

**Rise of China:
The Debate and a Theoretical Analysis**

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Introduction

Political Scientist Michael Beckley writes, “the rise of China’ has been the most read-about news story of the twenty-first century.”¹ The debate over the rise of China has become a central topic in the study of international relations (IR). Will China rise peacefully? Scholars from three schools of IR theories give different answers. I argue that the China is prone to be a revisionist state, and that the rise of China will not be as peaceful as many optimists expected. My paper consists of two parts. In the first part, I will go over three IR theories’ responses to the rise of China. Then, I will discover why liberals, realists and constructivists offer different arguments. Analyzing the differences among three schools of IR theories yields one implication: Pessimistic constructivists and realists stand on the “pro” side of the debate. They agree that China tends to become a revisionist state. Optimistic constructivists and liberals stand on the “cons” side, and they argue that China may not pursue revisionist policies. Among these arguments, realist thesis and pessimist explanations convince me because Chinese policy makers identify China as a revisionist and regard the U.S. as the dominant-incumbent power. Also, history manifests China’s sphere of influence over East Asia region and history may repeat itself.

Defining terms and clarifications

Before I start my body paragraphs, I would like to define two terms. First, I adopt Robert Gilpin’s definition of revisionist state, “As its relative power increases, a rising state attempts to change the rules governing the international system, the division of the spheres of influence”.² In order to change the rules of the game, a revisionist is expected to be aggressive and demonstrate hostility to the ruling state. Second, two branches of realist theory, offensive realism and defensive realism should be specified. In this paper, when I say “realist”, I mean “offensive

¹ Michael Beckley, “China’s Century?: Why America’s Edge Will Endure,” *International Security* 36 (2011/12): 41, accessed October 24, 2014, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00066.

² Robert Gilpin, Chapter 5, “Hegemonic War and International Change,” in *War and Change in World Politics*, from *Conflict After the Cold War*, ed. Richard K. Betts, (Boston: Pearson, 2013), 94.

realist” in general.³ Also, this paper analyzes three schools of IR theories responses to the rise of China. The discussion of whether China has the capacity to be a revisionist or whether China is catching up with the U.S. is beyond the scope of this paper.

Three IR Schools of Thoughts on the Rise of China

Interdependence scholars, liberal institutionalists and democratic peace theorists reject the argument that China will be a revisionist state. Three branches of liberalism offer different reasons to validate their arguments. Interdependence theorists argue that the expansion of trade makes all countries involved better off. On the other hand, wars halt trade relations and thus harm the interests of all parties.⁴ In the case of China, interdependence theorists argue that China may not become revisionist power because the “in a conflict, Chinese maritime trade would stop entirely. The flow of oil would cease, and the Chinese economy would be paralyzed”.⁵

Democratic peace theorists’ assumption is that democratic countries rarely start wars against each other because “governments founded on a respect for individual liberty exercise ‘restraint’ and ‘peaceful intentions’ in their foreign policy.”⁶ Restraint suggests that “democracies are systems of dispersed power, and dispersed power means multiple veto points and groups that could block war”.⁷ Peaceful intentions mean that “democracies function through compromise, nonviolence, and respect for law”.⁸ Democratic peace theorists do not believe that China will be a revisionist country even though China is not a democracy. This is because optimistic

³ See Robert Jervis, “Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate,” *International Security* 24 (1999).

⁴ Robert Jervis, “Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace,” *American Political Science Review* 96 (2002): 5.

⁵ Although Brzezinski is realist, he is adopting liberal argument in this debate. Zbigniew Brzezinski and John J. Mearsheimer, “Clash of Titans,” *Foreign Policy* (January 5, 2005), accessed October 24, 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2005/01/05/clash_of_the_titans.

⁶ Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism* (New York/London: Norton, 1997), 205.

⁷ Robert Jervis, “Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace,” *American Political Science Review* 96 (2002):

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⁸ *Ibid* 4.

democratic theorists expect that China will democratize in near future.⁹ Also, American scholar Henry Rowen predicts that a democratic China will ease the Taiwan Strait tension because a democratic Taiwan may even reunite with a democratic China peacefully.¹⁰ Liberal institutions emphasize the role of international organizations and international laws. In essence, Robert Keohane believes that “institutions are essential for sustained cooperation that enhances the interests of most, if not all, people.”¹¹ In short, international institutions promote cooperation among states and benefit all members within the institutions. Liberal institutionalists argue that China may not pursue revisionist policies because China is now actively participating in various international organizations.¹² Enjoying the benefit from international institutions such as WTO, China may not choose to challenge the United States.

Realist thinkers, especially offensive realists, argue that China will be a revisionist power. Precisely, “China cannot rise peacefully”.¹³ Prominent realist scholar Robert Gilpin offers a rising state model to rationalize Mearsheimer’s statement.¹⁴ In Gilpin’s model, there are two major players, i.e. a declining dominant state, also called the incumbent state, and a rising state. “Due to the redistribution of power”, the incumbent state maintains its dominant position at an increasing cost while the “cost to the rising state of changing the system decrease.”¹⁵ One source of increasing cost comes from the fact that the dominant state provides international public goods and weaker states free-ride on these services.¹⁶ For example, peace provided by the U.S. and the

⁹ Yu Liu and Dingding Chen, “Why China Will Democratize,” *Washington Quarterly* 35 (2012): 41-63, accessed October 24, 2014, doi: 10.1080/0163660X.2012.641918.

¹⁰ I will offer an opposite expectation a democratizing China will reclaim Taiwan by force in my following section. Henry S. Rowen, “The Short March: China’s Road to Democracy,” *National Interest* 45 (1996): 69, accessed October 24, 2014, Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/218384055?accountid=10226>.

¹¹ Robert O. Keohane, “Twenty Years of Institutional Liberalism,” *International Relations* 26 (2012): 127, accessed October 24, 2014, doi: 10.1177/0047117812438451.

¹² Alastair I. Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?,” *International Security* 27 (2003): 21-22, accessed October 24, 2014, doi:10.1162/016228803321951081.

¹³ Zbigniew Brzezinski and John J. Mearsheimer, “Clash of Titans,” *Foreign Policy* (January 5, 2005), accessed October 24, 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2005/01/05/clash_of_the_titans.

¹⁴ Robert Gilpin, Chapter 5, “Hegemonic War and International Change,” in *War and Change in World Politics*, from *Conflict After the Cold War*, ed. Richard K. Betts, (Boston: Pearson, 2013), 94.

¹⁵ Ibid 94.

¹⁶ Michael Beckley, “China’s Century?: Why America’s Edge Will Endure,” *International Security* 36 (2011/12): 45, accessed October 24, 2014, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00066.

American-created trade regimes such as WTO are public goods. Because of the increasing cost of maintaining and internal decay¹⁷, the dominant power is declining. At the same time, the rising state seeks to topple the incumbent power by breaking the status quo. The rising state dares to challenge the incumbent because states are self-interested-power maximizer and there is no world government to regulate rising power's behavior. Today, China and the U.S. seem to fit into Gilpin's rising power model. The U.S. "remains mired in the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression" while China's economy grows at 9 percent annually".¹⁸ Realist predicts that China will challenge American military presence in East Asia and eventually dominate the region even though China may not threaten America's global-leadership.¹⁹ Recent South China dispute and the territorial dispute over *Senkaku* Island demonstrate that a rising China is becoming more assertive against its neighbors. Some China's neighbors such as Japan and Philippines are American allies. Therefore, realists believe that China is prone to become a challenger, i.e. a revisionist state.

Constructivists' views on the issue of the rise of China are ambiguous. Constructivists stress norms values and historical processes. The clash of values and ideologies creates conflicts while the convergence of norms facilitates cooperative behaviors. Some constructivists agree with liberal thesis that China may not become a revisionist. Optimistic constructivist Iain Johnston argues that it is premature to treat China as a revisionist power.²⁰ One of the reasons is that China is now adhering to international norms and values.²¹ Other Constructivists agree with the statement that China will become a revisionist state. Political scientist Samuel Huntington writes, "conflict between civilizations will be the latest phase in the evolution of conflict in the

¹⁷ For example: Domestic economic crisis

¹⁸ Michael Beckley, "China's Century?: Why America's Edge Will Endure," *International Security* 36 (2011/12): 41, accessed October 24, 2014, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00066.

¹⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski and John J. Mearsheimer, "Clash of Titans," *Foreign Policy* (January 5, 2005), accessed October 24, 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2005/01/05/clash_of_the_titans.

²⁰ Alastair I. Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?," *International Security* 27 (2003): 6, accessed October 24, 2014, doi:10.1162/016228803321951081.

²¹ Ibid 13-22.

modern world”.²² Based on Huntington’s illustration, China belongs to the Confucian camp while the U.S. is a member of western civilization.²³ Huntington also predicts that China is likely to form an anti-west coalition with Islamic countries such as Iran and Pakistan.²⁴ In the following section, I will substantiate the two branches of constructivist arguments and their connections to liberals and realists.

Liberals and Realists, especially offensive realist like Mearsheimer, offer strictly opposite views on the Rise of China. However, constructivists can either agree or disagree with the statement that China will be a revisionist state. Why is it so? Alexander Wendt did a precise and insightful analysis of the differences among three schools of IR theories. He begins, “the debate between ‘neorealists’ and ‘neoliberals’ has been based on a shared commitment to “rationalism”.²⁵ In realist and liberal paradigms, foreign policy decisions are expected to serve national interests in the first place. Despite this common ground, Wendt points out that “neorealists and neoliberals may disagree about the extent to which states are motivated by relative versus absolute gains”.²⁶ In short, liberal theorists stress the possibility of mutual gains while realists view the interactions among states as a zero-sum game, i.e. one’s gain must result in someone else’s losses. In the case of China, liberals argue that China does not have the incentive to challenge the U.S. because working with U.S. benefits China while realists contend that China will be better off if the American military presence declines in East Asia.

Rationalists, i.e. realists and liberals, take national interests as granted. However, “[Constructivists] share a concern with the basic ‘sociological’ issue bracketed by rationalists- namely, the issue of identity- and interest formation”.²⁷ Constructivists aim to discover how

²² Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs* 72 (1993): 22, accessed October 25, 2014, doi: 10.2307/20045621.

²³ Ibid 25.

²⁴ Ibid 45-48

²⁵ I admit that this argument might not be entirely true because Robert O. Keohane points about that moralism serves as an essential element of international institutions. Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46 (1992): 392, accessed October 25, 2014, doi: 10.2307/2706858.

²⁶ Ibid 392.

²⁷ Ibid 393.

national interests are shaped. For example, to answer the question, “whether China is a revisionist state or not?”, rationalists, as I stated in the previous paragraph, make their arguments based on “whether choosing to be a revisionist serves China’s interests or not”. However, constructivists aim to discover what China’s interest is and whether Chinese leaders see China as a revisionist and the U.S. as an incumbent state. Therefore, the research objective between rationalists and constructivists are different. This is why constructivists can either ally with liberals or agree with realists. Essentially, constructivists are not answering a “yes” or “no” question. They are answering “what” and “why” questions instead. Analyzing differences among three theoretical camps, we can clearly identify two sides of the debate on the rise of China. Pessimistic constructivists and realists form the pessimist synthesis that China is becoming a revisionist state. Optimistic constructivists and liberals form the optimist argument that China does not have a revisionist agenda.

Pessimists versus Optimists

After analyzing the differences among three schools of IR theories, I would like to present my position in the rise of China debate. I argue that China has a strong tendency to become a revisionist state because pessimistic constructivists cogently validate the realist rising power model. In another word, the pessimist synthesis convinces me when it applies to the issue of rising China. I offer two reasons to support my argument. First, China will be a revisionist power because Chinese policy makers and think tanks adopt the realist theory. They view the U.S. as a threat.²⁸ Second, China’s revisionist agenda is manifested by history because the Chinese empire once dominated the East Asia. This constructivist argument is also called the “Sino-centric image of Middle Kingdom impulses.”²⁹

²⁸ Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, “How China Sees America: The Sum of Beijing's Fears,” *Foreign Affairs* 91 (2012): 34-36.

²⁹ Alastair I. Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?,” *International Security* 27 (2003): 25-26, accessed October 24, 2014, doi:10.1162/016228803321951081.

China will be a revisionist state because Chinese elites embrace the realist theory of rising power. In the constructivist theoretical framework, “norms shape interests and interests shape actions.”³⁰ The realist Chinese analysts may advise Chinese leaders to pursue a revisionist policy. Andrew Nathan conducted research on how Chinese foreign policy makers perceive the U.S.. Based on his work, Chinese analysts believe that the U.S. is now containing China.³¹ In order to contain China, the U.S. has signed bilateral defense treaties with its traditional allies such as Japan, Philippines and South Korea. Also, the United States seeks to extend its military cooperation with other partners.³² Economically, “U.S. legislators have proposed sanctioning China for artificially keeping the value of the yuan low to the benefit of Chinese exporters”. Ideologically, the United States keeps pressing China on the issue of human rights.³³ Constructivists stress the role of identities.³⁴ We can see that Chinese strategists identify the U.S. as the dominant-incumbent hegemon which tries to limit the power of a rising China. On the other hand, Chinese scholar Shi Yinhong argues that China demands the “redistribution of formal influence within global financial and security institutions”.³⁵ For professor Shi, China should challenge the American-led world order. At this point, Chinese scholars regard China as a revisionist power. Furthermore, Professor Nathan discovers that “the most influential body of international relations theory in China is so-called offensive realism”.³⁶ The policy makers in China are now adopting the realist approach. They try to fit China and the U.S. into Gilpin’s rising power model. Because those who make Chinese foreign policies think that China is

³⁰ Martha Finnemore, “Constructing Norms of Humanitarian Intervention,” in *Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 158.

³¹ Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, “How China Sees America: The Sum of Beijing’s Fears,” *Foreign Affairs* 91 (2012): 33-36.

³² Nathan did not clarify which partner is. However, I suspect that these partners might be America’s non-traditional allies such as Vietnam and India because both countries have territorial disputes with China.

³³ Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, “How China Sees America: The Sum of Beijing’s Fears,” *Foreign Affairs* 91 (2012): 35-36.

³⁴ Jack Snyder, “One World, Rival Theories,” *Foreign Policy* 145 (2004): 57.

³⁵ Mark Leonard, “Why Convergence Breeds Conflict,” *Foreign Affairs* 92 (2013), accessed October 28, 2014.

³⁶ Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, “How China Sees America: The Sum of Beijing’s Fears,” *Foreign Affairs* 91 (2012): 34.

prepared to be a revisionist state, it is highly possible that China may pursue revisionist policies in the future.

Mearsheimer believes that “China is likely to try to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere”.³⁷ For Mearsheimer, China is mimicking the U.S.. However, I would like to offer a different explanation for China’s ambition. I believe that China aims to dominate the East Asian region because the Chinese empire had ruled East Asia for a long time. In his article, “The Lonely Superpower”, Huntington argues that “for several centuries the classical world under Rome, and at times East Asia under China, approximated” the unipolar model.³⁸ Unipolar model in this case suggests that Chinese empire was the only superpower in East Asia and Ancient Rome dominated the West. In addition, when we refer to Huntington’s map of civilizations, we can see that the Confucian civilization includes mainland China, Taiwan, two Koreas and Vietnam.³⁹ In my opinion, the Confucian bloc is historically shaped because Taiwan was part of China. Korea and Vietnam were China’s vassal states. At this point, I am not arguing that China will dominate all states within the Confucian civilization. However, it is highly possible that the People Republic of China (PRC) will reclaim Taiwan when China has the military and economic capacity to do so.⁴⁰ In the case of rising China, realists may argue that China will be a revisionist because China is a power maximizer. Pessimistic constructivists synthesize realist argument. They propose that China had maximized its power in history. We cannot deny that history may repeat itself. This cycle view of history is also shared by realists.⁴¹

³⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski and John J. Mearsheimer, “Clash of Titans,” *Foreign Policy* (January 5, 2005), accessed October 24, 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2005/01/05/clash_of_the_titans.

³⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Lonely Superpower,” *Foreign Affairs* 78 (1999): 35, accessed October 24, 2014, doi: 10.2307/20049207.

³⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 23-24.

⁴⁰ Zbigniew Brzezinski and John J. Mearsheimer, “Clash of Titans,” *Foreign Policy* (January 5, 2005), accessed October 24, 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2005/01/05/clash_of_the_titans.

⁴¹ Michael Beckley, “China’s Century?: Why America’s Edge Will Endure,” *International Security* 36 (2011/12): 44, accessed October 24, 2014, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00066.

Pessimist synthesis convinces me. However, Martha Finnemore argues that norms and values change over time.⁴² In addition, Wendt points out that “interaction among states in a world with new communications technology, nuclear weapons, externalities from industrial development, and so on”.⁴³ Based on these two assumptions, optimistic constructivists may ally with the liberal camp in order to provide two alternative explanations for the rise of China. They may criticize pessimists by pointing out that not all Chinese elites are anti-American realists and history does not repeat itself. One explanation is related to the possible democratization in China and the other is concerned with China’s participation in international institutions. First, optimistic constructivists and democratic peace theorists may together argue that some Chinese leaders may embrace the liberal values and try to start political reform in China. They may ask me, “what if China becomes a democracy?” Also, if China becomes democratic, it may not seek to challenge the American-led liberal order because democracies do not fight each other. Liberal scholars Liu Yu and Chen Dingding show that “China is moving closer to vindicating classical modernization theory, which states that economic development eventually leads to democratization.”⁴⁴ In addition, by analyzing the factional politics within the Chinese Communist Party, Liu and Chen expect that “certain political liberalization measures will be taken, and the more liberal leaders will seek support from civil society to balance the more conservative leaders.”⁴⁵ For Liu and Chen, China’s democratization is on its way and political elites have certain incentive to liberalize Chinese politics. Second, as I mentioned in the previous paragraph, liberals contend that China’s integration in international institutions will make China less aggressive. Also, optimistic constructivists may propose that through dialogues with people from other countries, Chinese leaders as well as Chinese people may gradually accept western-liberal norms such as “free trade”, “nonproliferation” and “arms control”. Therefore, China will

⁴² Martha Finnemore, “Constructing Norms of Humanitarian Intervention,” in *Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 156-159.

⁴³ Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46 (1992): 416, accessed October 25, 2014, doi: 10.2307/2706858.

⁴⁴ Yu Liu and Dingding Chen, “Why China Will Democratize,” *Washington Quarterly* 35 (2012): 41, accessed October 24, 2014, doi: 10.1080/0163660X.2012.641918.

⁴⁵ *Ibid* 54.

pursue peaceful and cooperative foreign policies. Professor Iain Johnston's research on Chinese foreign policy supports two arguments stated above. First, China's participation rate in international institutions is much higher than the world average. Second, statistical evidences show that "on a number of international normative questions, China appears to be conforming more with an extant international community, such as it is, than it has in the past".⁴⁶ This demonstrates that China welcomes certain international norms, and that China is showing its compliance with rules of international institutions to some extent.

I would like to offer my responses to these alternative arguments. First, optimist theorists assume that democracies do not wage wars against each other. However, realist scholars such as Jack Snyder attack democratic peace assumption. "Countries transitioning to democracy, with weak political institutions, are more likely than other states to get into international and civil wars" because "nationalist politicians can hijack public debate".⁴⁷ In my point of view, China may be more likely to reclaim Taiwan by force and militarily confront Japan, Philippines or Vietnam during the early stage of democratization. Nationalist politicians may remind Chinese people historical humiliation and even adopt anti-western rhetoric in order to win more support. Contemporary China witnesses the surge of nationalism.⁴⁸ Because of the upsurging Chinese nationalism, we cannot deny the possibility that Chinese people may "vote to war against" its neighbors during the early period of democratization. In response to the optimist synthesis, I would like to adopt Mark Leonard's argument that interactions and convergence between China and the U.S. actually drives two countries apart.⁴⁹ Optimistic constructivists and liberal institutionalists assume that the dialogues between China and western countries and China's integration into international institutions will make China "more western", i.e. China will embrace western ideologies and become less anti-western. However, I believe that a more-

⁴⁶ Alastair I. Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?," *International Security* 27 (2003): 21-22, accessed October 24, 2014, doi:10.1162/016228803321951081.

⁴⁷ Jack Snyder, "One World, Rival Theories," *Foreign Policy* 145 (2004): 57.

⁴⁸ Mark Leonard, "Why Convergence Breeds Conflict," *Foreign Affairs* 92 (2013): 131-132, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/docview/1428163599?accountid=10226>.

⁴⁹ Ibid 125.

westernized China may not necessarily become friendlier to the west. For example, Chinese leaders may learn the liberal institutionalist thesis that international institutions facilitate cooperation among countries. Inspired by this argument, Chinese policy makers may also begin to build up their own regional-multilateral institutions to counter the influence of American-led liberal institutions. One empirical evidence lies in the fact that “China has set up security institutions of its own, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which aims to counter Western influence in Central Asia”.⁵⁰ At this point, realist thinkers may argue that China is merely allying with Russia and Central Asian states to balance against western countries because realists assume that international institutions reflect the balance of power.

Conclusion

China will be a revisionist state. The rise of China implies more friction, disputes and conflicts between China and American allies. Optimists may point out that I fall into the trap of essentialism, the belief that norms, culture and ideas never changed. They would cite the recent Obama-Xi’s handshake deal on greenhouse gas cut to show that China is willing to accept the western-liberal norm of international cooperation. However, adopting some western values does not guarantee that the rise of China will be peaceful. Borrowing the western norms of international institutions and multinational cooperation, China is able to build its own regional bloc. Moreover, even a possible wave of democratization in China, signifying the acceptance of western political values, might make China more aggressive to its neighbors than before.

⁵⁰ Ibid 135.

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