

## Is China's Rise going to be Peaceful?

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### Abstract

This research paper maintains the notion the "Rise of China" at its core, while attempting to theoretically conceptualize its implications toward the current world order. It has also put a strong emphasis on the various relevant elements, which have mainly shaped the behavior of China in the global arena in various time periods. The theoretical framework used in this paper has been largely based on the school of thought of "Political Realism, where questions such as "Is China a status quo or revisionist power?" and "Is China's Economic interdependence with other countries and the attitude of China neighbors reason enough to permit its peaceful rise?" have been analyzed accordingly following the guidelines and principles of that specific school of thought. Lastly, this paper proposes that China's rise cannot be peaceful unless the world leadership will facilitate its further incorporation in the international system and perceives China as part of the solution instead of the problem.

**Key Words:** Rise of China; Interstate dynamics; Political realism; Status quo power; Revisionist power

## 1. Introduction

This is a question, which will most probably dominate a substantial part of the intellectual debates in the decades to come. The question posed above is not a question which corresponds to the present circumstances, since it would not be in accordance with the present situation of world affairs. But instead it is more of a question which corresponds to the future decades. The “rise of China” is the term used to describe China’s enhanced capabilities and influence and related synergies- has become a global phenomenon economically, diplomatically, culturally, and increasingly militarily.<sup>1</sup> As a phenomenon the “rise of China” marks one of the most significant events of the 21st century, given that China has experienced a pace and scale of economic growth unknown before to human history. This extraordinary performance could be described as a well balanced and efficient combination of market forces with the institutional factors, which have ultimately pushed for the adoption of pragmatist economic reforms and an efficient utilization of the international economic system. Thus, transforming China from an inward looking and antithetical toward the international system-country, to the world’s largest exporter and second largest importer. Nevertheless, this question applies to a period of time in the future in which the People's Republic of China will have reached an even higher economic development, a higher living standard for its citizens and a more potent hard and soft power. Given that economic development alters the behavior of countries, it makes the potential “change” in world affairs more feasible. Thus, the “change” in itself will have implications on the shifting of global powers as well as on the perception and the status of the PRC in the world affairs.

## 2. Rationale

Social sciences have limited instruments in giving accurate predictions. As, there is simply no empirical data available which could assist us in answering the question directly regarding an event which might or might not occur. Therefore, we have to analyze this question on a theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> Chung J.H., *East Asia responds to the rise of China: Patterns and Variations*, (Pacific Affairs: Volume 82, No.4 Winter 2009/2010) pp. 657.

plane.<sup>2</sup> IR theories could prove themselves as useful in guiding us in the right direction to answer the main question. Different schools of political thought have different notions on the interaction of global actors. In our assessment we believe the most effective way to analyze this question lies somewhere within the school of thought of "Political Realism".<sup>3</sup> However, the world is definitely more complex than realism portrays it to be, because states are not simply "isolated fortresses" relying solely on power. Therefore, political realism does have its limitations when it comes to taking under consideration the Non-state actors such as Multinational Enterprises or domestic politics or even the human factor which could be the leaders of particular countries. However, the notions offered by political realism are not totally anachronistic since they have strong fundamental arguments based on the idea that world politics is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature.<sup>4</sup> Starting from political theorists such as, Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Morgenthau, Carr or Waltz. Realism has continuously evolved and adapted to coherent situations in time by adding, removing or focusing on different factors. All political theorists have considered different factors to be the cornerstones for the dynamics of inter-state relations, may they be morality, military power or the leadership of countries. However, five assumptions of structural political realism persist up to this day and remain strong arguments to explain interstate dynamics<sup>5</sup>:

- Anarchic world order: States are the principal actors in international affairs with no higher authority imposing a concrete hierarchy upon the others.
- Military capabilities: Every State has military offensive capabilities of different sizes.

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<sup>2</sup> Schonfield, A. Introduction to the Annual Report, Social Science Research Council, Newsletter Special. London (1971).

<sup>3</sup> Robert J. Realism in the Study of World Politics, (International Organization at Fifty: Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics, Vol. 52, No. 4, Autumn 1998), pp. 971-991.

<sup>4</sup> Morgenthau H.J., *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, (Fifth Edition, Revised, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978) pp. 4-15.

<sup>5</sup> Mearsheimer J.J., *Structural Realism*, in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, eds., *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 3rd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 73-74.

- Unclear intentions: The intentions of States go under changes as time progresses and as governments modify, therefore they are unquantifiable.
- Survival: The principal goal of every State is its survival
- Rationality: States are defined as strategic calculators ensuring its survival.

According to the above mentioned political thinkers the human condition is defined differently and the source for conflicts is defined differently as well. Whatever their theoretical disagreements are, realists are unanimous in holding that human nature contains an ineradicable core of egoistic passions; that these passions define the central problem of politics; and that statesmanship is dominated by the need to control this side of human nature.<sup>6</sup> This means that states are not continually warring but instead have the disposition to do so.

As mentioned above the anarchic and complex world order makes it difficult to assess the main issue completely, leaving us to theorize on future developments. To reach the point in which we are able to answer the main question, we need to review some other important questions first. Such as Whether China is a “Status Quo Power” or a “Revisionist Power”? Is the world economic interdependence assurance that Chinas rise will be peaceful? What are the attitudes of China’s neighbor’s toward China?

At the present situation there is no doubt of a US domination in the world. Its economic development, its hard and soft power are undisputed facts which instate the US as the present world leading country. However, as empires are susceptible to time they go through different stages of a natural “life cycle”, which are growth, stability, maturity and decline.<sup>7</sup> In the recent decades the U.S has been involved in eight armed conflicts around the world since 1989 during the time of the implosion of the USSR.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Donnelly J., *Realism and International Relations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) pp. 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> Ferguson N., “Complexity and Collapse: Empires on the Edge of Chaos.” March/April Issue 2010, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65987/niall-ferguson/complexity-and-collapse> [Accessed 2 /5/ 2014].

<sup>8</sup> Though I believe that all armed conflicts conducted in the past two decades by the U.S are justifiable in their cause in order to correct the wrongs done in different regions in the world by governments or armed forces, yet they have no relevance to the posed question above.

Therefore, there have been increasing concerns that the U.S might be in an "Imperial Overstretch"<sup>9</sup>. Though it is difficult to identify in what stage the U.S is today we can observe that there are signs of an "Imperial Overstretch" and a very slow economic recovery from the 2008 financial crisis. These two above mentioned factors are not definitive in concluding an absolute decline of the U.S domination, but they do raise the question whether the present relative decline is going to progress to an absolute decline. Nevertheless, the global situation has been further complicated with a "Rise of China", and this has been pressing the need to further research the main question posed in the beginning.

After assessing the above mentioned facts and other relevant data we would like to give our interpretation on this matter that: No relevant hegemony in any period of time in the world would agree to step down willingly. In the case that if China at some period in the future would desire to deliver its values and concepts as the main principles of the world order. Then a "rise of China" could not be peaceful unless the current world leadership would accept the change in the nature of world affairs and facilitate a transition by creating the appropriate environment for China to be the new world leader.

## **2.1 China: Status quo or Revisionist power?**

The Chinese behavior in the international arena has changed dramatically over the years. Since abandoning of a strict Maoism where a clear realpolitik was followed, China has altered its international behavior gradually into a more neoliberal approach. To define whether China is a status-quo or revisionist state according to regime theory, seems difficult to do. First there should be a theoretical definition of a status-quo and revisionist state, since the definition might have different connotations according to the political system defining it.<sup>10</sup>

Status quo state: Is a state, which desires to cooperate within the existing international system without trying to challenge the current order.

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<sup>9</sup> Kennedy P., *The rise and fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military conflict from 1500 to 2000*, (London: Unwin Hyman Limited 1988) pp. 9-438.

<sup>10</sup> Not to be confused with the definition in Marxist theory. Enver Hoxha describes Revisionism as: the form bourgeois ideology and practice takes on within the revolutionary movement. Thus, in this paper we don't use the definition offered by Marxism instead use the definition offered by Liberalism.

Revisionist state: Is a state mainly concerned with its own power assertion and tries to alter the international order for its own interests.<sup>11</sup>

None of these two definitions fit completely China per se, instead China could be defined in fitting somewhere in-between. In different areas of global interaction China adopts different features which might resemble either one of the above mentioned definitions. The severe economic conditions in which China was under in the Maoist era, pushed forward the need to adopt a different approach by the Chinese government for economic development. That is that China could not develop unless it would cooperate with the international community. Receiving its membership in the WTO in 2001 has been a great step forward for China's economic development, and yet a symbolic gesture from the Chinese showing that they are willing to compromise and cooperate with the international community. The process which China underwent to make its economy compatible with the requirements of the WTO was a difficult process. Even though, it impacted its "sovereignty" since the legislature had to be changed and needed to be adapted to new legislatures, the process of change progressed as planned. This shows that China adopted a more neoliberal approach regarding the international community thus depicting China as a more Status quo oriented country.<sup>12</sup> However it could be argued that China's behavior follows a careful calculation of risk analysis. Meaning that China is willing to cooperate after assessing that the benefits will be larger than losses in the long term, thus initially accepting a disadvantageous position.<sup>13</sup> And as history displayed, the entering in the WTO proved to be a very beneficial investment for China.

In areas such as climate change regarding CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, China has been very vocal. China has taken a very strong stance regarding climate change toward developed economies, thus following a political realism. China's development and economic growth over the last 3 decades has come with a high cost, such as the continuous decline in their environment.

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<sup>11</sup> Abramo Fimo Kenneth Organski, in his theory of power transition defined status quo states as those that have participated in designing the "rules of the game" and stand to benefit from these rules. Challengers, or revisionist states, want "a new place for themselves in the international society" commensurate with their power. Revisionist states express a "general dissatisfaction" with their "position in the system", and they have a "desire to redraft the rules by which relations among nations work.

<sup>12</sup> Johnston, A. Is China a Status Quo Power? *International Security* 27(4) (2003), pp. 5-56.

<sup>13</sup> Kent, A, China's International Socialization: The Role of International Organizations. (*Global Governance* 8 2002), pp. 343-364.

By the year 2020 China will be the world's largest CO2 emitter. Thus, making China de-facto an important factor in the international cooperation over climate change. However in the contrary, during the Copenhagen summit in 2009 China displayed a strong opposition toward the initiative made by developed countries in regard to updating the Kyoto Protocol and imposing new requirements for the greenhouse emissions of developing countries. China considered the excessive emissions done historically from the developed countries in order to advance their economies as they key factor for the current environmental degradation. In other words, China considered developed countries to be responsible for global warming and according to the Chinese it would be unfair for developing countries to be counted as responsible for the developed countries behavior. In all fairness, it does seem hypocritical to require from the Chinese to be sacrificing their economic development in this stage where they are still in the process of developing their middle class. On the other hand the Chinese cannot seek greater say in world affairs as they constantly call for, without being a more responsible "stakeholder" for global issues.

Thus, in this aspect the evidence depicts China to have more revisionist tendencies. Unfortunately, this sections doesn't have the scope to go much more in detail regarding this question. However we can observe that China has greatly benefited in the past three decades through the international system instead of completely relying on hard power, meaning that practical issues have been more important than ideological issues in the international spectrum. According to Johnston, China cannot be considered as a revisionist power, instead it is more status quo-oriented power. It seems that the Chinese so far are weighing more as a status-quo power, due its constraints imposed by its domestic challenges. Meaning, that the Chinese in this period of time are mostly concerned with their economic development process instead of challenging the current world order. However China changes its approach when it fears its sovereignty could be harmed or when the current world leadership changes international norms by taking unilateral military actions in the world.<sup>14</sup> As we mentioned in the beginning that economic development alters the behavior of countries, and that intentions are unquantifiable therefore we cannot assess completely

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<sup>14</sup> Combes K., *Between Revisionism and Status Quo: China in International Regimes. China's behavior in the global trade, non-proliferation and environmental regimes*, (POLIS Journal Vol. 6, Winter 2011/2012) pp. 33.

what the future holds prepared for China. However, we might be able to see a shift in the paradigm by looking at the two last Chinese government slogans, from “Peace and Harmony” to “The Chinese Dream” this could display China as to be taking a more assertive role and more responsibilities in the global arena in pursuit for a multipolar world order.

## **2.2 Economic interdependence and the neighbors**

Probably the strongest argument supporting the notion that the “rise of China” will be peaceful, along with the argument of possession of nuclear weapons by various countries, is the argument of economic interdependence. The theory posed by Michael Mandelbaum<sup>15</sup>; suggests that by promoting interdependence and stronger economic integration: countries would benefit greatly in the sphere of security and economy. After the decline of the USSR, the world began to embrace more capitalist and market oriented strategies to develop their economies, that including China. This change paved the way for the trend of globalization, which facilitated the economic development of underdeveloped countries, again including China, which in the past had a GDP per capita lower than African nations.<sup>16</sup> Thus, lifting around 600 million people out of the poverty line. However, according to Kenneth N. Waltz economic interdependence does not always produce peace, instead it can be a source for friction among countries.

The 2008 financial crisis proved that financial interdependence could lead to a contagion of crisis around the world.<sup>17</sup> It showed that countries are much more vulnerable to the changes in the world economy, and thus depicting interdependence also as a source for economic destabilization. If we take a look at the economic interdependence of China, its neighbors and the US, while including the security factor as variable we can observe a very complex dynamic between them. “China’s rise” over the past 3 decades has had its implications in the change of the perception of its

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<sup>15</sup> Mandelbaum M., *The Ideas That Conquered the World: Peace, Democracy, and Free Markets in the Twenty First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Public Affairs Press, 2002) pp. 190-193.

<sup>16</sup> China Overview, the World Bank 2014; Available from”  
<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview> [Accessed 13/4/2014].

<sup>17</sup> Ahmedov, Z. and Bessler, D., *Structure of interdependencies among international stock markets and contagion patterns of 2008 global financial crisis*, (presentation at the Southern Agricultural Economics Association Annual Meeting, Corpus Christi, TX, February 2011).

neighbors through various events domestic and foreign. They have constantly altered the public, political and business opinion over the years in the other countries. The economic development of China has been a great source for suspicion for its neighbors, since China is beginning to dominate Asia economically as the world's second largest economy, questions have been raised whether this will influence the Chinese foreign policy into adopting revisionist tones.<sup>18</sup> This trend has created a change in the "tectonic plates" of geopolitics in East Asia. According to Jae Ho Chung there have been "balancing" tendencies against China and "bandwagon" tendencies from other East Asian countries. The scheme portrayed in the paper shows that countries such as: Japan, S Korea, Mongolia, Singapore, Australia and the Philippines, are balancing against China whereas Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, N Korea, Laos, Thailand and Malaysia are bandwagoning with China. This means that some countries perceive China's rise as security threat others see China's rise factor for stability and a great source for economic development. Nevertheless, the Chinese government has been relentlessly voicing that its rise is purely peaceful and that China only seeks to cooperate with the international community.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the Chinese government has made clear that it will not allow its sovereignty to be undermined.<sup>20</sup>

Figures show that trade between China and the US has been very imbalanced: in 2012 has had a trade deficit of \$315 billion from \$258 billion in 2007. Foreign Exchange Reserves in China increased to \$3.9 US Trillion in March of 2014 from \$3.8 US Trillion in December of 2013 thus making it the largest foreign holder of US debt.<sup>21</sup> Making the US economically more vulnerable to China's actions. However China's continuous increase in demand for oil as a major recourse for its economic drive, has made it extremely vulnerable to the Middle East region. The need to safely navigate the oil back to China by sea has increased the demand for the development of a stronger naval power. However, the geographic situation imposes to China to pass through many countries which could be influenced by the US

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<sup>18</sup> Wang, J.: *China's Peaceful Rise: A Comparative Study* University of Wisconsin May, 2009

<sup>19</sup> Chung J.H., *East Asia responds to the rise of China: Patterns and Variations*, (Pacific Affairs: Volume 82, No. 4 Winter 2009/2010) pp. 669-675.

<sup>20</sup> Thornton, J. L. 'China's Peaceful Rise: Speeches Of Zheng Bijian 1997-2004'. 2005. Web.

<sup>21</sup> Foreign Trade US Trade with China - Census Bureau, (Global Trade Atlas, U.S. International Trade Commission 2012), Available from: [www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html](http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html) [Accessed 25/4/2014].

actions and thus creating economic issues for China.<sup>22</sup> According to Hirschman economic imbalances gave Germany the ability to greatly influence neighboring countries in the 1930's.<sup>23</sup> Thus, creating fears that this might happen again in the present time. It seems that when it comes to matters of national security: economics has a leverage to inflict problems to other countries thus it can serve as a dampening mechanism for political situations. However, it doesn't seem to be the most important mechanism for peace.

### 3. Conclusion

There is no doubt of an emergence of China in the world during past three decades, or perhaps a re-emergence as Angus Maddison would depict it. The rise of new powers in the world brings with itself implications for the relevant status quo. Hegel's concept of recognition "anerkennung" seems to be a potent instrument in understanding the human condition which could also be helpful for describing interstate dynamics. According to Fukuyama's interpretation of Hegel, the struggle for recognition is the cause for conflict yet it is also the cause for every human brilliance.<sup>24</sup> It is the desire to impose our own values on others which creates the "Slave-Master" dialectic. According to Williams "Hegel conceives international relations as a struggle for recognition between states. Just as the original encounter between autonomous individuals was described as a struggle between life and death struggle, also the relation between sovereign states is comparable to a life and death struggle for recognition that includes the possibility of war".<sup>25</sup> To that I can add that, in the case of the interaction between sovereign states the same concept is applicable, with the difference that the interaction goes beyond the finite dimension of the autonomous individual, and instead the antagonism stretches on an indefinite ideological plane. Historically, China was the

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<sup>22</sup> Yue, J.: *Peaceful Rise of China: Myth or Reality?* International Politics, (London School of Economics and Political Science. Department of Government, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK, 2008) pp. 439-456.

<sup>23</sup> Hirschman A.: *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, report. ed. 1980).

<sup>24</sup> Fukuyama F. *The End Of History And The Last Man*. New York: Free Press, 1992. Print.

<sup>25</sup> Williams R.R.: *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition*, (University of California Press, 1997), pp. 335.

worlds most developed country until the event of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>26</sup> It was that particular historical current which China failed to seize, which consequently altered the course of history leading China to be a technologically and economically backward country. The lack of pragmatism from the Chinese Imperial leadership, created the opportunity for Japan to develop extensively in technology and military power hence deepening the expansionist appetite of Japan. The past century has been a century filled with injustice, famines, and wars for China. That is, only in the past three decades China seems to have found its way back to attaining the status it used to historically enjoy. It is China's and every others nations universal right to develop and flourish culturally and economically. The rise of China is an inevitable fact, and seems to be merely a matter of time, however it would be the moral obligation of China to guide the international system toward economic development and peace. It would be of great interest to perceive China as factor of stability and economic growth for the world. But instead, there is a trend of a "silent animosity" regarding China's rise. Time seems to be on China's side, and this might be obvious to its neighbors and to the current powers as well. Therefore, incentives to provoke conflicts with China at this time while it still is developing are quiet realistic, since in the future its dominance would dictate another system. This could be demonstrated with the issue of the Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, where the symbolic value is rapidly outpacing the intrinsic value of the islands, and an armed conflict seems to become more and more feasible. Therefore, to conclude China's rise cannot be peaceful unless the world leadership will facilitate its further incorporation in the international system and perceives China as part of the solution instead of the problem.

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<sup>26</sup> Maddison A., *Chinese Economic Performance in the Long Run*; (second edition revised and updated: 960-2030 AD Paris, OECD, 2007).

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