

## What China's Rise Means: Perspectives from Liberals?

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**ABSTRACT:** To many, the rise of China means a lot and many scholars continue to debate what the rise of China is likely to mean. According to Global Language Monitor, in 2015 there were over 50,000 internet searches that were searching about "Meaning of China's Rise." While it may be difficult to gauge the true intentions of nation states, closer analysis of china's behavior especially in Global governance and engagements, the writing is on the wall. From their mega projects both at home and in foreign countries, Beijing is now a key player in terms of Global Governance and no doubt it would love to see herself on top which is close to reality with their sustained economic growth. China's rise has in many ways been possible as a result of arguably, a conducive atmosphere the current global system has provided, and therefore, more than any other country, even with their rise, China would love to see continued tranquility.

From Beijing's noninterference policy in internal affairs of other countries, this behavior resonates well with Beijing's consistently claimed peaceful development. However, this does not mean that Beijing would sit back provided it sees her future being compromised. Indeed, as the country observed 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of People's Republic of China, president Xi Jinping was categorical stating that; "No force can stop the Chinese people and the Chinese nation forging a head...". However, that should not be treated as a sign that they are ready to engage in conflicts since any war or conflict with big powers would leave disastrous effects on both including a greater possibility of failing Beijing's dream to be the world's power house. In the same way, the economic effect of U.S.A's invasion of Iraq is still fresh in her mind and U.S.A knows that this war contributed to its economic crisis that later became global in the year 2007 and 2008.

Upon that background, China is interested in peace and is fully aware that without peace, her development efforts will not be realized. Hence, China's rise while may especially in western capitals raise fears, it will remain peaceful after all, this is good both for China and entire world.

**KEY WORDS:** China's Rise, Global Governance, Peace.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Francis Fukuyama proclaimed it the "end of history", a triumph of liberal ideas over all other forms. The United States of America (US) victory over the former Soviet Union in the early 1990's was equated to triumph of western ideas, democracy and free market capitalism (Roden, 2003). The collapse of the bipolar world was drastic such that scholars of international relations could not predict. It ushered in an 'uncharted' era of a unipolar world, with other major powers as supporting cast. The US became the sole provider of public goods on the one hand, while reaping the spoils on the other. Fast-forward to 2015, and the most searched news item in the Internet covering over 50,000 news sources, as tracked by the Global Language Monitor, was the 'rise of China' (Beckley, 2011).

China is rising, this is not in question, and this has made US-China relations to be the single most important bilateral relationship in the contemporary world (Friedberg, 2005). A deepening and positive relationship has endless possibilities of peaceful resolution of outstanding regional conflicts, sustained global economic growth, successful management of issues of global concern like terrorism and climate change. A worsening relationship on the other hand could see the return of the 'cold war', military buildup, arms race or even hard war. What happens will depend on the role that China wants to play; supporter, spoiler or shirker (Schweller & Pu, 2011) and the perception that the U.S.A will have to this role.

As different scholars agree, China is rising while the U.S.A is currently the world's super. If China's rise pauses any challenge, the challenge is then largely felt on the side of the U.S.A who feels China's rise means USA's decline and therefore, USA's response towards China's rise will likely determine whether China's

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rise will be peaceful or not and the reverse is true. Kissinger, (2011) notes that “The Question ultimately comes down to what the United States and China can realistically ask of each other. An explicit American project to organize Asia on the basis of containing China or creating a block of democratic states for an ideological crusade is unlikely to succeed – in part because China is an indispensable trading partner for most of its neighbors.” (Kissinger 2011:526). Kissinger adds that, “by the same token, a Chinese attempt to exclude America from Asian economic and security affairs will similarly meet serious resistance from all other Asian states, which fear consequences of a region dominated by a single power.” Kissinger 2011:526).

U.S.A Security and foreign policy scholars downplay their leaders’ threat to be tough in response to China’s rise noting that in the past, U.S.A leadership has threatened to be tough and at times threatening to do so militarily claiming such moves are meant to reduce what the American leaders call China’s aggression. An example is when in 2011, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly announced that U.S’ foreign policy would change and added that, the United States would begin a military “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific so as to check China’s influence there (See more: Foreign Policy<sup>2</sup>, 2016). Surprisingly, it did not even take months and this threat died a natural death. This military pivot primarily, would mostly feature token gestures of American diplomatic and military support, such as sending littoral combatant ships to Singapore and thousands of U.S Marines to Australia. However, U.S later rethought on this and significantly cut down on number of navy forces it was planning in this arrangement. Later, a top U.S. Naval college professor Toshi Yoshihara concluded that, a “shrinking fleet” would “nullify our attempts to pivot to Asia.” And his colleague and co-author of “Red Star Over The Pacific”: China’s Rise and The Challenge to U.S.A Maritime Strategy - James Holmes uncompromisingly said that, the pivot talk was “bush league.” (See more: Foreign Policy, 2016).

### ***China’s Power: The Statistics***

Power is the ability to influence another to act in a manner they would not have acted otherwise (Nye, 2008). Sources of power include population, economy size, military hardware, and culture. Militarily, with the exception of the U.S.A, China spends more money on military modernization than any other country in the world today (Kastner, 2012). In 2015, China’s military expenditure reached a new high of US\$145.8 billion coming second only to the U.S.A at \$597.5 billion. In 2002, China’s nuclear arsenal was 5.3% of that of the U.S.A standing at 7,600 nuclear warheads, while its defense spending was 26% of that of the U.S.A despite it being the second in global military spending rankings (Wei Wei, 2016). It spends 2% of her GDP on military (cia.gov).

Economically, China became the second largest economy in the world in 2010 with its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at US\$10,380 billion in 2014 while that of the US was put at US\$17,418 billion (IMF 2014 as quoted in Lee, 2016). Position one in economic power is retained by the U.S.A. According to CIA.gov unemployment in China in 2015 was 4%, population below the poverty line at 6.1%, budget deficit was at -3.4% of GDP, and GDP according to Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) was at US\$19.39trillion. The U.S.A on the other hand in 2015 unemployment was at 5.3%, population below poverty line (2010 estimates) was at 15.1%, budget deficit of -2.4% of GDP, and GDP according to PPP was at US\$17.95 trillion.

As the figures tell, China is firmly second and rising if the trend continues. Worth noting is that 30 years ago, it was not anywhere near its current position but a period of rapid economic growth propelled by double digit rates enabled the astonishing transformation. China’s contribution to global GDP jumped from 1.6% in 1990 to 8.6% in 2009. Her share of global exports was at 8.4% in 2010 up from 1.3% 20 years ago. It is now the principal lender to Latin American countries, prime investor in African energy, largest buyer of oil in the Middle East, and with US\$1.317 in treasury bonds and notes as at July 2013 is also the single most important state with high stakes in the US economy (Nuruzzaman, 2016). With the exception of Organski (1958) who predicted the rise of China in his Power transition theory, most scholars did not see it coming as fast as it did.

## **II. THE BIG DEBATE: IMPLICATIONS OF CHINA’S RISE**

Two schools of thought have emerged from the rise witnessed. Pessimists (mostly realists and power transition theorists) view this phenomenon as the ‘China threat’, which might lead to confrontation, conflict and maybe even war, while optimists (mostly liberalists) argue that the rise of China can be good for world peace and development. Historically, the ‘Thucydides trap’ showed during the Peloponnesian war that the growth of power in Athens instilled fear in Sparta which made Sparta to initiate a pre-emptive strike against Athens (Hiroko, 2016). The potential for conflict in US-China relations is present. Related to the above, the U.S.A leadership perception too is as varied while the Chinese leadership has tried to project a more positive image. In

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<sup>2</sup><http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/07/donald-trumps-peace-through-strength-vision-for-the-asia-pacific/>

this paper, as an author, I will take a liberalist approach. However, for better understanding, I will also precisely look at key ideas from the realist/ power transition school of thought.

**Figure 1: Quotes from US and China**



Offensive realists and power transition theorists posit that the level of dissatisfaction with the distribution of benefits within the international system and the need to re-write the rules and norms governing the system motivate rising powers to pursue aggressive and often confrontational policies against the existing hegemon or dominant state in this case, the U.S.A being the chief architect of the system as it is. However, for this to happen, perceived benefits must outweigh the costs (Fravel, 2010). On the other hand, a rising power which is satisfied with the international system (status quo) is less likely to cause conflict and instability (Organski 1968 as quoted by Kastner& Saunders, 2012). For china to take this route, it will therefore depend on whether she is dissatisfied with the status quo enough to have motivation of re-writing the rules of the international system once she has the capability (power) to do so. Indeed, while the rise of the U.S.A was smooth, some have been violent as witnessed by the rise of Germany and Japan in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

However, power transition theorists argue that dissatisfaction with status quo alone might not necessarily lead to conflict. Power parity has to be present also for the challenger to feel powerful enough to challenge the dominant state (Weiwei, 2016). Otherwise, the challenger might hide her true intentions to avoid attracting counter-balancing efforts of the hegemon. According to Weiwei, the best way to deal with a rising power is to incorporate it into the system and give her the benefits in order that she may like the status quo. Gilpin (1981, pp 23-24) as quoted by Lee (2016) gives three ways to identify a revisionist or status quo state; level of support for existing rules of international system, regional security institutions, international economic

institutions amongst others; satisfaction with the global distribution of power; and how the leaderships speak and act regarding hierarchy and prestige in the system.

The central question for this paper is therefore; does China's rise threaten the U.S.A (and by extension world peace and stability)? Put simply, is China a revisionist or status quo state?

Though it is difficult to gauge the true intentions of a state (to determine whether its revisionist or otherwise), I will use evidence from the liberal point that suggest China is indeed a status quo state (and at least in the near future it will continue to be).

### **III. LIBERALISM AND THE RISE OF CHINA**

Most liberals are optimists as they believe in the pacifying power of the three causal factors of economic interdependence, international institutions and democratization process (Friedberg, 2005).

#### ***Economic interdependence***

Liberalists argue that the greater the trade volume between 2 countries, the more groups in both countries will have strong motivation to avoid conflict and war. For the case of U.S.A and China, since the introduction of market changes in China in the 1970's, economic exchanges have soured and continue to thrive. Trade and foreign investment made China become more integrated into the global economy (Kastner & Saunders, 2012). When China moved from a planned economy to a socialist market economy in 1978 and trade grew from US\$ 1 billion to US\$ 120 billion in 2000, and US\$ 245 billion in 2004 (Friedberg, 2004). Economic interdependence between U.S.A and China has led to changes in attitudes between them (Sang-Hwan, 2015). China remains reliant on U.S.A technology and expertise, and is predominantly an export market hence she is structurally reliant on international trade for economic development (Roden, 2003). Indeed, cross border trade between China and her neighbors has led to improved relations as witnessed in Vietnam (Wei-Wei, 2004).

Steinfeld in his book "Playing our game" (2010) as quoted by Nuruzzaman (2016) posits that China's rise is centered on international trade, production, investment and market system. It makes no sense to pursue confrontational policies, which might rid all these benefits. Her participation in an international system created by the West in terms of regulatory rules, norms and systems makes her a 'capitalist enabler' and status quo state and not a threat. Chinese firms, he argues, do not make the rules of economic and trade transactions but simply follow and implement them, made and designed by the U.S.A

Integration into the international economic system has made China to adopt and localize these norms domestically through socialization. An example is the protection of individual rights, rise of legal system, and protection of intellectual property rights. In essence, China is attaching into the system to reap the benefits (economic growth) and not to fight it. Since joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 for instance, China has revised some 3000 laws, regulations and rules to conform to international cooperation (White Paper on China's Peaceful Development Road, 2005). Her admission into the WTO itself was centered on adoption of neo-liberal policies which moves the US and China closer together in recognition of neo-liberal ideas (Roden, 2003).

#### ***Democracy***

Liberalists believe that democracies rarely go to war with each other; hence democracy is a factor for peace. As many countries around the world become democracies, peace will be the resultant effect. For China, liberalists are optimistic that democratization is underway courtesy of economic development and socialization in the international system. Indeed, Chinese leadership refers to the communist system as 'democracy with China's characteristics' or 'Chinese democracy'. The term democracy has crept up in official documents like the white paper, a central document on China's domestic and foreign policy. For liberalists, the growing middle class in many states has pushed for democracy and expected the same to be replicated in China. Worth noting is that all other developed economies are democracies and therefore China has no option but to follow suit if it is to attain levels attained by other advanced industrial societies. When this happens, tension with the U.S.A will go down and global peace will result. Indeed, former President George W. Bush was overt in choosing engagement as opposed to containing China as he noted; "economic freedom creates habits of liberty, and habits of liberty create expectations of democracy...trade freely with China, and time is on our side" (Friedberg, 2005).

It is the view of this author that, while the democratization process might be slow, it will happen. Beijing will slowly fully comply with demands of democracy. Some analysts contend that due to China's involvement in International governance, they will slowly accept demands of democracy. Indeed, though it is under China's so-called One country two system, when pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong erupted, many feared that Beijing would send in People's Liberation Army to quell protests, but they have not done it and have instead conceded and withdrawn the Extradition Bill which sparked off protests. Secondly, though it was clear that Politicians in Hong Kong that had linkage with mainland China were not favored, as democracy would demand, Hong Kong which is part of China went on with local elections where pro-Beijing politicians lost.

Upon that background, from a liberal perspective, though it may delay, as night follows day, China will have no long short cuts but to agree to democracy.

### ***International Institutions***

One core pillar of liberalism is institutions. Robert Keohane, a core proponent of the Liberal Institutionalism school of thought writes in his essay, *Twenty Years of Institutional Liberalism* (2012) that, "Institutions and rules can facilitate mutually beneficial cooperation within and among states". This theory arose as a reaction from the dominant realist school which, based state to state relations as influenced by power games and power distribution in the international system. While acknowledging that the world is characterized by anarchy and self-interests, liberal institutionalists take a more optimistic stance towards relations amongst states, in as far as human welfare and security achieved through a peaceful and free community of nation-states is concerned.

Keohane and his fellow liberal scholars believe that institutions are a key means through which peace can be pursued and promoted, as they have a role to play in changing state preference from pursuit of power and self-gratification, to a more inclusive perspective. They argue that institutions play a mediating role between diverse interests by providing common grounds for cooperation amongst states. Accordingly, Nuruzzaman, (2008) notes that, the institutions become the independent variables, having considerable influence over state behavior.

Cooperation, it is argued, is made easy where states find common interests and less divergent interests. In the anarchy that exists in the system, interacting states cannot be sure of other state(s)' intentions and motivation to cheat is high. Cooperation is difficult to attain when states are looking for relative gains. This is why; cooperation is easier on economic matters and environmental issues than security matters (Keohane, 2012; Nuruzzaman, 2008). This is because; defeat resulting from cheating in economic matters is less costly than a defeat from a military and security matter. The latter can have costly ramifications; hence states generally are wary of cooperating in this aspect. This way, a statement can be made that even if China's rise was to cause serious concern to other powers like U.S.A to the extent of a full-scale war, available institutions such as UN can be used to mediate for peaceful resolution.

Institutions offer platforms where states can cooperate through an array of shared interests and goals, while at the same time tame cheating behavior of these states. In essence, the institution becomes an arena where political games like the famous "prisoner's dilemma" are played out. Ultimately, the cost of fooling another state or "sucker" is higher than if states choose to cooperate, though this might not be the preferred best course of action or outcome for individual states, they choose it as it is the second best looking at the consequences of not cooperating.

International institutions help to improve communication between states, reduce uncertainty about intentions and improve capacity of governments to make credible binding commitments with each other.

### ***China and International Institutions***

China is a member of regional and global institutions. These include Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN (Association of South East Asia Nations) +3, East Asia Summit, Forum for China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime, World Trade Organization (WTO), and the United Nations (UN). China's membership to international institutions grew from 21 to 52 in 1996 alone.<sup>3</sup> In many of these, she shares membership with the U.S.A. Worth noting is that, one of the indicators of a status quo nation is the level of membership in organizations where both the rising and established powers are members. These organizations cover an array of issues, from trade, environment, to security. With contact between China and U.S.A enhanced, communication is made easy, mistrust issues reduced, and so do the chances of conflict with the U.S.A. In the UN alone, China has become active and is now the largest contributor of peacekeeping forces of all the permanent members of the UN Security council. She has signed more than 300 international conventions, and participated in 18 UN peacekeeping operations, sending over 16,000 troops abroad (Weiwei, 2016). This way, a statement can be made that China's rise is peaceful and will not cause fears among the West notably U.S.A, to the extent of a full war.

## **IV. SOFT BALANCING AND POWER POLITICS WITHIN INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

Fearing to provoke the superpower, or out of pursuit of peace, China has propagated, 'peaceful development' model (*hepingfazhan*). In this, she has employed soft balancing through international institutions, chief being the UNSC. In a unipolar system dominated by the U.S.A, with time, the hegemon has become

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<sup>3</sup>Freidberg, 2005

aggressive in pursuing its agenda. Trying to challenge the dominant state can be costly to the weak states, both economically and militarily. Most weak states prefer to bandwagon with the U.S.A in the hope of receiving favors from her. Rivals therefore find it hard to pursue alliances. Only soft balancing is a viable option.

China, as a veto wielding permanent member of the UNSC has used this forum to counter U.S.A-led initiatives. As quoted in Yeshi (2013), Pang (2005:90) says "China needed the UN more than ever before to handle and balance the threat from U.S.A and its allies". With the threat and or use of veto, China has sought to influence U.S.A's behavior towards a more 'acceptable' norm which is less threatening to China's own national interest. China's push for the UNSC to be the avenue where decision-making with regards to matters of international peace and security are made and respected by all states, can be argued to seek to balance against the unilateralist tendencies exhibited by Washington after the end of the cold war. France, Germany and Russia's opposition to invasion of Iraq in 2002-2003 coupled with China's abstention, effectively balanced U.S.A power to use the UNSC to attack a sovereign state. Though ultimately the U.S.A leading a coalition of allied forces invaded Iraq, this was not through the UN as a body. Some scholars have in fact argued that, China's veto is the only 'equal' that she has with the U.S.A. Whether this is true or false is beside the point. What is clear is that, with competition and power games played within these institutions, diplomacy and ultimately peace prevails.

## V. CONCLUSION

While it is difficult to gauge the true intentions of nation states, China's behavior and from the evidence as seen above, can be seen to be a status quo state. She has benefited immensely from the international system as it is and therefore has motivation not to cause chaos. This does not mean in any way that priorities will remain the same in future. Whether this stance is taken until such a time she is fully developed and can openly challenge the U.S.A, it remains to be seen. Evidence suggests that her behavior is consistent with the proclamation of peaceful development espoused in her foreign policy. Though existing in an anarchical world, the international institutions and economic interdependence increase avenues for states to cooperate. Having various issue areas means the U.S.A and China can solve most areas of conflict and disagreements while leaving out contentious issues for a later time. An example is agreeing on the agreement on nuclear non-proliferation, UN peacekeeping, while the Taiwan issue and South China Sea disputes are left for another time. Competition within the framework of international institutions is also healthy as it tames aggressive state behavior. The result is world peace.

China understands well that engaging herself in any war with a big power would be catastrophic especially in terms of economic development and would reduce or even hinder her development pace. In the same way, the economic effect of U.S.A's invasion of Iraq is still fresh in her mind and U.S.A knows that this war contributed to its economic crisis that later became global in the year 2007 and 2008. This means that U.S.A is not ready to engage in another full-scale war moreover with a powerful country like China. Hence, China is interested in peace and knows that without peace, her development programs may be disturbed, as U.S.A too knows. A statement can therefore be made that China's rise while may raise some fears in Washington, it will remain peaceful after all, this is for good of both Washington and Beijing as far as economic growth and stability are concerned.

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