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‘One Belt, One Road’: Sign of a Revisionist or Integrative China?

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Is China gunning to become the next global hegemon? Will its ascent be a peaceful one or will it come at the expense of its Asian neighbours? And what does that mean for Sino-US ties, especially in the context of the latter's prevailing influence in the region? These are just some of the questions that international relations scholars have attempted to answer in the last two decades since Deng Xiaoping proclaimed a bold Chinese foreign policy aimed at revolutionising its development in the region. This legacy took a giant leap in 2013 when President Xi Jinping announced that China would embark on the ambitious Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road initiative, henceforth referred to as 'One Belt, One Road', or OBOR for short. This long-term vision is aimed at connecting the Eurasian continent by way of an integrated land and sea trade network that stretches from East Asia to Western Europe (Campbell, 2017). OBOR can be considered a culmination of China's steady rise in recent years, with President Xi's announcement prompting fiercer debate as to the country's aspirations in the region. Existing research implies that OBOR is the clearest indication yet of China's revisionist tendencies, and that it will look to challenge the US' influence (Cai, 2017; Chi, 2015; Ghiasy and Zhou, 2017). Meanwhile, others suggest that China merely wishes to integrate itself economically into the global status quo (Summers, 2016; Djankov and Miner, 2016). This paper therefore aims to predict China's future regional strategy by analysing the security motives behind OBOR.

Firstly, this paper will introduce two competing theories of international relations that can possibly be applied to China's ascension. It will discuss the offensive realist model first prescribed by John Mearsheimer, which argues that China's continued growth in Asia will place it in direct security competition with the US and increase the probability of war between the two great powers (Mearsheimer, 2014, p.360-411). This theory will be pitted against a neoliberalist understanding of China's rise, particularly its 'new security approach' that seeks to preserve its interests via economic interdependence and common goals (Zhang and Tang, 2005). Next, the essay will touch on OBOR's primary objectives and how they are a realisation of the broader 'China dream' following its 'century of humiliation'. It will then analyse the security motives of OBOR based on the existing blueprint and make a case that these are largely realist in nature. Finally, it will conclude by suggesting that China should be viewed as a revisionist power in the long term. The paper will focus predominantly on assessing OBOR through a traditional security lens, and not attempt to dissect the wider implications or feasibility of such a grand-scale ambition, of which many commentators have expressed doubts.

An Unpeaceful Rise?

Neorealist scholars like Mearsheimer (2014, p.362) have long believed that China's increasing power will inevitably set it on a warpath with the US, while its regional neighbours such as Japan, South Korea, and Russia will balance against it by joining a US-led coalition to contain its rise. He suggests a sub-branch of realism known as 'offensive realism' to describe this scenario, arguing that the anarchic global order forces states to behave aggressively towards each other in order to preserve their own security (p.3). In the context of China, he posits that it will in the long-term try to control Asia the same way the US has controlled the West, and this would lead to a face-off as both powers try to prevent the other from acquiring more power at its expense (p.361). Glaser (2011) explains this security dilemma by suggesting that China will ultimately be forced into competition with the US even if it does have benign intentions, as Washington will likely react to Beijing's economic growth with assertive measures of its own and thus

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initiate a vicious cycle that magnifies each side's suspicions of the other.

Similarly, realists also point towards China's military postures in the recent past to further justify their argument that it is taking an offensive approach to regional security. For one, it has embarked unilaterally on a military modernisation programme aimed at cementing its status as a rising power (Shambaugh, 2005, p.38). This has naturally raised concerns among its neighbours, who appear to be taking 'hedging strategies' of their own (p.41), inadvertently complicating the security dynamics in the region even further. In Southeast Asia, that threat is exacerbated by China's increasingly hard-line approach to the maritime disputes in the South China Sea (Swaine, 2005; Glaser, 2011), where it has undertaken military operations deemed unlawful by a United Nations-backed tribunal; a decision Beijing has vehemently rejected (Phillips, Holmes, and Bowcott, 2016).

It must also be noted that China ultimately intends to serve its own national interests, especially that of the Communist Party of China (CCP), which help reinforce the realist viewpoint. In 2009, a Chinese foreign official reminded his American counterparts at an economic dialogue that China's core interests lay in preserving the power of CCP, national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and economic stability (cited in Yahuda, 2011, p.301). Yahuda interpreted this as an official narrative from Beijing that still pinned the blame on US and the West for stifling China's rightful ascent (p.302). Furthermore, Chinese leaders have on numerous occasions expressed misgivings about the US alliance system in East Asia (Gill, 2005, p.262). Its 'new security concept' therefore constitutes a direct alternative to the American security model in the region (p.261). From a realist standpoint at least, this suggests that China is indeed prepared to challenge the US for long-term regional control.

The 'New Security Concept'

It can be argued that Mearsheimer's offensive realist position is rather pessimistic about China's intentions in the region. He predicts a worst-case scenario of war that appears to have far-fetched implications. Instead, there is evidence to suggest China's rise can be a peaceful one as its actions largely signify an attempt to integrate into the status quo through increased economic cooperation with its neighbours. After all, an assertive and militarily ambitious China will only risk jeopardising its economic expansion, especially if two important stakeholders – the US and Japan – react negatively (Goldstein, 2008, p.82). Therefore, it is argued that China has opted for an approach more resonant with the neoliberalist belief, by turning itself into a 'market for regional states and a provider of investment and technology for the region' (Zhang and Tang, 2005, p.51). This approach is enshrined in the vision of the 'new security concept' introduced by President Jiang Zemin in 1997, based on the idea that peaceful coexistence and regional stability can be achieved through mutually beneficial economic interactions (Sutter, 2005; Gill, 2005).

China's peaceful rise, as argued by Yahuda (2011), is very much dependent on whether it could pursue its national interests in coordination with other regional players and not at their expense. Beijing has seemingly leaned towards the former, though it has also cleverly allayed concerns among neighbours of its increasing military might. It has done so by actively engaging in bilateral and multi-lateral initiatives, such as the Asean Regional Forum (ARF), security dialogues with countries like Japan and India, two-way military exchanges, and the publication of defense white papers at the behest of its neighbours (Shambaugh, 2005, pp.39-41). Additionally, it has also undertaken active roles in international institutions such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Greater Chinese involvement in these institutions reduces the likelihood of conflict in power transition, and provides the ideal platform for peaceful integration into the status quo (Ikenberry, 2008). One such example of successful integration was the relationship between ASEAN and China that evolved from one of hostility in the 1960s to a strategic partnership that has been preserved via the annual East Asia Summit (Qin and Wei, 2008, p.130). Therefore, China's increasingly open posture towards its neighbours coupled with the desire to reform its own economy reinforces the apparent shift towards a neoliberalist approach. However, as Wu (2010) contends, this is not neoliberalism in its traditional sense. Instead, he states that the Chinese model 'consists of two seemingly contradictory yet complementary elements: a market mechanism and strong state control' (p.628). This selective neoliberalist model has arguably allowed China to achieve marked progress in its foreign engagements in recent years, serving as an impetus for its greatest ambition yet – the Belt and Road initiative.

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OBOR: The ‘China dream’

OBOR is largely viewed as Chinese president Xi Jinping’s landmark foreign policy initiative. It was first announced during a state visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013, where as reported by Wu and Zhang (2013), he proposed the Silk Road Economic Belt (the ‘Belt’) that would essentially link China with Central Asia, Russia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and the European Baltic states. Then at the APEC summit and East Asia Summit in Indonesia the following month, Xi broached the idea of building a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (the ‘Road’) that would go ‘from China’s coast to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean in one route, and from China’s coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific in the other’ (Summers, 2016, p.1630). The Belt portion involves the construction of high-speed railways, roads, and gas pipelines along the Eurasian continent, while the Road refers to an extensive sea network that will link prominent coastal cities in the region stretching to the African continent through the construction of shipping ports and maritime facilities (Chi, 2015). If fully realised, OBOR will benefit at least 65 countries (accounting for 60% of the global population) and cost upwards of US\$4 trillion once all the planned projects are financed (Djankov, 2016, p.6). For Beijing, this would ultimately translate into massive economic leverage in the region and beyond.

At the crux of it, OBOR is China’s visionary attempt to relive the glory days of its early civilisations. The term ‘Silk Road’ in this context directly refers to the intricate land and sea networks between the ancient Chinese dynasties and the world, which made China a formidable economy of its time (Djankov and Miner, 2016). As has been well-documented, the first Opium War in 1839 subsequently brought about a ‘century of humiliation’ characterised by Western imperialism and Japanese oppression that is still a source of despair for the Chinese people. Nonetheless, a positive takeaway is that it ultimately spurred China towards the modernisation path, firstly through the socialist revolution in 1949 under Mao Zedong and secondly, Deng Xiaoping’s market reform in 1979 (Wu, 2010, p.623). Consequently, OBOR is the next chapter of China’s ongoing revolution, and one that President Xi intends to leave as a legacy. In his own words at this year’s National Congress of the CCP:

China adheres to the fundamental national policy of opening up and pursues development with its doors open wide. China will actively promote international cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative. In doing so, we hope to achieve policy, infrastructure, trade, financial, and people-to-people connectivity and thus build a new platform for international cooperation to create new drivers of shared development. (Xi, 2017).

According to Xi, OBOR would signal an end to the old way of doing things. As quoted in Cai and Lau (2017), he said ‘We will not follow the old way of geopolitical games during the push for the Belt and Road Initiative, but create a new model of win-win and cooperation’. The CCP secretary-general’s words resonate with the ‘China dream’ that has taken root in the last decade. It is based on a nationalistic ideal of a collectively successful and modern Chinese society, and has evolved into a political ideology by the CCP to depict themselves as the deliverers of that success (Ferdinand, 2016). As Ferdinand also notes, the dream stems from China’s increasing confidence in its recent economic achievements (p.948). OBOR is therefore a manifestation of this dream and the desire to return China to its rightful place in the world. It is in this vein that the underlying security motives of OBOR – whether actual or perceived – need to be studied.

OBOR: Chinese Hegemony?

Contrary to the collectivist narrative being touted by the CCP leadership about OBOR’s aspirations, there are strong suggestions that it is a Chinese attempt at establishing regional hegemony. Firstly, commentators argue that OBOR was conceived as a counterweight against the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal and the Obama administration’s ‘pivot to Asia’ (Cai, 2017; Ferdinand, 2016; Chi, 2015;). Now that the US under President Donald Trump have pulled out of the TPP, OBOR has assumed a newfound significance and even a sense of urgency, given that China’s rivals Japan (a US ally) are leading negotiations between the 11 remaining TPP members (Gramer, 2017). Apart from containing US influence, China also seeks to utilise OBOR to compete directly with its American counterparts for valuable oil and energy resources in the Middle East. Presently, 80% of China’s oil imports passes through the US-monitored Straits of Malacca, and is susceptible to a blockade if conflict erupts between the two powers (Campbell, 2017). Under OBOR, however, the construction of new pipelines in Central Asia, Southeast Asia

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and Pakistan – especially the utility of the strategic port of Gwadar in the Belt's southern corridor – offers a new transit point that will negate the need for China's oil supply to go through Southeast Asia (Cai, 2017, p.4; Ghiasy and Zhou, 2017, p.7). This objective supports Mearsheimer's realist prediction that intense security competition between Beijing and Washington would be triggered by their respective obsessions with oil from the Persian Gulf (Mearsheimer, 2014, p.379). OBOR can therefore be considered an assertive measure by China to further secure this vital interest.

Secondly, and much closer to home, OBOR is China's means of containing a fellow emerging power in the form of India. India has major reservations about OBOR, primarily because the proposed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is a key project of the 'Belt', involves the construction of infrastructure that runs through the disputed territory of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan-administered Kashmir (Shah, 2017). As Shah notes, India's wariness stems from increasingly friendly relations between China and Pakistan and their cooperation on CPEC, which it believes undermines its protracted hostilities with Pakistan over Kashmir. China continues to maintain its neutrality on the issue and has upheld a policy of non-interference and respect for each nation's choice in relation to their involvement in OBOR. However, Summers (2016, p.1637) offers scepticism of the non-intervention policy, suggesting that it is merely the CCP's way of politically justifying a capitalist endeavour like OBOR. Furthermore, CPEC would function as leverage for China in its growing competition with India to become the dominant force in Asia (Ghiasy and Zhou, 2017, p.28). There continues to be apprehension about OBOR's geopolitical objectives from other countries such as South Korea, Russia, and the ASEAN members. But perhaps another neighbour that China will specifically look to suppress – largely because of its significance to the US – is Japan. In his compilation of Chinese commentary on OBOR, Swaine (2015) notes some surprisingly honest views from non-authoritative sources, who suggest that among others, OBOR is a response to Japan's rapid progress towards remilitarisation. This suggests OBOR has been employed as a pre-emptive but offensive economic strategy to balance against any future military threat from China's Eastern neighbours.

Thirdly, it can be argued that OBOR is also a form of security collaboration that aims to deflect or mute opposition towards China's own growing military strength and its unilateral military activities in the region. Long before OBOR was proposed, China's security strategy in the region was characterised by three overarching objectives: 1) deflect US attention towards its political-military ambitions; 2) curtail countervailing strategies that could affect its long-term military rise; and 3) prevent any attempt to halt its economic, military, and political development (Pollack, 2005, p.330). By committing its neighbours to mutually beneficial trade deals, China is set to acquire greater domestic political and economic influence – which in turn will translate into greater military strength (Chi, 2015). China will likely exhibit this newfound strength by attempting to negotiate swifter resolutions to outstanding territorial disputes in its favour, such as the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. It could achieve this by facilitating greater economic integration with fellow claimants Philippines and Vietnam in exchange for more unyielding demands over the contested waters. Despite trumpeting openness and inclusivity in its foreign policy approach, China has continued to demonstrate fearlessness in being more aggressive towards its rivals. As Chinese academic Shi Yinong suggests, Beijing's foreign policy is increasingly 'triumphalist', while its military emphasises the need to 'win victoriously' instead of merely modernising its troops (cited in Ferdinand, 2016, p.949). Shi also notes that this hard-line stance is popular among the Chinese masses, a fact that President Xi's administration is poised to take advantage of.

Lastly, OBOR will likely spark progress in economically backward areas of the region, not to mention in some of the underdeveloped provinces within China itself, such as Xinjiang. Once the CPEC project is completed, the city of Kashgar in Xinjiang will be connected directly to the Port of Gwadar in Pakistan, creating greater economic opportunities that will help alleviate poverty in the Chinese province (Cai, 2017, p.7). Similarly, the 'Belt' will traverse through countries like Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, which have less of an economic foothold in the region and are therefore likely to benefit the most from OBOR. On the surface, this would appear to support Xi's win-win model. However, upon closer scrutiny, it can be viewed as an implicit strategy by China to establish 'soft power' over the region. According to Ghiasy and Zhou (2017, p.11), some states should be concerned about overreliance on China as they would require Beijing to help fund larger infrastructure projects under OBOR. The pair argue that this would extend further leverage to China and ultimately allow it to exert political and economic control over those states, despite Beijing's assurances that it would not practice any kind of veto power in implementing OBOR. There are additional concerns that projects funded by China or its companies will be designed to prioritise its needs rather

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than benefit its neighbours equally (Truman, 2016, p.17). Again, this is synonymous with offensive realist behavior, only that China has opted for an economically (rather than militarily) aggressive route towards preserving its national interests.

Conclusion

If there were any lingering arguments that China's integration into the global order would be benign, these appear to have been written off by OBOR. It is only possible to view the security motivations of this initiative from a realist lens, as failing to do so would not only constitute misplaced idealism, but also grossly underestimate China's growing authority in power relations in the region. Specifically, this essay has argued that OBOR serves as a revisionist strategy for China to reel in its Asian rivals and counterparts into an economic collaboration which, despite many obvious benefits to overall growth and stability, will inherently propel it towards becoming the preeminent power in the region. Hence, this paper supports Mearsheimer's argument that China will eventually become embroiled in a security dilemma with the US. However, it disagrees with his more pessimistic prediction of war between the two powers. Instead, it suggests that the competition between the two powers can be characterised by periods of political and economic cooperation, and that other players in the region will play a balancing role to maintain relative peace. It should be stressed that this analysis is based on prevailing information about the scope of OBOR, which remains rather vague. As the objectives become more tangible, the pendulum of perception towards China's motives may swing towards further wariness, or perhaps even trustworthiness.

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