

Theoretical Discussions on China's Rise in the Era of Globalization

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Abstract

The rise of China in the 21st century has triggered long-lasting debates and has evolved into one of the most popular and heated topics in contemporary international relations (IR) scholarship. The key query on China's rise is how it will interact with the rest of the world. This paper discusses China's rise by engaging with the mainstream theoretical discussions in IR from the three schools of thought—liberalism, realism, and constructivism. From an analytical perspective, this paper examines these existing theoretical discussions on the rise of China, evaluates their arguments, and compares their reasoning logic. Finally, this paper suggests that China being a revisionist power is often an overexaggerated claim lacks convincing evidence. In fact, throughout the years, China's behaviors in global governance imply a tendency to climb-up within the existing status quo, rather than overthrowing or replacing it.

Keywords: Asian studies, China studies, globalization, political science, international relations, international relations theory, theoretical discussion

1. Introduction

The rise of China in the 21st century has triggered long-lasting debates on the changing landscape of the post-World War II global order, evolving into one of the most popular and heated topics in contemporary international relations (IR) scholarship (Pan & Kavalski, 2022). Starting from Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Open-up policy in the 1970s, China underwent tremendous transformations in almost all aspects, including economically, politically, and socially. Today, as the second largest economy in the world and soon to surpass that of the United States, China undoubtedly became a central focus of academic discussion in IR and the emerging field of global studies.

The key query on China's rise is how it will behave and interact with the rest of the world. Numerous scholars have dedicated their research to the puzzling questions: What is China's state agenda in the current international order? Will it challenge the existing global status quo? Does China pursue certain hegemony? And most importantly, will China end up in confrontation with the United States (Tammen & Kugler, 2006)? In seeking answers to these questions, we must first discover how China became the big player that it currently is. When China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, it started as an international rule-taker like most other countries. Yet, after becoming the biggest free-rider of economic globalization (Wang & Michie, 2021), increased influence in regional and global affairs made China significantly more potent as an active player in world politics.

With the above background, this paper aims to discuss China's rise by engaging with the mainstream theoretical discussions in IR from the three schools of thought—liberalism, realism, and constructivism. From an analytical perspective, this paper will examine these existing theoretical discussions on the rise of China, evaluate their arguments, and compare their reasoning, logic, and evidence. Finally, this paper would like to suggest that China being a

revisionist power is often an overexaggerated claim that lacks convincing evidence. In fact, throughout the years, China's behaviors and progressive steps in global governance imply that China tends to climb up within the existing international status quo, rather than overthrowing or replacing it. That is because, over the last few decades, China has relied on the system to thrive and still is benefiting greatly from it. Therefore, the argument of a revisionist China is, in many ways, not strongly convincing.

2. Globalization and Its Winners

There have been several waves of globalization throughout modern history, from the age of the gold standard to the Bretton Woods and the Cold War-dominated era (Lane, 2014). In this paper's context, globalization mainly refers to what is recognized as the third wave that began in the 1980s and continues to the present. The rise of China is primarily associated with this era of globalization, in which economic, financial, and trade integration around the globe formed unprecedented forces that expanded the modern capitalist system worldwide (Lane, 2014). This economic globalization results in a world of increased complex interdependence, producing apparent winners and losers. Although many scholars suggest that we are now entering an age of de-globalization or limited-globalization (Zheng, 2003), the impact and result of a globalized world system are unlikely to deteriorate or fade away anytime soon.

As prior research on the third wave of globalization has pointed out, this ongoing wave of global economic interdependence demonstrated several distinctive characteristics unseen in the past. Firstly, economic globalization has made a large group of developing countries enter global markets from which they largely benefited (Milberg & Winkler, 2013). Such as countries like China. Second, the development of globalization simultaneously caused certain countries to become increasingly marginalized in the international economic system. Conceptualized by Immanuel Wallerstein as "peripheries", these "losers" of globalization suffered severe income decline and rising poverty (Wallerstein, 2011). Thirdly, this ongoing wave of globalization has accelerated international movements of capital and human migration to a substantial new scale like never before (Czaika & Haas, 2014).

1.1 The United States and the Liberal International Order

The United States, given its dominating position in the world since the Second World War, naturally turned out to be one of the winners of globalization, not only economically but also politically. It is fair to say that the United States largely led the process of globalization itself, and while globalization expanded, the US-led liberal international order also thrived (Gruszczynski et al., 2022). American political scientist Francis Fukuyama once pointed out in his famous "end of history" argument that the US hegemony (in the form of liberal democracy) will remain the final form of world governance along with the globalization is defined by the expansion and formation of a capitalist world system, then the US-led liberal order played a decisive role in this process. The liberal international order emerged at the end of World War II,

and became the single dominant international order following the end of the Cold War in the 1990s (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999). It is believed that the order could provide a more secure international environment and maintain peace between nations and states. Indeed, the international liberal order has dominated for good reasons, as Western industrialized nations broadly welcomed and supported it (Ikenberry, 2018). After such liberal ideology became the central policy drive of the United States towards the rest of the world, its hegemony further cumulated and stabilized.

The era of globalization functioned as an effective pushing force for the US-led liberal order, which made it into a "global mindset" associated with concepts of "democracy", "freedom", and "universal value" (Keohane, 2012). Beyond the economic context, much of the globalization process is related to cultural, political, and social changes in developing parts of the world and the flow of information from the West to the rest. Skeptics of globalization have repeatedly accused it of being hegemonic and exclusively Western (Norrlof, 2010). That vast changes brought by globalization on local societies are causing indigenous cultures and traditions to diminish while Western/American ideologies, practices, and values continue to take over.

1.2 China the Big Free-Rider

As mentioned earlier, another significant change brought by globalization is the rise of China. As the world's second-largest economy, not only did China gain hugely from globalization, China very much flourished because of it. Many scholars have suggested that China is the biggest free-rider of globalization—without globalization, China would not be the powerful international player it is today (Amadi, 2020). By definition, free-riding is when some actors enjoy the benefits of collective action without contributing (Olson, 1974). Although China is not favorable of the free-riding label, it cannot deny the fact that it is a champion in globalization's most remarkable success story.

According to scholars, 2001 marked a milestone in China's path toward integration into the global economy (Kalathil, 2017). This was when China joined the WTO, which turned out to be a total game changer. Over the decades of rapid globalization, China quickly learned to grasp the benefits of free trade, and with its low labor cost and high production rate, China became a powerhouse of world manufacturing. Referred by some as the "Chinese miracle", globalization has led the country to grow at an annual average of ten percent for twenty consecutive years, becoming an engine of growth (Lin et al., 2003). It is also evident in the World Bank data that China's GDP per capita increased from \$959 USD in 2000 to \$10409 USD in 2020.

Research has suggested that the "Chinese miracle" rationale may be twofold. First, after witnessing the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, China had to escape a similar fate by accelerating its steps in socio-economic reforms. Second, and most importantly, the wave of globalization offered China one unprecedented opportunity to free-ride and reap the fruit of a globalizing world economy, which Chinese leadership successfully seized with a pragmatic mindset (Amighini, 2018).



2. Theoretical Perspectives on China's Rise

In many ways, today's China actively presents itself as a passionate advocate for continued globalization and economic openness. Especially since the Donald Trump Administration took office, in which an anti-globalization tendency showed up under the "America First" slogan (de Graaff et al., 2020). Therefore, the key debate that follows is the extent and ways in which China, with its power and potential, is adapting or comforting to the rules of the game, or perhaps developing some alternative path. In other words, whether China is a status quo or revisionist power to the liberal international order. As this paper engage the debate, we shall first look at the various theoretical frameworks in IR in terms of their analysis of China's rise and its implications on the international order.

2.1 Liberalist Perspective: Interdependence and Political Globalization

As argued by liberalists, nation-states are not the only actors in world politics that matter, as interest groups, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and even individuals are all influential to the behaviors and practices of states (Moravcsik, 2001). Liberalism holds an optimistic view that the greater the trade volume and bilateral exchange between countries, the less likely they will end up in conflict. Similarly, the more integrated a country is into the world system, the less motivated it will be to challenge the existing order. In the era of rapid globalization, China increased reliance on technology and expertise from the West, particularly from the United States; and cross-border trades have significantly improved China's foreign relations, becoming structurally reliant on the global market (Roden, 2003). From the perspective of liberalism, China's rise results from global economic interdependence. In order to maintain its advantage, it would be rational for China to uphold the existing international order. Scholars argue that it makes no sense for a rising China to pursue aggressive foreign policies. That China's participation in the system created by the liberal international order (with its rules and norms) transformed the country from a previous outsider into a "state-capitalism" and status quo player (Carlson, 2012).

Another core concept stressed by liberalism is international institutions, which is associated with the idea of political globalization. IR scholar Robert Keohane has identified that international institutions and rules (from globalization) help facilitate mutually beneficial cooperation within and among nation-states (Keohane, 2012). Liberalists believe institutions are a key channel in facilitating political globalization and promoting world peace. As international institutions improve communication between states, they are also effective in changing state preference from solely pursuing self-interest to more inclusive cooperation. Indeed, international institutions, such as the WTO, often play the role of mediation between different states with diverse goals. Cooperation between states, acknowledged by liberalism, is easier in economic and environmental subjects than in security (Keohane, 2012). Since it can be difficult to be sure of a state's real intentions is to provide platforms to reduce the possible cheating behaviors of

states by raising the cost. After calculating loss aversion, states are more likely to cooperate than to bear the risk of defeat. Sharing many memberships with the United States, China is an active participant in international institutions. China is now one of the largest contributors in the United Nations, signing over 300 international conventions in global peacekeeping (Fung & Lam, 2021).

Liberalists insist that China's status quo position can indeed be evident from its involvement in international institutions. As those institutions cover a wide range of global governance areas that upload the liberal international order, the relationship between China and the Western world also enhanced substantially, reducing the chances of conflict and strategic misjudgment. Furthermore, some liberalists are even hopeful that with interdependence and political globalization, China will eventually become a liberal democracy (Chu, 2021). Although the chances are rare for the Chinese leadership to adopt a form of Western-style democracy, today's China is dramatically different from the socialist country it was half a century ago. In fact, the official slogan of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" is no longer so accurate. In reality, "capitalism with Chinese characteristics" might be a better suited description for today's China.

2.2 Realist Perspective: Power Transition Taking Place

Contrary to the optimistic view of liberalists, the realist school in IR presents a much different angle of debate on China's rise. Realism believes that the rise of China is a challenge to the US-led liberal international order, and that China holds a revisionist intention to the existing global balance of power (Mearsheimer, 2010). Although China has largely integrated into the world system with economic globalization, it is believed that politically, China still grasps very different intentions and agendas from the Western world. Viewing the phenomenon as a case of power transition, scholars of realism argue that China is undermining the existing order by pursuing some form of hegemony, which could potentially lead to competition, confrontation, or even possible military conflict with the dominant power of the United States.

The theoretical focus of realists is on the power game between states. While there are differences within the school of realism, certain fundamental proponents remain the same. First, it is assumed by realism that human nature is selfish; therefore, the biggest motivation of nation-states is driven by self-interest. Secondly, the international system of our world is anarchic, meaning there is no higher authority or any "world government" above and beyond nation-states. Thirdly, due to such circumstances, self-interested sovereign states become the sole central actors in world politics. Under such logic, states are thus constantly competing for more power and security out of the need to survive. Realism presents a pessimistic scene of a zero-sum game, where all states seek to take advantage of any possible means to achieve their own relative gains over the others. When states' survival depends entirely on the struggle for power and security, then conflicts will take place only in a matter of time.

With such perspectives, there is not much surprise for realists to view and interpret China's rise as revisionist—with intentions to challenge the liberal international order, change the

international system, and obtain hegemony. To support this argument, a key piece of evidence put forth by realists is China's increase in its military spending. According to research data, if China continues with its current trend in military expansion, its spending will surpass that of the United States within ten years (Agyapong, 2020). It is pointed out by John Mearsheimer, a representative scholar of realism, that as a rapidly rising power becomes more capable and confident, the dominating power will fear losing its superiority; eventually, the entangling and struggling between the two will drive them toward war (Mearsheimer, 2014). Similarly, the Thucydides Trap argument also proclaims that in history, war is more likely to occur when the dominating power is threatened by the emerging power (Allison, 2017).

The above realism perspectives gained considerable popularity in recent years, as the relationship between the United States and China significantly worsened during the Trump administration. Presently, much research influenced by realism are treating China's rise as a case of power transition in their analysis (Chan, 2007). It is worth noting that such a trend exists not only in the outside world but also within China and the works of Chinese IR scholars. Based on the theory of power transition, the structure of our international system is hierarchic, with the most powerful state (the United States in this context) at the top. This dominant state then relies on a system (the liberal international order) to maintain regional and global stability. However, stability is not always achievable because growth dynamics can change power relations and generate potential challengers (such as China). Yet, it is not always the case for emerging powers to challenge because the motivation for re-writing the rules and norms of the existing order depends on the level of dissatisfaction from the rising power towards the status quo. When the rising power reaches the stage of power parity (the odds of winning or losing are even) with the dominant power, the possibility to challenge increases. If the rising power is mostly satisfied with the status quo, then a peaceful power transition occurs. Otherwise, the risk of war increases if the rising power is dissatisfied with the status quo (Tammen et al., 2017). Although not all advocates of the power transition theory agree that a rising China will end up at war with the United States, it is generally believed that a case of power transition is happening. With China's rise and its capabilities to either move up in the hierarchy or potentially alter the rules and norms of the liberal international order.

2.3 Constructivist Perspective: Be Cautious of Self-fulfilling Prophecy

Unlike the optimistic view of liberalism nor the pessimistic view of realism, constructivism took a distinctively unique approach to analyze China's rise. In the context of IR, constructivists believe that the realities of the world are not natural but are products of social construction. Meaning material resources in world politics, such as military force or economic power, should be understood through the social concepts that define their meanings for humans and society. Concepts such as anarchy, power, sovereignty, and institutions do not exist in the material sense, like mountains, rivers, and lakes in nature. They are artificial products made by humans and are the result of interaction between different actors. According to constructivist IR scholar Alexander Wendt, the condition of anarchy in the international system is what states make of it,



meaning it is socially constructed.

When it comes to explaining states' behaviors and motivations, constructivism suggests that states act towards objects and other states based on the meanings that the objects/others have to them (Wendt, 1992). In general, constructivism is a critique of both liberalism and realism. Constructivists view reality as subject to change and emphasize different realities based on different perceptions and meanings. From the constructivist perspective, what is real and unreal about the assumptions in IR, cannot be reduced to material existence only. Rather, IR should be understood within the social, cultural, and political context of meanings based on socialization patterns over time (Wendt, 1999). From this analysis, the behaviors of states then differ from one another on different levels of constructed realities. For example, while the United States acts more realist against Iran and Russia, it adopts a more liberal approach when dealing with Canada and the UK.

Simply put, constructivists believe that the reality of international politics is a world of our own making. From this perspective, whether the rise of China is a challenge to the liberal international order also largely depends on human construction. In the international system, the dominant state has significant constitutive power to shape its own image, how states view other states, and how states desire other states to view themselves. Referred to as the danger of self-fulfilling prophecy, it is argued that when the dominating state (the United States) views the rising power (China) as a revisionist, it will treat the other as a threat, making conflict almost certain between the two. Likewise, if the dominating state views the other as open to communication and dialogue, the two are more likely to arrive at a peaceful solution. In this logic, the question of China being revisionist or status quo remains open-ended, as the result largely depends on how the actors will socially construct it.

3. Conclusion

With the above theoretical discussions on China's rise, it can be observed that the debate is greatly divided among the mainstream schools in IR. Yet, the indisputable fact is that China has risen as a significant player in the international system from the era of globalization. In conclusion, this paper suggests that the claim of China being a revisionist to the existing international order lacks sufficient evidence. However, this does not mean that a revisionist approach is not among the choices of China, but that the current evidence is not convincing enough to conclude a revisionist China. In fact, China has never rejected the beneficial principles of the liberal international order (at least not openly). So far, most of China's behaviors and approaches in international affairs suggest that it is more willing to evolve into a status-quo power within the existing system. Just US-China tensions alone in recent years cannot be solid enough to label China as a revisionist power. As mentioned, China's rise is the result of globalization, which is largely shaped by the liberal international order and the expansion of capitalism. These were the foundations for China to thrive upon. Today, as the world's second-largest economy and a major actor in world politics, one should not be surprised that

China is seeking more voice and influence in international affairs due to its growth rate and changed circumstance in power relations. China might want to alter, adjust, or revise some of the norms and rules of the order in its favor, but this cannot be equivalent to the abandonment or overthrow of the entire system and to replace the hegemonic position of the United States, at least not based on current evidence.

Overall, the earlier discussed perspectives from different schools in IR can provide valuable theoretical insights into interpreting the rise of China. As liberalism stresses the importance of economic interdependence, international institutions, and political globalization, it is optimistic that a win-win situation can be maintained as China integrates economically, socially, and politically with the West. On the other hand, Realists hold a much more pessimistic view of China in the international order. With its focus on international anarchy and states' constant competition for security and power, realism sees China's rise as a challenge to the existing system. Different from both liberalism and realism, constructivists argue that whether China's rise is a threat hugely depends on how the reality is socially constructed. Perhaps, one better approach is to analyze these theories in combination with each other instead of in opposition. This way, future research may lead to a more comprehensive understanding of China's rise and its interactions with the international order.

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