Considering China’s continuing rise as well as the United States’ growing instability on the global stage, I believe there is real potential for a China-US conflict in the future. For example, China’s growing market may be mutually beneficial in some ways, yet China’s growth intimidates the US. Also, although China is participating much more in international institutions, its goals as a representative of developing nations and its drive to start its own establishments like the AIIB threaten the US as the modern global leader. The conflicting ideologies of democratic and authoritarian rule have sewn a seed of distrust between the US and China; since neither is likely to change, this opens the door to misconceptions and miscommunications with one another. Although it can be challenging to predict the nature of international relations, it would not be too much of a shock if China and the US had a quarrel in the coming years.

Liberal optimists argue that the economic interdependence of China and the United States will inevitably lead to better relations and make conflict unlikely (Pessimists and Optimists Lecture). However, good economic relations are certainly not a cure-all for international tensions. For example, China also has booming trade relations with Japan, yet tensions between the two states still persist as a result of political missteps and a long and violent history of mutual ill will (Sino-Japanese Relations Lecture). Not to mention, although trade between the US and China is increasing, so is American resentment toward China’s prosperity. Realist pessimists argue that historically, when a nation experiences a rapid rise, it tends to challenge the established powers (Friedberg 19). Some estimates predict China’s economy to overtake the US
within a quarter of a century. If this is the case, I suspect the US will not go down without a fight and do everything in its power to maintain its status as the world’s economic giant.

Another assertion from the liberal optimists claims that China’s increased involvement with international institutions will promote increased communication and understanding across borders (Friedberg 14). While this may be a valid point, it does not take into account the United States’ dominance within these international institutions and its reluctance to share its leadership position with China. For example, when China invited numerous Western powers to join its AIIB, only the United States declined. The bank has been quite prosperous thus far, which has alienated and intimidated the United State (A Little on Other Economic Relations Lecture). In addition, China recognizes the Western dominance of the international institutions and seeks to give developing nations a bigger voice within these multilateral establishments (Environmental Cooperation Lecture). Since no established power takes well to losing its influence, the US is unlikely to share its leadership position without some struggle.

One of the liberal optimists’ key beliefs is that China will eventually democratize which will lead to a more stable relationship with the United States (Friedberg 16). However, there is more evidence to suggest China will remain an authoritarian regime for years to come. One of the main reasons liberal optimists suspect democracy is on the horizon for China is the nation’s increasingly open market. They argue that with such an open system, the people will demand a major change in the political order (Friedberg 16). Although, after Tiananmen, discussion of democracy in China nearly shut down. The Chinese middle and upper class are content with their economic freedom and seek to maintain the status quo and avoid political upheaval (The Tank Man). Therefore, with a growing middle class living comfortably in China’s open market, there is little demand for dramatic change in the political sphere. Since China most likely will
not democratize, the drastic difference of ideologies between the two nations will continue as a source of tension. While this in itself will probably not lead to a major conflict, it certainly hinders a stronger relationship between the two states.

2. Especially in the United States, we often receive inaccurate information about the People’s Republic of China and proceed to make unfair assumptions that do not reflect reality. Many see China as a “police state” and accuse China’s government as an oppressive body keeping its citizens under martial law. Convinced that China is a communist regime exactly like the Soviet Union, many also believe the party is a unified, untouchable body that dominates every facet of Chinese life. Upon closer examination of how China actually operates, we can see these notions are quite misguided, if not close to completely false.

One common myth about the modern People’s Republic of China is that the nation is suppressed by the police force. While it is true China’s system is authoritarian, that does not entail a martial law environment or Big Brother-like supervision. China maintains its order and stability through tactics such as soft repression and a dependence on self-censorship. Soft or relational repression is the strategy of restraining rebellion by manipulating the relationships between people involved in the protests and friends or family who are somehow connected to the party. The authorities use ultimatums through this connection to pressure the protestors into giving up their cause (State Repression Lecture). While this device could be perceived as devious or underhanded, it certainly is not a sign of a “police state.” While the government could easily send the forces into protests with riot gear and pepper spray, it opts for a much more quiet and sophisticated approach to weakening public dissent. Another factor that limits the need
for antagonistic police intervention is the “Uncertainty Solution” (State Repression Lecture). This simply means that Chinese citizens are often unsure of what is and is not permissible under the law, especially regarding press and censorship regulation. Since the lines are so blurry, the press prefers to err on the side of caution to the point where punitive measures are rarely necessary. Another component that fails to signify China as a police state is the incredibly low morale of their armed forces (State Repression Lecture). Due to administrative annoyances and lack of power compared to local politicians, the profession is not well respected among the public. As a result of China’s preference for soft over hard repression, the effectiveness of the Uncertainty solution, and the weary reluctance of the officers of the law, China can hardly be deemed a “police state.”

Another misguided belief is that China’s party-state is all powerful. While the party has extreme sway over upward advancement as well as heavy influence in the National People’s Congress, this in no way signifies the party as a monolithic entity that achieves its goals quickly and efficiently. In fact, many describe China’s system using the term, “Fragmented Authoritarianism” (The Party-State Lecture). The party is comprised of differing factions and interest groups, namely the Princelings and the China Youth League (Informal Politics Lecture). Since these groups often have conflicting goals, party decision-making slows down and there is often internal opposition to whatever the decisions may be. Another element of China’s fragmented authoritarianism is the condition that central policies must be implemented in line with the individual local environments (The Party State Lecture). The further away from the central government, the less power the party has. In Beijing, the party has far more pull in the daily lives of its citizens. However, the more remote you travel in China, the more powerful the local authorities and the less relevant the party. In conclusion, while it is true the party is
dominant respecting certain areas in the urban sphere, division within the party as well as declining authority relative to distance from Beijing prevents the party from becoming a unified, all powerful entity in China.