

Updating Schweller & Pu's "Three Scenarios" for China's Rise

Refreshing IR theory's positions on current events keeps it relevant and dynamic, and toward that purpose, this essay reviews academic literature on how the ascendant People's Republic of China (PRC) might affect the international system. Considering the phenomenon in terms of hegemony privileges realism in the analysis, so extra care will be taken to incorporate insights from liberalism, institutionalism, and constructivism. As a framework for departure, Schweller & Pu's 2011 article offers three scenarios for how the PRC might position itself in the world, if its power should eclipse that of the current U.S. hegemon. These three possibilities, described below in terms of their prominence in the literature and consequences for international order, label a potentially dominant PRC as a "supporter, spoiler, or shirker."

Supporter. The most optimistic scenario for the West foresees the PRC upholding the liberal world order, even after China's power surpasses the U.S. conclusively. Books from the mid-2000s from Lanteigne (pg. 15-30 especially), Wu & Lansdowne (Eds.) show that the PRC gains many large, tangible benefits from participation in multilateral institutions, and many liberals would be satisfied if hegemonic China kept these robustly in place. From the perspective of a politician rather than an IR theorist, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's chapter (in Rosecrance & Miller) frames the realization of this scenario via institution-building in Asia as a liberal *imperative* not only to preserve the current order but also to prevent another world war. By David Kang's assessment (in Aggarwal & Newland, pg. 44), even if China returns to its traditional place atop the Asian hierarchy, true hegemony requires legitimacy which today can only be attained by "adjusting" to the prevailing global norms and institutions. Finnemore's observation that the PRC impugns U.S. legitimacy with criticism based on international law is encouraging in this regard. There is, in short, more to hegemony than power.

G. John Ikenberry is also among the foremost advocates of drawing the PRC into the liberal system as a "global stakeholder" or "responsible player" (Scott), at least partially based on the logic that "[t]oday's Western order [...] is hard to overturn and easy to join" (2008, pg. 24). Ikenberry duly notes that the PRC would not only have to surpass the U.S. but also its liberal allies to exert Chinese will upon the current order. Huntington might respond that a pan-Asian "Confucian civilization" (however unlikely to cohere) might be up to the transformative task, and Breslin's section on South-South and BRICs cooperation led by China (pg. 627-8) suggests that the global balance may not be tipped so heavily toward the liberal side. Existing institutions which China has come to appreciate are thus the best arena to observe the struggle to incorporate China as a full supporter, where disengagement or active subversion would definitively discredit this scenario.

Rosemary Foot believes the UN is the most attractive way to draw China permanently into the fold, for while the UN is the foremost global institution, it needn't be a liberal one. An illiberal global majority could well co-opt it, as the question of whether the UN serves or constrains hegemonic power is increasingly open (and relatedly, it may be in the hegemon's own interest to have its power checked). With Chinese foreign policy becoming more active (Duchatel et al., Chung, Rozman), PRC leaders have used the UN as a forum to counter U.S. power—especially when used "irresponsibly," though not necessarily in knee-jerk reaction against liberal ideals. Foot also points out that China keeps the Security Council contentious, thereby honest and relevant, while also increasing payment of dues, now ranking sixth in the world. On this global stage for leadership, Foot (pg. 1090) highlights the benefits China receives from being able to express its two identities as both a great power and a developing country.

Being an active participant in institutions and a leader in economic globalization, where most scholars view China currently, does not add up to being a supporter. There is a sense in the literature that China may only be going through the motions in most institutions, and Odgaard suggests that the PRC may never be convinced to support, let alone spread liberalism. As Suisheng Zhao (pg. 116) puts it, China is already becoming more vocal about the issues it cares about and what goals it will pursue, noting that so-called global responsibility is not a "core interest," to adopt the

ruling Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) own terms. While Breslin notes that China's regional cooperation in the mid-2000s solidified official rhetoric of a "peaceful rise," including within multilateral institutions of China's own creation such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, this suggests China may be building *alternatives* to liberal institutions rather than supporting their legitimacy. These actions drive a conceptual wedge between liberalism and institutionalism, and if the organizations and values China supports are decidedly subversive of predominant liberal ones, they belong to the second scenario, not the first.

Spoiler. Dacicco & Levy (in Elman & Elman, pg. 110) note that while power transition theory works within the power-focused realist paradigm, it rejects balance of power theory because "hegemonies frequently form, [...] these extreme concentrations of power are stabilizing rather than destabilizing and contribute to peace rather than war, and [...] blocking coalitions do not generally form against dominant states." In terms of the theory's progenitors, A.F.K. Organski and Robert Gilpin, if China is fundamentally "dissatisfied" or a "revisionist" rather than a "status quo power," the "spoiler scenario" may be distinguished as the most theoretically disruptive and enabling of myriad speculative outcomes.

Reinhard Wolf's claim that Chinese people are "tired of an international order dominated by the West and its ideas" suggests it is also the most likely, though least immediate. Power transition theory supports both realist and constructivist interpretations of China and "other rising powers" replacing the liberal order with norms derived from unique historical and cultural experience, as argued by Kupchan. Playing the spoiler, in other words, would require a hegemonic PRC to thoroughly dismantle the current international system, perhaps violently, and use its irresistible power to rebuild a system which better serves Chinese interests. While most consequential, for most authors like Shambaugh who view China as still merely a "partial power" with strong influence in only some arenas, this scenario would also have to be the most temporally distant. Many authors also claim that China lacks a coherent alternative world view, as concepts like the "Beijing Consensus" are not intended as models for other developing countries to emulate (Beeson, pg. 111).

Early signals of revisionist intent are highly perceivable, however, according to White and Odgaard. Both believe that China finds the current order of Western liberal cooperation unacceptable, and as China rises, its nationalist coalitions will become more "inward-oriented" in Solingen's terms (Finnemore & Goldstein, Eds., Ch. 6). Such powerful coalitions demand more "respect" for those who subscribe to different views of domestic order but also, in a manner typical of unreflective nationalists, inevitably foist their self-centered preferences for international order upon neighbors and the global stage. If unchecked, Wolf and White believe they could undermine the most liberal aspect of China's rise and reforms, in the economic realm. For Kupchan, Odgaard, and Leonard, sufficient respect would entail a diversity of norms, enforced coexistence, and a "walled world" of absolute sovereignty, respectively. In initial contradiction, this would require strong global intervention from China to establish, toward the eventual goal of leaving state regimes alone to do as they please in their sovereign territory. Westphalia reinvigorated, however, might invite a new Cold War.

Most authors, perhaps most explicitly Kang in suggesting that the Soviet Union would be a better comparison than rising Germany, believe that China would have to establish itself definitively as the U.S.'s bipolar rival before any global agenda could be advanced. Breslin's article (pg. 624-5) surveys Chinese academic literature to find consensus that a transition from U.S.-led unipolarity toward multipolarity is both desirable and *inevitable*, though he notes the contradiction that dissatisfied states like China must still push for such a change. Modified polarity is only a short-to-medium term spoiling of world order, however. In the long term, much larger changes could be in store for a world led by China.

In a 2008 article and 2011 edited volume, constructivists like William Callahan and other contributors outline how a future Chinese world order would differ radically from the current one. A return to the Sinocentric concept of *tianxia* "all under heaven" would be the most fundamental change, and Wang Hui's *The Politics of Imagining Asia*

suggests that the violent, teleological history of the nation-state system would not be mourned as a casualty. Indeed, Wang Hui and Wang Gungwu--among other scholars, by no means all Wangs or only Chinese—view the legal equality of states in the current system as little more than a self-orientalized fiction. Barely more than subtext in Leonard's 2007 volume, Jacques' *When China Rules the World* attempts a full re-imagining only two years later.

These could easily be dismissed as flights of fancy, if not backed up by force. Zhao finds examples of outspoken figures in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), supported by a nationalist majority of the population, who want China to start behaving like a superpower immediately, to "become the world's number one" as a means to break out of perceived American encirclement (Zhao, pg. 113). The CCP, still preferring the global "low profile" advocated by Deng Xiaoping (*taoguang yanghui*), may actually be a restraining factor on this scenario. Perhaps as China is well aware of the theoretical dangers involved in openly full scale revisionism, most scholars place the PRC as straddling the line between been a status quo and dissatisfied power.

Empirical studies which fall clearly on the side of the status quo tend to come either from questionable Chinese scholarship or in Kastner & Saunders' case, be based on odd indicators like where Chinese leaders travel. Shih-Yueh Yang's dissection of power transition theory is usefully precise in laying out the very restricted conditions when we should expect rising powers to seek expansion and war but credulously accepting of "peaceful rise" rhetoric. Lebow & Valentino also claim that China became "objectively" the most powerful state in the 1980s (!), and no war or other drastic reconstruction could arise from a transition which has already occurred. Instead, by their account, the world is already under the third scenario of "shirking" hegemonic responsibility.

Shirker. This is Schweller & Pu's pick as most likely. Ikenberry generally implies but sometimes asserts that China would not be overturning only the U.S. hegemon but also an entire liberal world order, too great a task for a country which may not shed its status as a developing country in this century. The system, for Ikenberry, is far more than just the U.S., and Schweller & Pu's framework allows for the possibility that a realist, hegemonic China would simply let liberal institutions gradually decay, leading back to the pure anarchy assumed by realism. Equally likely, China may choose to maintain the elements from which it directly benefits, like free trade and a relatively peaceful system without warfare between great powers.

All these are consistent with Johnston, Breslin, and others' assessments of the PRC as fundamentally pragmatic, preferring unadorned and amoral realism on a case-by-case basis to any grandly explicit and thereby liberal or constructivist project (including a preference to negotiate bilaterally, rather than with regional organizations like ASEAN). Even Kissinger seems to agree that change under Chinese leadership would be gradual, viewing the Chinese tendency to take the strategic "long view" as one of confident patience for the sake of avoiding destabilizing conflict rather than supporting a grand scheme. In the presence of scholarly disagreement on China's intentions, this "middle ground" scenario gains the most traction. And ultimately, the shirker scenario would be a test of just how resilient (and independently powerful) liberal and multilateral institutions would be in the absence (or decline) of superpower patron states.

Discussion & Conclusions. In the years since this framework was introduced, China's rise to regional hegemony looks all but certain, yet its intentions are no clearer. A chorus of domestic actors call out to jettison the official "peaceful rise" rhetoric of Zheng Bijian in favor of the unbridled assertiveness Johnston already finds China accused of in Western media. Wolf suggests that the PRC needs to signal its intentions better, in a costlier way such as a cap on its interrelated narratives of victimhood and nationalism, but Kliman's 2015 book counterposes that there can be no improvement in signals' trustworthiness as long as China's ruling regime remains authoritarian. The latter volume likely resonates well with those who believe that a "league of democracies" would be the West's best way to consolidate a liberalizing force against China and other illiberal states, but such would effectively rule out the "supporter" scenario in

favor of a “democratization first” agenda. It is dubious, however, that containment to the scale offensive realism prescribes has any viable options short of preventive, hegemonic war, just as power transition theory predicts.

Schweller & Pu’s three scenarios offer a useful heuristic for understanding the possibilities of China’s rise, but they share the assumption of surpassing U.S. power not just in Asia but globally. Successful “retrenchment” by the U.S., MacDonald & Parent argue, could prevent this or push it far into the future. Earlier works are less certain that the U.S. will recover from the Great Recession, and while all express some doubts that the PRC can continue its torrid GDP growth rate, the major hurdle of becoming the world’s largest economy is already in the range of depending on whether the comparison is made in Purchasing Power Parity. That China would ever seek more than regional hegemony should not be a foregone conclusion; it could do no more than repeat Japan’s fleeting challenge in the 1980s and then cede the spotlight to another of the rising BRICs in a cycle which would be familiar enough to defuse.

In sum, “China watching” has certainly become a cottage industry within IR, and authors’ perceptions of threat relate directly to their theoretical assumptions and systemic predictions. Importantly, only the “spoiler” scenario could possibly involve hegemonic war, and even then not necessarily. That Gilpin argues for a Thucydidesian basis for IR theory more forcefully in 1988 than do the authors of Rosecrance & Miller in 2015 is no small comfort, and the role of fear for Thucydides to reify inevitability suggests that constructivism should be privileged over analysis of “real threats.” This said, Odom’s piece on UNCLOS and current events in the South China Sea remain worrisome. In conclusion, I believe that the experts cited offer better prognostication than supposedly predictive theories like power transition.

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