



Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts

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Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts by Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson. Cornell University Press, 2018, 263 pp.

As China rises, so does the number of books grappling with what that means. Enter Joshua Itzkowitz Shifrinson, an assistant professor of international relations at the Pardee School of Boston University, with the most recent scholarly contribution to the debate—*Rising Titans, Falling Giants*. But where much of the literature focuses on narrow slices of the puzzle, Shifrinson integrates multiple perspectives into a wide-angle view of great power politics.

The central issue of the work is how rising powers deal with declining powers. Although liberal theories tend to take an optimistic position and realist theories a pessimistic position, the historical record is varied. Why do rising powers sometimes undermine declining powers and other times buttress them? Shifrinson’s argument is that rising powers’ strategy (or what commonly goes by the name grand strategy) is a product of the declining state’s strategic value and military posture. First, a rising power determines whether a declining power has high or low strategic value, primarily based on whether the declining power would blunt the threat coming from other great powers. Next, the rising power assesses whether the declining state has a weak or robust military posture. Interacting these two factors yields four ideal type strategies: strengthening, bolstering, weakening, and relegating. At base, rising powers decide on geopolitical grounds whether they want to help or hurt declining powers and how energetically they want to do it.

Conceptually, Shifrinson defines decline by relative regional economic capability and has defensible quantitative cut points. This brings a number of advantages—it avoids being circular or parochial, and we can use the same yardsticks across the globe and across history. His concept of decline implies about a half dozen cases over the past century and a half, but Shifrinson zooms in on two in particular: US-Soviet treatment of Britain after World War Two and American responses to Soviet decline in the 1980s. These are tough cases for Shifrinson’s argument, have potent opposing arguments, and are the most politically relevant (because they are the most recent and the only ones involving nuclear powers). Using interviews, archives, and government data, Shifrinson traces these cases in fine detail. In addition, he spends time in

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the conclusion reviewing earlier cases, such as the decline of Austria-Hungary and France to check his theory's validity. The main rival views are those of theorists of the security dilemma, interdependence, and domestic ideology.

His key findings are that predation is not very frequent in great power politics and war is very infrequent. He finds that not only do outcomes correlate with the factors predation theory says they should, but the interviews and archives make plain that they correlate for the reasons predation theory gives. Quite accurately, he points out that rival theories are not baseless, only that predation theory explains more with less. The policy recommendations that flow from his analysis are to expect mild Chinese predation on the US position in the Pacific, but because of the US military edge in the region—which is unlikely to substantially erode for some time—that predation is unlikely to intensify. The real pivot of Asia, in this story, is Japan in decline, which will continue to be propped up by the United States and undercut by China.

The strong points of the book are manifold. Most obviously, the book takes theory seriously. Shiffrinon is meticulous in selecting quality building materials and making sure they fit together tightly. The author is head and shoulders above his peers in this department, and it makes life a lot easier for the reader. Rather than do violence to reality or muddle it, Shiffrinon makes manifest who is doing what to whom, why, and what to do about it. Further, his careful treatment of evidence illuminates things you think you know in new ways. For instance, he excavates shifts in Soviet grand strategy after 1945 from trying to woo Britain away from the United States to actively trying to sap British strength. He also shows how US grand strategy turned increasingly predatory on the Soviet Union as the 1980s wore on, in line with the predictions of his theory. These changes over time, shown in exquisite detail, help nail down causation and shed new light on history.

The weak points of the book are few. One is the occasional inconsistency. Shiffrinon treats states as rational unitary actors and assumes great powers will perceive shifts in world power in predictable ways, leading to predictable responses. Boldly stated, there is no genuine domestic politics in the theory, and that makes it parsimonious. Nonetheless, domestic politics sometimes creep in, for example, where he says that a declining state must be “politically available” (p. 27), which depends on domestic political support. Still, sand these edges off and the logic and evidence stand.

Another weak point is incongruousness. Like Charles Darwin or Adam Smith's theories, Shiffrinon's balance of power theory depends more on objective environmental shifts than subjective statements of the actors in the system. Interviews with dating couples would not invalidate *The Origin of Species* any more than interviews with the butcher, the brewer, or the baker would disconfirm *The Wealth of Nations*. So though Shiffrinon's quotes line up with his logic, that is not to say that they fit with it. Politicians not being known for their self-awareness or foreign policy acumen, it is impressive that they verbally confirmed predation theory as much as they did. Yet if the quotes had been different but the strategies the same, would the theory be less right? Shiffrinon's belt-and-suspenders solution is to track objective conditions and leaders' perceptions of them, which may be more rhetorically effective but has some tension and redundancy in it.

But these are quibbles. Shiffrinon asks a great question, collects the best explanations, tests them fairly against the best evidence, and follows the evidence to its logical conclusion. He says things that are new, true, and nontrivial and has produced a book that is both timely and timeless. Long may titans and giants read it.

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