

## China's Contemporary Foreign Policy Behavior: An Analysis through Realist, Liberal & Constructive Perspectives

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### Abstract

*China's tremendous rise will certainly be one of the major turbulent of the current century. Chinese leadership has already astonished the world with its economic development and active diplomacy. It is apparent that there will be a greater increase in Chinese power, influence, and involvement in regional and global affairs in future decades. We cannot envisage the exact nature of Chinese objectives and intentions in near future, however, we can proclaim that Chinese aims will be more spacious than they now are. Some observers view this increasing Chinese enthusiasm in regional affairs as a step towards regional hegemony, while others regard it as promotion of mutual understandings and economic interdependence. Some regional states are viewing Chinese policies with cautions and concerns have been raised in international community. To discuss and elaborate all these aspects of Chinese foreign policy behavior; the major paradigms like realism, liberalism, and constructivism will be explored respectively.*

### Key Words

Foreign Policy, Strategic Options, Power, Interdependence, Identity

### Introduction

Napoleon Bonaparte, the French revolutionary emperor, once labeled China as a “sleeping giant, whose awakening would astonish the world”. It seems true as, since Napoleon's epoch, China looks in a state of sleep and slumber. During this period, it has endured occupation by imperialist West, century of humiliation, overthrown of monarchy through revolution, invasion by Japan and civil war. However, the recent decades witnessed China exorcising its ghost. It has astonished the world by its rapid and steady economic growth, particularly in current century which brought it up to the level of the world superpowers; USA and Europe. Today China is the second-largest economy of the world, hoping for the level one (maybe very soon) through its rapid domination in the fields of manufacturing and exports. This speedy, strategic and peaceful growth is not a surprise for many scholars. Deng Xiaoping introduced the policy of ‘opening up’ in 1978, who started a new era of economic and cultural reforms. As Henry Kissinger describes, “*China as the present-day economic superpower is the legacy of Deng Xiaoping*” (Kissinger, 2012). Significantly, he demonstrated the will to direct China along the path to international prominence with patience and methodically. While studying the state's foreign policy behavior so many theoretical approaches are ferociously contested. Although each, based on some reliable philosophies and assumptions, is controlled under definite identified situations and follows its own systematic objective. Though different theories may focus on approximately persuasive decisions in international relations, no one can surely denote them as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. However, each holds some effective tools useful for the scholars of international politics while analyzing and studying fertile, multi-causal phenomena.

Each theoretical perspective relies on generalizations and cannot cover all the aspects of a given phenomenon. So, none of these theories are coherent, singular entities. Each holds a range of variations and perspectives, some of which may overlap with those of the others. Sometimes these theoretical approaches look competing but supplementing each other. It results that Chinese foreign policy behavior at both regional and systematic level can only be determined through a combination of ideational factors and material interests.

### Realism: A Critical Appraisal

The broad range of international relations cannot be explained by a single theory. Each partially contributes to defining China's foreign policy behavior in the twenty-first century. However, one theoretical framework called ‘realism’ gained significance while studying international relations.

So, this is the first theoretical paradigm which needs to be explained in this study in order to analyze China's strategic foreign policy options. According to Ole R. Holsti, classical realism is the best fit theory to analyze the international relations, having most persistency and venerability providing base and starting point to compare with different models (Holsti, 2004).

Modern realist theory evolved in the reaction to a traditional theory called idealism. Realists argue to have a very long tradition. Nearly 2,000 years ago a strategist Sun Tzu from China, guided the rulers about the tactics for survival during warfare. Sun Tzu was also against the use of morality while managing state administration, particularly in the presence of antagonist neighboring states. He advised rulers to use power to safeguard their interests and ensure their survival (Griffith, 1963).

Thucydides, the founding father of realism (Kagan, 1969) focused on relative power while defining the account of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.) (Warner, 1972). He said that “the strong do what they want to do and the weak have to accept accordingly.” Later on, in Italy, Niccolo Machiavelli recommended princes to focus on strict actions to remain long in power, have an influence on public as well as military alliances (Parks, 2009). Hans Morgenthau, the leading realists of the 1950s and 1960s, proclaimed that international politics rest on objectives and national interest-based laws outlined by power. He argued that no state had “God on its side” (a universal morality) and that all the actions and steps taken by the states should base on rationale and practicality. However, realists do not always defend the use of military power, except extreme necessity (Morgenthau, 1965).

Realism carries various sub-divisions like classical realism, structural realism or neo-realism defined by Kenneth Waltz which focuses on the structural features of anarchic world system; particularly the use of power to make or disturb the world arrangements, offensive realism by Mearsheimer who describe the states as power maximizers: doing for “all they can get” with “hegemony as their ultimate goal” (Acharya, 2007) and defensive realism presented by Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder supporting for power equilibrium ensuring security and survival but not to enhance power for hegemonic intentions (Slaughter, 2011), neo-classical realism coined by Gideon Rose offering a synthesis between classical and neorealism. These different realist models are emphasizing that state survival, security, and self-help are the basic characteristics to be considered while deciding the state policies in this anarchic world.

#### **Containment: A Realist Perspective**

If Beijing maintains its economic growth, then according to Mearsheimer “the United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war”. Realists like Morgenthau and Waltz, who believe that the universal system is anarchic in nature and that great powers compete for power, claim that the Chinese growing military might suggest a hegemonic pursuit. According to different reports Chinese military expansions are surpassing that of America's. In 2012, President Xi has declared the “Chinese Dream”, a grand process of state revitalization as a world power, which has further explained by a retired PLA colonel that China has to become greatest military power by overtaking USA (Hudda, 2015). Such Chinese ambitions strengthened the realist assumptions that China will change the world order to gain global dominance. Further, Chinese approach towards Taiwan and alignment with North Korea provides solid ground to realists claiming that Chinese growing influence might threaten status quo.

Viewing this growing Chinese potential to destabilize the system, the realists suggest that a strong policy of containment should be followed against increasing Chinese influence. West can adopt this policy with or without allies. By providing technical and strategic support to Japan and Taiwan; the U.S. can deter China from applying its hegemonic intentions. Containment requires that United States should support India and Taiwan in an explicit manner and strengthen its military capabilities. Some also advocate that Washington should employ covert operations causing destabilization in China, particularly by fueling unrest among Chinese ethnic groups. Further, U.S. has to uphold its military and nuclear dominance over China and should develop first-strike capabilities. The proponents of containment hope that through such measures, U.S. may able to halt Chinese hegemonic intentions and preserve American dominance (Layne, 2008).

It is to mention here that realism stems out various schools of thought, however, the basic concept regarding the anarchic world and self-centric nature of states are shared in all. Seeing Chinese rapid growth and influence on world stage, mostly realists present a pessimistic view of the consequences for the global system. Some realists, on account of historical records of rising versus great powers competitions, predict a Sino-US conflict in near future (Art, 2010). Mearsheimer assumes that a rising China is “likely to try to push the US out of Asia, much the way the US pushed the European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere”. He proposes that Beijing would “come up with its own version of the Monroe Doctrine, as Japan did in the 1930s” (Mearsheimer, 2006).

Some Realists scholars are emphasizing that Chinese foreign policy behavior can be best explained through traditional *realpolitik* model and power equilibrium paradigm (Bernstein & Munro, 1997; Mearsheimer, 2001; Roy,

2003). However, Chinese government officials have presented another view point that they have no hegemonic intentions and China's rise will not be conflictual. But the realists argue that Beijing has adopted the option of peaceful development as it is need of the day for her progress and economic development but it is hard to believe that it will continue same practice in future (Scott, 2008) because according to realists the great power's behavior is determined by her intentions instead of her capabilities. However, liberalism presents a different aspect of Chinese foreign policy behavior.

### **Liberalism: An Exploration**

Liberalism is a political orientation favoring the change and development through an evolutionary process of social reforms and change of laws. The liberal stance is assumed to bear amity, in contrast to realist view in which enmity is presumed (Doyle, 2005). Liberals promulgate that every state has to follow a cooperative attitude and policy of partnership which is necessary for its development and it has to transform itself in accordance with the coetaneous trends. According to this school of thought the only criterion of success is to have strong productive connections with the other countries. Further, liberals are of the opinion that economic interdependence brings peace.

Liberals denote that economic interdependence certainly results in decrease of political conflicts. According to liberals' today China has gained the status of influential world player due to her economic reforms and open-door policy announced by Deng Xiaoping in late 1970s. Near liberals, the increasing economic liberalization in China will soon stimulate the people of China to call for change in political system too (Funabashi, et al., 1994; Lieberthal, 1995).

The classical Liberal theory rests on three basic assumptions (i) Economic Liberalism, (ii) Democratic Liberalism, (iii) Institutional Liberalism. The first one is main pillar of this paradigm which is also called commercial liberalism bearing the features of economic interdependence, free trade; which results in reducing the war prospect due to its cost effects. The second one recalls democratic peace and contends that liberal republics are more benign than autocracies, there are rare chances of fighting them with each other. Lastly, international organizations contribute to promoting collective security, nurturing peace and reducing the conflicts (Acharya, 2007).

### **Neo-Liberalism**

Neo-liberal institutionalism is a more useful modern deviation of liberalism explaining the practice of collaboration and cooperation. Neo-liberals consider that international institutions, as well as political regimes and formal groups, have the capability to boost cooperation and regulate state behaviors by reducing transactional costs. Further formation of effective institutions results in stopping cheating, assisting information sharing and providing more space to resolve the disputes peacefully (Shambaugh & Yahuda, 2008). As compared to realist assumptions which are mainly relevant to power and security issues, the liberalism is mostly focused on nature, collaboration, and cooperation.

### **Engagement: A Liberal Perspective**

Liberalism focuses on resolving international conflicts and problems and achieving the cooperation and lasting peace in International Relations through interdependence. Proponents argue that through economic interdependence among states, the potential for conflict may be decreased (Keohane & Nye, 1998; Liu, 2010).

Liberals follow an optimistic 'glass-half-full' perspective regarding the world stage and that humanity believes in cooperation. The global interconnectivity among states is the key feature of liberal viewpoint. Liberal theorists opposed Realism's 'zero-sum' perspective with rigid assertion of a 'non-zero-sum' view of global politics and international sphere. These have effectively recognized operating standards and endorse a consistent approach to the rule of law amongst contributing states (Keohane & Nye, 1998). Now the question is that can we perceive Beijing adopting liberal norms through increased involvement in world forums, both economic and political? In Chinese case, what does the Liberalism lens illuminate?

over the past decades China has willfully participated and joined the regional and extra-regional forums (Keohane & Nye, 1998). In the start it was a passive participator, gradually it has become an active and proactive participant (Liu, 2010). This increasing confident of China on existing world system, suggests that China considers such institutions as important apparatuses for managing and moderating world relations covering security, economic and political dimensions. The liberalists, Proponents of engagement claim that Chinese stance towards various regional policies reflects its confidence over these institutions as more reliable source to protect and manage its various interests in Asia pacific even on world map. Further, these forums will moderate Chinese foreign policy behavior. This increasing interdependence shows its trust in these forums which surely means that Beijing will prefer to resolve its disputes through peaceful means.

Engagement rests on evolutionary political change inside China through its links with the outer world which broaden its exposure to Western cultural and political values. The proponents of Liberalism conceive that the features of economic globalization and domestic political liberalization will bring change to Chinese foreign policy ambitions and result in a peaceful Sino-US interaction. Liberalists contend that increase in economic interdependence and strengthening of institutional ties eventually decrease the potential for conflict. Viewing the cost/benefit ratio of confrontation results escape from war which is costly, on the other side trade is much beneficial (Rosecrance, 1999). Liberal theorists claim that Chinese engagement in pro-western international institutions like UNO, IMF and the World Bank advocates that Beijing is less likely to indulge in clash with status-quo powers in the global environment (Hudda, 2015).

Liberals, therefore, believe in Chinese engagement through its integration into global economy which lessens the threat of confrontation. This will also bring change in Chinese social system tilting towards western-style liberal and democratic norms. Economically, China has adopted capitalism but not politically yet. Liberal theorists recommend that these social and economic exchanges will eventually bring political change as well. In this scenario of complex interdependence and integration, the individuals, the state actors, the non-governmental actors like NGO's, significantly affects economic exchanges between countries and in this way play a substantial part in international relations. According to Mitrany the economic interdependence has a "spillover" effect (Liu, 2010).

Chinese establishment is very much clear that maintained and good friendly relations with regional and global powers will be necessary and helpful for its policy of peaceful rise. As described by Yang Jiechi, the State Councilor, that the "new type of great power relationship" can be best defined by three characteristics: firstly, "non-conflict and non-confrontation"; secondly, "mutual respect of each other's different political systems and main interests"; and "win-win cooperation" is the third one (Jiechi, 2013). Thus there is cooperation instead of competition which can be seen in their relations.

#### **Democratic Liberalism: Brings Peace, Reduces War**

The Chinese government has remained resistant to political democratization which is still a far dream. The democratic peace theory demonstrates that democracy demotes war, so as more countries adopt democracy will result in more peaceful and harmonious world (Russett, 1994). Immanuel Kant in "Perpetual Peace -1957" argues, "On the other hand, in a constitution which is not republican, and under which the subjects are not citizens, a declaration of war is the easiest thing in the world to decide upon, because war does not require of the ruler, who is the proprietor and not a member of the state". This theory promotes the idea that "democracies by nature do not go to war with one another, a fact which historically has guaranteed peace between democratic states", arguably without exception (Pugh, 2005).

China is still reluctant to adopt a democratic system, however, according to liberal scholars, its involvement in regional and world level organizations and advancement in world environment has paved the way towards more democratic system. To promote democratic norms in China, West has to encourage the rule of law, growth of free press, media, and liberal system. Eventually it will help in sowing the seeds of democracy in China.

#### **Constructivism: A Critical Analysis**

Social constructivism is the third theoretical approach used in this study providing a different perspective on foreign policy behavior which enables us to understand how China's unique values could have impact on regional and international order through her foreign policy. Whereas realism and liberalism carry assumptions about human nature and consciousness; constructivism has not presented such presumptive and subjective line of thinking (Kegley & Blanton, 2011) considering instead that social structures are "real and objective" (Wendt, 1995).

In previous sections, China's foreign policy behavior particularly her regional strategy has been discussed through purely traditional theoretical research perspectives of international relations. Under these research paradigms the international factors have been the key source in explaining and analyzing the state behaviors towards world affairs (Hongyi, 2010). However, the ideational side of debate like norms, regional identities, and shared values have been paid a little attention, which should also be taken into account while shaping the decisions of the country. This concept has given rise to another theoretical perspective called 'Constructivism'.

Constructivism considers that human consciousness plays a key role in the international political system as states' interactions are actually determined by ideational factors. Constructivists is not an opposite dimension but supplement the ongoing debate by adding a social dimension which realists and liberals ignore. It does not totally refuse the presence of material aspects in global affairs. However, they introduce a mind over matter perspective. They present an ideational view parallel to materialist view of the world. Their basic focus is human consciousness or awareness and its use in world affairs. Constructivists preset a standpoint that the global system is created by

ideas instead of material forces. In other words, they are of the opinion that people make society and society make people.

Rather than a theory, Constructivism is an ontology. It provides a set of suppositions about human behavior, world norms, motivation, and agency. None of the paradigms discussed above are counterparts it, but intellectualism (Slaughter, 2011). According to Constructivism, international relations are not only based on material forces like economy, power, international institutions, but also on subjective as well as inter-subjective factors, like norms, human behavior, ideas, identity, culture and history (Wendt, 1999).

The term constructivism was coined by Nicholas Greenwood Onuf in 1989 in his book "*World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*". He laid down the basics of the constructivist framework bearing broad theoretical sources. In this way he has provided a diverse approach beyond the "third debate" in the theoretical realm of international relations (Kubalkova, et al., 1998; Kubalkova, 2015). Houghton describes, foreign policy analysis (FPA) as a kind of free-floating enterprise and considers social constructivism as the most logical base to approach and define foreign policy behavior (Houghton, 2007).

Alexander Wendt is the most prominent figure of constructivist ideas. Wendt has played a significant role in reviving the constructivist school of thought. "Anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt, 1992) and "Social theory of international relations" (Wendt, 1999) are some most relevant work by Wendt providing solid footings for constructivist debate. Wendt discusses that 'identities are the basis of interests' (Wendt, 1992). Martha Finnemore, Emmanuel Adler, John Gerard Ruggie, and Peter Katzenstein are some influential names in constructivist camp (Chernoff, 2007).

Constructivism evolved during the 1980s and gained the status of an alternative perspective in the field of international relations; can be discussed in three different forms: "systemic," "unit-level," and "holistic" (Reus-smit, 2005). Wendt has illustrated systemic constructivism very effectively through his influential writings (Wendt, 1992, 1994, 1999). Contrary to this, Peter Katzenstein has promulgated the unit level constructivist presenting domestic political domain, social norms, identities and interests of states. The last one is holistic constructivism epitomized by the writings of Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie, striving for bridging and dividing between how state interests and identities are constituted at state and domestic levels (Reus-smit, 2005).

The main objective of social constructivism is to explain how culture, norms, and arguments about identity and influence, shape the political system as compared to the fixed perceptions of material capabilities. This model hence finds the space to define that what are the interests of the state, what are the sources behind these interests and how these interests are changed with the passage of time (Katzenstein, 1996). Relying on Chinese identity of responsible stakeholder of international community, Constructivist scholars argue that its rise will remain peaceful. Since last two-decade constructivism has become a hot debate among Chinese academia and identity, ideas and international norms have become important research topics (Qin, 2011). Peaceful development and international cooperation have been echoed as the key principles of Chinese foreign policy and global strategy.

## Conclusion

In this study the potential value of mainstream theoretical approaches of international relations; realism, liberalism, and constructivism in their latest forms has been critically analyzed. It has been proposed that each paradigm has potentially elaborated some crucial aspects of complex nature of Chinese strategic foreign policies. Realists try to explain Chinese behavior with reference to power and anarchic structure of international environment. While Liberals focuses on the importance of interconnectivity among global institutions and try to explain Chinese strategies in the milieu of economic interdependence. Constructivists place more emphasis on state identities and national interests which are formed and shaped through state to state interactions. They present a middle-ground sociological approach focusing on shared information and knowledge which does not contradict the basic notions put forth by realism and liberalism.

Each theory alone seems inadequate to present comprehensive understanding of China's contemporary posture and strategic behavior, however, each perspective has its own worth and importance. While dealing with issue of Chinese foreign policy behavior, we should also have to understand Chinese perspective about contemporary world order in an appropriate manner. Chinese policymakers are much aware of their history and tremendous past. Each theoretical perspective impounds the source and control of public power to a different agent: realism belongs to the state, liberalism to the state plus institutions and global or multinational corporations, and constructivism to activists and thinkers. The interconnectivity in power, interdependence, and identity is necessary instead of separating them. As only a combination of material and ideational factors can provide a deep understanding of Chinese strategic foreign policy approaches both at domestic and systematic levels.

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