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# Interpreting the Rise of China: Realist and Liberalist Perspectives

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## Introduction

China's unprecedented development after Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening up" policy (Gaige Kaifang) in 1978 laid the foundations for some indisputable achievements. This is evident in the three decades of 9.8 per cent average annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth since 1979, the lifting of more than 600 million people out of poverty, and China's usurping of Japan as the world's second largest economy in 2011.[1] "The most remarkable economic transformation in human history"[2] has led to a significant 'rise of China' phenomenon, confirmed by organisations such as the United Nations (UN), which cites a profound "shift in global dynamics and evolving geopolitics" in a more "south-orientated world".[3] Xi Jinping's assertion that "we all need to work together to avoid the so-called Thucydides trap"[4] affirms the prominence of realist interpretations of China's rise, while academics such as Justin Yifu Lin argue that a liberalist approach via economic interdependence offers a more accurate method of interpreting China's rise.[5]

This research paper will evaluate two major theoretical paradigms in relation to the interpretation of China's rise: Realism and Liberalism. It will demonstrate the inadequacy of using one perspective in isolation when interpreting China's rise and how we must instead combine a multiplicity of theories, lenses and insights.

## Realist Perspectives on the Rise of China

While there are different types of Realism,[6] proponents such as Kenneth Waltz and Hans J. Morgenthau agree on the pessimistic assumption that human nature is selfish and the international system is anarchic.[7] That is, it lacks a governing authority above and beyond the state. This lacuna leaves self-interested sovereign states—the central actors in world politics—competing for power and security.[8] This competition is a zero-sum game in that states seek to take advantage of any possible means to achieve relative gains. Since states often fail to cooperate in the Realist "self-help system",[9] survival depends on the struggle for power and security, which can ultimately lead to conflict.[10]

In a world where perceptions matter,[11] China's actions are in some quarters perceived as Realist. Those who argue a realist perspective when interpreting China's rise look to several distinctive examples. Two of these will be analysed in this paper: military expansionism and historical analogy. Realist interpretations have been bolstered by Xi Jinping's declaration of a "China Dream" resulting in the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation",[12] as well as retired People's Liberation Army Colonel Liu Mingfu's directives that China needs to "take over from the United States as the world's greatest military power".[13] However, through a comprehensive illustration of these two facets of Realist concern (military expansionism and historical analogy), we will see that Realism cannot fully account for them.

China's unprecedented economic growth has been coupled with the "world's largest military build-up"[14] via a huge expansion of military spending and technological advancement. This would superficially adhere to Realist interpretations of a China that wants to "change the international system" and "obtain global

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hegemony”.[15] Statistics compiled by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) confirm China’s dramatic increase in military expenditure; during the period 2003–2012, its military expenditure increased by 175 per cent, significantly more than any other state listed in SIPRI’s Yearbook[16]. In monetary terms, SIPRI states that China’s annual defence spending rose from over \$30 billion in 2008 (when it became the second largest military spender) to almost \$170 billion in 2010.

Furthermore, estimates published by *The Economist* in 2012 show that, if recent trends continue, China’s military spending could overtake America’s after 2035.[17] In addition, China’s military expansion has led it to be more confident in its military capacities and more assertive in their use. Realist interpretations are reinforced by the Taiwan Anti-Secession Law.[18] Furthermore, Jia Xiudong’s[19] comment in response to Taiwanese independence—“We will use whatever means we have to prevent it happening”[20]—shows China’s military capabilities go “well beyond Taiwan”, helping to strengthen realist interpretations of China’s rise. A Pentagon senior defence official’s opinion that “the balance of cross-Strait military forces continues to shift in the mainland’s favour” supports this.[21]

Nevertheless, solely Realist interpretations of China’s rise through a military perspective would constitute an oversimplification and exaggeration of reality. As SIPRI figures show in terms of military expenditure as a percentage of GDP, China’s (2 per cent) military expenditure is less than half that of the United States (4.4 per cent) and lower than that of the UK (2.5 per cent), Russia (4.4 per cent), France (2.3 per cent), India (2.5 per cent), and Saudi Arabia (8.9 per cent). Thus, “As a percentage of GDP, Chinese military expenditures do not appear to have reached levels where one could conclude that the Chinese economy is being militarised and mobilised to balance against US power.”[22]

In addition, data listing military spending as a percentage of the world share shows China’s 5.5% representing spending of 89.8\$bn remains significantly behind the United States’s 45.7% representing 739.3\$bn [23]. While China’s increased military assertiveness has been highlighted, it is also important to note its diverse role in the international community.

For example, China's troop deployment for UN Peacekeeping Operations has seen a twenty-fold increase since 2000, placing it second among troop-contributing countries to peacekeeping operations, outnumbered only by the United States, which has 10,000 troops in UN Security Council.[25] While there may be vested interests at stake for China, the level of cooperation and integration exhibited by its increasing role in UN peacekeeping missions—which seek global peace and security—suggests states are not only 'self-interested', as Realist theory would advocate. Hence, to use only Realist interpretations of China's rise provides too narrow a view, as it does not explain the full extent of China's rise through military aspirations.

Another important empirical illustration of the Realist interpretation of China's rise is the United States' response to China's military expansion. US Defence Department figures evidence the considerable military presence of the United States in the Asia-Pacific—a region blighted by territorial rights and surrounding resource-rich waters[26]. As part of a response which the United States calls a "pivot" or "rebalance"[27] towards the Asia-Pacific region, there have been efforts to bolster America's military presence in the region. This has resulted in increased naval assets in Singapore, a full marine task force in Australia planned by 2016, increased troop and hardware deployment in South Korea, a new military access agreement with the Philippines, and a commitment that 60 per cent of US Navy assets will be deployed to the Asia-Pacific region by 2020.[28]

The pivot or rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific region seems to align with the Realist 'Thucydides Trap' cited earlier. As Thucydides puts it, "It was the *rise* of Athens and the *fear* that this inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable." [29] In other words: "The dynamic inherent when a rapidly rising power (China) becomes more confident, a ruling power (US) fears losing its edge, and entangling alliances on each side drive the parties towards war." [30] History seems to support the tendency for war: "In 11 of 15 cases since 1500 in which a rising power rivalled a ruling power, the outcome was war". [31] If we consider John Mearsheimer's argument valid, China will respond to the American build-up by pushing the United States out of Asia, in "much the way the US pushed the European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere". [32] One view is that China will "come up with its own version of the Monroe Doctrine as Japan did in the 1930s". [33]

However, it is problematic to use the Thucydides Trap and Mearsheimer's predictions to assess China's rise through Realist interpretations. Although former US Defence Secretary Robert Gates' comments that the US 'pivot' "isn't about China at all", his clarification that "it is more about our relationships with the rest of Asia" suggests a much more balanced approach than Realists would claim. [34] In addition, President Obama compliments the positive role that China can play: "from reducing tensions on the Korean peninsula to preventing proliferation" [to] "seeking more opportunities for cooperation with Beijing" [which will include] "greater communication" [between militaries in order to] "promote understanding and avoid miscalculation". [35] This weakens the case for the use of Realist interpretations in relation to the rise of China—not entirely, but enough to conclude that a fully Realist interpretation of China's rise is inadequate. Elements highlighted by Mr Bates and President Obama, "cooperation", "communication" and "reducing tension", in addition to the actual visit of China's top military commander General Chen Bingde to the United States in order to improve military ties, [36] decrease the likelihood of falling into the Thucydides Trap. It can be argued that Mearsheimer's arguments, based on historical analogies, are too weak to hold merit in this discussion. How can historical analogies from an American experience predict what China, a country with a contrasting and unique history and culture, will do today? Analogical arguments are "not causes or explanations"; they "tend to haphazardly pick and choose the similarities to focus on, while ignoring potentially important differences". [37]

## **Liberalist Perspectives on the Rise of China**

Liberalism is made up of several interrelated concepts and strands, including the 'Kantian Triangle', [38] 'international institutions', 'interdependence', and the 'Democratic Peace Theory', [39] as explored by scholars such as Michael Boyle and Andrew Moravcsik.

In contrast to realist assumptions, Liberalist ones are optimistic in that they assume human nature is fundamentally good and that conflict can be avoided. Realism and Liberalism both concur on the existence of an anarchic international system, but for Liberalists, this can be mitigated. For Liberalists, sovereign states are not the only central actors in world politics. Individuals, interest groups, and intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations all have an influence on states. While Realism virtually denies the possibility of cooperation, this notion underpins Liberalism. Since the consequences of using military power often outweigh the benefits, states have a vested interest in engaging in cooperation. Cooperation can lead to absolute gains: a win-win situation for all. The next section will focus on interdependence (in particular, economic interdependence) when assessing Liberalist perspectives on the rise of China because it seems to be one of the strongest strands (if not the strongest strand) in

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the Liberalist armament.

Richard N. Cooper defines economic interdependence as the sensitivity of economic activity between multiple nations in relation to “economic developments within those nations”.[40] Economic activity tends to refer to international transactions such as trade (imports and exports) and foreign direct investment (FDI).[41] Intense economic activity results in an increased number of ties and greater influence among the nations that engage in such economic activity. Consequently, economic interdependence lessens the likelihood of conflict as one economy becomes more bound to another. As David Starr Jordan puts it when referring to the likelihood of European conflict, it is a beacon for economic interdependence: “What shall we say of the Great War of Europe, ever threatening, ever impending, and which never comes? We shall say that it will never come. Humanly speaking, it is impossible.”[42]

As the graph shows, China’s overseas direct investment or FDI has risen significantly. The darker line—Chinese FDI flow into the world, including Asia—shows an increase of nearly \$75 billion. Using the economic interdependence notions above, this increase in FDI should lead to a decrease in the likelihood of conflict and can, in fact, foster greater cooperation amongst states.

In addition, China’s trade interaction with the rest of the world accounts for nearly 50 per cent of its GDP.[43] This shows an intertwined economic relationship between the nation’s economy and the global economy. Conflict would undermine this economic relationship and result in universal losses and repercussions. Furthermore, China is now an active member in a range of regional and international organisations, institutions and frameworks. Xi Jinping correctly points out that China contributes to, and is a proactive member of, the G20, The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), The United Nations Security Council, the Shanghai Cooperative Organization and The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) mechanism.[44] He adds that there is a further need to “seek common ground on issues of common interests in pursuit of win-win progress”,[45] which not only denigrates the Realist interpretation of China’s rise, but wholly supports the Liberalist interpretation. Through China’s participation in such organisations, the encouragement of cooperation ensues, ensuring all participants are awarded a share of winnings, meaning that they are less likely to engage in conflict with one another.

However, using economic interdependence as an example to show the absolute interpretation of China’s rise is vulnerable. It undermines and oversimplifies the frictions that economic interdependence causes between nations. High levels of economic interdependence has the ability, as Samuel Huntington notes in *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, to act as “war-inducing” and not “peace-inducing” as Liberalists would

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argue.[46] For example, it fails to account for the deterioration in Sino-Japanese relations which has undermined economic interdependence. Territorial disputes over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, as well as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to the controversial and sensitive Yasukuni Shrine, have had a severe effect on bilateral ties and economic interdependence.[47] To quantify this, trade between China and Japan decreased by 3.9 per cent in 2012 followed by a further 5.1 per cent drop in 2013. In addition, China's FDI in Japan fell by 23.5 per cent during the same period.[48] Is China's new provocative "air-defence identification zone" over the East China Sea testament to Huntington's predications?[49]

## Conclusion

Overall, Realism and Liberalism offer us valuable theoretical insight into interpreting the rise of China. This research paper does not conclude that these theories are redundant, but does assert that simple analysis and interpretation of the rise of China through Realism and Liberalism in isolation is inadequate and provides an incomplete perspective. Realist theory offers interpretations of China's rise that focus on its pursuit of power and security in an international anarchic system. In this system, self-interested states such as China compete in a zero-sum game environment. Several empirical examples in this paper support this narrow Realist interpretation, but not to a full extent. Competing empirical evidence based on Liberal theory contradicts the narrow realist interpretation. A Liberal scenario is one where the anarchic element of an international system can be diluted. In contrast to a Realist view, cooperation means that a win-win situation for all is a possibility and conflict is not inevitable—in fact, it can be prevented.

The implication is that in the interpretation of China's rise, these two theories must be analysed in combination with each other—not in opposition to each other. Indeed, "the complex correlations between power and interest defy analytic capture by any one paradigm".[50] However, this is not enough. Using both theories in combination will lead to a more comprehensive and more accurate interpretation of China's rise, but since all proponents of these theories use history to characterise and interpret present or future discourse, speculations tend to be too simplistic. Although debatable and undefined in this paper, perhaps the theories evaluated could be combined with 'Chinese characteristics' in order to get a better interpretation of China's rise.

This combination could include taking into account China's own unique culture, civilisation and historical backdrop, in addition to being more inclusive when it comes to interpretations. That is, current interpretations of China's rise need to include a more diverse range of literature that includes significant Chinese sources.

In relation to current policy regarding interpretations of China's rise, I would hope for increased cooperation where there is common ground to avoid miscalculations and misperceptions. More importantly, issues of dispute need to be handled with more care, and within designated frameworks. This is important in order to avoid the extremes of Realism, but also address the failings of Liberalism.

Finally, I would like to extend Martin Jacques' comment that there needs to be more humility by the West when addressing China.[51] Perhaps more humility on the part of all nations—including China itself—needs to be present before a multiplicity of theories, lenses and insights can be as effective as they need to be. This will then enable a more accurate interpretation of China's rise.

[1] Compiled from the World Bank. See <http://data.worldbank.org>. First seen at <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/growth-and-the-chinese-economy-s-latecomer-advantage-by-justin-yifu-lin>.

[2] In November 2012, in London, Martin Jacques stated that since 1978, China has seen "the most remarkable economic transformation in human history" during an 'Intelligence Squared' debate addressing Western democracy in China. See <http://www.intelligencesquared.com/events/democracy-china/>.

[3] United Nations Development Report 2013. See <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2013-report>.

[4] Comments made by Xi Jinping during the Berggruen Institute on Governance 'Understanding China Conference' in November 2010 at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. For full transcript, see <http://berggruen.org/topics/a->

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conversation-with-president-xi-at-big-s-understanding-china-conference

[5] Callahan, William A., 2013, *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future*. Oxford University Press.

[6] Two main types of realism exist today: classical realism and structural/neo-realism.

[7] Morgenthau, 1973, p. 10; Waltz 1979, p. 95.

[8] Morgenthau 1973, p. 10; Waltz 1979, p. 95.

[9] Morgenthau 1973, p. 512; Waltz 1979, pp. 115–6.

[10] Morgenthau 1973, p. 12.

[11] For further insight, see Jervis, Robert, 1976, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[12] See <http://vimeo.com/80820310>.

[13] Callahan, 2013, p. 26.

[14] Analysis on China's military rise by *The Economist*. See <http://www.economist.com/node/21552193>.

[15] Yee and Storey, 2002, p. 7.

[16] See "SIPRI Yearbook 2013.", Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, [www.sipri.org/yearbook/2013](http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2013)

[17] See <http://www.economist.com/node/21552193>.

[18] The 2005 Anti-Secession Law commits China to a military response should Taiwan declare independence, or even if the government thinks all possibility of peaceful unification has been lost.

[19] Senior Researcher On International Affairs at China Institute of International Studies

[20] See <http://www.economist.com/node/21552193>.

[21] Comments made by unknown senior US defence official. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-10995111>

[22] Johnston, Alastair Iain, 2003, 'Is China a Status Quo Power?', *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4, pp. 5–56.

[23] See *The Economist*, 07.04.2012 See <http://www.economist.com/node/21552193>.

[24] United Nations Peacekeeping Statistics. Retrieved from article by Bates and Huang, 'China's Expanding Peacekeeping Role' 2009. See <http://www.sipri.org/media/newsletter/essay/jan09>.

[25] United Nations Field Support. See <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/about/dfs/>.

[26] See <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-15715446>

[27] The US 'pivot' or what would be toned down in connotations to 'rebalance' towards the Asia-Pacific was first

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coined by the former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. See [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas\\_pacific\\_century](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century) and <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-15715446> for Obama's take on the 'rebalance'.

[28] <http://thediplomat.com/2014/03/us-philippines-reach-deal-on-greater-us-military-access/>;  
<http://www.voanews.com/content/us-announces-new-troop-deployment-to-south-korea/1825505.html>.

[29] Thucydides, n.d., 'The Melian Dialogue', *The Melian Dialogue*. Web: 06 Apr. 2014.  
<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/melian.htm>

[30] See [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/07/opinion/obama-and-xi-must-think-broadly-to-avoid-a-classic-trap.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/07/opinion/obama-and-xi-must-think-broadly-to-avoid-a-classic-trap.html?_r=0).

[31] See [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/07/opinion/obama-and-xi-must-think-broadly-to-avoid-a-classic-trap.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/07/opinion/obama-and-xi-must-think-broadly-to-avoid-a-classic-trap.html?_r=0).

[32] John J. Mearsheimer, 2006, 'China's Unpeaceful Rise', *Current History*, Vol. 105, No. 690 (April), pp. 160–162.

[33] John J. Mearsheimer, 2006, 'China's Unpeaceful Rise', *Current History*, Vol. 105, No. 690 (April), pp. 160–162.

[34] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-11705355>.

[35] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-15715446>.

[36] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-13442723>.

[37] Johnston, Alastair Iain, 2003, 'Is China a Status Quo Power?', *International Security*, Vol. 27,

No. 4, pp. 5–56.

[38] Michael Boyle analyses the 'Kantian Triangle', a prediction of liberal peace based on three factors: states must be republics; states will gradually establish peace among themselves by expansion of a 'pacific union'; all states must respect a 'cosmopolitan law' about how they treat foreigners in their midst while advocating his notions of liberalism. For further clarification and insight, see Doyle, Michael W., 1986, 'Liberalism and World Politics', *American Political Science Review*, 80:04, pp. 1151–69.

[39] The notion that democracies were inherently more peaceful than autocratic states. This is because even though democracies are engaged in wars, it is rarely the case that a democratic state is engaged in war with another democratic state. For further insight, see Walt, Stephen M., 1998, 'International Relations: One World, Many Theories', *Foreign Policy*, No. 110, Special Edition: Frontiers of Knowledge.

[40] Cooper, Richard N., 1972, 'Economic Interdependence and Foreign Policy in the Seventies', *World Politics* 24:02, pp. 159–81.

[41] Cooper, Richard N., 1972, 'Economic Interdependence and Foreign Policy in the Seventies', *World Politics* 24:02, pp. 159–81.

[42] See <http://thediplomat.com/2013/04/economic-interdependence-less-conflict/>.

[43] <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/TG.VAL.TOTL.GD.ZS>.

[44] Comments made by Xi Jinping during the Berggruen Institute on Governance, 'Understanding China Conference', in November 2010 at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. For full transcript, see

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[48] Statistics quoted from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/gordonchang/2014/02/16/the-chinese-and-japanese-economies-are-delinking-prelude-to-conflict/>.

[49] See <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-25062525>.

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