Offensively Realist? Evaluating Trump's Economic Policy Towards China

Riding to the White House on a wave of populist fervour and promising policies that put "America First", Donald Trump's election presented a massive challenge to the liberal internationalism that had defined US foreign policy since World War Two (Ikenberry et al, 2018, p.1). High-profile campaign promises such as being tougher on NATO free-riders, avoiding expensive endeavours in the Middle East and restoring equity with regards to Sino-US trade were self-proclaimed as "rational" (NY Times, 2016) and ostensibly embodied the realist IR tradition that places self-help as the raison d'être of states operating under conditions of international anarchy (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp.30-31). However, to what extent President Trump's foreign policy has reflected realism is a matter of debate amongst scholars in the field. Randall Schweller sees Trump's policies as based on a worldview that is "fundamentally realist in nature" (2018a, p.134), whereas others have criticised his haphazard policies as anathema to a pragmatic, realist approach (McGurk, 2019; Walt, 2017). In this essay, I seek to add to this debate by analysing Trump's foreign economic policy through the prism of offensive realism, one of the most popular theories of international politics. I will specifically examine two key Trump policies; his initiation of a trade war with China and his withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). By doing so, I will demonstrate that the Trump administration's economic policy towards China cannot be considered realist. Before beginning my analysis, I will briefly elaborate on the link between offensive realism and foreign policy.

Offensive Realism and Foreign Policy

Offensive realism is a recent addition to the realist IR tradition, distinguishing itself from classical realism and defensive realism (Telbami, 2002, p.158). Unfortunately, I cannot offer a detailed analysis of the debate that rages between realist scholars, though it is important to note that offensive realism is one type of realism, not *the* type of realism (Kirshner, 2010, p.53). Therefore, it is entirely plausible that Trump's policies could be considered realist when assessed using a different variant of realism- indeed scholars have endeavoured to make this case (see Schweller, 2018). Nonetheless, the scale of this essay is restricted to analysing Trump's policies through the prism of offensive realism and concludes on these grounds that Trump cannot be considered a realist.

First conceptualised by John J. Mearsheimer, offensive realism (hereafter also referred to as realism) adopts a structural view of international politics. In doing so, it eschews the analysis of the internal dynamics of states; bureaucracy, structure of government, and leadership personality do not figure in a world of rational, utility-maximising states (Mearsheimer, 2014, p.31). Mearsheimer builds on the principles of classical realism (an anarchic system, the importance of power and the fight for survival between states) and articulates them into a rigorous theory that asserts that states will always seek to maximise power, achieve regional hegemony and subsequently prevent others from gaining such status (ibid., pp.363-65). This makes offensive realism of relevance to current US-Sino relations- the US is undoubtedly a regional hegemon in the Western hemisphere and China's sensational rise and assertive policies suggest that it too desires such status (Mandelbaum, 2019, p.125). Therefore, a realist US foreign policy's fundamental goal is to prevent China from becoming a regional hegemon in East Asia.

Despite asserting that military power is the ultimate currency in the international system (Mearsheimer, 2014, p.55), offensive realism has much to say about economics. Essentially, military power cannot be acquired without

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significant reserves of wealth to manufacture weapons, invest in technology and train soldiers (Ibid.). Realism therefore approaches economic transactions from a zero-sum perspective, in short 'one great power's gains are by definition, the other's loss' (Christensen, 2006, p.96). Thus, it places a primacy on *relative gains* (Grieco, 1988, p.499), meaning hegemonic states cannot tolerate a status quo that sees a rival's power grow quicker than its own. A final assumption that is relevant to trade is that of rationality, with Mearsheimer asserting that states will make a cost-benefit assessment and choose the policy that is most effective in improving its power position relative to its rivals (2009, p.244). Such assumptions are crucial in determining whether a policy is realist or not.

A common lightning-rod for realist criticism is the "theory-practice paradox"; if realism asserts itself to be reflective of the reality of international politics, why do realists constantly prescribe policies for states to follow (Oren, 2009, p.284)? However, neorealist theories never aspire to elucidate individual foreign policy decisions, instead endeavouring to explain international politics more broadly- indeed Mearsheimer recognises his predictions aren't always right (2014, pp.10-11). Realists therefore spot the inherent dangers that occur when states do not behave as predicted and involve themselves in the political process to prevent this from occurring, making offensive realism both prescriptive and predictive (Rosato and Schuessler, 2011, p.813). From herein, I will demonstrate that Trump's economic policy towards China does not follow the prescriptions of offensive realist theory.

The Unrealism of Trump's Trade Wars

Offensive realism is not protectionist by nature as free markets often benefit the world's leading powers (Popescu, 2019, p.394). However, when the economic order is more beneficial to one great power than the other, realists would expect the latter state to attempt to alter the system so as to ensure a relative benefit (Ibid). Prior to Trump's election, the global economic order fundamentally benefitted China vis-à-vis the US. For years, the US has pursued a policy of "engagement" which had sought to integrate China into the world economy and manage its peaceful rise (Zhao, 2019, p.489). Such a policy approach runs counter to realism; even if China masks its rise as "peaceful", its true intentions can never be known and therefore it must be treated with suspicion (Mearsheimer, 2014, p.381). Every year, China's economy grows relative to that of the United States (World Bank, 2020), in no small part due to unfair trading practices such as forced technological transfer and intellectual property theft (Meltzer and Sehnai, 2019, p.2). Such economic growth allows China to accelerate funding into its military (Atesoglu, 2013, p.88) and thus increases its ability to project power in the region. That the Trump administration is bidding to alter this scenario by imposing massive tariffs on the Chinese (which have been reciprocated) (BBC, 2019) has seen it associated with offensive realism (Popescu, 2019, p.394). Whilst these tariffs have diminished US economic growth (Tankersley, 2019), an argument could be made that such policies remain in line with offensive realism as they damage the Chinese economy more, therefore increasing US relative gains (Mearsheimer, 2014, p.386). However, protectionism is the wrong remedy to the problem of Chinese relative growth.

 Trump's trade policy towards China demonstrates an absence of rational analysis of the structure of the international economy. A state can only expect to make relative gains via economic coercion if the targeted state cannot obtain the tariffed goods and services elsewhere (Ibid). In this case, there are many economic actors in the international system who are "functionally equivalent" to the US (in that they can supply similar goods and services) who would be willing to fill void left by America in China's trade (Kim, 2018, p.1278). Indeed, China's decision to lower tariffs with the European Union demonstrates that they can and will look elsewhere to alleviate the pressure Trump's tariffs have placed on its economy (Drezner, 2019, p.15). That Trump has also placed tariffs on EU goods (Helmore, 2019) is evidence of the unrealismof his trade policy, as this has given the EU further incentive to engage with China in trade and thus act as the US' "functional equivalent". The reality is that economic containment can only produce relative gains if done in concert with other states (Art, 2003, p.120), which renders Trump's unilateral trade war against China an exercise in futility. The Chinese economy is expected to adapt to the initial shock, whilst US firms will likely become less competitive due to increased costs, thus meaning that Trump's trade policy will increase China's relative economic advantage (Kim, 2018b). At best, the US will also find "functionally equivalent" trading partners, rendering the policy approach futile due to "minimal impact" on either side (Kim, 2019, p.1432). Therefore, because of the existence of "functionally equivalent" competitors in the international system, a rational state in the position of the US would have concluded that the costs of adopting economic protectionist policies against China were greater than the benefits or at best would preserve the status-quo.

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However, it could be argued that Trump's policies are not part of a long-term strategy to damage China's economy but are a form of "economic statecraft" designed to force it to make concessions in the short term (Ibid., p.1440). Such a policy approach would appear to be compatible with offensive realism, which suggests that states should pursue incremental increases in national power when the opportunity arises (Snyder, 2002, p.158). In this sense, the agreement of a trade deal between the US and China earlier this year (that covered many of the areas China derives its unfair advantages from (Politi, 2020)) could be viewed as a victory of Trumpian economic statecraft. However, there is reason to believe that Trump's deal will not actually improve US power relative to China. Realism would hardly have us expect that China would capitulate to US economic pressure so readily; if the ongoing trade war won't reduce Chinese gains relative to the US, why would China make the concessions Trump desires? As Grieco asserts, states are likely to cheat on or leave an international agreement should it become apparent that others are making gains relative to it (1988, p.499). Therefore, offensive realism would expect the cooperative agreement reached between the US and China to be short-lived. China will wish to defect from the agreement once it realises that curtailing its unfair business practices will reduce its competitiveness in the global economy and thus reduce its relative advantage over the US. Indeed, it has past form in this regard, repeatedly breaking WTO rules designed to curtail its unfair practices (US Trade Representative, 2019, p.2). Thus, whilst it may seem that Trump's economic statecraft has forced the Chinese to the bargaining table, realism would urge one to be sceptical of such a narrative and would predict Chinese defection or withdrawal from the deal and a resumption of the damaging trade wars.

The Realism of the Trans-Pacific Partnership

Not only has the Trump administration pursued a Chinese trade policy that is incompatible with offensive realism, it has rejected a trade agreement that had all the hallmarks of a sound, realist policy. On his first day in office, Trump signed an executive order withdrawing the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a multilateral trade agreement with 11 other pacific rim nations, crucially excluding China (Traub, 2014). His reasons for doing so can be viewed as compatible with offensive realism; he considered the TPP a bad deal due to the fact that the other trading partners benefit more than the US, thus meaning the US would make relative losses (Magcamit, 2017, p.20). However, "when considering the problem of relative gains, decision-makers usually only care about the most powerful country or a country with the strongest upward mobility" (Bin, 2003, p.315). In this sense Trump should have viewed the TPP not through the prism of relative gains vis-à-vis other member states but assess how the trade agreement affects US power relative to China. When viewed in this regard, TPP ratification was a fundamentally realist policy, with the deal projected to result in significant losses for China (Sidkar and Mukhopadhyay, 2017, p.20) whilst simultaneously boosting US economic growth (Petri and Plummer, 2016, pp.10-11). Given the dependence of China on its regional neighbours, it is unlikely that it would have been able to find suitable alternative trading partners, therefore offering them a choice between economic marginalization or "constructive engagement" with TPP members (Poletti, 2018, p.58). Should China have chosen this latter option, they would have been locked-in a US-led trade regime designed specifically to limit the comparative advantages they derive from unfair trading practices (Chow, 2016, p.376). In this sense, ratification of the TPP would have afforded the US far greater leverage over China as opposed to a unilateral trade war and therefore would have been a much more suitable remedy to the failed policy of engagement. The US' withdrawal from the TPP has subsequently left the door open for Chinese involvement, with the remaining members far more likely to be laxer regarding China's trading practices, due to their desire for access to its large market (Foster and Doffey, 2018). Such a move would increase China's economic dominance over its neighbours and thus further its ability to project power in the region, an outcome anathema to the realist scholar. A realist administration would have avoided this outcome at all costs and ratified the TPP.

Furthermore, it would be misleading to limit the benefits of TPP ratification merely to the relative gains it would have accrued to the US – there were also strong strategic incentives for this policy. As Mearsheimer elucidates, China's neighbours all have a common interest in containing its rise so as to avoid domination but are not powerful enough to do so alone and therefore require US leadership (2014, p.385). In this light, the TPP could have been the first step in the 'coming balancing coalition' that Mearsheimer predicted would emerge to contain China's rise (Ibid., p.383). As Hasegawa elucidates, economic integration between states affords them a sense of mutual security against threats and often foreshadows military partnership (2017, p.164). Therefore, many TPP member states saw the initiative as vital from a security perspective, as it demonstrated that the US had a commitment to engage in a balancing policy against China (Miller, 2015, p.8). Before Trump's premature dismissal of the trade agreement, even an anxious India

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was considering engaging with the project (Tellis, 2014, p.112). Should this have occurred, the US would have succeeded in uniting China's regional neighbours in an extensive trade regime, with the potential for greater military cooperation further down the line. Without such a coalition, China's neighbours know that they cannot temper its ambitions in the South China Sea and are therefore reliant on US leadership to deter its irredentist policies there and prevent it from asserting control over the strategically crucial sea lane and the natural resources that lie under it (Emmerson, 2017, p.12). The TPP would have demonstrated such a commitment and thus acted as a firm bulwark against Chinese expansionism in the region (Hasegawa, 2017, p.164). That the Trump administration would ignore the geostrategic benefits of the TPP is therefore demonstrative that its policy approach does not align with offensive realism.

Conclusion

By using offensive realism as an analytical tool, I conclude that Donald Trump's economic policy towards China cannot be considered realist. If the US' fundamental goal is to contain China's rise and prevent it from achieving regional hegemony in East Asia, then Trump's decisions to withdraw from the TPP and initiate a trade war with China have been resounding failures. Whilst the status-quo policy of engagement is undesirable, the trade wars have accentuated Chinese relative gains as opposed to diminishing them and have therefore been unable to secure tangible concessions regarding China's unfair trade practices. The TPP withdrawal was similarly anti-realist, rejecting an agreed trade deal that would have allowed the US to set the trade agenda in East Asia, increased US gains relative to China and signalled to regional allies a lasting US commitment to contain China's rise. The net result of these policies is a China that remains on course to dominate East Asia economically, with a continuation of such a policy approach surely ushering in Chinese regional hegemony in the future.

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