



# Countersurge: A Better Understanding of China's Rise and U.S. Policy Goals in East Asia

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*Abstract: Many experts raise concerns about the “rise of China” and the potential threat it presents to American interests. Indeed, the recent strategic pivot announced by U.S. leaders is designed to address these concerns. Yet what we are likely to see is not a rise of Chinese power, but a surge—a temporary situation of perhaps twenty to thirty years. Demographic, economic, and political factors will all combine to create a ceiling on Chinese power and ultimately cause it to decline. The United States needs to develop military capabilities that will prepare it for the coming strategic window, along with the economic and political initiatives that will enable it to influence events in the region.*

Many analysts argue that China will supplant the United States as the dominant world power, or at least soon emerge as a peer super-power competitor. The Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) expects that China will overtake America as the world's largest economy by 2016.<sup>1</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) forecasts that China may match expected U.S. defense spending by 2025 or 2030.<sup>2</sup> China's defense spending will match the rest of the major Asian nations combined

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<sup>1</sup> Malik Singleton, “OECD Report Says China's Economy Will Overtake U.S. Economy By 2016,” *International Business Times*, March 22, 2013, <http://www.ibtimes.com/oecd-report-says-chinas-economy-will-overtake-us-economy-2016-1146333>.

<sup>2</sup> Giri Rajendran, *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, March 19, 2013, <http://iissvoicesblog.wordpress.com/2013/03/19/chinese-us-defence-spending-projections>.

by 2016.<sup>3</sup> And it is not just opinion leaders and academics who believe China will overtake the United States. Recent global surveys suggest that most countries hold this view.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, in fact, what we are likely to see is not a “rise” of Chinese power, but a “surge”—a temporary situation of perhaps twenty to thirty years. Demographic, economic, and political factors will all combine to create a ceiling on Chinese power and ultimately cause it to decline. China’s population is aging and will soon start shrinking. Because of this, in part, its economic growth is slowing. Few countries have attempted to expand their military power under such conditions, and those that have—like the Soviet Union—generally failed, sometimes catastrophically.

Two to three decades is a big window for U.S. leaders to address, but viewing it as a window puts the situation into perspective. This perspective better defines the actions that are needed, and the available options. Several outcomes are possible, and the goal of the United States should be to create the most favorable conditions for sustaining American influence well into the twenty-first century and beyond. To do this, the United States must develop military capabilities that will prepare it for the coming strategic window, along with the economic and political initiatives that will enable it to influence events in the region.

### Getting Older and Smaller

While its “one child” policy has reduced China’s population growth successfully, the long-term unintended consequences are beginning to emerge. China is aging at an alarming rate. According to the 2010 census, nearly 14 percent of Chinese were over age 60, and one-in-ten were over 65. This trend will rise to 20 percent by 2030 and 25 percent by 2050. The median age in 2050 will be 49 in China, compared to 40 in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

Not only will China have more elderly people; it will have proportionately fewer young people to support them. In 2010, there were 116 million people aged 20 to 24; this will fall to 94 million by 2020 and 67 million by 2030. Over the next 20 years, the ratio of workers to retirees will drop from 5:1 to 2:1.<sup>6</sup> This means that China will get much older before it enjoys a developed economy capable of supporting an aging society. Other developing economies—even those with shrinking populations like South Korea and Japan—had already achieved a much higher standard of living by the time they started to age and slow. For example, per-capita purchasing power parity (PPP) income levels in Japan are nearly double those

<sup>3</sup> Raju Gopalakrishnan, “Fighters, radars, marine patrols top Asia’s military wish list,” *Reuters*, Feb. 16, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/16/asia-defence-idUSL4E8DF2M720120216>.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Kohut, “The World Says China Will Overtake America,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 14, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303678704576442400450218990.html>.

<sup>5</sup> “Demography: China’s Achilles’ Heel,” *The Economist*, April 21, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21553056>.

<sup>6</sup> Feng Wang, “Demographic Transition: Racing Towards the Precipice,” *China Economic Quarterly*, June 2013, pp. 17–21.

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