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How Accurate Were Predictions of China's Rise?

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The rise of China is often depicted as one of the clearest, most predicted, and predictable realities in a century of international politics. Instead, China's rise has been gradual, widely foreseen, and not because of a conflict that transformed the world. Predictions and recommendations from academics and policy circles on China's rise matter because they transfer to popular discourse, albeit haphazardly. Therefore, understanding the predictions and recommendations and how they have changed over time is vital to explaining democratic responses to China's rise.

To empirically assess understandings of China's rise and how they have changed, we have coded a sample of four decades of academic and policy predictions. Through this, we produce empirical answers to three interrelated sets of questions: 1) How early and often was China's rise predicted? 2) What were the predicted factors that could enable or prevent China's rise? 3) Was China's rise seen as a threat or an opportunity to the status quo, the Washington Consensus, and a monopolar world dominated by the United States?

We assess whether predictions about China became more accurate as more information presented itself or whether perceptions and cognitive biases, including orientalist assumptions, have prevented accurate assessments. We focus on the repercussions of understanding China's rise in its ability to build and project soft power, especially in developing areas like sub-Saharan Africa. We argue that narrow and orientalist perceptions have led to inaccuracies and biases in viewing China's potential. These inaccuracies allowed China to slowly build its influence for decades when democracies could have non-confrontationally countered its efforts to build soft power.

Ultimately, we find that predictions of China's rise have more to do with different stakeholders' politics and current concerns, than the emerging reality of China's rise.