notable example of this was the Korean War from 1950 to 1953 (Towle, 2005). This conflict is particularly enlightening because of its back-and-forth nature, with both the US-supported South and the Soviet and Chinese-supported North being pushed to the brink of defeat. Yet both sides acted as rational actors and restrained from using nuclear weapons. In other words, there needs to be more than just nuclear deterrence that makes war unattractive to both parties of a power transition. The stopping power of water serves this purpose excellently. Notably, the Soviet Union was equally reluctant to face the US in open war for much of the same reasons, proving that the stopping power of water works both ways and affects the rising state just as much as the dominant state.

This section served the purpose of quickly verifying my theory using three of my six sample cases for power transition in the last 150 years. I have alluded several times to the current power transition between the US and China, both in the war against Japan and the peaceful transition with the Soviet Union. Which is why I will dedicate the final chapter of this thesis to the future of the Sino-American relationship, but first I will show in detail how my theory explains why the power transition between the US and the British Empire was able to remain peaceful while the power transition between Britain and Imperial Germany escalated into the first World War.

5.2 Power Transition in Depth

I selected the power transitions between the British Empire and both the United States and Imperial Germany for my in-depth analysis for the simple reason that both transitions happened roughly concurrently. Unsurprisingly, this leads to many similarities between the two cases. Most notably, Britain was the dominant power in both cases, the geopolitical climate was obviously the same, and both powers rose rather rapidly. If anything, the relations with the US were more strained because of its status as a former colony. Yet, despite this, the power transition was only peaceful in the case of the United States. In other words, I am working with a most similar case design. One of the few major differences between Germany and the United States is that the ocean separating them from Britain is much larger in the American case. Geographically speaking, the US was literally half a world away, separated from Britain's home isles by the Atlantic Ocean, while the much smaller North Sea was all that separated Britain from Germany. As I will illustrate below, this difference was what decided between a peaceful or a war-torn power transition.

5.2.1 The Peaceful Transition between the British Empire and the United States

I will first take a closer look at the prime example for a peaceful power transition: The transition between the incumbent British Empire and the rising United States that transpired in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Some might consider this to only be a regional transition of power in the Western Hemisphere. However, considering the trajectory of both powers after this transition and the fact that the 20th century is commonly referred to as the "American century," I believe it is appropriate to say that the power transition in question was very much a transition of global predominance. As illustrated by Allison (2017), it was during the final third of the 19th century that the United States not only recovered from its disastrous civil war but emerged stronger than ever before. The country became a juggernaut of industry and economy, with a GDP that exceeded Britain's by the early 1870s and the entire British Empire's by 1916. Unsurprisingly, US confidence grew accordingly, and Washington became increasingly assertive in the Western Hemisphere and expanded its regional role. Many feared this would escalate into a great power conflict because of European and particularly British interests in the Americas (Allison, 2017).

However, the rise of the United States went against the logic of realism and was met not with contestation by the dominant British Empire (Feng, 2006). Instead, Britain showed itself willing to accommodate the US time and time again until the US successfully establish itself as the new dominant power in the international order of the 20th "American" century. Even A.F.K. Organski, who pioneered the Power Transition Theory, acknowledged that the transfer of power

between Great Britain and the US is the only example where replacing the top nation did not result in war (Feng, 2006). While it can be argued that London's change in policy from hostile relations to appeasement in the Western Hemisphere had the explicit purpose of freeing up resources to defend British preponderance elsewhere on the globe, most notable in Europe and Asia (Allison, 2017), it seems naive to believe that the British leadership was not aware of the ramification of giving a rising United States free rein in the Western Hemisphere.

Assuming that British leadership was well aware of the ramifications, namely that they would be paving the way for American dominance, the question becomes why they nevertheless decided that a peaceful power transition would best course of action. Amidst all the rising powers challenging Britain at the time, including Germany, Japan, and even Russia, London considered the United States to be the least threatening (Feng, 2006). The preponderance of the US would have therefore been the lesser evil. This is, of course, under the assumption that a continued preponderance of the British Empire was not an option; a reality seemed increasingly likely as British resources were stretched thin at the turn of the century (Allison, 2017; Kupchan, 2010).

The explanation for the British preference towards American predominance was primarily twofold: First, while the US was in absolute terms the most powerful of the rising powers during this time, it was also much farther away. In contrast, Germany and Russia were much closer to the British homeland and thus posed a more proximate danger (Allison, 2017). This explanation adheres to the concept of "balance of threats" and is widely propagated. However, this approach cannot explain why Great Britain decided to foster friendly, almost brotherly, relations with the United States (Feng, 2006). This is where the second approach comes in, according to which the preference towards a dominant US, as opposed to Russia or Germany, was borne out of the shared culture between Britain and the US. They not only shared the same language, but they were also highly compatible in terms of ideology and political culture. Therefore, Britain could rest easy in the belief that the US would continue to carry the torch of liberalism and open market economy, thereby ensuring that British values would remain dominant (Allison, 2017; Zeren & Hall, 2016; Kupchan, 2010; Feng, 2006).

Chapter 3 illustrated this particular explanation in detail and elaborated on how it facilitated the peaceful power transition between the two nations. And in this specific case between these two specific countries, the cultural similarities between them certainly helped significantly to facilitate the peaceful transition. However, I disagree with the assertion that it was the deciding factor of the continued peace between the US and Britain. For the stated goal of this paper to define a universal theory of peaceful transition, the shared culture approach, as previously

elaborated, is not universally applicable, as there have been peaceful transitions without any form of shared culture. If the presence of a shared culture was the necessary variable for a peaceful transition, a war should have been the guaranteed result of the Cold War.

Likewise, this assumption would not bode well for a peaceful resolution of the currently ongoing power transition between the US and China. Organski (1968) believed that Britain allowed the US assumption of the superpower mantle because the US respected Great Britain's international status and argued that America's rise as a status quo power was beneficial to both sides, as the US advocated preserving the British-led international system (Feng, 2006; Organski, 1968). I agree with these assertions but have to note that they are incomplete. They fail to explain why Britain would trust the US to remain the status quo power it presented itself as during its rise. What allowed London to take this risk and trust in Washington's projected intentions was the fact that both countries were half a planet away from each other, separated by an ocean, and because both countries were comparatively being maritime powers. Aside from the shared language, most of their cultural similarities can be attributed to the shared maritime nature. More generally speaking, I posit that both the proximity between states each other to a large body of water is integral for defining a universally applicable theory for peaceful power transitions. The geographical separation by large bodies of water is the necessary variable for a peaceful transition, as they act as a protective barrier and offer economic opportunities, both of which profoundly influence the behavior of coastal states.

As illustrated in my theory chapter, it was the presence of a large body of water, in this case that of the Atlantic Ocean, that allowed the power transition between the US and Britain to transpire peacefully. Not only were the two powers not in close proximity to each other, which prompted Britain to shift its focus to other rising powers closer to the homeland and thus perceived as more significant threats, such as Germany and Russia (Allison, 2017; Feng 2006). Britain and the US were also specifically separated by open waters. While that was obviously also the case in regard to Germany or any other European power, as the British homeland is entirely located on islands, the Atlantic Ocean, by virtue of its sheer size and more extreme weather patterns, was and still is a much more challenging terrain to traverse than the North Sea. Especially considering that the British Isles are at their closest at the Straits of Dover, only separated by roughly 33,3 km of water from continental Europe. In other words, the stopping power of water posed much more of an obstacle for any hypothetical military offensives between Washington and London, even to the point of unfeasibility. Much more so than for any conflict between London and any European power.

On the one hand, the stopping power of water led to the Atlantic Ocean, making it near impossible for Britain to prevent America's rise through military force. A British invasion of American soil would have been a logistical nightmare that would have put Britain as the aggressor at a severe tactical disadvantage, even if Canada had been used as a staging ground. On the other hand, the stopping power of water likewise acted as potent protection against any hypothetical invasion plans by a newly dominant America on the British home islands. Believing in the American intentions, which according to realism are inherently indeterminable (Mearsheimer, 2001), was therefore not as integral in the decision for peace. For these reasons, America's rise and the resulting naval superiority were acceptable to Britain on a strategic level, as navies are ill-suited for invasions (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Furthermore, the circumstances around the British-American power transition led to the stopping power of water being at its most effective. Both countries were great powers with powerful navies, and while it is true that the American navy was at this point far less powerful as the British, it also had a lot less "ground" to cover. Washington had, after all, long since followed a policy of relative isolationism. As a result, the US navy had no territories it had to protect beyond the North American continent, aside from Hawaii. The opposite was true for the British Empire of the late 19th/early 20th century. Its far-flung empire put significant stress on the British admiralty to adequately protect all of their holdings (Allison, 2017). Additionally, the US Navy had been rapidly growing since Theodore Roosevelt took office. In a span of only ten years between 1900 and 1910, America almost tripled its naval tonnage (Kennedy, 1987). Turning a hypothetical conflict into an increasingly even fight.

Neither did either country possess a safe beachhead to stage an invasion from. While Britain did have Canada as a possible staging ground, I once again have to echo the statement by Layne (2002): The US would never have allowed Britain to ship a massive number of troops to Canada, as proved by the existence of war plans for an invasion of Canada to prevent such an eventuality. For the US, the situation was even more clear cut; it did not have any territories in Europe and therefore would have had to follow up the already challenging crossing of the Atlantic Ocean – no doubt harried by British naval battle groups along the way – with the even more difficult task of performing an amphibious assault on the British home isles. All in all, the Atlantic Ocean meant that both London and Washington deemed an offensive against the other to be strategically and logistically unfeasible, while also acknowledging the defense-favorable offense-defense balance both of them enjoyed against each other because of the geographic characteristics (Blagden, 2014) of their territories in relation to each other. While not impossible, having success as the aggressor in a war between the US and Britain would not

have been easy, making war far less likely (van Evera, 2013). This argumentation is in line with the logic of deterrence, according to which states can be prevented from initiating wars if the costs are higher than the benefits (Paul, 2016). Allison (2017) likewise concurs with my assessment that the vast Atlantic Ocean separating the two countries diminished America's direct security threat to Britain. The same is, of course, also true vice versa.

The second major aspect that played into the peacefulness of the US-American power transition is that both states were traditionally maritime powers. As I illustrated at length in the theory chapter, maritime powers have specific characteristics that cause them to be inherently less threatening than continental powers. The most obvious of which is also the most related to my previous point. Namely, maritime powers are often insular powers without threats to their territorial integrity by rival powers (Blagden, 2011). The US and Britain thus had the luxury to be able to funnel the majority of their military capacity into their navies. Moreover, navies are by nature unsuited for wars of conquest, particularly if they act independently of armies instead of supporting them (Mearsheimer, 2001). As a result, sea-power-based states still need ground armies if they want to have any ambitions for a war of conquest. Maritime powers, however, often have smaller armies than their continental counterparts (Levy & Thompson, 2010). Combined with the difficulty of transporting an army onto enemy shores in times of war (Mearheimer, 2001), maritime powers pose a significantly smaller threat to the territorial integrity of other states. In other words, sea power generates security without threatening others' overall political survival. This results in the benevolent image of even the predominant global maritime power (Levy & Thompson, 2010; Blagden, 2014). Historically speaking, continental powers did not even consider the naval components of power of a state as a major threat to their vital interests (Lobell, 2016).

Furthermore, while it is true that their status as maritime powers did not prevent late 19th century Britain and America from building up impressive land armies, their strongest suit remained – and arguably remains to this day – their navies. As the historical data from Mearsheimer (2001) proves, the use of a navy in independent operations such as bombardments and blockades of enemy cities and ports would not lead the enemy to surrender. Thus if, either the US or Britain wanted to start a war with each other that they had any hopes of winning, they would need to ferry their grounds soldiers onto the opposition's shores. It does not take a master tactician to see that using one's strongest assets as glorified transport for comparatively weaker armies, only for said armies to then be forced to face terrible odds as they attempt a precarious amphibious assault, is not the best use of one's resources. The peaceful transition between the two nations was possible because neither Britain nor the US feared the opposition's navy as a

tool for conquest. Especially if maritime powers like Britain and the US need their navies for another, arguably more important purpose. As the great rapprochement between them progressed, both nations came to see each other not just as benign but even as friends and brothers (Allison, 2017; Kupchan 2010), thanks not in small parts to their nature as maritime powers.

The aforementioned alternative purpose of navies is the second important characteristic responsible for the benign image of maritime powers. More often than not, this characteristic forms the second pillar alongside the raw naval power of maritime states. Sea powers also tend to be economic powerhouses. In fact, for most of history, the leading maritime power has usually also been the leading economic power in the global system (Levy & Thompson, 2010). This economic dominance is because maritime powers prefer to trade with other great powers instead of warring with them. They traditionally have been known for providing public goods to facilitate trade, making an alliance with them an easy choice (Levy & Thompson, 2010). As the protection of the commons is central to prosperous trade relations, it is hardly surprising that the primary purpose of the maritime powers' navies is the protection and expansion of their trade routes (Levy & Thompson, 2010).

History supports this assertion. During the period of Pax Britannica, the purpose of the British navy had been the protection of trade routes. However, the protection of the commons and other common goods to facilitate global trade is far from cheap, and Britain, at the end of the 19th century, has begun to feel the strain of these responsibilities. Because of Britain's perceived sense of strategic over-commitment, a policy of appeasing the United States was implemented (Kupchan, 2010) as the impending Anglo-American power transition became apparent. Britain realized that the US, although protectionist at home, subscribed to the same commercially liberal ideology of open-door trade when it came to overseas commercial opportunities (Lobell, 2001). This economic orientation meant that not only would Britain retain access to its overseas markets, investments, and sources of raw materials, even in a US-dominated global order. It would also be free of all costs, including economic, political, and military costs, of maintaining regional hegemony in the Western Hemisphere (Lobell, 2001). It is, therefore, no surprise that Britain decided against a preventive war, which in all likelihood would have been prohibitively expensive (especially since the US had no rivals in the Western Hemisphere that London could have enlisted as allies (Allison, 2017)). Not when it could continue to rely on its economic prowess based on global trade even under a US-dominated international order.

Britain could follow the advice of its First Sea Lord Jacky Fisher in 1904 and "use all possible means to avoid such a war" (Allison, 2017) with the US because its survival and prosperity as a state were not endangered by the rise of a maritime great power like the US. This course of action was not just viable but became quite attractive to Britain since it would fall to the newly dominant United States to provide the common goods to facilitate trade. Therefore, it was very much in Britain's economic interest to allow a peaceful power transition with the US. Washington's foreign economic policy as a maritime state aligned with London's and was based on economic growth through a liberal global trade (Lobell, 2001). This meant that even after the power transition, little would change economically speaking, and as a maritime power itself, economic prosperity was of the utmost importance for Britain. And even if America would come to dominate the economy and the seas, they would do so without territorial infringements, further reducing any residual fears of an American conquest of the British Isles (Levy & Thompson, 2010). Thus, the famous reconciliation of these two countries happened first and foremost for strategic and economic reasons (Kupchan, 2010). In contrast, the economic system would have most likely changed drastically if it had come to a peaceful power transition with Imperial Germany, for instance (Lobell, 2001), but more on that in the following section. Because of this, a peaceful transition of power to the US as the dominant power was considered by London to be the preferable alternative, as it would neither threaten Britain's survival nor its economic prosperity.

All of these circumstances led to what is now known as the Great Rapprochement. Britain successfully healed the long-standing hostilities with the US, managed to accommodate American demands, and did so without sacrificing its own vital interest, even as Britain was surpassed in all important dimensions (Allison, 2017). This was only possible thanks to the stopping power of water. The existence of the Atlantic Ocean as a natural barrier and the maritime and thus liberal mercantile focus of both Britain and the United States were the deciding factors for the Great Rapprochement and, eventually, the peaceful power transition between them. And with the decision for a peaceful power transition made, the way towards the "American Century" was open.

In the end, it was a combination of conditions, including offensive capabilities, intentions, and geographical proximity (Blagden, 2014), that facilitated the peaceful transition. The lack of geographical proximity between the US and Britain (further emphasized by the existence of the Atlantic Ocean), the middling offensive capabilities of navies and the difficulty of amphibious assaults, as well as the liberal trade-focused intentions of maritime powers (as opposed to the conquest focus of many continental powers) were enough to preclude a great

power war between the two countries. This specific constellation made it possible for London to successfully avoid war with the oftentimes quite aggressively rising US. However, Allison (2017) warns of the danger of counting on a repetition of these unique circumstances and thus repeated peaceful power transitions in the future. As I have proved in this chapter, I argue that the circumstances that led to the peaceful transition between the US and Britain, while certainly specific, are far from unique and can all be attributed to the existence of a large body of water acting as a barrier against military aggression, while also influencing a state's nature.

In the end, the acceptance of an American ascension to regional hegemon of the Americas allowed London continued access to its commercial interests without the cost of regional hegemony and, as a result, freed-up ships and other resources to be dispatched to more unstable regions, where British interests were threatened by non-liberal states (Lobell, 2001). Many of these ships were used to reinforce the home fleet in response to the challenge leveled at Britain's naval superiority by a rising Imperial Germany. This decision proved to be a timely rebalancing of British forces before World War I, which even prolonged British influence in international affairs (Allison, 2017). Therefore, an argument can be made that the power transition between Britain and the US was only peaceful because there was a bigger threat on the horizon for Britain in the form of Imperial Germany, which at this point was rapidly growing in power. Unlike the US, who acted as one would expect from a maritime power and whose leadership was always "careful to avoid the Kaiser's mistake of threatening Britain's actual security (Allison 2017 quoting Ernest May)", German leadership showed no such restraint. Germany's behavior certainly influenced Britain's ultimate decision for a peaceful transition with the US, but I consider the relative lack of threat Britain perceived from the US thanks to the stopping power of water, to have been the deciding factor. I do also believe that the shared culture between the US and Britain, fabricated or otherwise, and the perceived continuity of British values, even under American stewardship, played major roles in preventing a war between the two great powers. However, I consider the shared culture that existed between the two powers – and was purposefully nurtured – to ultimately be a result of the shared nature as maritime powers.

5.2.2 The War-torn Transition between the British Empire and the German Empire

The second power transition that I will analyze in detail in this chapter is the transition between the British Empire and the German Empire in the early 20th century. Aside from the rise of the German Third Reich a couple of decades later, the rise of Imperial Germany is probably the most infamous historical example of how a power transition can escalate into an all-out war. The confrontation between an ascending Germany as the challenger and the

dominant British Empire as the status quo power happened just as power transitionists would have expected considering the power constellations. It was, however, wrapped within a greater conflict: The Great War, as it was called in the interbellum period, was one of the most devastating conflicts in human history, a true World War. Even if it is often overshadowed by the second World War in today's public conscience, which somehow surpassed it in its brutality, the Great War was still a monumental event that tremendously influenced the world long after its end. What began as a minor dispute in the Balkans escalated into a conflict that would profoundly affect the government and structure of the European political system (Gilpin, 1989).

But what were the causes for this devastating conflict? That is an exceedingly complex question. Entire books have been written on the reasons for the outbreak of WWI. It would be impossible to illustrate the motivations of all parties that participated in the war within the pages of my thesis. However, some notable scholars point to the inability of Britain as the dominant force in Europe and the rising German Empire to come to a compromise regarding their naval rivalry as the catalyst for the escalation into a world war. Both sides distrusted each other deeply and believed that any potential compromise would place their national security in the hands of the other (Gilpin, 1989), which is why I will focus on this seemingly so central relationship in this conflict. At first glance, the fact that war broke out between these two countries seems to invalidate my theory of the stopping power of water as the deciding factor for peace. After all, Great Britain is mostly made up of two main islands off the coast of continental Europe and is separated by water from the rest of Europe. Shouldn't then the power transition between Britain and Germany have been peaceful, according to my own theory?

This might come as a surprise to some, considering the ultimate outcome of the transition, but the power transition between Britain and Germany was indeed initially peaceful. British indecisiveness in how to handle Germany's economic growth, while Britain's own economy suffered under stagnation, led to seemingly peaceful German rise and a transition in economic power preponderance between the two countries after 1905 (Claar & Ripsman, 2016). This indecisiveness was at least partly the result of the stopping power of water and Britain's maritime nature, making any conventional confrontation difficult. Unfortunately for the peace in Europe, various circumstances between 1900 and 1905 caused Britain's risk and rival assessments to change, and with it, its approach also changed from indecisive accommodation to containment and ultimately war (Claar & Ripsman, 2016; Lobell, 2001). This section is dedicated to illustrating the reasons for this unfortunate shift in policy. I will also demonstrate

that the war between Britain and Germany is well within the explanatory scope of my theory. But first, a bit of history for context.

In 1871 for the first time in history, the disparate, only loosely connected, and often rival German territories gave way to a single entity, with the notable exception of the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary. Now a true unified Empire, as opposed to a loose Confederation like the Holy Roman Empire had been, and ruled by an Emperor of the Prussian Hohenzollern dynasty, Germany's power began to rise rapidly and began to dominate the continent economically, militarily, as well as culturally (Allison, 2017). This was, of course, a cause for concern for the other European powers. A powerful Germany in the heart of Europe could shift the balance of power considerably. France, in particular, was resentful of and worried about an increasingly powerful Germany after its defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. However, initially and up until the early 20th century, Britain's policy was one of accommodation. The two countries shared no prior rivalries, and Britain deemed a containment policy to be too difficult, considering the multiplicity of challengers that Britain faced at the time. Instead, Britain decided to focus on the threats from its traditional rivals, Russia and France (Claar & Ripsman, 2016). The masterful diplomacy of Otto von Bismarck, who served as Germany's chancellor from the inception of the Empire in 1871 until 1890, also helped to alleviate the concerns of the European powers.

However, as the 19th century drew to a close and Bismarck was relieved of his duties as chancellor, Germany, now under Kaiser Wilhelm II, who was eager to step out of the shadows of Bismarck and Britain, became increasingly aggressive in its behavior in an effort to fulfill its newfound manifest destiny (Claar & Ripsman, 2016). Kaiser Wilhelm II desired its own "place in the sun" for Germany (Allison, 2017). And Germany appeared to be on a good path. Its industry had grown tremendously, bringing Germany close to economic parity with Britain by 1914 (Claar & Ripsman, 2016). Despite this rapid economic growth and other impressive national achievements, many in Germany were under the impression that they have been taken repeatedly advantage of by the other European powers (Allison, 2017). Kaiser Wilhelm was also eager for Germany to build up its own colonial empire in the vein of the French and the British. The Kaiser was convinced that the future of a strong German Empire "lay on the waters" (Allison, 2017). For this purpose, Germany also began to rapidly build up its navy.

However, the increasingly powerful German navy and economy resulted in ever more strenuous relations with Britain in particular. By 1905 this led to a change in Britain's perception of Germany's rise and the challenge it posed to them, resulting in London redefining its relationship to Berlin as a rivalry (Claar & Ripsman, 2016). The feeling was mutual; Germany,

for all its rapid progress, "saw its path to global greatness blocked by what it considered an unjust and covetous incumbent" (Allison, 2017). As the preeminent naval power in Europe and most of the globe, the British had a policy of outnumbering the fleets of any European power, and Germany had all intentions of challenging this status quo. German naval ambitions forced Britain to reinforce their fleets as well, as a powerful German navy had to be considered a formidable threat to the British homeland (Allison, 2017; Claar & Ripsman, 2016). In the end, the relations between the two countries were strained to such an extent that Britain fought on the side of the allies against Germany and the central powers during the Great War, ignoring the close familial ties of both ruling dynasties.

All this sounds contradictory to my theory of the stopping power of water, which, as I have shown, explains how the Atlantic Ocean facilitated a peaceful transition between the US and Britain. After all, Britain is separated by water from both the USA and Germany. Likewise, Berlin's naval build-up was not unlike Washington's own build-up. So why did one result in a peaceful power transition and the other ultimately in a military conflict? I do not believe that this points to a flaw in my theory. The exact circumstances of the British-German power transition are simply more nuanced since it occurred in the middle of Europe. This circumstance makes it virtually impossible to isolate it from the European great power competition. Aside from that, there are two central reasons why Britain was a lot more concerned about Germany's rise than it was for America's.

First of all, the North Sea is significantly smaller and safer to traverse than the Atlantic Ocean, offering less protection as a natural barrier. The proximity of Germany was therefore of much greater concern to the British leadership. The second reason was that the German Empire, for all of its naval build-up in the late 19th early 20th century, was still very much a continental power and not a maritime power. It hence did not display the same behavioral patterns that Britain knew from itself and recognized in the US. Even before unification, the many kingdoms and principalities that made up the German-speaking territories have repeatedly shown an eagerness for war and wars of conquest specifically, as expected from a continental power, the most recent of which having been the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, which had served as the catalyst for German unification. Prussia, more than others, was infamous for its military tradition, some even remarking that "Prussia was not a country with an army, but an army with a country (Blackbourn, 2003 p. 17)."[4] It is easy to see why Britain looked at Germany's rise with worry considering Prussia's dominant position in the new German Empire.

[4] I was unfortunately unable to determine from whom this quote originated. Blackbourn attributes it to a government minister with the name of Friedrich von Schrötter. Other sources, however, provide a German

In the following I will illustrate how both of these reasons led to the different outcome in the power transition between the British and the German Empires. As it will become apparent, the tragedy that was the Great War does not contradict my theory but instead lies well within its explanatory power. First, the more obvious difference. The proximity between Britain and Germany is evidently much smaller than between Britain and the US. That is not to say that the North Sea offered no defensive value to Britain's safety. On the contrary, quite the opposite is true as Mearsheimer's (2001) data set shows that Britain is the only European great power to have never been invaded in modern times thanks to its status as an insular power. The stopping power had served Britain well and continues to do so until today. If anything, it is a testament to the reputation of the German Army and the speed of the German naval build-up that Britain genuinely feared the prospect of a German invasion. Nevertheless, the smaller distance and the better-charted waters between Britain and continental Europe did negatively affect the stopping power of water. Germany's close proximity reinforced Britain's belief that the German navy was clearly intended to either deter or fight the British navy. Furthermore, if Germany achieved dominance on the Continent, it would gain access to sufficient resources to undermine British naval supremacy, thereby threatening its existence by leaving it vulnerable to invasion (Allison, 2017). In 1902, the First Lord of the Admiralty, the Earl of Selborne, underlined this concern by stating his conviction that "the great new German navy is being carefully built up from the point of view of war with us (Allison, 2017)."

British concerns were only elevated as the German fleet had come closer to matching the British fleet in size by 1914 than either Russia or France had ever managed. This achievement, more so than potential economic power parity, sparked fear among British leadership as it made Germany a direct threat to the British home front, especially as it kept its "whole Fleet always concentrated within a few hours of England (First Sea Lord, Admiral John "Jacky" Fisher, as quoted by Allison, 2017)". Unsurprisingly, Anglo-German tensions increased considerably in response as an intense arms race was sparked (Allison, 2017; Claar & Ripsman, 2016). While amphibious assaults remained as hazardous as ever, the act of actually getting one's army from shore to shore appeared much more feasible, considering the width of the English Channel is at most only about 240 km. There is no question that it would be difficult, but the crossing of the English Channel can hardly be compared to the monumental task of transporting an entire army safely across the entire Atlantic Ocean into an active war zone. It is, after all, not just a question

version ("Die preußische Monarchie ist nicht ein Land, das eine Armee hat, sondern eine Armee, die ein Land hat") and claim it originates from the writer Georg Heinrich von Berenhorst (1978). I was unable to verify either.

of logistics; the fatigue of the soldiers being transported must also not be disregarded and would be much more extreme after crossing the "pond" as opposed to the Channel.

The closer proximity between the leading British Empire and the rising German Empire was undoubtedly one reason why the stopping power of water was overcome, and a war was fought. Especially as it was further weakened by the fact that Britain had secure beachheads on the shores of its western European ally France, was great powers in their own right. The location of the beachheads meant that Germany was unable to quickly reach the beachheads to deny them Britain. I would, however, argue that the stopping power was very effective in preventing at least German aggressions against Britain, as Germany did not have any secure beachhead on the British Isles. Therefore, it could not realistically plan an invasion, especially not while most of its armies were tied up in other conflicts and not after its naval build-up had failed in overtaking Britain, despite its immense financial and diplomatic cost (Allison, 2017). In short, the geographical component of the stopping power of water was significantly weakened and made British aggression during the power transition between Britain and Germany more favorable, which was one reason why a peaceful transition could not be achieved.

Aside from the geographical component, there is another reason why Britain decided against the same appeasement policy it employed in the case of the rising USA just a few years prior. This came in form of the nature of Germany as a great power. Despite of its new focus on building a powerful navy, Imperial Germany was not a maritime power. Therefore, it did not behave like one and did not profit from the peaceful perception that these powers generally enjoy. In Britain, the navy was central to its dominance, whether it was to secure colonies or to help protect and expand trade. On the other hand, Britain's armies were far less critical for its defense and economic expansion (Claar & Ripsman, 2016). The British policy focus was on maintaining open-door trade. In contrast, Germany, and Prussia in particular, had great pride in its formidable armies and was eager to use it and its navy for territorial expansion and colonial gains (Claar & Ripsman, 2016). Combined, the existence of a formidable German army and the prospect of a German naval force capable of rivaling Britain's own would have been a cause for great concern for many in London. This stood in contrast to the US army, which, while certainly well trained, was much smaller than the standing German army at the turn of the century (100.000 in 1901 (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020) vs. 605.000 in 1902 (Neugebauer & Ostertag, 1993 p. 212)). Thus, Washington's naval build-up was considered less of national security risk by London, especially since Britain believed that the purpose of the German navy would not only be the protection to German trade routes (Allsion, 2017). Even if German intentions towards its navy had been honestly non-hostile, certain voices among the British

leadership made it clear that intentions were irrelevant and only capabilities matter. Germany's vague policy of growth could shift at any time. Therefore, it was considered prudent for Britain to oppose Germany's naval expansion (Allsion, 2017).

This unwillingness of Britain to offer Germany the same benefit of the doubt it gave the US is a direct consequence of the geographic proximity, but also the fact that Germany did not behave like a maritime power, which was reflected in its foreign economic policy. Without the assurance that the inherently benign nature of maritime powers offered, Britain "could ill afford to trust German assurances" (Allsion, 2017 quoting Eyre Crowe, Britain's leading expert on Germany at the time) and was accordingly unwilling to risk further accommodation. Moreover, it might very well have been right not to do so. While Berlin's intentions for this reinforced North Sea fleet were indeed similar to that of maritime powers, with its emphasis on the protection of trade, it also served the purpose of facilitating continental expansion and, through increased tariffs, Germany's self-sufficiency (Lobell, 2001).

Additionally, unlike the US, whose foreign economic policy (Lobell, 2001) aligned with the British and thus promised minimal disruption of trade relations after the power transition, Germany's foreign trade policy was hardly compatible with British interest. Best described as a non-liberal contender, Germany intended to establish its own exclusive commercial arrangement in the regions it would come to dominate, disregarding previous open-door trading policies that might have been established there (Lobell, 2001). This incompatibility was, of course, a threat to Britain's open trading system, and its economy would have suffered greatly under an international order of Imperial German design. Especially since Germany, after a late start in the race for colonial holdings, intended for central Europe to serve as its exclusive sphere of influence instead. With the creation of an outwardly closed-off "Zollverein" (lit. customs union) under German leadership in "Mitteleuropa" (lit. central Europe), Berlin wanted to keep other great empires out of its sphere of influence, including Britain (Lobell, 2001). This policy was part of a wider "Weltpolitik" (lit. world policy), which also included the search for new and exclusive overseas colonies and markets as well as the aforementioned enlarged navy (Lobell, 2001).

Germany did not just differ from Britain in terms of foreign economic policy. They also had vastly different political systems. In stark contrast to the US and even Britain, Germany, during the turn of the century, was still a quasi-absolutist state, politically dominated aristocracy, albeit one moving towards parliamentary democracy. This social incompatibility certainly factored into their growing geopolitical rivalry (Kupchan, 2010). Ironically, this meant that Britain, even with the prevalence of its royal family, had much more in common with the liberal democratic

United States than with the German Empire, which was a fellow monarchy with close familial ties. All of these factors, and the potential economic loss and the threat of an invasion by the German army first and foremost, made it nearly impossible for Britain to accept the rise of Imperial Germany without contestation. Even if British leadership had been willing to concede the power transition to Germany as the dominant power in Europe, if not around the globe, without the narrative of a shared culture, of familiarity and continuity, it would have been immeasurably harder to sell this to the British public than it was with America's rise. Differing economic interests and approaches resulting from the differences between maritime Britain and continental Germany played just as much of a role in Britain's more aggressive stance towards Germany's rise as the threat of its armies. All in all, it is hardly surprising that when faced with two rising powers in the United States of America and the German Empires, Britain would choose to concede the leadership role to the country it believed to be less likely to abuse its newfound dominant to threaten Britain and its interests. The stopping power of water and the culture it fostered in seafaring nations was integral for Britain to estimate which of the two countries posed the more significant threat to Britain.

However, British opposition to the rise of Germany did not immediately escalate into the devastating Great War. The stopping power of water, even weakened by the factors mentioned above, and various alliances with the other European powers would have posed too much of an obstacle for either side to risk initiating an armed conflict against the other. It is doubtful whether any of the western European states would have allowed a hypothetical British aggressor to use their shores as a beachhead, as such an action would have surely dragged them into the conflict as well. Without secure beachheads on either side, the North Sea was able to forestall a British-German confrontation. In the end, the catalyst that allowed Britain to overcome the stopping power of water were not the geographic intricacies or the conflicting ideologies, both economic and political, but the fact that another, purely continental, power transition between Germany and Russia escalated into war first.

Without any meaningful bodies of water separating Germany and its ally, Austria-Hungary, from Russia, power transition ran its course. As predicted by the classic power transition theory (Organski & Kugler, 1980), Germany, which in this isolated transition was the dominant power, felt its status as the greatest land power in Europe threatened and, encouraged by the "cult of the offensive" that gripped most of Europe at the time, decided on preventive war in an effort to curtail Russia's rise (Allison, 2017). The generally fatalistic attitude about an eventual European war further encouraged Germany's aggressive attitude. Germany wanted to fight Russia while it still had a chance to decisively win (Allison, 2017). Berlin did so while being

well aware of the net of alliances that bound the fate of all major power in Europe to one another. Said alliances resulted in Germany being at war with both Russia and France, and after the invasion of the British ally Belgium by Germany, Britain had both the political justification and the beachheads in France to overcome the stopping power of water and join the war. The result was a war of unprecedented proportions that, because of the colonial holdings of many European powers, soon earned the title of a world war. And to make matters worse, the supposed advantage of the offense proved to be fatally misinformed, resulting in a terrible war of attrition on the western front in the form of trench warfare for which WWI would, unfortunately, become infamous for.

I believe it not to be an unlikely possibility that in a counterfactual world, where Archduke Ferdinand was not assassinated or perhaps where Russia's rise happened just a few decades later, that the stopping power of water might have allowed peace between Germany and Britain to prevail. Perhaps not in the vein of the Great Rapprochement between the US and Britain, as the ideological differences and national interests were too divergent, but maybe similar to how the oceans successfully stalled out open conflict during the Cold War until the Soviet Union collapsed by itself. Whether the British or the German Empire would have been the one to eventually prevail is something I will leave to experts in counterfactual history.

As it stood, the odds were stacked heavily against peace. Britain had few options to maintain peace without signaling weakness. It stood little to gain economically from a cooperation with Germany, in stark contrast to a cooperation with the US. Likewise, could it ill afford appeasement through territorial concessions as those would only enhance Germany's war-making capacity (Lobell, 2001). With its non-liberal economic outlook and hunger for continental expansion, Germany betrayed its true nature as a continental power, despite its self-proclaimed ambitions to find its future "on the waters" (Allison, 2017). Britain reacted by meeting Germany's naval challenge with its freed-up military resources from the American power transition and through increased naval construction of its own, forcing Germany to concede defeat in the naval race (Allison, 2017; Lobell, 2001). With only its geographical component mitigating the likelihood of conflict, the stopping power of water, for all its potency, could not facilitate a peaceful transition between Britain and Germany. Germany's nature as a continental power and the general volatility of the relationships between the continental powers of Europe were enough to overcome the inherent peacekeeping properties of the North Sea and the English Channel. The stopping power of water was, however, successful in once again protecting Britain from invasion.

As I have hopefully convincingly illustrated, the power transition between Germany and Britain was a fair bit more complex because of the involvement of the other European great powers. Allison (2017) believes that it was not Germany's economic growth that made a strategic rivalry between the two inevitable. Instead, so he claims, it was "the growth of the German navy and its geographic proximity to Britain [that] posed a unique existential threat." I disagree and believe that both equally contributed to the rising tensions. Nevertheless, without an external catalyst easing the crossing of the Channel, I do not believe that either country would have dared an attempt at overcoming the stopping power of water. In other words, without the circumstances that led to Germany declaring war on Russia and thereby inadvertently plunging the entire continent into war, a direct military confrontation between Germany and Britain would have been unlikely, thanks to the body of water separating them. So, while it is true that the stopping power of water was not able to prevent war between Germany and Britain during their power transition, I do not think that this event invalidates my theory. On the contrary, it proves just how potent it truly is. Even when unable to cooperate with the non-liberal and aggressively rising Germany without undermining its national security interests and thereby signaling its growing weakness (Allison, 2017; Lobell, 2001), Britain was unwilling to initiate a war until the outbreak of a continental conflict opened an avenue for safely transporting its troops onto the continent. Germany was equally reluctant to be the first to initiate hostilities against Britain because of the water separating them. But in combination with Germany's nature as a continental power, its incompatible foreign trade policy, its close proximity, and its desire for colonial gains, Paul's (2016) observation that the aggressive build-up of naval power might have tipped the balance against peaceful accommodation, might very well be accurate.

5.3 Summary

I believe that all of the cases I listed in this chapter, both in brief and in more detail, support my theory that the inherent stopping power of water is the deciding factor for whether power transition between great powers is likely to transpire peacefully. Both the logistical and military difficulties posed by bodies of water acting as geographical barriers and the societal and behavioral differences maritime powers exhibit compared to their continental brethren play a part in why the separation by oceans more often than not dissuade great powers from going to war with one another. The stopping power of water is particularly powerful in cases where both powers are maritime great powers with aligning foreign economic policies, do not have access to secure beachheads, and are located on different continents. However, even if only some of

these conditions are met, the stopping power of water nonetheless poses a formidable barrier dissuading conflict, if not always successfully.

6 Power transition between the US and China – What does the future hold?

Finally, I will return to the initial motivation behind my theory: Creating a universally applicable theory of power transition that allows me to make predictions on how likely wars will be in future power transitions. As I have previously shown, there is currently an ongoing power transition between the incumbent United States and the rising People's Republic of China. While I do not dare to offer a prediction on who will ultimately be the winner, I do believe my theory allows me to offer a prediction on the likelihood of whether this power transition will remain peaceful or will escalate into an open war in the future. Unfortunately, the Sino-American transition is far from a straightforward case. At first glance, it seems to be a pretty obvious case; China and the US are, after all, separated by not just any body of water. The Pacific Ocean is significantly larger than the Atlantic Ocean that facilitated the peaceful transition between the US and Britain. Surely with an Ocean as massive as the Pacific, peace is all but guaranteed? It is even in the name, the "peaceful ocean." Such an assumption would be a gross oversimplification of my theory and would blissfully ignore historical examples to the contrary, most notably the Pacific Theatre of WWII, and would misconstrue the name's etymological origin, which relates to the supposed calmer weather patterns.

It is certainly true that the Pacific Ocean is a formidable barrier for any hypothetical military aggression across it. Its sheer size makes large-scale conventional attacks almost impossible (Glaser, 2015). The weather is also by far not as peaceful as the name would suggest. The lack of proximity and the separation through an ocean certainly mitigates any fears of a potential invasion on both sides, as it limits the power-projection capabilities of land forces (Mearsheimer, 2001). Not only that, oceans and the military technology that controls them heavily favor the defender (Blagden, 2011), thereby making the prospect of being the aggressor highly unattractive. Historically, states have only been able and willing to disregard this defense bias, either when there has been a significant power disparity – as seen for instance, during Japan's conquest in the Asia Pacific region prior to America's entry into WW2 (Toft, 2005; Mearsheimer, 2001) – or alternatively, if the attacker has access to secure beachheads – as seen with Britain entry into WW1.

As China and the US are both considered great powers with formidable military might, the chances for a military confrontation are thus limited because there is a distinct lack of viable beachheads on either side. America's allies in Asia might be willing to act as safe harbors after crossing the ocean; in fact, both South Korea and Japan already have American naval bases on their territory, but none of them are located in a way that would allow the US to avoid an amphibious assault on China. Japan is an island nation, and South Korea is separated from

China by its nominal ally North Korea. It seems unlikely that the US would choose to fight its way across North Korea to avoid an amphibious assault. After all, the North Korean leadership is considered to be rather unpredictable, and there are suspicions it is in possession of nuclear weapons. China's other neighbors are hardly an option either. Russia most certainly will not allow US troops to land on their soil, while the jungles of China's Southeast Asian neighbors are only marginally more manageable to traverse than the ocean. Considering its own rivalry with China, India might be willing to host American forces. However, the presence of the Himalayan mountains makes India an unsuitable launching off point for any major military offensive as mountains are only slightly less difficult to traverse than oceans (Blagden, 2014). China is obviously in the same boat in this regard. The US only shares a land border with two other countries, one of which is fellow NATO member Canada and the other Mexico, which also maintains a mostly friendly relationship with the US. It is highly improbable that either of them would willingly offer secure beachheads for a Chinese invasion of the US.

Any potential war between the two powers will thus eventually have to include an amphibious assault onto the opposition territory if either side wishes to win decisively. Mearsheimer (2001) established that naval bombardment of blockades would hardly be enough to force an American capitulation. Nuclear deterrence is also just as effective in the Sino-American transition as during the Cold War, as the vast ocean separating the two countries makes the use of nuclear warheads even remotely viable without endangering their own territories. These international conditions lead some scholars to assume that a war between the US and China is highly unlikely, as both can protect their vital interests without posing too large of a threat to each other (Glaser, 2015; Mearsheimer, 2014). To put it simply, war is unlikely because it almost certainly not be an easy victory (van Evera, 2013). A peaceful outcome of the power transition would be in line with the geographical site of my theory. However, the stopping power of water does not solely draw its strength from its geographical component; it also has a notable cultural/behavioral component.

In that regard, there are some worrisome, if inevitably inexact, parallels between China's current rise and the rise of Imperial Germany. Like Germany before it, China feels that it had been repeatedly taken advantage of by the great powers when it was weak (Allison, 2017). This deep resentment towards the great powers is not precisely unwarranted if one considers the period of time now generally referred to as the "century of humiliation," which began with the First Opium War and the concession forced upon them by the British and culminated in the atrocities inflicted upon China by the Japanese during WWII. All of this fueled China's belief that it, like Imperial Germany, was a latecomer to modernization (Brunnermeier et al., 2018).

Because of its experience with humiliation and subjugation, some within China believe it to be in a unique position to remake the unjust status quo of the international order (Kaufmann, 2010), which informs the desires of China's leadership to establish its own sphere of influence in Asia, once again paralleling German intentions for central Europe before WWI. Unsurprisingly the incumbent powers, America and Britain respectively, observe such behavior with suspicion and have no intentions to accommodate any drastic shifts that would weaken their own position (Allison, 2017, Mearsheimer, 2001). The facts that China based its economic rise through state-directed economic and technology programs on Germany's approach during the turn of the 20th century and that China plans to leverage its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to mitigate its maritime inferiority similarly to Imperial Germany with its "Zollverein" only reinforces these concerns (Brunnermeier et al., 2018; Lobell, 2001).

Additionally, just like Imperial Germany before it, China has begun to build up its navy, even if not as rapidly and desperately as in the German case. It has, for instance, begun with the construction of its own aircraft carriers and has established a naval base in Djibouti in what some consider "only the first step in what is likely to become a network of Chinese bases across the Indian Ocean (Bloomberg, 2018)." However, that does not make it a maritime country. Traditionally China has always been a continental land power, as it feels the need to safeguard its borders from its fourteen neighboring states, some of whom have nuclear weapons and large armies themselves. This is only further amplified by the existence of interior border disputes and other internal security challenges, including terrorism, separatism, and extremism (Lobell, 2016).

Some might point to the fact that China is evidently not an insular state as the reason for its nature as a continental land power instead of a maritime power (Blagden, 2011). But as established previously, geographical characteristics do not predispose whether a state has a maritime or continental orientation. For instance, non-insular countries like the Netherlands were able to become maritime powers, while Japan decided against a maritime orientation for most of its history, even though its geography could not have been more optimal (Levy & Thompson, 2011). China made the conscious decision to be a continental power first and foremost. As a result, its relatively sudden naval build-up could only be interpreted as a clear military threat by the US as the dominant sea power, as China does not benefit from the benign perception of a maritime power. Beijing has also begun constructing artificial islands in the South China Sea to solidify its claims on 90% of the sea as its territorial waters, thereby potentially pushing the US out of a large part of the Asia Pacific region (Reuters, 2020), much to the ire of the other countries in the region. Some of which, like the Philippines, are US allies.

This further fuels Washington's worries for Beijing's intentions, as it has no interest in allowing the creation of a Chinese regional hegemony with its own sphere of influence as this would allow Beijing to undermine America's Command of the Commons (Mearsheimer, 2001; Lobell, 2016).

There has also been an unfortunate shift in foreign policy that has made war more likely. For the longest time after the Cold War, despite not being a maritime power in the traditional sense and despite relying on autocratic state-protected economic development domestically (Brunnermeier et al., 2018), China's foreign economic policy has aligned with America's own, and by extension with the liberal economic policy of the international order. In recent years this alignment no longer seems guaranteed. And curiously not because of any change on the side of China's foreign economic policy. It was actually the US under President Trump that drastically changed its foreign economic policy both in regard to China and in general. The resulting tensions are detrimental for the prospects of peace, as the danger of damaging its economy has been the most powerful deterrent against war for China (Mearsheimer, 2014). A change in America's foreign economic policy only diminishes the incentives for China to maintain a cordial relationship. US course correction from accommodation towards containment of China had undoubtedly already begun during the Obama administration with its "pivot to Asia" (Lieberthal, 2011) and the now-defunct Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

However, Washington's outright dismissal of the multilateral trade and the globalized world as no longer beneficial to the US only happened during Trump's time in office. He made his disdain for the globalized world apparent during his first address to the UN General Assembly, stating that "We reject the ideology of globalism and accept the doctrine of patriotism (Trump, 2018)." This disdain was not just limited to the economic dimension, as the Trump administration also reneged on several multilateral treaties and agreements, most notably Iran Nuclear Deal (Reuters, 2018) and the Paris Climate Agreement (Reuters, 2019b). The revival of American isolationism, which Krauthammer (1990) had warned against as a possible outcome of a post-Cold War world, had seemingly arrived. President Trump also openly antagonized both President Xi and China as a whole (Trump, 2018) and started a trade war with them, causing tensions to rise. By creating this conflict on the economic level, the Sino-American relationship further mirrors the tensions present in the power transition between Imperial Germany and Britain, who also had incompatible foreign economic policies.

However, after Trump failed to secure his reelection, it remains to be seen what course America will take under President Biden. Should he continue to follow Trump's course and reinforce the incompatibility of their respective foreign economic policies, the chances for a

military confrontation between the US and China will certainly increase just like it they did during the transition between Imperial Germany and Britain. At least in regard to the US's commitment to international multilateral trade and globalism, I consider it likely that Biden will return to a more cooperative foreign economic policy. President Biden has already shown himself much more inclined to international cooperation than his predecessor. For instance, under his leadership, the US has already rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement (2021). However, the days of American economic accommodation towards China specifically might well and truly be over. After decades of accommodating China by integrating it into the liberal international order, both economically as well as institutionally – even offering a tacit acceptance of China's brand of communism – America's, admittedly naïve, hopes of China liberalization never came true (Layne, 2020). Instead, Beijing has shown itself to be not just undemocratic, but as increasingly anti-democratic, as, among many others, the harsh measures it currently employs to suppress the democratic movement in SAR Hong Kong have shown (Harris, 2021; 2020). Under these circumstances, a repeat of the peaceful handover of the reins of the international order in the same way Britain had at the turn of the 20th century is not an option for Washington as the preservation of its liberal values cannot be guaranteed. "China's expansive definition of its maritime sphere of influence (Claar & Ripsmann, 2016 p. 172)" made sure of that and resulted in Washington's shift to containment.

In conclusion, I believe it is accurate to assert that a war between the US and China due to the ongoing power transition is unlikely, if not as unlikely as some like to claim. The geographical component of the stopping power of water will ensure that any military aggression by either side will be highly unattractive because of the difficulty of traversing an ocean and volatility of amphibious assault, especially as any hard-fought victory can turn pyrrhic at a moment's notice if the losing side resorts to nuclear weapons. Even if the Cold War has shown that most countries are incredibly reluctant to use nuclear weapons, this possibility of their use cannot be ignored, especially since during the Cold War, there was no war fought on the "home front" of either superpower. However, even if war is unlikely, without the help of the behavioral component of the stopping power of water offering reassurance of each other's intentions, it will be difficult to avoid the "commitment problem" (Yoder, 2019). Because of its nature as a rising state, China cannot credibly commit to any agreements made in the present, as it would be in its best interest to renegotiate them at a later date when it has grown more powerful and thus in a more favorable position. This would only further the mistrust of the US as a relatively speaking declining state (Yoder, 2019).

As a result, there will most certainly be a fierce security competition between the two powers that might transform the liberal international order into something like the one described by Mearsheimer (2019), and not too unlike the Cold War. Only the unbalanced multipolar system in Asia today has much more in common with pre-WWI Europe than Cold War-era Europe and thus is much more prone to war (Mearsheimer, 2014). There is reason to doubt whether the promise of mutual prosperity will keep Asia peaceful in the face of a rising China. In the end, states will prioritize political calculations over economic ones when their national security is endangered (Mearsheimer, 2014). If a war were to happen between the Asian powers, the US might decide to take a page out of the British playbook during WWI and join the war to ensure China's downfall. There are also numerous flash points that might force Washington into an open confrontation with Beijing. The invasion of Tawain or an escalation of the dispute over the South China Sea being the most likely candidates.

There are very worrisome parallels in both the behavior of China and its relationship to the US as the incumbent power to Imperial Germany's behavior and relationship to Britain over a hundred years ago. The stopping power of water has proven insufficient before, and politicians and scholars would be well advised to keep that in mind, to keep the chance of war at a minimum as the relations between the two countries worsen. The US has begun to shift the rivalry into an ideological dimension (Layne, 2020), and war remains a distinct possibility that should not be sought after but prepared for, as it is part of the tragic nature of great power politics.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, as I hopefully illustrated convincingly over the course of my thesis, the presence of oceans positively affects the prospect for peace during power transition between great powers. The military and logistical difficulties that the traversal of such a vast stretch of water poses are definitely important facets explaining the pacifying effects oceans have. But the better chances for peace that large bodies of water facilitate are certainly not limited to them acting as physical barriers; there have after all been numerous occasions where wars have been fought despite the participants being separated by oceans; there could hardly have been "World Wars" otherwise. Oceans also deeply shaped the nature of the countries adjacent to them in a way that makes war with other great powers a less attractive option for furthering one's own power. Both from a material perspective, as coastal and particularly insular powers, have a tendency to focus on economic prosperity through naval power, which is incidentally ill-suited for offensive wars of conquest, as well as from a cultural and behavioral, perhaps even ideological, perspective, as their mercantile focus put a bigger emphasis on economic alliances, open trade, and prosperity instead of territorial expansions. Maritime powers were, for these reasons, less likely to begin a war while simultaneously also less likely to be balanced against even as they rose to the top of the international order. They pose little threat to the national security of others while offering attractive benefits if allied with them. Maritime powers are even willing to peacefully pass the leadership of the global order to another power, as long as their own prosperity is secure.

However, no defense is impregnable, and unfortunately, the stopping power of water, too, can be overcome, as some of the examples above have shown. It is, for instance, less effective if the target is a less powerful state or if secure beachheads are available. Likewise, an ordinarily benign dominant maritime power might see itself forced into confrontation if it sees its economic order and prosperity threatened, although even in such cases, it is rarely the aggressor and waits for a suitable opportunity. All in all, my theory of the stopping power of water as the integral factor for peace is a universally applicable theory with impressive explanatory power. It was able to convincingly explain the differing outcomes of all of the listed power transitions of the 20th century. Applying it to the ongoing power transition between the United States and China offers important insight, as it illustrates both the facets of that particular relationship that point towards peace and war.

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