

## A Crisis of Status Quo or Power Transition Amidst China Rise: An Integrative Review of a Literature

Pervaiz Ali Mahesar\*

Ali Khan Ghumro †

Iftikhar Ali ‡

**Abstract** *This article reviews China's rise in the context of Status Quo or Power Transition in international society. A growing power strives to gain its power, prestige, and position among the comity of nations. A rising power can be a rival, or it supports the status quo of global governance. This review showed that there is no power transition in the global order whereas, Beijing is willing to engage or cooperate with the USA and existing institutions to keep the status quo of the power. China is not in a hasty mood to replace the American global order, but it will continue to push softly for multipolarity.*

- Vol. VI, No. I (Winter 2021)
- Pages: 281 – 286
- p- ISSN: 2520-0348
- e-ISSN: 2616-793X
- ISSN-L: 2520-0348

**Key Words:** Status Quo, Power Transition, China, US, Peaceful Rise, Soft Power, and Bandwagoning

### Introduction

One of China's long-term goals is to become a regional power. Beijing knows that America is a hegemonic power that seems to be beyond its reach. Hence, their leaders acknowledge privately that they are not in a position to counter the USA. Recently Beijing has adopted a policy of bandwagoning that seeks to adjust the US globally. However, the US remains far ahead of China in key determinants of national power, including gross domestic product.

The phrase (Peaceful Rise) was developed by a group of Shanghai academics close to the new leadership led by Hu Jintao that was installed in Beijing last year. Zheng Bijian explained the notion of 'peaceful rise' at the annual Boao Forum for international business. China has been saying for years that it needs a peaceful environment for its development. Beijing is now underlining that regional and international stability is not threatened by its rapid development. That establishes a mutually reinforcing theoretical balance between the rise of China and inter-national stability — China will develop in a peaceful environment and contribute to world peace through its development ([Yong Deng and Thomas G Moore, 2004](#)).

It is to be noted here that the changing dynamics of world politics have drastically changed, and it will not be founded only on constitutional or legal formalities but beyond it. Instead, there would be a transformation from a unipolar to a multipolar world. In this sense, most of the Realist Theorists argue the return/revival of the previous powers. These powers would, as usual, compete, cooperate, and influence the events and situations ([John J. Mearsheimer, 2001](#)). This prediction is based on the premise that multipolar systems emerge at the heart of the system from conventional "strong" equilibrium and are necessarily conflictual. Professor John J. Mearsheimer, while disagreeing with the above prediction and was of the view that a return to multipolarity means that as poles within the international system, several great powers will emerge to join the United States. While David A. Lake asks what the shape of international politics could and whether there be a transition to unipolarity or multipolarity. He argues that it largely depends on China, how they are going to react or play a role at the global level ([David A. Lake, 1984](#)).

History tells us that dramatic structural changes rarely unfold smoothly or peacefully,

\*Department of Political Science, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan.

†Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan.

‡Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, Karakoram International University, Gilgit, Pakistan..

whereas hegemonic wars are systemwide military contests of unlimited means. The fundamental issue at stake is the maintenance or acquisition of prestige. Prestige decides who will order and govern the international system ([Robert Gilpin, 1983](#)). This article provides an integrative review of the literature to understand the status quo or power transition in the midst of China's rise. There are two separate sections: status quo power and power transition; then it reviews where China stands in the international order.

### Literature Review

In this section, the researcher has reviewed China's rise in the context of status quo power or power transition. It reviewed studies that see China as a status quo power, whereas other studies reflect on a power transition. China is interpreted or portrayed in different ways. For instance, some say that Chinese soft power can make its transition smooth ([Sheng Ding, 2010](#)). The role approaches and policies of China with regard to institutions and organizations (G20, IMF, IFIs) have been explored by Sinologists. The findings of the study show China is actively engaged in the discussions and actions of the G20. It submits proposals, enhances share, tries to leverage voting in its favour. This amply justifies that it is increasing its position, power and internationalizing its currency. This system has prospered. Hence, the existing system may not be overturned as observed by Western scholars. In this context, China is the force of the status quo. It claims that the new international order is faulty and that several unequal and irrational elements remain. It has long been important to reform them. As noted in the research, that Beijing may not be fully called a supporter of the status quo, but rather a reform-minded power ([Ren Xiao, 2015](#)).

Experts agree that China is not America. Chinese culture, heritage, history, and civilization is deeply rooted in the past. However, it is portrayed as a revisionist and challenger in the Western Sino-centric scholarship. China will have to work and wait before it could reap the fruits of international leadership. Since the existing system is still dominated by the West, Beijing appears to be a free rider. It neither determines rules nor international order. Hence, it manipulates the existing international system in its favour ([Suisheng Zhao, 2018](#)).

[Ghazala Yasmin Jalil \(2019\)](#) explains her study from the perspective of aggressive realism, advocated by John Mearsheimer, which predicts intense rivalry and confrontation between China and the US. She discusses the actions of China as a growing force against America. Her study reveals that China, far from being an offensive, hegemonic and revisionist regime, is a status quo force aimed at maintaining rather than disrupting its place in the international system. The paper states that the action of China shows elements of defensive rather than aggressive realism. She concludes that, far from being a state maximizing revisionist power, the action of China seems to be more of a status quo power. China can be a source of stability in the area instead of being a threat and a source of instability. As Mearsheimer argues, China's foreign policy tends to be motivated by defensive realism rather than the ideals of offensive realism. There is no imminent confrontation between China as a growing power and the US as a status quo power ([Ghazala Yasmin Jalil 2019](#)).

### Rise of China: A Crisis of Status Quo

In international relations, liberalists, realists, and idealists view China from different angles. Some of them see China as the supporter of the status quo, while few others disagree with this view. Before we consider what scholars have said or written about China, we need to reflect briefly on what is status quo in the context of international relations. Basically, the status quo, in the international relations parlance, is the expression that has been extracted from the concept of power transition within the more extensive field of worldwide relations. The norm states endeavour in safeguarding things as they are, though revisionists look to change things in worldwide legislative issues. As indicated by the political specialist Randall Schweller, 'Status quo states are substance to protect the fundamental qualities of the current global order and the overall dispersion of power.' It likes a group of people endorsing life, the state of affairs, and states should acknowledge and put in place shared standard to guarantee the endurance of the framework ([Nicholas Taylor 2007](#)).

Some scholars believe that China is strongly committed to the status quo by engaging with multilateral institutions ([Yueh-Tsan Lai, 2004](#)). Even the USA and ASEAN recognizes the Chinese role during the Financial Crisis in Asia

(1997) ([Robert Sutter, 2006](#) and [Amitav Acharya, 1999](#)). In addition to this, the role played by China in resolving its territorial disputes with its neighbours has been widely acclaimed by the international community. It is not in a mood to escalate conflict over the South China Sea. As China is increasing its role, its stakes are increasing at the regional level, hence, paving the way for the existing internal economic order. Further, it has shown readiness to sponsor and support economic growth, investment and constructively engage with institutions. However, analysts opine that "when China faces a security challenge with disadvantageous prospects, it is more likely to take risks to conduct exclusive institutional balancing against the United States" ([Huiyun Feng and Kai, 2017:44](#)).

The Chinese engagement at the multilateral level shows that it is keen to keep the status quo rather than adopt a confrontationist approach. This approach is ultimately changing the suspicious perceptions of the Western powers ([Yueh-Tsan Lai, 2004](#)). It can easily be seen from the Chinese role and its active participation at WTO, UNO ASEAN, and SCO organizations ([Robert Sutter, 2006](#)). In addition to this, its interaction with other regional organizations like APEC, EAS, and G8 countries reflects the overall strategy of China to show its active engagement and play its due role ([Yong Deng and Thomas G. Moore, 2004](#)). Subsequently, David Shambaugh properly brought up that "China's commitment with key worldwide organizations infers support for the state of affairs and presentations a more dependable and valuable pretended by China in foreign relations" ([David Shambaugh, 2004/05](#)). China got acknowledgement from the US and ASEAN for the initiative it appeared during and after the 1997 Asian monetary emergency ([Amitav Acharya, 1999](#)). It is gradually moving following the restraint norms requested by the worldwide local area, particularly the US, post-September eleventh, 2001.

If we look in the past, China has been a great facilitator of "Six-Party Talks". It is a multidimensional dialogue that addressed the concerns of North Korea ([Anne Wu, 2005](#)). Concerning its territorial disputes, Beijing has resolved its territorial disputes amicably with Russia, and at the same time, it has kept up the process of border talks with India and preferred a low profile at the South China Sea (Opcit., Shambaugh, p. 66). These peaceful measures on

the part of China demonstrate its willingness to engage and contribute constructively to economic growth and regional stability ([William H. Overholt, 2005](#)).

Besides, [Zheng Bijian \(2005\)](#) had seen that "by tolerating the standards of the contemporary US-drove worldwide economy, China has gotten probably the greatest recipient, procured a significant stake in the global framework and its administration seems to accept that it can accomplish a large portion of the further development and advancement it needs by working as indicated by the conditions of the current global financial request" ([Zheng Bijian, 2005](#)). Following this, [Steve Chan \(2004\)](#) in his examination additionally had seen that "state power, regional trustworthiness, and non-intercession in homegrown issues, Beijing stays a vocal ally of the worldwide the state of affairs" ([Steve Chan, 2004](#)). Along these lines, it would not be right to expect that the Chinese methodology and its commitment with provincial and worldwide establishments show its help for the norm. To reinforce further this argument that China is integrating itself with the international economy, inviting regional and global institutions to play an active and responsible role in resolving intractable territorial disputes with its neighbors like India. These developments show that Beijing is willing to support the status quo rather than threaten or weaken the current regional stability and peace in its backyards, regions, and beyond it.

### **China Rise: Crisis of Power Transition**

The concept of power transition was first proposed by AFK Organski in his book, *World Politics*, and he predicted China's possible rise and its effect on the international security order. He identified it some sixty years ago that China would-be challenger to the US. He considered the US to be weak or less influential supremacy in the Global order ([Organski, 1968: 338–376](#)). He clarified that since China is growing rapidly at the domestic level is worth watching a show on the earth. It would pave the way towards the increasing influence of China and, in turn, a threat for the Western powers ([Organski, 1968: 361](#)).

Generally, it is believed that a country's rise is depicted by its ideological appeal in the world, military power, economic prowess, social stability, and political cohesion within itself. And by all of these standards, China's unprecedented

rise is inevitable. American's power and say in international affairs is somehow dented because of its unilateral actions and policies. Its international image and prestige have been affected by its illogical actions, such as withdrawal from JCPOA and lack of interest in supporting climate policies. Its actions in the Middle East and the way it has shunned multilateralism have irrefutably tarnished its image.

Furthermore, the political rhetoric of Donald Trump has earned more hatred than love for the US. The once champion of democracy is nowadays painted with the brush of 'populist regime', the likes of which existed before the Second World War. These misplaced priorities and inaccurate policies have certainly pushed the US image to the museum of intellectual curiosity. The gap is ultimately being filled by giant China through its soft corner, multilateralism, work for climate improvement, and global connectivity. Through its soft power and economic connectivity, it has earned more friends than enemies in the international arena. Hence, power transition seems to be on the cards in the not-so-distant future.

There are two points of view regarding the power transition. The first being the fact that it is only the internal growth and structural change from within that power takes its birth from. Since growth happens at various rates, nations will rise and fall relative to each other. The second aspect of this theory under discussion is that the international environment and system also influence the hegemon state or government. In addition to this, the power transition relies on two simple observations. The first is that the power of a country stems from inner growth. Since growth happens at various rates, nations will rise and fall relative to each other. The second cornerstone of the theory of power transition is that the dominant government, the hegemon, is decisively influenced by the international system. Those times in which the dominant power is overtaken by an increasing power are called transitions of power. America peacefully overtook Great Britain. It shows that the USA was happy and satisfied with an existing international order. On the other hand, Germany was a dissatisfied power while the British were taken as a hegemon power.

Notably, the power transition theory has attained less attention on the part of academic experts and think tank analysts. It came to the

global limelight in the wake of the 21<sup>st</sup> century while the upsurge of China was mere the talk of the town. However, it has not been altogether ignored by the East Asian international relations scholars. The theme of rising China, the nuclear issue, deterrence, and its impacts on several countries have been widely debated by many scholars.

The theory of power transfer has gained new scholarly attention as China continues to grow. The essence of system stability is an important feature of the power transfer theory. The theory of power transfer, such as the theory of hegemonic stability, indicates that hegemonic supremacy by power preponderance comes with stability and preservation of global structures. Challenges to the order contribute to chaos in both the dominion solidity concept and dispersal theory.

Given the rise of an angry power that threatens the hegemon, most theorists of the power transition have concluded that the rising power would start a conflict. [Organski \(1958, 1968\)](#), in his research, noted that before a transition to power, the known initial stage is that it would pose a challenge to existing power. Inevitably, this would lead to the probability of Americans coming into conflict ([Organski, 1968](#)). In general, due to its adherence to the status quo, the power transition theory demonstrates that formally and empirically that the protector does not initiate. As observed by one of the experts, [Levy \(1987\)](#), that conflict would be sparked by decreasing control. Similarly, the studies of [Werner and Kugler \(1996\)](#) showed that in wars driven by discontent, the opponent is more likely to be the initiator. In addition to this, [Alsharabati and Kugler \(2008\)](#) explained in their studies which their research revealed that the initiator was the opponent. While [Kim and Morrow \(1992\)](#) showed that the emanating rival is more supposed to contest the status quo and that the danger-opposed weakening domination is something like avoiding escalating the matter amid conflict. [Organski and Kugler \(1980\)](#) and [Kim \(1991\)](#) revealed where the claimant always drops just due to a slighter and feebler coalition.

Furthermore, the theory of power transition suggests that the attempts of the declining hegemon to mitigate the degree of discontent of the growing challenges with the state of affairs could decrease the probability of the conflict of a balance of power between the growing contender and the falling domination. Therefore,

the theory of power transfer assumes that before the military strength of the PRC overtakes that of the United States, there is no chance of warfare between the United States and China.

Many reports have indicated in recent years that the PRC probably, become the giant fiscal major power in two to three decades, and in that case, the PRC could be the only challenger to the US ([Mearsheimer, 2014](#)). Some of the above, of course, argue in other ways. A couple of other experts analyze that inner matters like financial inconsistencies and provincial imbalances, ethnic minority issues, and issues of regarded trustworthiness, to give some examples, would hold the PRC could complicate its development rate. Some still estimate that it would, in any case, be a little more fragile than that of the United States, particularly the PRC's military capacity.

However, different researchers demonstrate that Beijing is certifiably not a troubled power ([Ikenberry 2014](#); [Johnston 2003](#)). Others additionally say that while generally contented, China is probably going to turn into a despondent force. Will the United States permit the rising PRC to have a more noteworthy portion of the financial advantages? Will it be a smart thought for the US to advance the dynamic association of its local partners in the PRC-driven AIIB? Would it be able to assist with relieving the conceivable dismay of China with the current liberal financial request by expanding monetary and exchange relationship between the United States and China and between its partners and the PRC?

## Discussion and Conclusion

The unprecedented rise and growth of China have largely remained peaceful as compared to the turbulent rise of other superpowers of the bygone era. In support of Halliday's and Mearsheimer's dictums about the impossibility of peaceful rise, there are instances of rising of

certain nations such as Japan, Germany, and the USSR. However, the peaceful and silent growth of China certainly defies the above-given dictum. Beijing is no more in a mood to replace the USA since the former appears to push for a multipolar world. It sees its relations with great powers as part of its multipolar drive envisioned in its 'Community of Shared Destiny'. It is unlikely to accept the existing norms and values of the liberal international order as they reflect and reinforce Western dominance. Holistically, Beijing acts like an 'order shaper', and it seems to realign its policy of connectivity, networking, and institutions which directly or indirectly adjusts with the international liberal order. It is neither challenging nor is a threat to the Western liberal order ([Can, C. M., & Chan, A. 2020](#)).

However, there is a growing concern and the dominant view in the Western world that the rise of China appears to challenge American primacy. The decline of American influence, experts argue, could jeopardize American interests in the region ([Joshua Shiffrinson 2020](#)). He further observes that there is no apparent incentive for China to challenge or threaten the USA. Rather, it will opt for cooperation and engagement.

For more than three decades, China's economic dynamism and policies aimed at peaceful coexistence and development have been worth watching. A poor country humiliated, and isolated has transformed its wealth and power. They have achieved these results within decades without creating trouble or coming into major conflict with their neighbours. In last, it is worth noting that international political dynamics and pressures have also indirectly pushed China to work hard and produce qualitative products. Globally, China is being viewed as the next superpower after the USA. Hence, its fast-track growth and modernization drive makes a greater impact and overshadows its democracy and human rights challenge.

## References

- Alsharabati, C. & Kugler, J. (2008). War initiation in a changing world. *International Interactions*, 34(4): 358–381
- Amitav, A. (1999). A concert of Asia? *Survival*, 41(3), p. 97
- Anne. W. (Spring 2005). What China whispers to North Korea', *The Washington Quarterly*, 28(2), pp. 35-48
- Can, C. M., & Chan, A. (2020). Rethinking the Rise of China and Its Implications on International Order. *Chinese Journal of International Review*, 2(01), 2050005.
- Chan, S. (2004). Exploring puzzles in power-transition theory: Implications for Sino-American relations. *Security Studies*, 13(3): 103–141
- David, A. Lake, (June 1984). Beneath the Commerce of Nations: A Theory of International Economic Structures, *International Studies Quarterly*, 28(2). pp. 143-170
- David, S. (2004/05). China engages Asia, *International Security*, 29(3), pp. 73 -77
- Ghazala, Y. J. (2019). China's Rise. *Strategic Studies*, 39(1), pp. 41-58
- Huiyun, F. & Kai, (2017), China's Institutional Challenges to the International Order. *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 11(4), pp. 23-49. Air University Press.
- Ikenberry, J. (2014). The illusion of geopolitics: The enduring power of the liberal order. *Foreign Affairs*, 93(3): 80–90
- John, J. M. (2001). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, chap. 10
- Johnston, A. (2003). Is China a status quo power? *International Security*, 27(4): 5–56.
- Kim, W. (1991) Alliance transitions and great power war. *American Journal of Political Science*, 35(4): 833–850
- Kim, W., & Morrow, J. D. (1992). When do power shifts lead to war? *American Journal of Political Science*, 896-922
- Levy, J (1987). Declining power and the preventive motivation for war. *World Politics*, 40(1): 82–107
- Mearsheimer, JJ (2014). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- Organski, A. F. K. (1958). *World Politics*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Organski, A. F. K. (1968). *World Politics*, Second Edition. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Organski, A. F. K. & Kugler, J (1980). *The War Ledger*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press
- Ren, X. (2015). A reform-minded status quo power? China, the G20, and reform of the international financial system, *Third World Quarterly*, 36:11, 2023-2043.
- Robert, G. (1983). *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 197-209.
- Robert, S. (July 2006). China-Southeast Asia relations: Military diplomacy and China's soft power, *Comparative Connections*, vol. 8, no. 2 pp. 78-79.
- Sheng, D. (2010). Analyzing Rising Power from the Perspective of Soft Power: a new look at China's rise to the status quo power, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19:64, 255-272
- Shiffrinson, J. (2020). The rise of China, balance of power theory and US national security: Reasons for optimism? *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 43(2), 175-216.
- Steve, C. (March 2004) Realism, revisionism, and the Great Powers, *Issues & Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, p. 149
- Suisheng, Z. (2018). A Revisionist Stakeholder: China and the Post-World War II World Order, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27:113, 643-658.
- Taylor, N. (2007). China as a status quo or revisionist power? Implications for Australia. *Security Challenges*, 3(1), 29-45
- Werner, S., & Kugler, J. (1996). "Power transitions and military build-ups: Resolving the Relationship Between Arms Build-ups, and War", (edit) Jack Kugler and Douglas Lemke, *Parity and War: Evaluations and Extensions of the War Ledger*, 187-207. Published by the University of the Michigan Press, USA.
- William H. Overholt, (19 May 2005). 'China and globalization', Testimony presented to the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission.
- Yong, D. & Thomas, G. M. (Summer 2004). China Views Globalisation, *Washington Quarterly*, Washington, DC, 27(3), pp 117-37
- Yueh-Tsan Lai. (February 2004). China's strategy toward the Asia-Pacific multilateral mechanism, *RUSI Journal*, 149(1) p. 68
- Zheng, B. (September/October 2005). China's "peaceful rise" to Great-Power status, *Foreign Affairs*, 84(5). p. 18