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## Reviews

### Reviewing the Challenge of Rising China to the United States' Hegemony from the Neo-Classical Realist Perspective

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*"For a major power, the love of wars will lead it to ash;  
 Peace without alert will exhaust its strength."*

The method of Sima, Chinese Military Text of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC

#### Abstract

In this review article, it is, perhaps, permissible to argue that the structure of neoclassical realism is the best analytical tool for understanding the current challenges that China presents to the United States and US led liberal democracies. China's threat to America is argued as a racial fear facilitated by the American mainstream. Firstly, the paper will critically analyze the other main approaches of realism, namely structural realism (defensive and offensive), in order to create a preamble for an in-depth understanding of the so-called potential threats that China presents to the United States. This article will also investigate the extent of China as a 'security threat.' China's military, economic, institutional and soft power are defined in the scope of neoclassical realism. Finally, the article will suggest the reasons why Europe may play a mediation role between the Sino-US competition.

**Keywords:** China, Sino-US relations, U.S. hegemony, China's Rise.

#### 1. Introduction

Recently, the director of policy of the U.S. state department, Kiron Skinner, remarked that "China is the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian" (Chan, 2019). Skinner further explained, "When we think about the Soviet Union in that competition [the Cold War], in a way, it was a fight within the Western family." Such statements reflect the undermining offensive realism not only from the security level of the American mainstream but also from the cultural-colonial understandings that form a clique on China's rise. The concept of "yellow peril" has its new academic space under the security studies. As Layne (2018) puts it, "the center of gravity, shifting from the Euro-Atlantic world to Asia, has ended the *Pax Americana*." Referring to America and Europe together as the "Euro-Atlantic" certainly enhances the whiteness

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\* The term yellow peril is a racist terminology that describes the people of East Asia and the fear of existential threat to the West. In the 19th century, the term was adopted for the encouragement of Western imperial powers to wage wars against Asia.

of America and naturally its cardinal protector position for the Western civilization, which subsequently makes its hegemonic position unquestionable. It is not surprising considering the Chinese exclusion act in the 1880s, which did not really end until 1965 in America. Thus, American social revulsion for China and Chinese people has a deep ethnocentric root.

Historically, America never had a leisure class that is comparable to the European intellectual and cultural connoisseurs who had a long experience of studying the Chinese fine arts and literature (e.g. *Chinoiserie* movement\*), which in turn created fondness for the Chinese culture and mind. The religious and cultural detachment from the painstaking European cultural and philosophical way of life fostered the simple and puritanical focus of America on mere economic and military capability, which is not able to rightfully accommodate cultures and minds of other distant traditions. Sadly, most of the modern scholarship on China related to international relations' issues is conducted by the functionalists. In the Americanized context, China's rise is seen as a threat not only by the traditional establishment but also by the West's own multi-ethnic components that may feel the threat of a homogeneous major power. Albeit the politically correct connotation of the West, homogenous east Asian societies do have advantages of mobilization of beliefs and competitive mental and IQ capacities over the multiethnic melting pot societies (Rushton, 1999). Pointed out by Anastasio and colleagues (Anastasio et al., 2012: 43), ethnic or racial memory of a nation was passed down through heredity (e.g. *das Volk und Blut und Boden*†: blood and soil) that bound the nation and state together. As it was argued by British historian Martin Jacques (2012), China does not see itself as a state in the Westphalian sense, but rather as state based on *Han* nationality. So, Mearsheimer's (2017) prediction that China will not keep its strength in comparison to the United States for the future might be flawed. Here, it is obvious that the ignorance of historical and ethnical factors hindered much of the research endeavor of structural realism. The revitalization of Chinese people, termed by three generations of Chinese communist leaders, also underlines the key reason for the *PaxSinica*. Therefore, for the Chinese regime, America is the most detrimental challenger for its revitalization. China's thirst for rise is the result of psychological resentfulness of China's tragic history of humiliation, namely the opium war and the Japanese invasion during the WWII (Zanadu, 2020). Structural realists, thus, only interpret China's rise from the functional point of view, but rarely on the premise of cultural-societal interplay.

Waltz' (2000) structural realism demonstrates the degree of self-determinism and absorption of the puritanical minds. Waltz's attests that America benefited from possessing a strong nuclear deterrent fit into the offense – a defense theory that believes that a super strong defense protects a nation from offensive threats. A sense of cowboy film becomes the general spirit of the American structural realism. Waltz furthermore contested that structuralists can predict what will happen but not necessarily when it will happen (Waltz, 2000). This leaves a high degree of arbitrary instances in the research approach of structural realism. Thus, neo-classical realism is the most conductive approach for understanding the issue of China since societal relations, strategic culture, and the nature of domestic politics are heavily interwoven with each other (Ripsman, 2011).

### **The State of Being**

Before using the neoclassical realist lens to analyse the U.S-China competition, it is advisable to first provide an overview of the current world affairs and clarify whether we are living in a multipolar, bipolar, or unipolar world. It is true that after the Cold War, the United States' unipolar position was mainly assured by its preponderant power in military and economy. Restated by Mearsheimer (2016), “the USA, in other words, is the sole great power. It has achieved global hegemony, a feat no other country has ever accomplished (p. 68).” However, such unipolar predominance also drove realism to its unpopularity after the 1990s. As Mearsheimer put, “you need a multipolar world to play the great power politics” (2017). Furthermore, as Waltz (2000) argued, after Soviet Union's fall, there is no other eminent power to challenge the United States; so, the unipolar position also fostered much of the global power disequilibrium.

\* *Chinoiserie* movement is a form of art style that entered Europe in 18th century. The partial number of European direct experiences of East Asia and their restricted movement created a level of mystification of East Asian cultures.

† Although it is a concept from the Nazi ideology of *Lebensraum*, it illustrates territorial land that connects with the indigenous population.

As we entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the economic progress made by China accompanied by its technological and military power, the potential revitalization of Russia in some areas (e.g. Putin's revitalization of the Russian spirituality), the possible rise of India all contributed to the modern formation of a multipolar world. The international order based on liberal rule is now facing the constant challenges from the rise of China and Russia (Layne, 2018). However, in the list of American foreign policy and strategic consideration, the immediate threat that would rank number one is China with its economic, technological, and coercive diplomatic strength. Thus, in reality, a bipolar constituent is closer to the true state of the world. For example, the traditional structural realism, represented by Mearsheimer, assumes the way for containing China's rise should include offshore balancing and containment of China by its neighbor countries. Otherwise, the structural realism assumes threat to the regional hegemony of the U.S. in the Asian Pacific (Mearsheimer, Waltz, 2016; Etzioni, 2015). It is believed that China is now ready to insulate itself and reduce its dependence on rival countries and potential enemies while developing tools for conducting economic statecraft and even, if necessary, for waging economic warfare (Friedberg, 2018). Friedberg furthermore listed "hiding capacities to bide its time", "binding and hedging by using economic incentives," and "shaping and restructuring through coercive approaches" as three major steps for China to challenge the world.

### **Neoclassical Realism on Sino-U.S. Affairs**

In short, neoclassical realism represents an effort to return structural realism to its classical roots (Ripsman, 2011). Classical realism is much more philosophical, reflective, and ethical than the instrumental realism (Weaver, 2015). So, neoclassical realism is a marriage between classical realism and structural realism where the scientific rigor is not to be compromised. According to a Canadian scholar Ripsman (2011), the structure of a neoclassical realist analysis for the security problems consists of societal relations, strategic culture, and the nature of domestic politics. However, to make the analysis more relevant to the challenges that China presents, it is reasonable to look into the four pillars suggested by Layne (2018), which are military power, economic power, institutions, and soft power. Does China's rise in fact rise present a threat for America? We can answer this question through the following analyses.

### **Military Power**

China's overall military is still lagging behind that of the United States (Layne, 2018). However, according to Navarro (2015), in some areas, China is increasing its antisatellite weapon capabilities, which poses a threat to the United States. In China, People's Liberation Army (PLA) internally supports the continued rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and is willing to obey directives from the top party leaders. The PLA's influence on the assortment of China's highest civilian leaders and ability to shape the domestic political environment is significant (Saunders, 2010). Xi's *China Dream*, under the nationalism rhetoric, succeeded in persuading common people's support for PLA. PLA's strategic culture is its focus on proficiency and willingness to upgrade the military and technical skills of soldiers in order for them to be able to operate more sophisticated equipment and conduct more complicated operations (Kiselycznyk, Saunders, 2010). In recent times, the revisionist approaches in the South China Sea and the deployment of military base in Djibouti\* demonstrate China's military ambition. However, defensive realists China's overall military capacities cannot reach the global prominence of that of the U.S. other than being a contender to the U.S. in the Asia-Pacific Region. In addition, China's PLA practically has no field combating experience compared to the American military.

### **Economic Power**

Currently, China is replacing the US and becoming the world's largest creditor country (Layne, 2018). In fact, it is the largest foreign creditor of the United States. Between 2000 and 2017 alone, debt owed from foreign countries to China soared ten-fold from less than \$500 billion to more than \$ 5 trillion (Tan, 2019). Xi Jinping's Belt Road Initiatives (BRI) pushed the domestic

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\* China's strategic point in Africa due to the favorable location of the horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean. China has invested 590 million USD in this project to further assure the showcase of China's blue water capacities. For more information, please refer to Max Bearak, "In strategic Djibouti, a microcosm of China's growing foothold in Africa," *The Washington Post*, Last modified Dec. 30th, 2019. [Electronic resource]. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/in-strategic-djibouti-a-microcosm-of-chinas-growing-foothold-in-africa/2019/12/29/a6e664ea-beab-11e9-a8bo-7ed8a0d5dc5d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/in-strategic-djibouti-a-microcosm-of-chinas-growing-foothold-in-africa/2019/12/29/a6e664ea-beab-11e9-a8bo-7ed8a0d5dc5d_story.html)

political favoritism for State Owned Enterprises and companies backed by the state interests to pursue mergers and acquisition projects overseas. According to data from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (MofCom), the total stock of outward foreign direct investment owned by Chinese firms in 2017 was 1.8 trillion USD, sixty-two times the 2002 amount of 29.9 billion USD (Rithmire, 2019). The economic impetus for development beyond its own borders also fostered the Chinese domestic discussion on industrial upgrade from the intensive labor focused industrial focus to technological and AI based economic set-ups.

**Institutions**

China has erected Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a protest to the Brenton Wood system. AIIB is regarded by Ikenberry (2017) as a Chinese external innovation outside the status-quo of international organizational framework. Beijing has made it a primacy to appoint leading figures in international organizations, including the International Telecommunication Union, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), and the Food and Agriculture Association (Sheperd, 2020) as its representatives. Inside the U.N., China is also opposing to the enlargement of the security council and trying to further challenge the liberal international order (Ikenberry, Darren, 2017). Much of the Chinese assertiveness on the international stage is motivated by the Chinese dream rooted in the revitalization from the national humiliation nightmare (Zanadu, 2020). Propaganda of nationalism is installed throughout the Chinese society from early years to the formative and higher education systems. Thus, the discourse of China’s international strategy is relied on this walk away from being the sick of Asia.

**Soft Power**

Although China has an ambition to revive its cultural value and popularity in the world, it fails to do so largely due to the shortcomings on the societal, domestic, and strategic level. Its relatively new role in the global affairs and integration may justify such inexperience. The lack of internal political transparency makes China’s international image agonizing for many. In recent years, the blackouts of Confucius institutes around the world show the failure of Chinese cultural diplomacy. Furthermore, China’s cultural products and entertainment industry cannot rightfully capture the world’s attention. There are also barriers to China’s soft power legitimacy (Kaylan, 2019). The overall weakness of world’s cultural narrative and enactive ability hurt its overall strategy.

**Table 1.** Four pillars of neoclassical analysis

Scope /Dimension	Societal Relations	Strategic Culture	Domestic politics	Threat to the U.S.
Military Power	PLA decides civilian leadership	Proficiency (know-how) and innovation	Nationalism based civilian support	No
Soft Power	Inexperience in global affairs	Lack of knowledge on soft power and imagery enactment	Lack of political transparency	No
Economic Power	Large foreign currency reserves and primacy of state-owned enterprise	Technology and AI Industry 2.0	Belt and Road Initiative for overseas M&A	Yes
Institutions	Hundred years of humiliation and revitalization of the Chinese nation	Increase decisiveness in the IO and push the weight to build its own system	Propaganda of nationalism from early years to the formative and higher educational systems	Yes

### 3. Conclusion

Historically, Europeans had more experience with China as a civilization, with the appreciation of its culture, philosophy, and arts throughout the centuries. Such experiences enabled Europeans to form civilized dialogues with the Chinese. Chinese intellectuals and elites tend to see Europe as par excellence, to some degree with great admiration, while Americans are just seen as a functional necessity that one has to engage with. A centuries old Chinese proverb says, 'A scholar is always wrong when he is in front of a gunman,' which reflects the Chinese wisdom of confronting the blunt offensive realism.

China can engage with the U.S. only on a functional basis, not as a civilization per say. So, Huntington's credence China-U.S. competition as the clash of civilizations is also rather self-wishful. The United States is merely an extension of the Anglo puritanism and does not fulfill the archaeological criteria of civilization (Childe, 1950). As put by Friedberg (2018), China's post-Mao grand strategy is somehow being portrayed in equivalence with the American version of grand strategy. This is in contrary to Deng Xiaoping's famous analogy of "Cross the river by touching the stones." Even in the current political world, Xi Jinping is still battling the internal political fights with his oppositions in which the future course and direction of China is debated in the domestic political arena. So, China-U.S. competition is maximally a functional systematic struggle in which the magnitude of "the clash of civilizations" is perhaps overly exaggerated.

European Union should play a significant role in balancing the Sino-U.S. clash of interests. This will also provide the beneficial leveraging power for Europe to sustain its own prominence and strategic position. Zanadu (2020) suggested an integrative approach for diplomatic engagement with China, which changes and comforts the resentfulness of China. Such humanistic approach is a natural domain for Europe. In order to bring peace to the world, it is necessary to move the national security issues beyond the functional level and start engaging with civilized dialogues.

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