

Offensive Realism and the Rise of China: A Useful Framework for Analysis?

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FRANK KUHN, JUL 9 2021

Within the last decade, the rise of China has emerged as probably one of the foremost issues in the Western world and beyond. International relations scholars and policymakers alike are grappling with the implications of an increasingly more powerful People's Republic of China (PRC). What seems to be the most likely trajectory for Chinese foreign policy? And which strategies should be implemented to meet what at this time appears to be the most consequential challenge to the Western liberal international order?

In quest for analytical frameworks to make sense of the rise of China, it seems that the lessons from offensive realism—closely associated with John J. Mearsheimer—have attained conventional wisdom: As China's relative power grows, it will adopt an increasingly assertive and competitive strategy (Shifrinson, 2020, p. 175). Therefore, an intense US-Chinese security competition with ample potential for armed conflict would appear likely; "China cannot rise peacefully," writes Mearsheimer (2010, p. 382).

However, I will argue that despite its widespread popularity, offensive realism is of rather limited utility, if not outright dangerous, when it comes to analysing the rise of China. Firstly, research on rising state strategy and power transitions highlights both empirical and theoretical problems with Mearsheimer's argument regarding the rise of China. Secondly, offensive realism takes into account only the structural level, but not the individual or the state level—thus leaving major blind spots in the analysis. Finally, Mearsheimer's strict emphasis on military capabilities appears to overestimate the risk of war—and underestimate US-Chinese competition in other domains, e.g. with regard to emerging technologies.

The Foundation for Offensive Realism appears doubtful

The fundamental assumption of Mearsheimer's offensive realism is a bold one. He portrays great powers as revisionist predators in pursuit of survival. The ultimate goal for any powerful state is to attain regional hegemony—that is, being the strongest nation in its part of the world. In addition, great powers also want to make sure there are no contenders dominating other regions (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 363). This image is both persuasive and parsimonious, but not backed by empirical evidence.

In fact, rising states do not always seem to employ aggressive strategies toward their declining competitors. Rather, history suggests that rising states even cooperate with their declining peers. Although Wilhelmine Germany competed with Great Britain for maritime primacy, it also provided Austria-Hungary with diplomatic and military support in the years before 1914. Both the United States and the rising Soviet Union attempted to support a weakening United Kingdom after the end of World War II. Eventually, Britain received remarkable economic, military and diplomatic assistance from the United States (Shifrinson, 2020, pp. 176–177). But the Soviet Union was also eager to cooperate with the UK; it even explored the feasibility of a formal military alliance with Britain in early 1947—more than one year before the United States started to discuss a similar proposal (Shifrinson, 2018, p. 90).

Similarly, a large body of literature on power transitions apparently calls into question Mearsheimer's offensive realist worldview, since there appears to be only a weak link between power shifts and the outbreak of war (Shifrinson,

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2020, p. 180). For example, Lebow and Valentino (2009) not only found that power transitions are fairly uncommon, but also that power shifts are usually the effect of armed conflicts—not their cause. Great powers traditionally eschew making war against their peers. Instead, they prefer to attack smaller states or gravely declining nations. It is true that these smaller wars have repeatedly escalated in ways that dragged other great powers into the conflict as well (Lebow and Valentino, 2009, p. 406). But these conflicts—inadvertent escalations, so to speak—differ considerably from the intense security competition which Mearsheimer is anticipating. Most importantly, there is even research indicating that dominant military powers are more likely than rising states to start major conflict, provided that they are apprehensive about their loss of status (Copeland, 2000, p. 3).

In sum, empirical evidence suggests that rising states adopt much more nuanced strategies than offensive realism would predict. This seems to hold true even for great powers with revisionist propensities (Shiffrin, 2018, p. 181). One possible explanation for this divergence between reality and what offensive realism teaches could be case selection. Indeed, Mearsheimer's case studies have been suspected of selection bias by various scholars (Snyder, 2002, p. 161; Toft, 2005, pp. 395–396). It is also worth noting that—at odds with Mearsheimer's predictions—NATO has yet to collapse (Kaplan, 2011). Neither has Germany acquired nuclear weapons, nor is there a vicious great power competition in Europe (Toft, 2005, p. 396). In other words: Mearsheimer has been off the mark by a great margin. Given the rather weak empirical basis and the theory's debatable predictive ability, it would seem reasonable to assume that offensive realism is not particularly useful when it comes to the analysis of the rise of China.

In fact, the People's Republic of China does not seem to harbour expansionist proclivities. It is true that China's territorial claims—e.g. Taiwan or large swaths of the South China Sea—are substantial. In addition, Chinese efforts to build artificial islands in the South China Sea have been widely regarded as expansionist and aggressive by China's neighbours. However, Chinese territorial claims are all firmly rooted in historical possession or exploration, not in offensive realist thinking (Nathan and Scobell, 2014, p. 21; Yergin, 2020).

Besides that, theoretical insights from balance of power theory would also cast doubt on offensive realism's core tenet, as Shiffrin (2020) has noted. If rising powers were to engage in all-out predation on their declining peers, they may expedite the formation of a sizable counterbalancing coalition. In multipolar systems, a rising power may also need assistance from other nations in its proximity to offset challengers. All-out predation on declining countries would seem to foreclose future cooperation with other states and thus appears strategically unwise (Shiffrin, 2020, pp. 181–183). For these reasons, rising states would seem to pursue more nuanced strategies toward their declining peers. More to the point, one would expect rising powers to follow either predatory or supportive strategies in varying intensities—depending on the decliner's strategic value and military posture, respectively (Shiffrin, 2018, chap. 2). Since China faces several challengers in its neighbourhood with both India and Japan, and the United States is likely to retain a robust military posture for the foreseeable future, it appears probable that China will exercise restraint—or, in fact, may even want to cooperate with the United States (Shiffrin, 2020, p. 199).

A comprehensive analytical framework found wanting

In addition to the empirical and theoretical issues presented above, offensive realism precludes two important levels of analysis when used as a tool for studying the rise of China. In his influential book *Man, State, and War*, Waltz (1954) conceived of three “images” of international relations: individuals, the state, and the international system. Now, offensive realism is a *structural* theory. It holds that state behaviour is determined by the anarchic structure of the international system. Individual leaders and domestic politics are excluded from consideration—offensive realism is an oversimplification of reality. As a consequence, the theory will be of limited utility when personal beliefs or domestic politics are the predominant variables which shape a state's foreign policy (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 10).

When it comes to China, reasonable evidence suggests that individuals and their ideas may indeed dominate the decision-making process. Chinese foreign policy has always been shaped by its supreme leader's personal ideas. Although it is true that the leader's role has become less significant from Mao Zedong to Hu Jintao (Nathan and Scobell, 2014, pp. 37–38), there can be no doubt that the rise of Xi Jinping, China's supreme leader since 2012, has reversed this trend. “Xi Jinping thought” has been included in the Chinese Communist Party's constitution in the 19th National Congress in October 2017 (Corre, 2018). And after an unprecedented centralisation of power, Xi holds

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more sway than any other Chinese leader since Mao. He has quelled dissenting voices, removed the term limit for his office as president and established a personality cult that bears resemblance to authoritarian leaders such as Vladimir Putin in Russia or even Kim Jong Un in North Korea. Hence, a sound understanding of Xi is of much greater significance than it has been for any of his immediate predecessors (Wasserstrom, 2021).

Xi's rise to power has been accompanied by what is described as an increasingly assertive Chinese foreign policy. This was first noted in 2009 by various Chinese and foreign pundits (Friedberg, 2014, p. 133), and has culminated in an unparalleled Chinese diplomatic offensive in 2020. The Chinese Communist Party tightened its grip on Hong Kong and passed a controversial national security law that has effectively terminated the principle of "one country, two systems." Chinese soldiers started a deadly brawl on the disputed border with India. The Chinese military repeatedly probed Taiwan's air defences and increased its patrols around the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, which are claimed by both China and Japan. Likewise, maritime presence in the South China Sea was intensified. Domestically, Beijing stepped up its clampdown against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang in what many have described as an attempt of cultural genocide. Finally, the Australian government's request for an independent investigation into the roots of the COVID-19 pandemic was met with harsh trade sanctions and cyberattacks, and Chinese diplomats started using very belligerent language (Campbell and Rapp-Hooper, 2020).

What may account for this dramatic change of direction in the PRC's foreign policy? Campbell and Rapp-Hooper (2020) have suggested that both Xi's belief that the time to restore China's historical might has arrived and this consolidation of power likely played a key role, while staunch nationalism may have served as a catalyst. H. R. McMaster (2020), former White House national security adviser, has similarly argued that the Chinese leadership is under the impression that its window of opportunity to accomplish the "China dream" is narrowing. He has also emphasised the importance of history when it comes to understanding China. Small and Jaishankar (2020) have put forward four conceivable explanations for the PRC's new assertiveness. These theories hold that weaknesses in the rest of the world, an internalisation of the Chinese leaders' own success, a reaction to current challenges posed by the pandemic or internal and external insecurity could be the reason of China's diplomatic offensive.

To date, there is no systemic analysis which would attribute Beijing's newest assertiveness to specific determinants on the individual, domestic or structural level. However, Liao (2016) has employed a classical levels of analysis approach to make sense of China's assertiveness after 2009. According to his assessment, prevalent structural and domestic explanations are not supported by empirical evidence and thus fail to offer a plausible explanation. Most importantly, there was no correlation in time between adjustments of international or domestic preconditions and China's increased assertiveness. Thus, the analysis suggests that the perceptions and ideas of China's elite and the state leader's preferences are the most convincing explanation for the changes in Chinese foreign policy (Liao, 2016, pp. 831–833).

It is true that China's new assertiveness could also be part of a larger plan to achieve the PRC's strategic objectives, as Friedberg (2014, pp. 143–146) has argued. In addition, the leadership argument is almost impossible to refute (Liao, 2016, p. 829). But regardless of that, the evidence presented above strongly suggests that a single-level perspective as offensive realism may be too parsimonious when it comes to the analysis of the rise of China. In fact, even Mearsheimer has dedicated one section of his chapter on China's rise to "hypernationalism," which he expects to exacerbate the US-Chinese security competition—whilst maintaining that realist logic will remain the key factor (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 399–403). In this regard, realism appears to be not just a theory, but also an ideology, as McFaul has so aptly noted: Realism is devised as a descriptive *and* a prescriptive theory; states ought to follow its lessons in order to be successful in international affairs. Yet, this would seem to undercut the core argument of realism—namely that leaders and their beliefs are irrelevant (McFaul, 2020, p. 113).

Mearsheimer's Unduly Focus on Military Capabilities

The third and final reason why offensive realism would seem to be of rather limited utility in the analysis of the rise of China is the theory's unduly focus on military capabilities. Mearsheimer grasps at the concept of power only in a very narrow sense—states' capabilities are measured in purely military terms (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 363). Although military potential is certainly easy to estimate, this view disregards other ways to wield power and coerce one's

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adversaries—for instance by means of economic warfare (Toft, 2005, p. 384). In the context of US-China relations, an unabating focus on military force appears problematic; Mearsheimer's anticipated security competition may actually play out in the economic arena, not in the military domain. Indeed, a tech competition between China and the United States is already well underway.

Especially under Donald Trump's four-year tenure as United States president, previously uncontroversial economic cooperation has been increasingly considered through the lens of national security. This has led to a significant reappraisal of US-China relations; the United States believes that it is losing its competitive technological and military edge due to close commercial ties with the PRC (Foot and King, 2019, p. 47).

Looking more closely at the rhetoric of the Trump administration, it appears that both economic and civil society ties have been successfully securitised (Abb, 2020). That is, a reference object—i.e. economic relations with the PRC—has been defined as an existential security threat that warrants emergency measures outside the scope of normal political procedures (Buzan, Wæver and Wilde, 1998, pp. 23–26). One of the most apparent examples for this securitisation seems to be the 2017 US National Security Strategy because it frames economic security explicitly as a national security issue (United States, 2017, p. 17).

The Trump administration has acted accordingly. It imposed tough sanctions on the Chinese tech giant Huawei, cutting the company off from technology manufactured in the United States, including microprocessors (Abb, 2020, p. 2). After that, in summer 2020, politicians in Washington discussed whether or not TikTok—a social network owned by a Chinese company which is especially popular among young teenagers—could pose a threat to national security (Schuman, 2020). Some have even suggested that the White House should declare a national emergency and invoke the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) if the ownership company ByteDance is not willing to sell its service to a non-Chinese enterprise (Thompson, 2020). Subsequently, the People's Republic of China placed TikTok's recommendation algorithm on its export control list (Mozur, Zhong and McCabe, 2020).

As the Biden administration is reviewing Trump's China policy, the tech war is currently on hold—at least with regard to TikTok (Kruppa and Sevastopulo, 2021). But given that Joe Biden (2020) has also embraced technological competition with China, it seems reasonable to assume that the arms race for high-tech superiority is here to stay. Other trends, for example the transition toward renewable energy, would also suggest that control over technology and intellectual property rights will become increasingly more important (Overland, 2019, p. 38).

Conclusion and Outlook

Overall, there are numerous reasons to conclude that offensive realism may only be of limited utility when it comes to the analysis of the rise of China—I have presented these in greater detail above. But, and perhaps most importantly, following the dictates of offensive realism for policy recommendations would seem even more concerning than just employing the theory for studying the rise of China. After all, an extremely hostile military posture toward the PRC could eventually turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy (Lebow and Valentino, 2009, p. 408; Kirshner, 2012, p. 71). War with China would, then, indeed be in the offing.

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