

# **Confronting the Rise of China:**

*An analysis of*

*Realist and Liberal approaches*

Napoleon once labeled China a “sleeping giant” that if awoken, would shake the world. Since Napoleon’s era, China seems to have been more than asleep. It has endured imperialist occupation, a revolution overthrowing the monarchy, a Japanese invasion, and civil war. Only in recent decades does China appear to have exorcised its ghosts. After Mao’s death in 1976, China’s new leadership crafted sounder economic policies, improved standards of living, and most importantly, demonstrated the will to patiently and methodically direct China along the path to international prominence. The giant, it seems, has finally awoken from its slumber.

China’s long term goal to transform itself into a major world power presents a fundamental security challenge to the United States. As the world’s only superpower, how should the United States handle China’s rise in a way that avoids the potential for conflict? The fundamental answer to this question lies in the competing liberal and realist theories of international relations. Liberal theory advocates a policy of economic and institutional inclusion with the aim of integrating China into the global economy. Liberals claim that by encouraging China’s development, China will eventually adopt Western-style democratic liberalism, greatly limiting the potential for conflict. On the other hand, according to realist doctrine, the United States should adopt an aggressive policy of containment. China’s growing power, it contends, is a major threat to American hegemony, and Chinese aspirations should be checked to minimize the potential to destabilize the status quo. Ultimately, however, it is the liberal approach that most greatly reduces the potential for conflict.

### **Liberal theory applied to China**

Liberal theory is rooted in the notion that by strengthening global economic and institutional ties, prospects for conflict are reduced. The cost/benefit ratio of fighting a war has been tilted away from war, which is very costly, and towards trade, which is increasingly

beneficial. (p 155 Rosecrance 1999) Liberals therefore believe that the integration of China into the global economy reduces the threat of a belligerent China. As China increasingly integrates with the rest of the world, China's social systems will also change, tending towards Western-style democracy and liberalism. Economically, China has already embraced capitalism, but politically, China remains staunchly Communist and maintains an abysmal human rights record. Liberal theory suggests that economic and social forces will eventually precipitate political change as well.

Liberals advocate a policy of economic engagement in regard to China. By increasing trade and tying China's economy more tightly to that of the world, China will hesitate to initiate war for fear of the economic repercussions. The deepening of economic ties with the United States will in turn foster political development. The demand of Chinese investors for accurate economic news, for instance, has resulted in the growth of underground, stock-oriented newspapers. In this way, economic growth facilitates the growth of non-state run media to feed the public's need for unbiased financial information. (p 155 Friedman 1999) As China develops further, the pressure to change illiberal systems such as state-run media will continue to grow.

While China has thus far remained resistant to political change, the democratization of China is critical in the long run. According to the democratic peace theory, democracies don't wage war on each other and therefore, as more countries become democratic, the potential for international conflict is reduced. (p 11 Russett 1993) A democratic China, for example, would probably be more likely to seek peaceful means for resolving the Taiwan issue. Given the benefits of a democratic China, the United States should encourage the growth of a free press, rule of law, and other liberal systems. These could go a long way in sowing the seeds of democracy in China as well.

Unlike realist theory, which advocates deterrence as a means of containing China, liberal theory views such an approach as counterproductive. By clearly demonstrating America's intention to defend Taiwan, a realist approach, the Chinese would likely view such actions as threatening and respond by building their own military further. The United States would in turn view such actions as confirmation of Chinese aggression and then respond by further deepening its commitment to Taiwan. In such a way, the prospects for war increase dramatically as a result of miscalculation on both sides. Conversely, the strengthening of economic and political ties with China and makes war with the United States extremely costly and vastly reduces the prospect for misunderstanding.

### **Realist theory applied to China**

Realists conceptualize an international system built on self-interested states that compete for power. Because the system is anarchic, states use any means available to advance their agendas, often causing tension and conflict among rival states. The rise of China, therefore, has tremendous potential to destabilize this system. China's growing economic power will translate into increased military power and allow China to use force to assert its strategic aims in Asia and eventually across the globe.

China's growing ability to achieve its strategic goals, ranging from the annexation of Taiwan to the domination of Asia, naturally conflict with American interests. Thus, realists support an aggressive policy of containment to prevent China from becoming too strong. By working closely with its Allies, the United States can pursue such a policy without alienating other global powers. This is particularly important in regard to Japan and Taiwan, which lie at China's doorstep and are particularly sensitive to China's growing influence. By strengthening

our alliance with Japan and continuing to sell missiles to Taiwan, the United States deters China from using force to achieve its strategic aims in the region.

A divergent strand of realist theory proposes that our current unipolar system is actually less stable than the bipolar one of the Cold War era. (p 28 Waltz 2000) With the United States as the world's sole superpower, other countries are naturally inclined to unify against it. The United States already has avowed enemies in the Middle East and in China's neighbor North Korea. Because America's enemies are less clearly defined after the end of the Cold War, threats can come from many places. Though organizations such as Al Qaeda present the most immediate threat, China, with its Communist system, illiberal institutions, and growing military power cannot be counted out. Thus, the United States must remain vigilant of China's development and strategic aims even while fighting wars elsewhere.

In contrast to liberal theory, which advocates the democratization of China, realists remain skeptical of the benefits of internal change. Because China lacks a strong liberal tradition, encouraging democracy in China fails to guarantee the development of liberal institutions. (p 5 Zakaria 1997) The process of becoming democratic historically has been very unstable, and such a process in China could actually increase the potential for conflict. Thus, encouraging democracy in China is a weak solution. Realists maintain, conversely, that an aggressive approach of deterrence is the most effective means to combat China's growing threat.

### **Why the United States should rely on liberal theory**

In dealing with the issue of China's rise, a consideration of China's worldview is appropriate. The Chinese have an acute sense of their own history and are very aware that for centuries, they were the world's foremost power. The Chinese feel humiliated by their relative weakness in modern history and view themselves as victims of imperialist domination. As a

result, China has developed a fundamental mistrust of the West and is convinced that western states are intent on suppressing it as it seeks to regain its status as a world power.

Given such an understanding, a liberal foreign policy would be the most productive approach to China. By deepening its economic and political ties to China and taking a less aggressive stance, the United States mitigates the potential for misunderstanding and plays to Chinese sensitivities. The Chinese would be far more willing to cooperate with the United States on strategic issues if it feels it is included in regional security agreements and receives the respect it feels it is due. Economically, the forces of growth will slowly but surely liberalize political institutions. The Chinese so desperately wish to regain respect as a world power, they will permit gradual liberalization as they realize the reform of current institutions is necessary to maintain fast-paced economic growth.

Conversely, the aggressive approach of the realists serves to antagonize China and confirm suspicions that the West will suppress its rise to power. China lacks the military strength to remotely rival the United States. However, treating China as our enemy will go further to push China to respond in kind. It will have no choice but to build its military to threaten US military presence in Asia while seeking alliances with other states dissatisfied with American hegemony.

Ultimately, China's strategic aims are limited. China is methodically working to regain its status as a global power and sees the annexation of Taiwan as fundamental to restoring national dignity. But China doesn't wish to fundamentally alter the system of international relations and can be reigned in as a productive member of the world security community. Liberal foreign policy will go further towards achieving this end. When the day comes that China can shake the world, it will hopefully do so along with, rather than against, the West.

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