

The Rise of China

Written by Patrick Corcoran

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PATRICK CORCORAN, MAR 10 2011

As in every phenomenon that the international community encountered throughout recent history and, continues through this very day, there are always different theoretical explanations for why something has happened, what were the major factors in how something has developed, who was involved, and most importantly what this “something” says for the future. I seek to explore how these theories interpret the rise of China since the post-Cold War world. In international relations two predominate paradigms of thinking exist: *realism* and *liberalism*. In addition to the grand theories, there are several alternative paradigms in existence, however, *constructivism*, above all has gained the most academic recognition. By virtue of this, it will be used as the alternative perspective that all attempt to explain the rise of China. After establishing a basis for each of the theories, one must ask the larger question: which theory to accept (or seems the most plausible), and why? I hope to offer you my approach to finding which theory offers the best explanation for events and why I believe one over the other.

Realists believe that if China can maintain its domestic economic growth and international financial strength, then a “significant security competition between the two [United States and China] countries is inevitable.”[1] Some even believe that this competition between the United States and China will bring about a second *bipolar* world; we will soon ourselves entrenched in competition between the two as a result of the *security dilemma* theory. China will not be the only state affecting the balance of power, the United States (and probably regional states) will seek to balance Chinese shifts. Do we not expect China to establish a version of what the U.S Monroe Doctrine? There is no reason one should expect China to act differently than the United States has. Their behavior, particularly with regard to the South and Yellow Seas, lacking response to North Korea’s aggression, and Taiwan all indicate that they are, in effect, asserting sovereignty over an increasing sphere of influence; this behavior will lead to conflict.[2]

Secondly, liberals, particularly those who believe in *liberal institutionalism*, argue that the economic interdependence, in the era of globalization (especially between the United States and regional actors) combined with China’s continuing, and in some cases, increasing participation in international institutions will soon trump any security competition between the two (or others) states. And by virtue of what liberals refer to as the *democratic peace theory*; the prospects for conflict are extremely low, if not nonexistent. More specifically, *classical liberalism* argues, “that if marketization and democratization take place in China, the economic rise of China will not pose a threat to peace.”[3] In other words, China’s changing domestic landscape (emergence of a middle class through free market principles), will ultimately lead to democratization; the results of which would offset any security competition between states involved in the economic relationship.

Thirdly, constructivists[4] discard the realist balance of power theory as the potential for conflict between the two states and instead argue that “a shared identity will determine whether the two states view each other as threats.”[5] Also, China has adapted (and continues to) from an “aggrieved Maoist revolutionary state to a developmental state and a good global citizen,” which, though its interconnectedness with the international community has accepted the norms and reaps the benefits across the board thereby probably nullifying any future urge for conflict.[6] Although China may perceive itself as a victim of Western domination, it also perceives itself as a contributor, and ultimately a decider in world affairs, particularly economically.[7] These three theories give us radically different predictions on how China’s rise will come to fruition.

The larger question is: how do we know which one to accept? The beginning of wisdom might begin with exploring

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past great powers (the best example that of the United States) and their rise to fruition as a guide for predicting China's ascension. Juxtapose their histories, with that of China's post-Cold War history and seek out the correlations and contradictions. A bit of reductionism might be helpful as well, in the sense of the economic

(liberal) versus power (realist) relationship – where in history have we seen these two clash, and which has come out victorious? My immediate reaction, which I am sure, will be characterized by some as pessimistic, nevertheless, is accepting the prediction that realism offers us. I believe this for three reasons:

1. China's increasing investment in Africa. China needs resources and their policy of "Go Abroad" offers us little or no indication of "returning home." At times at the expense of the African workers while simultaneously reinforcing the tyrannical leadership – I do not accept the neocolonial theory which I define as exploitation through imperial (on the part of the Chinese) decrees, rather, a condition which I characterize as proxy-ism, exploitation of a state's labor economy by another state's investment because of the accessibility to markets made possible through globalization. It is important to make this distinction because China is only able to invest because of content leadership; they are not forcing their investments onto states. If, for instance, a government changes their position on Chinese investment (as some have already), China may enter a panic-mode which increases the chances of irrational (perhaps the use of force) decision making.

2. The massive arms build-up in Asia. A recent *Wall Street Journal* article indicated, "From the Arabian Sea to the Pacific Ocean, countries fearful of China's growing economic and military might – and worried that the U.S. will be less likely to intervene in the region – are hurtling into a new arms race."^[8] The arms race in the Pacific has been characterized by some as the most dangerous situation since the Second World War, and while China continues to denounce the notions of fostering expansionistic, militaristic policies, this however, flies in the face of continuing to increase its military projection capabilities.

3. The balance of power. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, Indonesia, India, and Vietnam, are all allies of the United States; those relationships will continue to strengthen if they feel threatened by China's increasing dominance. There is no reason to believe that these states will not attempt to balance China's rise, especially with an unresolved Korean peninsula and Taiwan status, Australian – U.S. relations, and India's subsequent ascension.

While I recognize the importance of other factors, i.e. the crux of the liberal theory which argues that the economic interdependence will stifle any conflicting interests through the use of strong diplomacy, and that of the constructivist position that conflict will be avoided because of a shared identity (between the United States and China) of a capitalistic, democratic, internationally involved society – states still matter, power still triumphs, and competition still thrives; these will be the determining factors for the future of Sino-U.S. relations as China's ascent seems limitless.

Appendix:

These visualizations represent the strongest positions I have seen taken on each theory. The larger the word, the more it was used in the text. I purposely removed the word "China" and other frivolous words that were not crucial to the theoretical explanation. There are stark differences in each of the three paradigms.

Realism^[9]

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Liberalism[10]

Constructivism[11]

Patrick Corcoran is a PhD candidate at the Catholic University of America, Washington DC. For a video of the panel discussion on which this article is based [click here](#)

[1] Stephen Walt, "China's New Strategy," *Foreign Policy Magazine*, April 26, 2010.

[2] John Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to U.S. Power in Asia," *Fourth Annual Michael Hintze Lecture in International Security*, University of Sydney, August 2009.

[3] David Rousseau, "The Rise of China through Liberal, Realist, and Constructivist Lenses," *Working Paper*, University of Pennsylvania, August 1, 2003, page 2.

[4] The basic theory of constructivism is, "that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces and that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature." This information can be found: Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1.

[5] Rousseau, 2.

[6] Lam Peng Er and Lim Tai Wei, *The Rise of China and India: A New Asian Drama*, (London: World Scientific Group, 2009), 17.

[7] *Ibid*, 17.

[8] Amol Sharma, Jeremy Page, James Hookway, and Rachel Pannett, "Asia's New Arms Race," *Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2011.

[9] John Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to U.S. Power in Asia," *Fourth Annual Michael Hintze Lecture in International Security*, University of Sydney, August 2009.

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[10] Deputy Secretary of State James B. Steinberg, "China's Arrival: the Long March to Global Power," *Center for New American Security, Keynote Address*, September, 2009.

[11] John W. Eberhard, "Socialized or Calculated Interests? Analyzing China's Regional Policy through Constructivist and Rationalist Perspectives," *Political Perspectives, Graduate Journal*, vol. 5, January 2011.