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China's rise in the eyes of contemporary U.S. realists

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the Second World War, with France and Britain struggling with preserving their empires, only two powers emerged as primary winners: the United States and Soviet Union. Although both winners, the U.S. had not suffered from bombing against its territories (except Pearl Harbor), allowing the American economy to boom. During WWII, 17 million new civilian jobs were created in the U.S. and industrial productivity increased by 96%.¹ At the end of the war, in 1945, the American economy was responsible for 50% of the world's industrial output.² By contrast, the Soviet Union underwent severe damages to its economic infrastructure and substantial human losses (almost 27 million deaths) due to the German invasion.³ Since then, the U.S. has supported the creation of several international institutions to promote and defend peace and prosperity. The point was that after the war, the U.S. and Soviet Union began to adopt contrasting foreign strategies. On one side, the U.S. saw the Western European Powers' recovery as an essential precondition to international stability and American prosperity based on capitalism. On the other side, the Soviet Union—deeply marked by the conflict and looking for security and recovery—began to extend its influence and ideology over Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. Overall, the U.S. portrayed capitalism as the sole economic model able to grant peace and prosperity. By contrast, the Soviet Union presented socialism as a valuable solution to economic and political strains.⁴ In the early 1990s, the Soviet Union crumbled, enshrining the shift from a bipolar to a unipolar system.

According to the Waltz's neorealist theory, the anarchical international system configuration determines how states are likely to act. There are three different power configurations: unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar. Each configuration is characterized by

¹ D. Goodwin, "The Way We Won: America's Economic Breakthrough During World War II", *The American Prospect*, 19.12.2001, <https://prospect.org/health/way-won-america-s-economic-breakthrough-world-war-ii/> (last access 24.05.2021).

² J. H. Hanhimäki et al., *International History of the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, New York, Routledge: 3rd Edition, 2015, pp. 229-230.

³ M. Ellman & S. Maksudov, "Soviet Deaths in the Great Patriotic War: A Note", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 46(4), 1994, pp. 671-680, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/152934>.

⁴ E. Crapol, "Some Reflections on the Historiography of the Cold War", *Society for History Education*, vol. 20(2), 1987, pp. 251-262, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/493031>.

a certain number of poles (or hegemonic powers), and its own rules of the game that eventually result in different patterns of interaction among states. Notably, in a bipolar configuration, there is competition between two hegemonic powers. As a result: (1) each pole tries to strengthen its power by persuading and eventually bringing into its sphere of influence the highest number of states possible; (2) each pole tries to eliminate the rival bloc by undermining its stability (if possible) or fighting (if necessary). By contrast, in a unipolar configuration, there is a sole hegemonic power which: (1) retains military and economic supremacy; (2) settles disputes between less powerful units; (3) prevents other units to achieve independence or greater autonomy; (4) may gradually attempt to lessen or eliminate the autonomy of other units.⁵

Since the Soviet Union collapsed, the international system has been firmly anchored in the U.S. leadership. However, in recent decades, China has recorded extraordinary performances, becoming (according to some) a potential competitor to global leadership. In 2001, China's GDP stood at \$1.33 trillion, while in 2019, it topped \$14.28 trillion.⁶ At the same time, China's export value has skyrocketed, passing from \$266 billion in 2001 to \$2.4 trillion in 2019.⁷ In the period 1991-2019, China's GDP per capita has increased by almost 30 times.⁸ In comparison, that of the other major emerging economies (Brazil, Russia, India, South Africa) only between two and seven times.⁹ Moreover, after the announcement of a "Go Out Policy" in the late 1990s, many Chinese enterprises have begun to invest and operate abroad. As a result, China has emerged as one of the major sources of outgoing foreign direct investment (OFDI). In 2009 (ten years after the introduction of the "Go Out Policy"), Chinese OFDI flows amounted only to \$43.9 billion, while in 2019 (twenty years later) to \$136.9 billion.¹⁰

⁵ K. N. Waltz, *Theory of international politics*, Reading, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979.

⁶ World Bank, *China's GDP (current US\$)*: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/CN> (last access 07.04.2021).

⁷ ITC (International Trade Center), *List of products exported by China*: https://www.trademap.org/Country_SelProductCountry_TS.aspx?nvpm= (last access 15.05.2021).

⁸ World Bank, *China's GDP growth rate (% annual)*: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=CN> (last access 14.05.2021).

⁹ World Bank, *BRICS's GDP (current US\$)*: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN-IN-RU-BR-ZA> (last access 22.05.2021).

¹⁰ OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), *FDI flows (indicator)*: <https://data.oecd.org/fdi/fdi-flows.htm> (last access 08.04.2021).

This work aims to present how U.S. realist International Relations (IR) scholars have interpreted China's rise after 2010. In other words, this research points to drive the reader through the complexity of debate around China's rise, providing answer to the following questions: How do American realists interpret China's rise? And how does the American realist interpretation differ from others?

Realism is one of the dominant and most ancient IR theories, since early realist traces can be found in Greek classical culture. Throughout human history, thinkers have been developing manifold realist schools of thought, providing new interpretations to state behaviors. For example, classical realists (such as Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Morgenthau) have argued that human nature is about competing to defend (and possibly increase) one's power.¹¹ In essence, humans are seen as egoistic, self-centered creatures who show a peculiar lust for power. As a result, since states are ruled by men, politics is nothing but a struggle for power among men.¹² In contrast, neorealists or structural realists (such as Gilpin, Mearsheimer, and Waltz) have hypothesized that one's state behavior results from the structural anarchy of the international system within which it lives with other states, rather than from human nature.¹³ Overall, although often charged to be old-fashioned and simplistic, realists have never ceased to up-to-date their theoretical framework. They have been evolving and looking at old problems (such as security and competition among states) from new perspectives—in the beginning, from an individualistic point of view and, then, from a structural one.

The year 2010 has not been chosen by chance. In 2010, China had already become the world's second-largest economy, surpassing Japan¹⁴, and the biggest exporter ahead of Germany.¹⁵ Thereafter, interest in China's affairs has steadily grown. Elizabeth Economy, in a *Foreign Affairs* article (2010), depicted 2010 as a turning point

¹¹ W. J. Korab-Karpowicz, "Political Realism in International Relations", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism-intl-relations/> (last access 05.07.2021).

¹² R. Jackson & G. Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press: 5th edition, 2013.

¹³ R. L. Schweller & D. Priess, "A Tale of Two Realisms: Expanding the Institutions Debate", *Mershon International Studies Review*, vol. 41(1), 1997, pp. 1-32, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/222801>.

¹⁴ D. Barboza, "China Passes Japan as Second-Largest Economy", *The New York Times*, 15.08.2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/16/business/global/16yuan.html> (last access 10.02.2021).

¹⁵ P. Inman, "China becomes world's biggest exporter", *The Guardian*, 10.01.2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2010/jan/10/china-tops-germany-exports> (last access: 13.05.2021).

forasmuch as China started to make herself even more heard.¹⁶ More recently, in 2019, Martin Jacques argued that the 2010s belonged to China as well as the next decade. A series of financial crises (2007-2009 and 2011-2012) hit heavily Western countries but not China, which—despite a limited downscaling of its average GDP growth rate—has kept being one of the major contributors to global economic growth.¹⁷

This work is structured as follows. In the first chapter, I will describe the features of China's perceived "rise". In other words, I will provide the reader with a dataset useful to understand (independently of the theory applied) why nowadays China is generally seen as a potential superpower. In the second chapter, after a short introduction to realism, I will present the U.S. realists' interpretation of China's rise. The scholars this work is going to take in will be IR scholars who have an active affiliation with an American university, whose thoughts are in line with realist assumptions and who have written at least an article or a book on China's rise after 2010. Finally, in the third chapter, I will show how the American realist interpretation of China's rise differs from that of other IR traditions. In essence, this work aims to provide the reader with a sharp picture of the state of the art of China's rise within American realism.

It is worth noting this research relies on a qualitative analysis that articulates in four steps. In the first step, I carried out an advanced search on the JSTOR database to collect preliminary information about authors who have published at least an article or a book on China's rise from 2010 onwards. In the second step, I consulted authors' bios, resumes, and areas of interest, selecting only those that fit into the IR scholar definition provided by Daniel Maliniak et al. (2011). In other words, I considered only scholars with an active affiliation with an American university and whose interest lies in economic, social, and political interactions between different countries.¹⁸ As a result, I excluded researchers employed in government, think tanks, and private firms, at the time of their writing. In the third step, using information previously gathered, I dug in-

¹⁶ E. Economy, "The Game Changer: Coping With China's Foreign Policy Revolution", *Foreign Affairs*, 2010, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2010-11-01/game-changer> (last access 10.02.2021).

¹⁷ M. Jacques, "This decade belonged to China. So will the next one", *The Guardian*, 31.12.2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/31/decade-china-west-china-ascent> (last access 13.05.2021).

¹⁸ D. Maliniak et al, "International Relations in the U.S. Academy", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 55(2), 2011, pp. 437-464.

depth authors' bios and careers and prepared a list (Table 17, chapter 2) to prove that the aforementioned advanced research settings have been quite effective in shrinking the research field to those interested in IR theories and security. Thus, for each scholar, I reported his/her areas of interest and academic affiliation. Finally, in the last step, after reading their works and identified recurring inquiries, I presented the reader with U.S. realists' answers to the following questions: (1) Will China try to challenge the status quo? (2) Does China has a chance to successfully overthrow the U.S.-led world order? (3) Is a U.S.-China war inevitable?

It is worth underlining that "status quo" and "world order" are terms frequently found in IR. On one side, "status quo" describes a factual situation (the order of things) at a given time. Thus, since after the fall of the Soviet Union, the international system has been firmly anchored in the U.S. leadership, the status quo is intended here as the period of time wherein the U.S. has been the sole and uncontested superpower on the international stage. On the other side, "world order" (or "international order") consists of structured relationships among units which coexist in the same environment. In other words, "world order" is defined as the body of rules, norms, and institutions that govern relations between states.

Chapter 1

China's Rise

In this first chapter, I will describe the features of China's rise. In other words, I will provide the reader with a dataset useful to understand (independently of the theory applied) why nowadays China is generally seen as a potential superpower.

1. Rise and power

According to many, although Europe and North America (generally identified as the West) have been ahead of the rest of the world for centuries, China's economic growth seems to drive the world back to the natural order of things, that is the pre-eighteenth century order when China and India were the major economies in the world. In fact, in 1750, most of the world's manufacturing took place in China and India, accounting respectively for 33% and 25% of the world total. However, by 1820, Europe was already the richest continent, with a GDP per capita twice as that of the rest of the world. By 1913, the Chinese and Indian shares of world production shrank drastically, falling respectively to 4% and 1%; simultaneously, the UK, the U.S., and continental Europe combined came to make three-quarters of the world production output.¹⁹

Even though one may disagree with this argument, one may not disagree that the magnitude of China's rise is unprecedented and embodies one of the major developments of world history. To give an idea of outstanding China's economic growth, let's start having a look at its GDP growth in the last 50 years. In 1970, Chinese GDP per capita was \$120; in 2010, it was \$4.340; in 2019, it was \$10.390.²⁰ Interestingly, digging into World Bank data and comparing China with other BRICS²¹ members, in the period 1991-2019, it turns out that China's GDP per capita has increased almost 30 times; by contrast, Brazil has leveraged its GDP per capita only

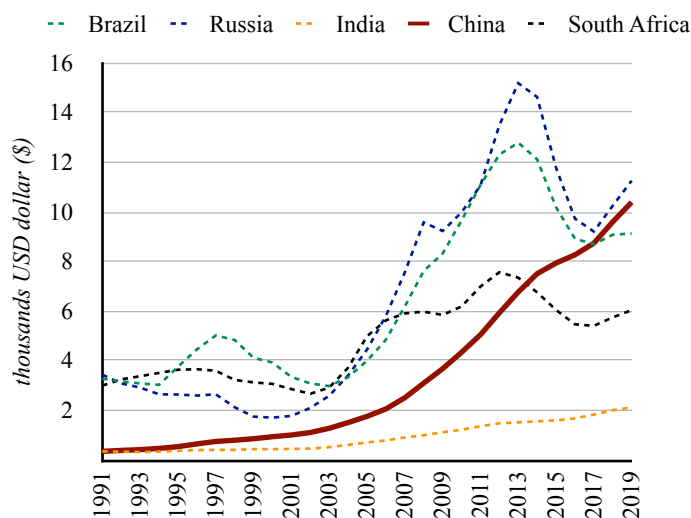
¹⁹ R. Allen, *Global Economic History: A Very Short Introduction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 1-10.

²⁰ World Bank, *China's GDP (current US\$)*.

²¹ BRICS is the acronym used to identify five major emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Originally the first four were grouped as BRIC, but in 2010 South Africa joined the group and the acronym turned to BRICS. The BRICS have a combined area of 39.7 km², an estimated overall population of about 3.21 billion (41.5% of the world population), and about 26.6% of the world land surface.

almost three times, Russian Federation (after the Soviet Union collapse) three times, India almost seven times, and South Africa twice.²² (Table 1)

Table 1: GDP per capita (1991-2019): Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa



Source: World Bank (2021)

This huge gap does nothing but prove how quick Chinese development has been, compared to the new emerging economies.

But how did China manage to do that? The usual answer is free-market reforms, but this is incomplete. Shigeru Ishikawa (1983) divided Chinese economic history, after 1949, in three phases: (1) pre-Cultural Revolution phase (1952-1966); (2) Cultural Revolution Phase (1966-1976); (3) post-Mao economic reforms phase (1976-1980).²³ More recently, Geoffrey Jones, professor of business history at Harvard University, used another periodization for the economic history of China since 1949. He divided it into two periods: the planning period (1950-1978) and the reform period (1978 to present). In the first, China adopted a Communist system with collective farms, state-owned industry, and central planning. Following the Mao's death 1976, Deng Xiaoping introduced liberalization and deregulation policies that allowed capitalist enterprises to flourish. In other words, it was in 1978 that China started to abandon the planning system gradually and move towards a more market-oriented economy.²⁴ Interestingly,

²² World Bank, *BRICS's GDP (current US\$)*.

²³ S. Ishikawa, "China's Economic Growth since 1949—An Assessment", *China Quarterly*, 1983, pp. 242-281, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/653882>.

²⁴ G. C. Chow, "Economic Reform and Growth in China", *Annals of Economics and Finance*, vol. 5, 2004, pp. 127-152, <http://down.aefweb.net/AefArticles/aef050107.pdf>.

many of the businesses which flourished over the last thirty years had been founded and grew in an environment characterized by import substitution. This policy regime provided local firms with opportunities to get bigger within protected domestic walls before diving into the global market.²⁵ By 1978, planning has been dismantled and market economy created in its stead. The first reform was in agriculture: the land ownership system of feudal exploitation was abolished and the system of collective farming was introduced in order to raise farm productivity and thus pave the way for new China's industrialization.²⁶ The reforms have also transformed the industrial sector. After 1978, township and village enterprises (TVEs) were promoted so the TVEs used appropriate and low-cost technologies to produce and sell consumer goods in the free market. In 1992, subsequent reforms created a financial system to take the place of state allocation of investment and converted state-owned enterprises from government departments into publicly owned corporations. Overall, legacies from the planning period have certainly clear the way to the China's rise. These included: highly educated population, a large industrial sector, low mortality and fertility rates, and scientific establishment with significant R&D capabilities.²⁷

At this point, it is important to define what China's rise means. Let's start with the general definition of the word "rise." According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the word "rise" has two different meanings: moving up from a lower to a higher position or becoming important, successful, or powerful.²⁸ Thus, thanks to this very basic definition, it is possible to draw two different conclusions: one's rise can materialize in case of unseating those who occupy higher positions within a particular hierarchical context, organization, or system; or it can simply mean acquiring the requirements to join a certain group or organization. The point is that, in both cases, the concept of "rise" implies dynamism, effort, movement. In essence, the rising subject has to do something; otherwise, it will not be able to change its situation, condition, position, or status. For some, in the last decades, China has done nothing but build up its power to

²⁵ G. Jones, "Business History, the Great Divergence and the Great Convergence", *Harvard Business School*, vol. 18(4), 2017, p. 2.

²⁶ C. Bramall, *Chinese Economic Development*, New York, Routledge, 2009.

²⁷ G. Jones, "Business History, the Great Divergence and the Great Convergence", p. 4.

²⁸ Cambridge Dictionary, *Definition of "rise"*: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/rise> (last access 22.05.2021).

challenge the U.S. leadership with the concealed ambition of subverting current status quo. For others, instead, China has only put its effort into raising from poverty its huge nation without any aspiration to global control. After all, China's achievements in poverty alleviation are remarkable: more than 850 million people have been lifted out of extreme penury in less than 40 years.²⁹ In any case, leaving reasons and interpretations of China's doing temporarily aside, it is undeniable that China has shown itself extremely dynamic in changing its condition in the last decades.

After having established what "rise" means, the question is: How can the fruits of Chinese doing be measured? To do so, one needs to select one or more indicators and then proceed with its/their measurement. In IR, power usually looks the most conventional and reasonable choice. Nevertheless, assessing countries' power is a complex issue and its quantitative measurement continues to be widely discussed by political scientists, historians, and practitioners. In any case, early before its assessment, one needs to clarify what power is. Kjell Goldmann (1977) described power as "A's ability to cause B to behave in the desired way."³⁰ Joseph S. Nye (1990) argued that: "power lies not in resources but in the ability to change the behavior of states."³¹ While, according to Michael Barnett & Raymond Duvall (2005), one of the basic conceptualizations of power is "the ability of states to use material resources to get others to do what they otherwise would not."³² This means that if A has power over B, and A wants B to do x, then B will do x. Although those definitions make clear that power is a relational and not absolute concept, they seem to leave out the international system's complexity and the fact that it is populated by far more than two actors—sovereign states, but also non-governmental actors. Therefore, it is worth underlining that if A has power over the system (S) in which it lives with other actors (S = system consisting of A, B, C, D, ...), and A wants S to do x, then A has to have a power base in relation to S. A's power base can be said to consist of a number of elements that can

²⁹ C. F. Marques, "China Scores Big Against Poverty But the Poor Haven't Gone Away", *Bloomberg*, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-11-29/xi-jinping-scores-big-against-extreme-poverty-but-china-still-has-its-poor> (last access 05.07.2021).

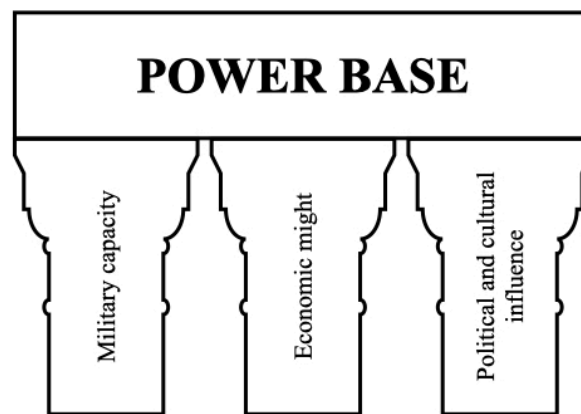
³⁰ K. Goldmann, "Notes on the Power Structure of the International System", *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 12(1), 1977, pp. 1-20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45082961>.

³¹ J. S. Nye, "Soft Power", *Foreign Policy*, 1990, pp. 153-171, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1148580>.

³² M. Barnett & R. Duvall, "Power in International Politics", *International Organization*, vol. 59(1), 2005, pp. 39-75, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3877878>.

increase A' capacity to push S's components to adopt desired behaviors. As already said, the point is that there are no agreed criteria helpful to quantify A's power over S. Scholars generally describe a superpower as a state that possesses military-economic might and influence vastly superior to that of other states. According to H. Sonmez Atesoglu (2019), a major power—completely self-sufficient in producing the most advanced weapons—may have so much economic and military power that it can readily deploy a substantial and a decisive force in any part of the globe to achieve its security objectives. Such a state—a superpower—can be considered a de facto member of all regions in the world.³³ Thus, starting from this definition, one may deduce that power base consists at least of three main elements (PBEs): military capacity, economic might, and political and cultural influence.

Table 2: Power base elements (PBEs)



Source: Author

Since power is relational and given that this study aims to present how American IR scholars interpret China's doing, it is appropriate to compare the speed at which China has been enlarging its power base since the 2000s, with that of the U.S. and the world as a whole—intended here, as the combination of all the states constituting the system within which China and the U.S. live together themselves. Overall, consulting the data that will be presented in following lines, the reader will have a sharp outlook of results achieved by China in the last decades.

³³ H. Sonmez Atesoglu, "Economic Power and International Security", *Insight Turkey*, vol. 21(3), 2019, pp. 68-90, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26776104>.

2. Military capacity

According to Robert Gilpin (1988), International Politics continues to be a self-help system. Thus, in the contemporary anarchy of international relations, distrust, uncertainty, and insecurity have caused states to arm themselves and to prepare for war as never before.³⁴ To deal with the age-old problem of security, most states possess armed forces. Military power is usually considered a necessity since it may deter enemies (both actual and perceived) from attacking. In other words, military capacity may serve states to coexist and deal with each other without being completely intimidated or subjugated. Obviously, military capacity varies sensibly among states: a few have the capacity to project their military power worldwide, others have limited armies, some instead have decided to outsource their defense to more-powerful neighboring states.

Since no one can predict with absolute certainty what tomorrow will bring, one needs to study the past to understand the present and forge the future. The global military expenditure has more than doubled since 1999, passing from \$852 billion³⁵ to almost \$2 trillion in 2020.³⁶

Military capacity depends on several factors, including: technology applicable in warfare,³⁷ army size in terms of troops (active duty and reserves), weaponry deployable (aircraft carriers, ballistic missile, tanks, and so forth),³⁸ military facilities (foreign bases, training camps, outposts).³⁹ The point is that the possession of military capacity entails costs. Thus, one of the first and immediate indicators to measure one country's

³⁴ R. Gilpin, "The Theory of Hegemonic War", *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 18(4), 1988, pp. 591-613, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/204816>.

³⁵ U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Verification and Compliance, *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 1999-2000*, 2001, <https://fas.org/asmp/profiles/wmeat/WMEAT99-00/WMEAT99-00.pdf> (last access 22.05.2021).

³⁶ SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), *World military spending rises to almost \$2 trillion in 2020*, 16.04.2021, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/world-military-spending-rises-almost-2-trillion-2020> (last access 17.05.2021).

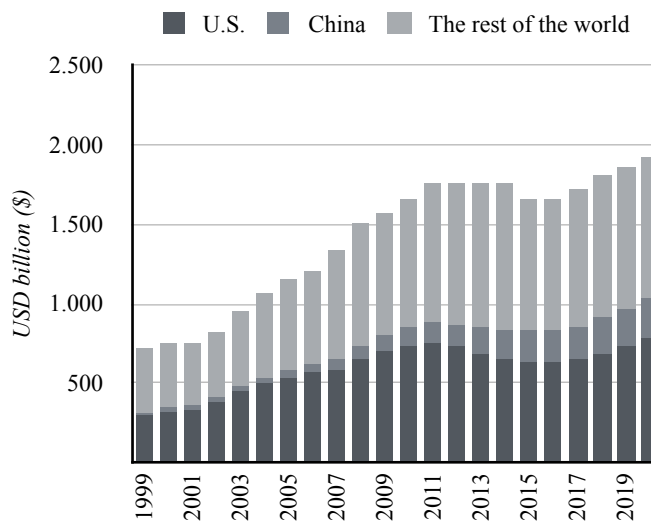
³⁷ Lowy Institute, *Asia Power Index 2019*, 2020, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/downloads/lowy-institute-asia-power-index-2019-methodology.pdf> (last access 28.06.2021).

³⁸ B. Giergerich, "Military capability and international status", *International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*, 2018, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2018/07/military-capability-and-international-status> (last access 28.06.2021).

³⁹ J. J. Carafano, "Measuring Military Power", *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 8(3), 2014, pp. 11-18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26270616>.

capacity is military spending. According to SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, in 1999, the U.S. was the world's largest spender, with \$281 billion; while China was nowhere to be found in the highest ranks, with only \$54 billion spent on defense.⁴⁰ In 2020, the U.S. was still the world's largest spender, holding 39% of global military spending (\$778 billion); yet, China has become the second-largest spender with \$252 billion (13% of the world's military budget).⁴¹ (Table 3) Despite this huge gap, China's spending has risen for 26 consecutive years, the longest series of uninterrupted increases by any country in the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database. Considering the decade 2011-20, it is possible to discover that China has increased its military spending by \$14.7 billion on average per year; in contrast, the U.S. spending has increased by \$4 billion on average per year.⁴²

Table 3: World military spending



Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database

A second important indicator of military capacity is the number of active personnel. After all, wars—hand-to-hand on the battleground, on the seas, in the skies, and even remotely by controlling drones—are fought by men and women. Although China's military has been significantly downsized since the 1980s, it remains the world's largest

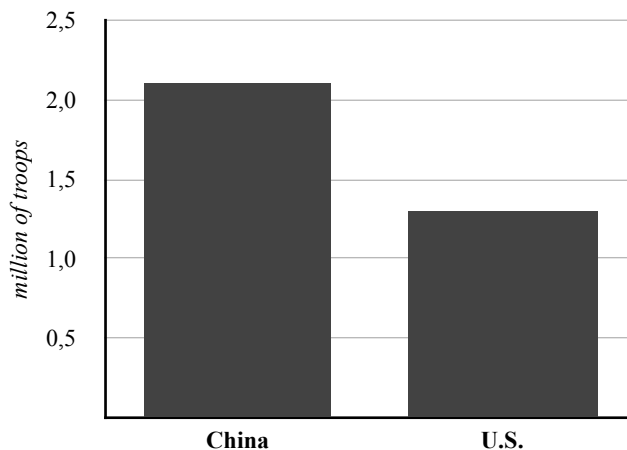
⁴⁰ SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*, 2021, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex> (last access 28.06.2021).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² D. Lopes da Silva et al., “Trends in World Military Expenditure”, *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)*, 2021, https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/fs_2104_milex_0.pdf (last access 22.05.2021).

army with more than 2 million active personnel.⁴³ In comparison, according to a demographic study of the U.S. military carried out by the Council on Foreign Relations, the U.S. active military personnel is about 1.3 million people.⁴⁴ (Table 4)

Table 4: Active duty personnel 2020: China and U.S.



Source: Nadia Lam (2020); CFR (2020)

Third, the amount of military machines can make the difference in war affairs, at least in deterring enemies from attacking. According to a report of the U.S. Department of Defense (2020), China results already ahead of the U.S. in certain areas such as shipbuilding, land-based conventional and cruise missiles, and integrated air defense systems.⁴⁵ China has the largest navy in the world, with an overall battle force of approximately 350 ships and submarines including over 130 major surface combatants. In comparison, the U.S. Navy's battle force is approximately 293 ships.⁴⁶ China has more than 1250 ground-launched ballistic missiles with ranges between 500 and 5500 kilometers. The U.S. currently fields one type of conventional missiles with a range of 70 to 300 kilometers.⁴⁷ China has one of the world's largest forces of advanced long-

⁴³ N. Lam, "China military: how Beijing is pushing forward its plan for a powerful, modern armed forces", *South China Morning Post*, 01.12.2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3111960/how-china-pushing-forward-its-plan-powerful-modern-military> (last access 17.05.2021).

⁴⁴ CFR (Council on Foreign Relations), *Demographics of the U.S. Military*: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/demographics-us-military> (last access 17.05.2021).

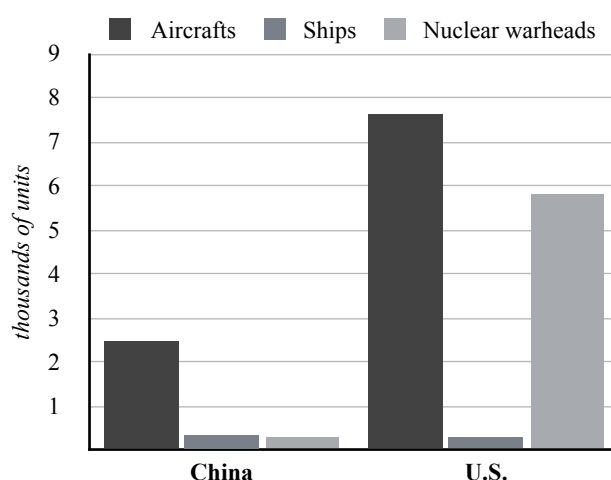
⁴⁵ U.S. Department of Defense: Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Development Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*: <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF> (last access 22.05.2021).

⁴⁶ Ibid, pp. 44-49

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 55-59

range surface-to-air systems—including Russian-built S-400s, S-300s, and domestically produced systems—that constitute part of its robust and redundant integrated air defense system architecture.⁴⁸ However, although China has the second-largest aviation in the world, with over 2500 combat aircrafts⁴⁹, it is far behind the U.S. air force which, instead, counts 7628 combat aircraft (more than the three times those of China).⁵⁰ Finally, the nine nuclear-armed states—United States, Russia, United Kingdom, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea)—together possessed an estimated 13400 nuclear warheads at the start of 2020. Of those, 5800 belong to the U.S. and only 320 to China.⁵¹ (Table 5)

Table 5: Conventional and unconventional warfare 2020: China and U.S.



Source: U.S. Department of Defense (2020); U.S. Department of Transportation (2021); Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI; 2020)

Although the U.S. has by far the most powerful military capacity, China seems having outpaced the rest of the world, ranking as the world’s second military force.

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 50-54

⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 60-69

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of Transportation: Bureau of Transportation Statistics, *Active U.S. Air Carrier and General Aviation Fleet by Type of Aircraft*: <https://www.bts.gov/content/active-us-air-carrier-and-general-aviation-fleet-type-aircraft> (last access 22.05.2021).

⁵¹ SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), *Nuclear Weapon Modernization Continues but the Outlook for Arms Control Is Bleak: The New SIPRI Year Book Is Out*, 15.06.2020, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/nuclear-weapon-modernization-continues-outlook-arms-control-bleak-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now> (last access 22.05.2021).

3. Economic might

In her article, *What Is Economic Power, and Who Has It?* (1975), Susan Strange stated that it is no longer possible to describe issues in purely economic or purely political terms. After all, most economic questions are notoriously political and almost all political questions involve some economic considerations.⁵² Robert Gilpin explained that the Peloponnesian War—fought between Athens and Sparta—embodied significant long-term changes not only in Greece’s military affairs but also in its economy and political organization.⁵³ In essence, both authors argued that military, economic, and political spheres could not be separated. Their combination is dynamic, never static, shifting from time to time according to circumstances. Therefore, the resources from which a state can create military power include more than demographics. In fact, one of the key among them is national income.⁵⁴ Without economic resources, military expenditure is hard to be sustained—especially in the long run.

Although it does not give a complete outlook, gross domestic product (GDP) measures the monetary value of final goods and services produced in a country in a given period of time (usually a year).⁵⁵ It counts the overall output generated within the borders of a country. In other words, it counts the economic resources available within a given country after that its economic actors have sold their goods and services, in a precise period. According to the World Bank, China’s GDP has passed from \$59 billion in the 1960s to \$14.28 trillion in 2019.⁵⁶ No country in human history has been able to raise from poverty more than 850 million people so fast.⁵⁷ In 2010, China had already become the world’s second-largest economy, in terms of GDP, surpassing Japan⁵⁸, and the second-biggest exporter ahead of Germany.⁵⁹ Table 6 compares the average GDP

⁵² S. Strange, “What Is Economic Power, and Who Has It?”, *International Journal*, vol. 30(2), 1975, pp. 207-224, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40201221>.

⁵³ R. Gilpin, “The Theory of Hegemonic War”.

⁵⁴ M. C. Libicki, H. J. Shatz & J. E. Taylor, *Global Demographic Change and Its Implications for Military Power*, RAND Corporation, 2011, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg1091af.11>.

⁵⁵ T. Callen, “Gross Domestic Product: An Economy’s All”, *International Monetary Fund (IMF)*, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/basics/gdp.htm> (last access 28.06.2021).

⁵⁶ World Bank, *China’s GDP (current US\$)*.

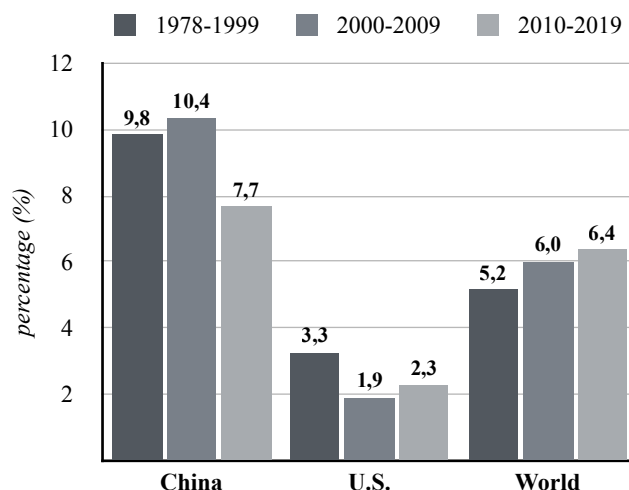
⁵⁷ C. F. Marques, “China Scores Big Against Poverty But the Poor Haven’t Gone Away”.

⁵⁸ D. Barboza, “China Passes Japan as Second-Largest Economy”.

⁵⁹ P. Inman, “China becomes world’s biggest exporter”.

growth rate per year in three different periods: 1978-1999, 2000-2009, 2010-2019. The average GDP growth rate per year, for the period 1978-1999, has been 9.8% for China, 3.3% for the U.S., and 5.2% for the world as a whole. For the period 2000-2009, it has been 10.4% for China, 1.9% for the U.S., and 6% for the world. Finally, for the period 2010-2019, the average GDP growth rate per year has been 7.7% for China, 2.3% for the U.S., and 6.4% for the world.⁶⁰

Table 6: Average GDP growth rate per year: China, U.S., World



Source: World Bank (2021)

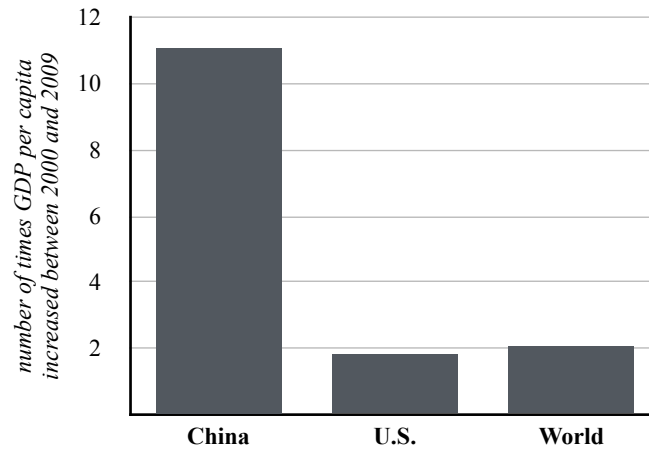
Table 7 shows the rate with which China has increased its GDP per capita. In the last two decades (2000-2019), China's GDP per capita has skyrocketed: in 2019, it was 11 times higher than it was in 2000, passing from \$940 to \$10.390. In contrast, the U.S. has less than doubled its GDP per capita.⁶¹ Before moving on, it is worth bearing in mind that although China's GDP per capita has increased tremendously in comparison to that of the U.S., American GDP per capita was already significantly high in 2000, to be precise \$35.960.⁶²

⁶⁰ World Bank, *GDP growth rate (% annual)—China, U.S., World*: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2019&locations=CN-US-1W&start=1961&view=chart> (last access 22.05.2021).

⁶¹ Ibid, 2000-2009.

⁶² World Bank, *GDP per capita growth rate (% annual)—China, U.S., World*: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD.ZG?end=2019&locations=CN-US-1W&start=1961&view=chart> (last access 04.09.2021)

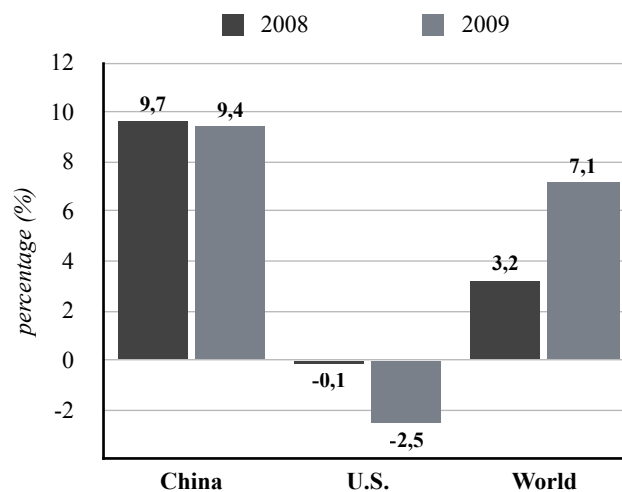
Table 7: GDP per capita growth (2000-2009): China, U.S., World



Source: World Bank (2021)

In the last two decades, at least two financial crises (2007-2008 and 2011-2012) have hit Western countries heavily but not China, which—despite a limited downscaling of its average GDP growth rate—has kept being one of the major contributors to global economic growth. In 2009, the Chinese GDP growth rate outperformed the world average and underwent only a light kickback: -0.3% compared to the previous year—keeping, however, a positive growth. By contrast, the U.S. GDP growth rate registered a -2.5% compared to 2008.⁶³ (Table 8)

Table 8: GDP growth rate after financial crisis of 2008: China, U.S., World

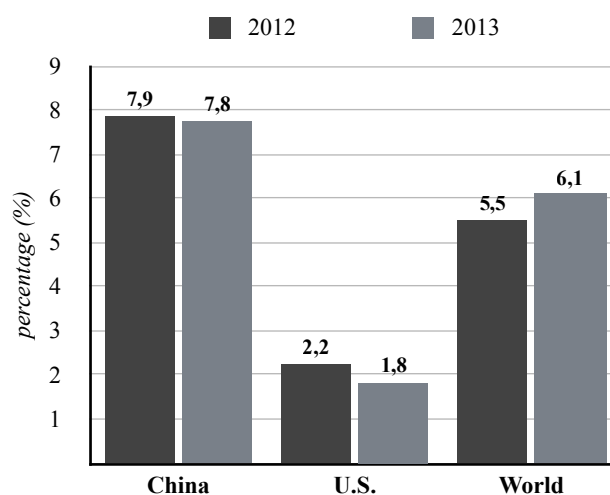


Source: World Bank (2021)

⁶³ Ibid, 2008-2009.

In 2013, the Chinese GDP growth rate was still ahead the world average. It only modestly slowed down: -0.1% compared to 2012. At the same time, although still positive, the U.S. GDP growth rate registered a -0.4% to the previous year.⁶⁴ (Table 9)

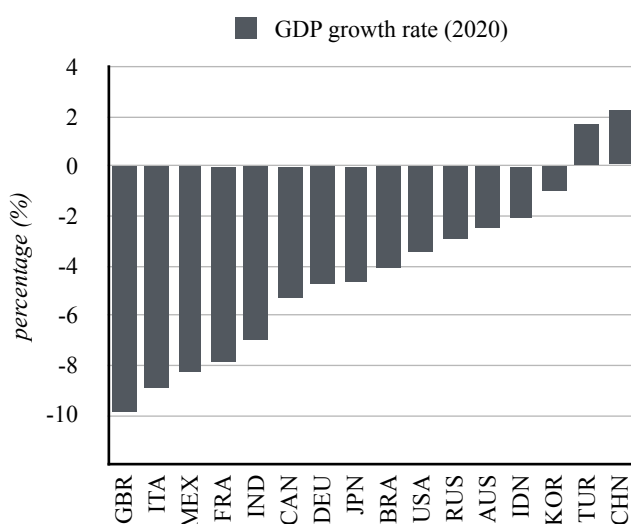
Table 9: GDP growth rate after financial crisis of 2012: China, U.S., World



Source: World Bank (2021)

More recently, in the wake of the economic recession due to covid-19 pandemic, China has been one of the very few countries to register a positive GDP growth. In fact, in 2020, China's GDP grew by 2.3% while those of other major economies registered significantly negative growth rates.⁶⁵ (Table 10)

Table 10: GDP growth rate after covid pandemic (2020): China, U.S., and other major economies



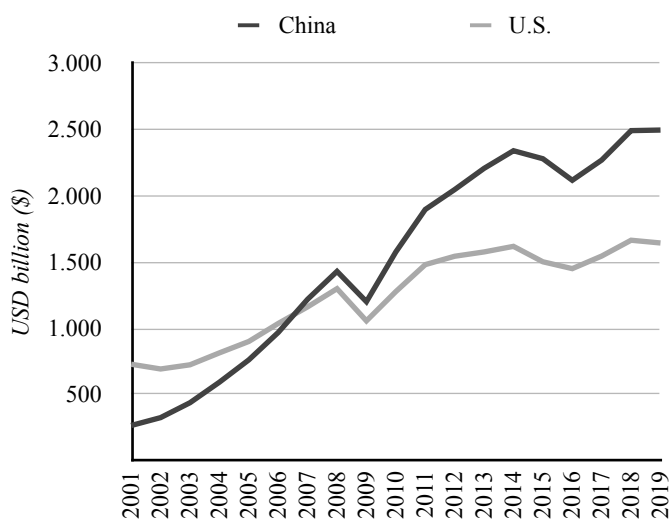
Source: OECD (2021)

⁶⁴ Ibid, 2012-2013.

⁶⁵ OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), *Quarterly GDP*, 2021, <https://data.oecd.org/gdp/quarterly-gdp.htm#indicator-chart> (last access 01.07.2021).

A second important economic indicator is export. Between 2001 (the year in which China joined the World Trade Organization) and 2019, the value of Chinese exports has surged, increasing by almost ten times and passing from \$266 billion to \$2.4 trillion. In contrast, U.S. exports increased only 2.3 times, passing from \$729.1 billion in 2001 to \$1.6 trillion in 2019.⁶⁶ (Table 11)

Table 11: Value of export (2001-2019): China and U.S.



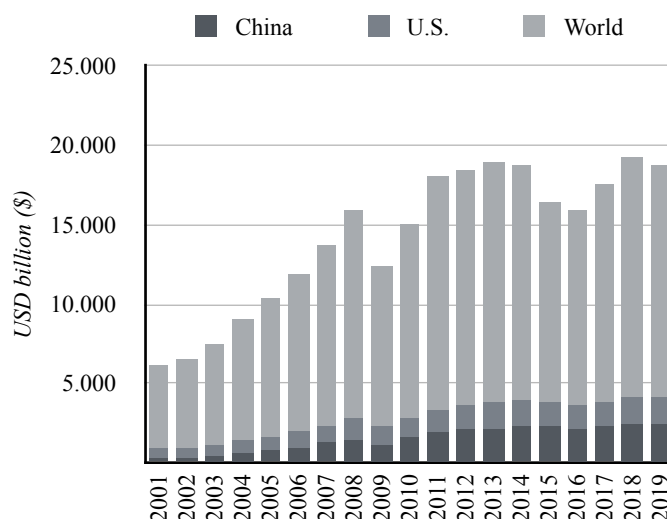
Source: International Trade Center (ITC; 2021)

Table 12 shows, instead, how the Chinese and American values of exports have been changing between 2001 and 2019 compared to the world total. The value of China’s exports to the global total has passed from 4% in 2001 to 13% in 2019; while, at the same time, that of the U.S. has dropped from 14% to 11%.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ ITC (International Trade Centre), *List of products exported by China*.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 2001-2019.

Table 12: Chinese and American values of export compared to the world total (2001-2019)



Source: International Trade Center (ITC; 2021)

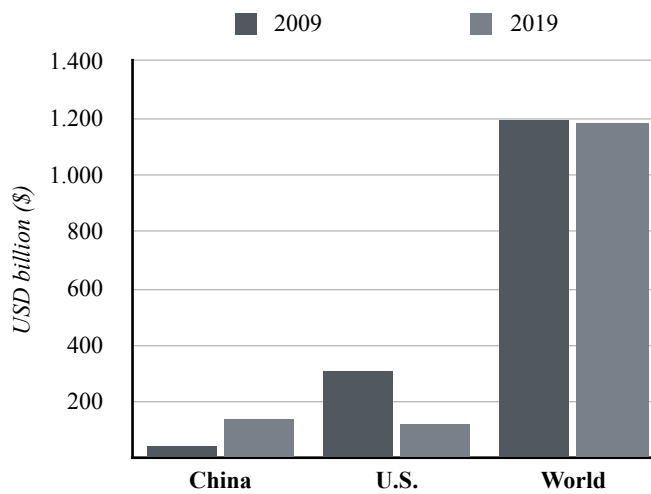
Third, foreign direct investment (FDI) cannot be excluded from this evaluation since it paved the way for the development of today’s global capitalist economy. Western investments have outflowed towards developing countries since the second half of the twentieth century. The Four Asian Tigers’ success (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) between the late 1970s and the 1990s has done nothing but prove the positive impact of FDI. Thereafter, just as Western countries did previously, the Chinese have begun investing abroad. In both cases, it has been the unceasing capitalistic search for new markets that have stimulated FDI flows. As previously discussed, China has gradually opened to the international market, pushing forward “Chinese capitalism characterized by an opportunist State, a market economy built on particularistic relationships, and a culturally self-sustained society with strong pragmatist tradition.”⁶⁸ As a result of its extraordinary growth, China has accumulated a huge wealth, that may devalue if not invested. After the announcement of a “Go Out Policy” of the late 1990s, many Chinese enterprises have begun to invest and operate abroad. As a result, China has emerged as one of the major outgoing foreign direct investment (OFDI) countries. In 2009 (ten years after the introduction of the “Go Out Policy”), Chinese OFDI flows amounted only to \$43.9 billion, while in 2019 to \$136.9 billion.⁶⁹ In other words, in the

⁶⁸ W. Zhao, “What Is Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics? Perspective on State, Market, and Society”, *R&R*, 2015, pp. 1-15.

⁶⁹ OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), *FDI flows (indicator)*.

period 2009-2019, Chinese OFDIs have almost tripled, while U.S. OFDIs have more than halved (passing from \$309.2 billion to \$118.9 billion). (Table 13)

Table 13: Outgoing Foreign Direct Investment (OFDI): China, U.S., World



Source: OECD (2021)

Finally, as part of its outgoing policy, in 2013, Beijing announced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The latter has been described as one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects ever conceived. The BRI is two-pronged: the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road. China has already spent around \$200 billion but the overall expenses are planned to account for \$1.3 trillion. The BRI aims to help China to market its products in 68 countries, reaching 65% of the world’s population.

Overall, what is clear from this data is that although Chinese economy is still far behind that of the U.S. (in terms of GDP and GDP per capita) and the era of the double-digit GDP growth rate is already over, Chinese progress remains remarkable compared to that achieved by the world as a whole in the last decades.

4. Political and cultural influence

Joseph S. Nye & Jack L. Goldsmith (2011) asserted that today we are seeing two big shifts in how power is used in international politics and world affairs. These shifts, which are the result of the information revolution and globalization, are power transition among states and power diffusion from states to non-state actors⁷⁰ (such as International

⁷⁰ J. S. Nye & J. L. Goldsmith, “The Future of Power”, *Harvard Kennedy Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, 2011, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/future-power> (last access 29.06.2021).

governmental organizations (IGOs)⁷¹, Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)⁷², Multinational corporations (MNCs)⁷³, and so forth).

On one side, diplomacy has been helping states to overcome their divergences for millennia; however, it also may serve to increase or project one's image. Even today, states rely on embassies for gathering information on other states' economies, foreign policies, armed forces, governing coalitions, and any other sort of useful information.⁷⁴ In this sense, one of the indicators to understand the involvement of a single state in world affairs is the size of its diplomatic network, that can be described as the total number of its embassies, consulates, permanent mission, and other representations worldwide. Table 14 compares the Chinese diplomatic network size with that of the U.S., and how the latter have been changing since 2016. According to the Lowy Institute Global Diplomacy Index, in 2019, China has outpaced the U.S. with 276 representations spread all over the world.⁷⁵ Notably, China has moved from the third to the first place in this particular ranking, that takes into account data of 61 countries and territories.

⁷¹ IGOs are institutions having activities in several states, and whose members are held together by a formal agreement. IGOs range in size, from at least three members to more than 185. Some IGOs are designed to achieve a single purpose (such as the World Trade Organization, created to oversee trade agreements between member states). In contrast, others have been developed for multiple tasks (such as the United Nations created to maintain world peace and security, develop friendly relations between nations, and enhance international cooperation). Their organizational structures can be simple or highly complex, depending on their size and tasks.

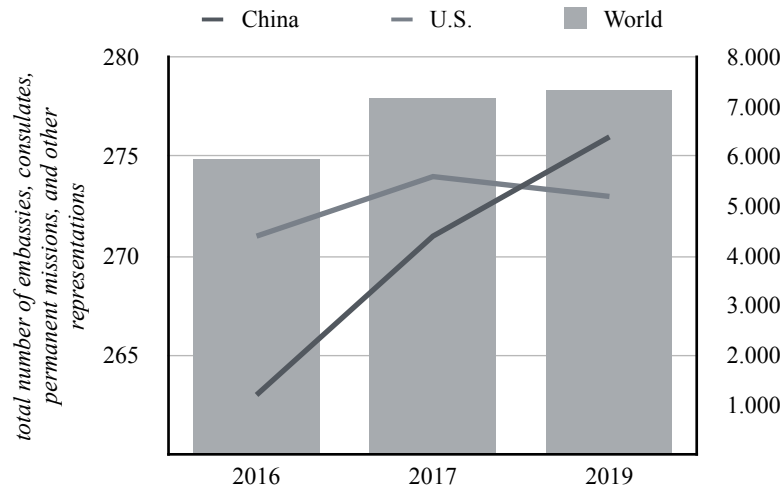
⁷² NGOs are organizations (independent of states and international governmental organizations) engaged in a wide range of activities, often in humanitarian or social activities, but also political and religious. They can take on different legal forms, depending on their scope and where they are settled. For example, some may have the status of charities while others may be registered for tax exemption based on the recognition of social purposes. Typically, they are funded through private donations from philanthropists, although the larger NGOs can be supported by public money.

⁷³ MNCs organize and carry out one or more activities in at least two different states. Major MNCs may have larger budgets than the economies of entire countries. Today, Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, and Google are some of the largest corporations in the world, with a market capitalization respectively of \$2.2 trillion, \$1.8 trillion, \$1.6 trillion, and \$1.4 trillion. To give an idea, they all have a value higher than South Korea's GDP, which is the 10th largest world economy. Unsurprisingly, these companies can play a key role in globalization processes and have a strong influence on international relations. U.S. Stock Market, <https://www.tradingview.com/markets/stocks-usa/market-movers-large-cap/> (last access 24.05.2021).

⁷⁴ G. R. Berridge, *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, London, Prentice Hall, 1995.

⁷⁵ Lowy Institute, *Global Diplomacy Index*: <https://globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org> (last access 18.05.2021).

Table 14: Diplomatic network size (2016-2019): China, U.S., World



Source: Lowy Institute (2021)

On the other side, science, art, and culture are increasingly becoming designated by governments and academics as central instruments for the construction of power within the international system, favoring the intervention of new agents (non-state actors) in the world of high politics.⁷⁶ In essence, one country’s influence is also linked to the appeal of its culture, ideals, and values. As a result, companies, foundations, universities, churches, and other institutions of civil society can help states in raising and promoting its own image abroad.⁷⁷ For instance, Confucius Institutes are non-profit public institutions affiliated with the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China whose stated aim is to promote Chinese language and culture, support local Chinese teaching internationally, and facilitate cultural exchanges. The first Confucius Institute was established in 2004. In 2018, the number of Confucius Institutes reached 548.⁷⁸

Moreover, according Joseph S. Nye (2005), also higher education can be taken as a national asset in order to expand individual countries’ influence.⁷⁹ This could explain

⁷⁶ M. M. Zamorano, “Reframing Cultural Diplomacy: The Instrumentalization of Culture under the Soft Power Theory”, *Culture Unbound*, vol. 8, 2016, p. 175, <http://www.culture-unbound.ep.liu.se>.

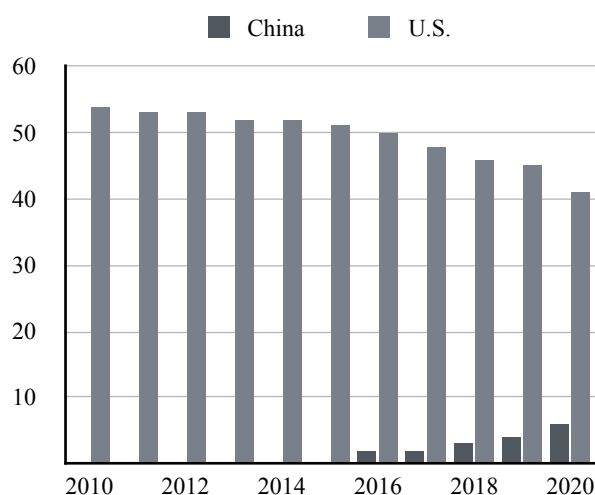
⁷⁷ J. S. Nye & J. Ikenberry, “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics”, *Foreign Affairs*, 2004, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2004-05-01/soft-power-means-success-world-politics> (last access 30.06.2021).

⁷⁸ J. Y. Wang et al., “The Role of Confucius Institutes and One Belt, One Road Initiatives on the Values of Cross-Border M&A: Empirical Evidence from China”, *Sustainability*, vol. 11, 2020.

⁷⁹ J. S. Nye, “Higher Education and Soft Power”, *Forum for the Future of Higher Education*, <http://forum.mit.edu/articles/soft-power-and-higher-education/> (last access 30.06.2021).

why many countries are reshaping their higher education systems to allow their universities to step in the world-class ranking.⁸⁰ Anglo-American universities dominated one of the most prestigious higher education rankings—the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities—for years. However, in the last decade, the number of Chinese universities in the top 100 of this ranking has passed from zero to six.⁸¹ By contrast, the number of American universities in the top 100—although still remarkable—has steadily declined, passing from 54 in 2010 to 41 in 2020. (Table 15) Tsinghua University has registered the best performance among Chinese universities, gaining 29 positions since its entrance in the top 100 in 2016 and placing itself even in the top 30 (at 29^o spot).⁸²

Table 15: Number of Chinese and American universities in the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities top 100 (2016-2020)



Source: *Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (2010-2020)*

The point is that globalization—which is a process that encompasses the causes, course, and consequences of transnational and transcultural integration of human and non-

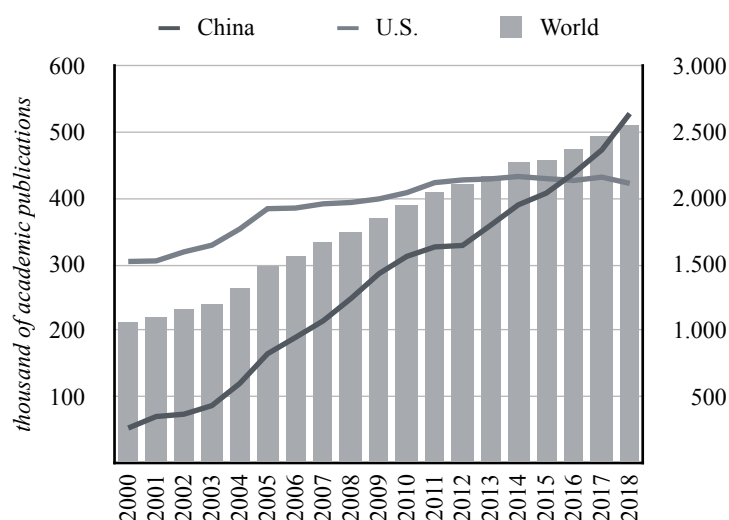
⁸⁰ W. Yat Wai Lo, “Soft power, university rankings and knowledge production: distinctions between hegemony and self-determination in higher education”, *Comparative Education*, vol. 47(2), 2011, pp. 209-222, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23074643>.

⁸¹ The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) was first published in June 2003 by the Center for World-Class Universities (CWCU), Graduate School of Education (formerly the Institute of Higher Education) of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China, and updated on an annual basis. ARWU uses six objective indicators to rank world universities, including the number of alumni and staff winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals, number of highly cited researchers selected by Clarivate Analytics, number of articles published in journals of Nature and Science, number of articles indexed in Science Citation Index - Expanded and Social Sciences Citation Index, and per capita performance of a university. Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2016-2020, <https://www.shanghairanking.com/rankings/arwu/2020/> (last access 30.06.2021).

⁸² Ibid.

human activities⁸³—paved the way to today’s mass prosperity, cultural crossover, as well as global challenges. As a result, in the information age⁸⁴, another important indicator to understand one country’s role in world affairs is the contribution given to knowledge advancement by its scholars working for universities, research institutes, think tanks, and NGOs. Nowadays, states are facing issues that climb over national borders (such as climate change, terrorism, pandemics). Since such problems require joint actions, advanced knowledge and shared information can help governments in overcoming those global challenges. According to World Bank, the number of scientific and technical journal articles published by Chinese scholars, lecturers, and practitioners has surged, passing from 53.064 in 2000 to 528.263 in 2018. China has surpassed the U.S. in 2016, becoming the world’s primary contributor to global scientific and technical advancement.⁸⁵ (Table 16)

Table 16: Number of scientific and technical journal articles published (2000-2018): China, U.S., World



Source: World Bank (2021)

⁸³ N. R. F. Al-Rodhan, “Definitions of Globalization: A Comprehensive Overview and a Proposed Definition”, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2006, <https://dl1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/31844386/definitions-of-globalization-with-cover-page-v2.pdf?> (last access 30.06.2021).

⁸⁴ Cambridge Dictionary defines “information age” as the present time, in which large amounts of information are available thanks to developments in computer technology. Cambridge Dictionary, *Definition of “information age”*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/information-age> (last access 29.06.2021).

⁸⁵ World Bank, *Scientific and technical journal articles—China, U.S., World*: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IP.JRN.ARTC.SC?locations=CN-US-1W> (last access 20.05.2021).

Chapter 2

U.S. Realists and Their Recurring Interrogatives

As mentioned in chapter one, the concept of “rise” entails dynamism, effort, movement. In essence, the rising subject has to do something; otherwise, it will not manage to change its situation, condition, position, or status. In the case of China, one cannot fail to recognize that in the last decades, regardless of the theory applied, Chinese leaders have shown themselves extremely active in trying to change the living conditions of their nation. The point is that the debate around China’s rise is controversial. For some, China has done nothing but build up its power to challenge the U.S. leadership with the concealed ambition of subverting the current status quo. For others, instead, China has only put its effort into raising from poverty its huge nation without any aspiration to global control.

To help the reader to understand how U.S. realists have interpreted China’s rise, this chapter will present the latter’s answers to the following questions: (1) Will China try to challenge the status quo? (2) Does China has a chance to overthrow the U.S.-led world order successfully? (3) Is a U.S.-China war inevitable? However, two essential premises are needed. First, the scholars this work will take in will be IR scholars who have an active affiliation with an American university, whose thoughts align with realist assumptions and who have written at least an article or a book on China’s rise after 2010. Second, reading their works, I have noticed that most of those scholars developed their analysis around the issues mentioned above. Hence, from here, the choice of arranging theories according to responses provided to recurring matters. Overall, 28 scholars were eligible for my analysis, for a total of 53 between articles, books, and papers written after 2010.

1. Qualitative analysis

This research relies on a qualitative analysis that articulates in four steps. In the first step, I carried out an advanced search on the JSTOR⁸⁶ database to collect preliminary

⁸⁶ JSTOR helps researchers, professionals, and students to explore a wide range of scholarly content through a powerful research and teaching platform. It provides access to more than 12 million academic journal articles, books, and primary sources in 75 disciplines. To discover more, visit the website www.jstor.org.

information about authors who have published at least an article or a book on China’s rise from 2010 onwards. This year (2010) has not been chosen by chance. In 2010, China had already become the world’s second-largest economy, surpassing Japan⁸⁷, and the biggest exporter ahead of Germany.⁸⁸ The filters used to shrink the research field have been the following:

Keywords searched in all fields: China’s rise, United States, U.S., War, Power, Realism, Competition, Security, World Order
Second keywords searched in titles: China’s rise, Chinese rise, China’s ascent, Chinese ascent, China’s ascendancy, Chinese ascendancy
Item Types: Articles, Books
Publication Date: from 2010 to present

Although they do not assure a full and precise skimming, the aforementioned keywords have limited the research to works that contain traces of realist terminology.

In the second step, I consulted authors’ bios, resumes, and areas of interest, selecting only those that fit into the IR scholar definition provided by Daniel Maliniak et al. (2011). In other words, I considered only scholars with an active affiliation with a university (in this case, American university) and whose interest lies in economic, social, and political interactions between states.⁸⁹ As a result, I excluded researchers employed in government, think tanks, and private firms, at the time of their writing.

In the third step, using information previously gathered, I dug in-depth authors’ bios and careers and prepared a list to prove that the aforementioned advanced research settings have been quite effective in shrinking the research field to those interested in IR theories and security. Thus, for each scholar, I reported his/her areas of interest and academic affiliation. (Table 17)

Table 17: List of eligible IR scholars for this study

Surname	Name	Areas of interest	Affiliation
Acharya	Amitav	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Security • U.S. Foreign Policy • East Asian Politics 	American University Washington DC
Allison	Graham	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Security • Decision-making 	Harvard University
Art	Robert J.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory • U.S. Foreign Policy • International Security 	Brandies University

⁸⁷ D. Barboza, “China Passes Japan as Second-Largest Economy”.

⁸⁸ P. Inman, “China becomes world’s biggest exporter”.

⁸⁹ D. Maliniak et al., “International Relations in the U.S. Academy”.

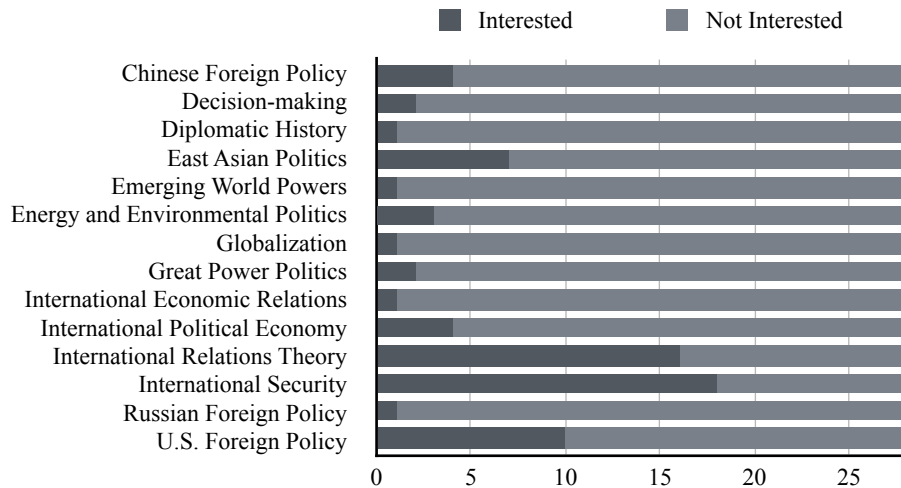
Surname	Name	Areas of interest	Affiliation
Beckley	Michael	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory • East Asian Politics 	Tufts University
Brooks	Stephen G.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory • International Security • U.S. Foreign Policy 	Dartmouth University
Carlson	Allen R.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory • Chinese Foreign Policy • International Security 	Cornell University
Fravel	Taylor M.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Security • East Asian Politics 	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Friedberg	Aaron	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Security • Globalization • International Political Economy • East Asian Politics 	Princeton University
Gattie	David	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Security • Energy and Environmental Politics 	University of Georgia
Glaser	Charles L.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory • International Security 	George Washington University
Ho	Benjamin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Political Economy • Decision-making • Energy and Environmental Politics 	Vassar College
Krasner	Stephen D.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory • International Economic Relations • U.S. Foreign Policy 	Stanford University
Lampton	David M.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Security • U.S. Foreign Policy 	John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies
Larson	Deborah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory • Great Power Politics • Decision-making 	University of California Los Angeles
Layne	Christopher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory • Great Power Politics • U.S. Foreign Policy 	Texas A&M University
Liff	Adam P.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory • International Security • East Asian Politics 	Indiana University Bloomington
Massey	Joshua	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Security • U.S. Foreign Policy • Energy and Environmental Politics 	University of Georgia
Mearsheimer	John	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory • International Security 	University of Chicago
Pu	Xiaoyu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory • East Asian Politics • Emerging World Powers • Chinese Foreign Policy 	University of Nevada Reno
Rosato	Sebastian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory 	University of Notre Dame
Ross	Robert S.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Security • East Asian Politics 	Boston College
Schweller	Randall L.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory • International Security 	Ohio State University

Surname	Name	Areas of interest	Affiliation
Shevchenko	Alexei	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory • International Political Economy • U.S. Foreign Policy • Chinese Foreign Policy • Russian Foreign Policy 	Pepperdine University
Shifrinson	Joshua	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Security • Diplomatic History 	Boston University
Sutter	Robert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chinese Foreign Policy • U.S. Foreign Policy • East Asian Politics 	George Washington University
Walt	Stephen M.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory • International Security 	Harvard University
Welsey-Smith	Terence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Relations Theory • International Political Economy 	University of Hawaii at Manoa
Wohlforth	William	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. Foreign Policy • International Security 	Dartmouth University

Source: Author

In total, only 28 scholars were eligible for my analysis. Table 18 shows the number of scholars per area of interest. Respectively with 18 and 16 preferences, International Security (IS) and International Relations Theory (IRT) occupy the highest ranks among the most popular areas of interest among eligible IR scholars for this study.

Table 18: Number of eligible IR scholars per area of interest



Source: Author

Traditionally, IRT is the study of international relations from a theoretical perspective. In other words, IRT seeks to explain why states employ certain behaviors in their interaction with other states. By contrast, IS—also known as Security Studies (SS)—is

an IR sub-field. The core of IS is the study of organized violence, and the steps that individuals (or groups of individuals) can take to both attack and defend themselves.

For realists, security is a priority. Because states have long been the most powerful actors on the world stage, according to realists, they can be considered as the main actors.⁹⁰ The modern concept of state has been presented by Max Weber, who defined the state as a political entity characterized by a well-defined territory, a permanent population, and a government that holds the monopoly of the means of force and that is constitutionally separate from all foreign governments.⁹¹ Although states are independent, they are not isolated. On the contrary, states are usually embedded in international markets that affect policies and choices of their governments as well as the wealth and welfare of their citizens.⁹² Together, independent states form the international state system. In general, each state holds its own interests, which can be described as particularly meaningful conditions or situations that must be maintained or defended. To reach a specific goal or preserve a given interest, states employ strategies or sets of actions. There are two different types of strategies: (1) persuasive when states use non-violent measures such as threats, pressure, or collaboration; (2) coercive when they make use of violence (war).⁹³ Realists believe that states are rational actors able to elaborate strategies to guarantee their primary interest: survival. Obviously, it is different from saying that survival is the only goal. By contrast, states cannot pursue any goal if they do not meet their very basic one, which is to exist and to be strong enough to overcome any internal or external threat.⁹⁴ Overall, the fact that these advanced research settings have allowed me to gather 53 works (articles, books, and papers) of IR

⁹⁰ J. Mearsheimer, "A Realist Reply", *International Security*, vol. 20(1), 1995, pp. 82-93, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539218>.

⁹¹ The Weber's sudden death in the summer of 1920 prevented him from writing a systematic treaty on the state. Instead of a finished product, he left behind only fragments and occasional writings bearing—directly or indirectly—on the problem of the state. Karl Dusza (1989) attempted to reconstruct Weber thoughts from these fragmentary writings. K. Dusza, "Max Weber's Conception of the State", *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 3(1), 1989, pp. 71-105, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20006938>.

⁹² J. Ku & J. Yoo, "Globalization and Sovereignty", *Berkeley Journal of International Law*, 2013, pp. 210-235, https://scholarlycommons.law.hofstra.edu/faculty_scholarship/574.

⁹³ M. Nincic, "The National Interest and Its Interpretation", *The Review of Politics*, vol. 61(1), 1999, pp. 29-55, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1408647>.

⁹⁴ R. Jackson & G. Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations*, pp. 66-75.

scholars with a particular interest in international security proves that methodology has been quite effective in shrinking the research field.

Finally, in the last step, after reading their works and identified recurring interrogatives, I presented the reader with U.S. realists' answers to the following questions: (1) Will China try to challenge the status quo? (2) Does China has a chance to successfully overthrow the U.S.-led world order? (3) Is a U.S.-China war inevitable?

It is worth underlining that “status quo” and “world order” are terms frequently found in IR. On one side, “status quo” describes a factual situation (the order of things) at a given time.⁹⁵ Thus, since after the fall of the Soviet Union, the international system has been firmly anchored in the U.S. leadership, the status quo is intended here as the period of time wherein the U.S. has been the sole and uncontested superpower on the international stage. On the other side, “world order” (or “international order”) consists of structured relationships among units which coexist in the same environment.⁹⁶ In other words, “world order” is defined as the body of rules, norms, and institutions that govern relations between states.⁹⁷

2. The realist tradition

Realism is one of the dominant and most ancient IR theories forasmuch as early realist traces can be found in Greek classical culture. Thucydides, a Greek scholar who lived almost 2500 years ago, has been considered by many as the first historian and one of the first to cast a critical eye over the dynamics behind great power competition. In his book, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, he wrote: “It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.”

After all, war and diplomacy have always been the main institutions to solve disputes originated by divergent, contending, opposing, or irreconcilable interests. With the

⁹⁵ Oxford University Press, “Status Quo”, *Oxford Public International Law*, 2006, <https://opil.ouplaw.com/view/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1475> (last access 15.09.2021).

⁹⁶ D. Lake & L. Martin & T. Risse, “Challenges to the Liberal Order”, *International Organization*, vol. 75(2), 2021, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/challenges-to-the-liberal-order-reflections-on-international-organization/2FE0E2621F702D1DD02929526703AED3>.

⁹⁷ M. J. Mazaar et al., “The Liberal International Order – a Health Check”, *World Economic Forum*, 03.10.2017, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/10/the-liberal-international-order-a-health-check/> (last access 22.09.2021).

Peace of Westphalia (1648) in the seventeenth century, a new international system was settled in Europe. The latter was based on clearly defined territories, permanent populations, independent governments with the monopoly of the means of the force, and mutual sovereignty recognition. Unfortunately, the competition among major continental powers paved the way to ever-harsher conflicts: Napoleon's attempt to impose French hegemony over Europe, World War I, World War II, to name a few.

The sequence of conflicts and wars among emperors, kings, rulers, and states throughout human history pushed prominent thinkers to investigate and try to give meaning to the reasons behind such competing behaviors. As a result, they have been developing various realist schools of thought, providing new interpretations of state behaviors. For example, classical realists (such as Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Morgenthau) argued that human nature is about competing to defend (and possibly increase) one's power.⁹⁸ In other words, humans are seen as egoistic, self-centered creatures who show a peculiar lust for power. As a result, since states are ruled by men, politics is nothing but a struggle for power among men.⁹⁹ In contrast, neorealists or structural realists (such as Gilpin, Mearsheimer, and Waltz) believed that one's state behavior results from the structural anarchy of the international system within which it lives with other states, rather than from human nature.¹⁰⁰ Notably, according to Waltz's neorealist theory, the anarchical international system configuration determines how states are likely to act. There are three different power configurations: unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar. Each configuration is characterized by a certain number of poles (or hegemonic powers), and its own rules of the game that eventually result in different patterns of interaction among states. In a unipolar configuration, there is a sole hegemonic power that: (1) retains military and economic supremacy; (2) settles disputes between less powerful units; (3) prevents other units to achieve independence or greater autonomy; (4) may gradually attempt to lessen or eliminate the autonomy of other units. By contrast, in a bipolar configuration, there is competition between two hegemonic powers. As a result: (1) each pole tries to strengthen its power by persuading and eventually bringing into its sphere of influence the highest number of states possible; (2)

⁹⁸ W. J. Korab-Karpowicz, "Political Realism in International Relations".

⁹⁹ R. Jackson & G. Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations*.

¹⁰⁰ R. L. Schweller & D. Priess, "A Tale of Two Realisms: Expanding the Institutions Debate".

each pole tries to eliminate the rival bloc by undermining its stability (if possible) or fighting (if necessary). Finally, in a multipolar configuration, three or more poles compete with each other. In this case: (1) each pole opposes any other pole (or alliance) that threatens to become hegemonic; (2) each pole tries to increase its power simultaneously preventing other poles from increasing theirs by negotiating (if possible) or by fighting (if not).¹⁰¹

It is worth noticing that Waltz' theory is also known as defensive realism. In Jeffrey W. Taliaferro's eyes, "defensive realism holds that the international system provides incentives for expansion only under certain conditions."¹⁰² The point is that, under anarchy, many of the means a state uses to increase its security decrease other states' security. In other words, to protect citizens from internal and external threats, states make use of force. However, the more a state uses its army to defend its interests, the more its enemy feels threatened and replies with violence. This mutual use of force does nothing but jeopardize both states' security.¹⁰³ This paradox is known as the security dilemma. Waltz believed that the anarchical structure of the international system encourages states to seek security. In contrast, John Mearsheimer put forward the idea that anarchy is responsible for the promotion of aggressive state behavior in international politics since states seek to maximize their power and influence to achieve security through domination.¹⁰⁴ Mearsheimer's theory is also known as offensive realism. Finally, neoclassical realists (such as Gideon Rose) more recently have tried to understand international politics by combining the nature of the international system—that is, the political environment within which states live and interact with each other—with domestic factors—such as political regimes, strategic culture, and leader perceptions.¹⁰⁵ In other words, neoclassical realists argue that states respond in large part to the constraints and opportunities of the international system when they conduct

¹⁰¹ K. N. Waltz, *Theory of international politics*.

¹⁰² J. W. Taliaferro, "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited", *International Security*, vol. 25(3), 2000, pp. 128-161, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2626708>.

¹⁰³ A. Wivel, "Security dilemma", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/security-dilemma> (last access 05.07.2021).

¹⁰⁴ J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions.", *International Security*, vol. 19, 1994, pp. 5-49.

¹⁰⁵ G. Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy", *World Politics*, vol. 51(1), 1998, pp. 144-172, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100007814>.

their foreign and security policies, but their responses are also shaped by unit-level factors.¹⁰⁶

Although often charged to be old-fashioned and simplistic, realists have never ceased to up-to-date their theoretical framework. They have been evolving and looking at old problems (such as security and competition among states) from new perspectives—in the beginning, from an individualistic point of view and, then, from a structural one.

As Jack Donnelly has pointed out in his book *Realism and International Relations* (2000), Robert Gilpin once argued that realism is not a theory defined by an explicit set of assumptions and propositions.¹⁰⁷ Rather, it is a loose framework that, nevertheless, shows five recurring motives:

1. The sovereign states are the primary actors in the international arena. Obviously, there are other actors operating at the international level such as international organizations, NGOs, and multinationals, but they play a secondary role.¹⁰⁸
2. The international system is anarchical. It is a self-help system wherein no higher authority seats above states. In other words, there is no world government and, as a result, all international agreements (such as conventions, customs, laws, alliances, and international organizations' membership) are provisional and conditional on states' willingness to comply with them.¹⁰⁹
3. The sovereign states operate in the field of uncertainty. They cannot trust each other since it is impossible to know or predict neither the real nor future intentions of other states.¹¹⁰
4. The sovereign states' primary goal is survival. It is different from saying that survival is the only goal. In fact, states have a great variety of particular interests

¹⁰⁶ N. M. Ripsman, "Neoclassical Realism", *International Studies Association and Oxford University Press*, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.36>.

¹⁰⁷ J. Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

¹⁰⁸ R. O. Keohane, "Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond.", *Neo-Realism and Its Critics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

¹⁰⁹ R. Gilpin, "The Theory of Hegemonic War".

¹¹⁰ J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions."

that motivate their behavior.¹¹¹ Consequently, states cannot pursue any goal if they do not meet their very basic one.¹¹²

5. The sovereign states are rational actors able to elaborate strategies to guarantee their survival and defend their interests.¹¹³

Overall, realism (like any other IR theory) is a tool to simplify the world's complexity. As shown above, it is not a solid unit rather a collection of general statements that combined serves to explain states' behavior. Obviously, it does not mean that realism can give meaning to any development of international politics. Still, it means just that a conceptual framework may prove to be more effective to comprehend aspects of given events or behaviors than others (such as liberalism, constructivism, feminism, and so forth).

3. Will China try to challenge the status quo?

Making predictions is never easy. In the specific case of China, understanding whether it will try to challenge the status quo or not is impossible, or at least extremely complicated. At this point, it is important to clarify the reader what the term *status quo* means. The term "status quo" describes a factual situation (the order of things) at a given time.¹¹⁴ Given that, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the international system has been firmly anchored in the U.S. leadership, the status quo is intended here as the period of time during which the U.S. has been the sole and uncontested superpower on the international stage.

In this section, I decided to compare the assumptions of who (among the IR scholars eligible for my study) anticipates that China will try to challenge the status quo with those of who disagree. As shown in Table 19, the relative majority leans towards an affirmative answer. In sum: nine hypothesize that China will give it a try, seven expect China will not do it, while the rest (12) has not provided a direct answer since they investigated China's rise from a different perspective.

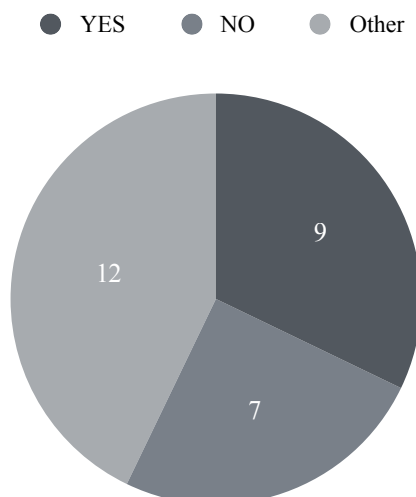
¹¹¹ J. Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, p. 50.

¹¹² J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions."

¹¹³ K. N. Waltz, *Theory of international politics*.

¹¹⁴ Oxford University Press, "Status Quo".

Table 19: Will China try to challenge the status quo?



Source: Author

Among those who anticipate that China will try to challenge the status, one can find: Graham Allison (Harvard University), Robert J. Art (Brandies University), Aaron Friedberg (Princeton University), Deborah Larson (University of California Los Angeles), Christopher Layne (Texas A&M University), John Mearsheimer (University of Chicago), Sebastian Rosato (University of Notre Dame), Alexei Shevchenko (Pepperdine University), Stephen M. Walt (Harvard University).

In his article *China vs. America: Managing the Next Clash of Civilizations* (2017), Graham Allison pointed that the rise of China (one of the ancientest civilizations in human history) is not a problem to be fixed; it is a chronic condition that will have to be managed over generations.¹¹⁵ Therefore, one cannot fail to expect that China will try to challenge the U.S. and reposition itself on world stage, especially after the humiliation underwent after the Opiums Wars. In the last decade, Beijing has been bolstering its diplomatic and economic connections with neighboring countries and has begun using economic leverage to encourage (or coerce) cooperation.¹¹⁶ In 1978, when Deng Xiaoping initiated China's economic reforms, China adopted a strategy known as "hide and bide." At that time, China needed stability and access to markets. Consequently, Chinese military officers preferred putting their effort in capacity-building before

¹¹⁵ G. Allison, "China vs. America: Managing the Next Clash of Civilizations", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 96(5), 2017, pp. 80-89, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44821871>.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

embracing a bolder attitude towards other countries. In recent years, however, with the arrival of Xi Jinping, the era of “hide and bide” seems coming to an end.¹¹⁷

Robert J. Art, in his article *The United States and the Rise of China: Implications for the Long Haul* (2010), argued that historically dominant powers have not readily given up their position of number one to rising challengers, and rising challengers have always demanded the fruits to which they believe their growing power entitles them. Therefore, there is no reason to expect that things will be different with U.S. and China.¹¹⁸ In other words, if history has taught us something, China’s appetites will grow as its power grows, and China will seek to shape its international environment in ways favorable to its interests.

In Friedberg’s view, China’s opportunity to challenge the status quo is due to U.S. miscalculations. In his article *Globalization and Chinese Grand Strategy* (2018), he pointed that the U.S. has started engaging China in the global economy, hoping that (sooner or later) the subsequent economic growth would have made its leaders vulnerable to external pressures and influences and ready to turn the country into a democracy. Unfortunately, something went wrong, and China not only managed to hold its authoritarian regime untouched, but CCP developed a sophisticated system to distort information.¹¹⁹ The near-collapse of the global economy, due to the financial crisis of 2007-2008, played a key role forasmuch as created two contrasting feelings in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) elites. On one side, the 2008 crisis has deepened fears about their own ability to sustain growth and stay in power; on the other, the crisis also has made them believe that a golden opportunity to expand Chinese influence globally had opened. After all, Chinese leaders’ optimism made sense since the U.S. and other liberal democracies were in bad shape while China’s economy had managed to keep up.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ G. Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?”, *The Atlantic*, 2015, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/mrcbg/files/Allison%20C%202015.09.24%20The%20Atlantic%20-%20Thucydides%20Trap.pdf> (last access 06.07.2021).

¹¹⁸ R. J. Art, “The United States and the Rise of China: Implications for the Long Haul”, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 125(3), 2010, pp. 359-391, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25767046>.

¹¹⁹ A. L. Friedberg, “Globalization and Chinese Grand Strategy”, *Survival*, 2018, vol. 60(1), pp. 7-40., <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.1427362>.

¹²⁰ A. L. Friedberg, “Competing with China”, *Survival*, 2018, vol. 60(3), pp. 19-21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.1470755>.

For Deborah Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, the reason why relations between the U.S. and China—as well as other emerging powers not aligned with western values like Russia—dwells in the American refusal to accord them great power status. Since China and Russia are neither U.S. allies nor Western-style democracies, they have not always accepted the rules of the liberal core of the international system. As a result, frustrated by their continued exclusion, both states had already started challenging U.S. leadership.¹²¹

To build their theory, they drew on social identity theory (SIT), which explores how social groups strive to achieve a positively distinctive identity. In essence, applied to international relations, SIT suggests that one state may see itself recognized as higher-status power by the hegemon (or group of hegemons) if it puts in place one of the following strategies: social mobility, social competition, or social creativity.¹²² The point is that this strategical choice depends on the openness of the status hierarchy as well as the values of the dominant power or group. After the fall of Soviet Union, the U.S. (that, meanwhile, had become the sole superpower) started promoting democratic values worldwide. Unfortunately, frustrated with conditionality and Western-imposed barriers to social mobility, China and Russia adopted social competition strategies.¹²³

Overall, Larson and Shevchenko recognized that in the future China and Russia could turn towards creative strategies. Yet, since the U.S. ability to achieve its goals looks in decline, the latter must learn how to treat them not as rivals but rather as junior

¹²¹ D. Larson & A. Shevchenko, “Prestige Matters: Chinese and Russian Status Concerns and U.S. Foreign Policy”, *Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center*, 2010, <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/Prestige-Matters-Chinese-and-Russian-Status-Concerns-and-US-Foreign-Policy-final.pdf> (last access 06.07.2021).

¹²² If the boundaries of the higher-status group are permeable, a lower-rank state may conform to the norms of an elite group to gain acceptance, pursuing a strategy of social mobility. Just as individuals imitate the lifestyle of the upper class to be accepted into an elite social club, states copy the political and economic norms of the dominant group to be admitted to more prestigious institutions or clubs. In contrast, if the elite group boundaries are impermeable to new members, the lower-rank state may strive for equal or superior status through strict competition. Low-rank states may also turn to competition when they regard the dominant group’s position as illegitimate or unstable. Finally, when the status hierarchy is perceived as legitimate or stable, a lower-rank state may seek prestige on a different dimension, such as promoting new norms or a developmental model. Unlike social competition, social creativity does not try to change the hierarchy of status in the international system but rather tries to achieve preeminence on a different ranking system. D. Larson & A. Shevchenko, “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy”, *International Security*, vol. 34(4), 2010, pp. 72-74, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40784562>.

¹²³ D. Larson & A. Shevchenko, “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy”, *International Security*, vol. 34(4), 2010, p. 76, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40784562>.

partners.¹²⁴ If the U.S. should fail to do so, China and Russia will most likely keep putting in place social competition strategy, that is the strategy adopted by the other rising powers throughout human history to challenge the then-established power.

Although he realizes that China it is not (yet) on the verge of either ruling the world or becoming a global hegemon comparable to the U.S. after the Second World War, also Christopher Layne expects that China will act as any other rising power did throughout history. In other words, as he wrote in his article *This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana* (2012), Layne expects that China will keep increasing its material capacity and try to contest the U.S. openly. As a result, international leadership will likely be contested for the next several decades.¹²⁵

John Mearsheimer, in his article *The Gathering Storm* (2010), asserted that if it will keep growing at the pace of the last decades, China will attempt to dominate the Asia-Pacific region the way U.S. dominates the Western Hemisphere.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, Mearsheimer did not deem that China poses to the U.S. the same challenge posed by Soviet Union. There are three reasons why he assumes that a new Cold War (this time, between the U.S. and China) will not take place. First, the global distribution of power from 1945 to 1989 was bipolar, while it started gradually shifting towards a multipolar configuration since 2005. In the aftermath of WWII, with France and Britain struggling with preserving their empires, only two powers emerged as primary winners: the United States and the Soviet Union. Those two superpowers engaged in a harsh security competition that ended only with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. As a result, the U.S. became the sole superpower within the system, playing this role for almost two decades. Yet, starting from the second half of the 2000s, the rise of China, the financial crisis of 2007-2008, the failing social-engineering project of turning Greater Middle East into a democratic region, and the revival of Russian power contributed to reshaping the distribution of power.¹²⁷ Second, in the Sino-American relations, geography plays a

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 95.

¹²⁵ C. Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana", *International Studies Quarterly*, 2012, pp. 1-11, <https://www.carlanorrlf.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/ThisTimeItsReal.pdf>.

¹²⁶ J. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 3(4), 2010, pp. 381-396, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48615756>.

¹²⁷ J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order", *International Security*, vol. 43(4), 2019, pp. 7-50, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00342.

different role. In fact, while a war in the center of Europe would probably have turned into World War III with nuclear weapons during the Cold War, such a possibility looks unrealistic in Asia. In fact, although Asia has several places where fighting might break out, the magnitude of any individual war would be nowhere near as great as it would have been in Europe between 1945 and 1990.¹²⁸ Moreover, apart from China and the U.S., it is expected that there will be other nuclear powers in Asia, such as Russia, India, and probably Japan. The fact that a number of great powers are closely located does nothing but make the region (and the world as a whole) more unstable than it was in the past, increasing the opportunities for a shift in the status quo.¹²⁹ Third, the situation on the economic front is much different today than it was during Cold War. Globalization was moderate between 1945 and the late 1980s but it has accelerated in the early 1990s and has done nothing but make the international economy increasingly integrated and dynamic. In such a hyper-globalized world, change occurs at incredible speed, and major developments in one country have significant effects in other countries.

As he wrote in his article *Why the United States and China Are on a Collision Course* (2015), Sebastian Rosato shared Mearsheimer's view. In essence, Rosato maintains that if China were to continue to grow economically and convert its wealth into military power, it would use this power to subvert the status quo and dominate Asia.¹³⁰

Stephen M. Walt asserted that the period when the U.S. could manage politics, economics, and security arrangements for nearly the entire globe was never destined to endure forever. Therefore, one should not be surprised if China attempted to take advantage of the situation. Nevertheless, the end of the American Era is not necessarily a bad thing. Rather, American leaders should consider it an opportunity to shift strategic attention from faraway places to domestic imperatives.¹³¹ They must bear in mind,

¹²⁸ J. Mearsheimer, "Can China Rise Peacefully?", *The National Interest*, pp. 29-30, 2014, http://www.eastlaw.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Can-China-Rise-Peacefully_-_-The-National-Interest.pdf (last access 06.07.2021).

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 32.

¹³⁰ S. Rosato, "Why the United States and China Are on a Collision Course", *Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center*, 2015, <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/rosato-us-china-pb-final.pdf> (last access 06.07.2021).

¹³¹ S. M. Walt, "The End of the American Era", *The National Interest*, 2011, pp. 10-11, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42896410>.

though, that China has the potential to become a more formidable rival than the Soviet Union for two main reasons. First, its economy is likely to become larger than that of the U.S. Second, China is likely to project its power abroad because, unlike the Soviet Union, its continuous growth depends on global trade and overseas resources.¹³²

After reviewing the ideas of those who deem that there is no reason to expect that China will follow a different path from that followed by other rising powers throughout human history, it is now time to look at counterarguments. Among scholars who held quite the opposite view, it is possible to find: Stephen G. Brooks (Dartmouth University), Benjamin Ho (Vassar College), Xiaoyu Pu (University of Nevada Reno), Randall L. Schweller (Ohio State University), Joshua Shiffrin (Boston University), Robert Sutter (George Washington University), William Wohlforth (Dartmouth University).

Stephen G. Brooks and William Wohlforth disagree with the assumption that China will try to challenge the status quo just because states are not capable of escape from historical recurrences. In essence, they believe that China's rise does not look comparable to any modern rising power. The most recent rising states of note—namely, the U.S. in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Germany in the early twentieth century, and the Soviet Union in the middle of the twentieth century—were not at dramatically different technological level from that of the leading state. Consequently, in assessments of the relative power of Germany or the U.S. to the United Kingdom or the Soviet Union to the U.S., technological gap did not matter as the size of their economies and how much they tried to convert their wealth into military power.¹³³ In contrast, China shows low level of technological expertise compared with that of the U.S.¹³⁴ In addition to this, China will not be able to leave out of consideration its domestic challenges (such as slowing economy, pollution, widespread corruption, rapidly aging population, and restive middle class).¹³⁵ In the end, they do not expect that China acquires the needed capacity to subvert the status quo.

¹³² Ibid, p. 13.

¹³³ S. G. Brooks & W. C. Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position", *International Security*, vol. 40(3), 2015, p. 35, https://watermark.silverchair.com/isec_a_00225.pdf?

¹³⁴ S. G. Brooks & W. C. Wohlforth, "The Once and Future Superpower: why China won't overtake the United States", p. 91, *Dartmouth Faculty Open Access Articles*, 2016, <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1133&>.

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 92.

In his article *Understanding Chinese Exceptionalism: China's Rise, Its Goodness, and Greatness* (2018), Benjamin Ho maintained that China will not strive for challenging the status quo because “China wants to be China and accepted as such, not as honorary member of the West.¹³⁶ He built his argument on Chinese exceptionalism, which implies that China is unique among nations—and for some even superior to others—because it is peace-loving and has no hegemonic intentions.¹³⁷ On one side, China’s emphasis on its peaceful rise highlights the idea that the Asian region would be peaceful if countries would follow China’s advice concerning international relations.¹³⁸ On the other side, the often-advertised China’s benevolent character does not weed out the possibility that China may dominate sooner or later; rather, it underlines that the Chinese leadership will be different from the American, often considered immoral.¹³⁹ To give credit to this idea, Ho also pointed that it is not a case if within Chinese culture there is the expectation that leaders (political and of any other kind) should be people characterized by an outstanding moral rectitude—both in public and (especially) in private life.¹⁴⁰

Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu argue that China will not necessarily try to challenge the status quo. As advanced in their article *After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline* (2011), Chinese leaders might follow three alternative paths. In other words, they might choose to be: (1) supporters, taking on a fair share of responsibilities associated with co-managing an evolving but essentially unchanged world order; (2) spoilers, seeking to subvert the existing order and replace it with something completely different; (3) shirkers, requesting the privileges of power but without contributing to global governance.¹⁴¹ In the first case, a peaceful power transition is likely to occur since the international system is still dominated and run by major powers, which though are more prone to make strategic

¹³⁶ B. Ho, “Understanding Chinese Exceptionalism: China’s Rise, Its Goodness, and Greatness”, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, vol. 39(3), 2014, pp. 164-176, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24569474>.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 165-166.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 171.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 170.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 169.

¹⁴¹ R. L. Schweller & X. Pu, “After Unipolarity: China’s Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline”, *International Security*, vol. 36(1), 2011, p. 42, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41289688>.

bargains and compromises to safeguard stability. In the second case, a conflictual power transition is likely to happen forasmuch as China wants to supplant the U.S. as a global leader and build a new global society, emphasizing social welfare and collective goods. In the third case, instead, a power diffusion is more likely to happen rather than a power transition. In this case, China does not seem to be eager to manage the existing international order mainly because it does not want or cannot support the associated responsibilities. In contrast, it prefers that the U.S. pays the costs of the order while it is free to focus on its own development. The reason behind this assumption is simple: global leadership is costly because it means asking citizens to pay for others' well-being, or to send young soldiers to die in faraway places.¹⁴²

In his article *Should the United States Fear China's Rise?* (2019), Joshua Shiffrin argued that it is wrong to assume that rising states—such as China—always tend to challenge the established power. In essence, he expects that the U.S. will maintain its primacy in world affairs because one cannot be certain that Chinese leaders will decide to challenge the status quo. He explained that rising states' strategies could differ profoundly across time and space. Typically, there are four strategies that rising states can embrace: relegation, strengthening, weakening, bolstering.¹⁴³ In Shiffrin's view, although China seems to have embarked upon a revisionist effort to challenge the U.S., it has adopted a weakening strategy (one that tries to shift the distribution of power against the U.S. gradually) rather than relegation. For instance, China has not increased the rate of its military spending over the last decade even as its economy has grown; in fact, Chinese military expenditures remain below the rates witnessed in both

¹⁴² R. L. Schweller, "Opposite but Compatible Nationalisms: A Neoclassical Realist Approach to the Future of U.S.-China Relations", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 11(1), 2018, pp. 23-48, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poy003>.

¹⁴³ The relegation strategy consists of efforts designed to rapidly shift power distribution, pushing declining states down the great power ranking using any means at the rising state's disposal. The strengthening strategy aims to support a decliner and keep it as a member of the great powers. Obviously, backing a declining power is not altruism but rather a strategic move to keep a potential partner that may help in case of other challengers should decide to threaten the rising state. The weakening strategy, instead, involves cautious gambits to gradually reduce a declining state's strength over time while trying to avoid an overt competition. Finally, the bolstering strategy involves ad hoc and low-cost efforts to keep a decliner a great power. J. Shiffrin, "Should the United States Fear China's Rise?", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 41(4), 2019, pp. 70-72, http://www.bu.edu/pardeeschool/files/2019/01/Winter-2019_Shiffrin_0.pdf.

the late Cold War period and the early 2000s.¹⁴⁴ In contrast, the U.S. seems to have adopted a highly aggressive strategy.¹⁴⁵

In 2010, Robert Sutter wrote an article entitled *China the United States and a Power Shift in Asia*. Here, Sutter assessed both American as well as Chinese strengths and weaknesses. The point is that, instead of investigating China's willingness to challenge the status quo, rather he tried to explain why China could not overthrow the U.S.-led order, even if it wanted to. In essence, despite the outstanding economic performance and prominent role in trade, China's rise in Asia remains encumbered by domestic, regional, and international limitations.¹⁴⁶ That said, I will dig into Sutter's theory in the following section. Nonetheless, one only needs to bear in mind that, in Robert Sutter's eyes, the status quo is not to change any time soon because China has neither the will nor the ability to challenge U.S. leadership.

4. Does China has a chance to successfully overthrow the U.S.-led world order?

Depending on the situation, different factors may come into play and interfere with the outcome: some of them may be in one's control, others out. The point is that trying to do something does not necessarily mean succeeding at doing it.

In this section, I set the arguments of who believes that China has a chance to successfully overthrow the U.S.-led world order against those of who do not. Before moving on, a premise is due. In IR, the term *world order* (or *international order*) refers to the totality of structured relationships among units which coexist in the same environment.¹⁴⁷ In essence, "world order" is used to describe the body of rules, norms, and institutions that govern relations between states.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 73.

¹⁴⁵ J. Shiffrin, "Neo-Primacy and the Pitfalls of U.S. Strategy toward China", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 43(4), 2021, p. 81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1849993>.

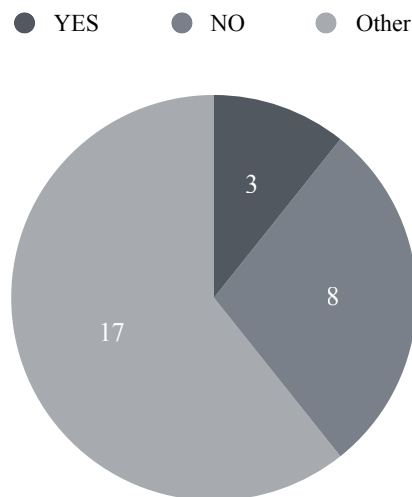
¹⁴⁶ R. Sutter, "China, the United States and a Power Shift in Asia", *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, 2010, pp. 9-24, <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/767/76715642002.pdf>.

¹⁴⁷ D. Lake & L. Martin & T. Risse, "Challenges to the Liberal Order".

¹⁴⁸ M. J. Mazaar et al., "The Liberal International Order – a Health Check".

In this case, most of the scholars eligible for my analysis have shown no bias towards a well-defined position. In fact, only three of them deem that China does have a chance, eight instead believe that, actually, China has none. The rest (17) has not provided a precise answer to the question since they have framed China’s rise differently. (Table 20)

Table 20: Does China has a chance to successfully overthrow the U.S.-led world order?



Source: Author

Among those who deem that China does have a chance to successfully overthrow the U.S.-led world order, it is possible to find: Aaron Friedberg (Princeton University), Christopher Layne (Texas A&M University), Randall L. Schweller (Ohio State University).

When it comes to assessing the possibility to overthrow the U.S.-led world order, Aaron Friedberg does not exclude the possibility that China will manage to do it. In essence, Friedberg believes that accommodation is a dangerous strategy that may lead to counterproductive outcomes. Therefore, if the U.S. and its allies had to fail to balance China’s accumulation of material power in the Indo-Pacific region—enhancing their defenses and putting in place a strong deterrent—China might take control of the waters off its coasts and, eventually, even absorb Taiwan gaining, in such a way, control of some of the high-tech manufacturing capabilities necessary to strengthen Chinese military and economy.¹⁴⁹ After all, the only way for the U.S. and its allies to prevent China from overthrowing the current world order is to use a more aggressive stance.

¹⁴⁹ A. L. Friedberg, “An Answer to Aggression: How to Push Back Against Beijing”, *Foreign Affairs*, 2020, http://www.viet-studies.com/kinhte/HowUSPushBackChina_FA.pdf (last access 06.07.2021).

As he extensively explained in his articles, *This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana* (2012) and *The U.S.-Chinese power shift and the end of the Pax Americana* (2018), Christopher Layne assumed that Pax Americana—that is, the post-1945 order based upon American primacy—has come to an end. In his view, the financial crisis of 2007-2008 has done nothing but accelerating both the American decline and the shift in global power from the West to the East, providing China (at least) with a chance to unseat the U.S.¹⁵⁰

On one side, Layne claimed that the weakening of U.S. relative economic power—which became unmistakably clear during the financial crisis of 2007-2008—has undercut the Pax Americana by compromising the U.S. ability to manage the international economy. After all, an economic hegemon is supposed to solve global economic crises, not cause them. Yet, the sub-prime mortgage crisis that started in the U.S. plunged the global economy into bad water. Moreover, showing a surging national debt and its inability to persuade other states to follow the American lead, Washington has proven to have lost grip on global economic leadership and simultaneously raised serious questions about the ability to repay its debts and control inflation.¹⁵¹ On the other, Layne noted that the emergence of new great powers in world politics is more restoration than a rise. In fact, in 1700, China and India were the world's two largest economies. Thus, from their perspective—especially Beijing's—they are merely regaining what they view as their natural and rightful place in the hierarchy of great powers.¹⁵²

In Layne's view, the point is that the combination of economic decline and the shift in the distribution of power in the last decades has led to the creation of new institutions that potentially could constitute a parallel international order outside the framework of the Pax Americana. The most important of these may be the Beijing-backed Asian

¹⁵⁰ C. Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana", *International Studies Quarterly*, 2012, pp. 1-11, <https://www.carlanorrlf.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/ThisTimeItsReal.pdf>.

¹⁵¹ C. Layne, "The U.S.-Chinese power shift and the end of the Pax Americana", *International Affairs*, vol. 94(1), 2018, pp. 94-96, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/images/ia/INTA94_1_6_249_Layne.pdf.

¹⁵² Ibid.

Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).¹⁵³ In fact, the diminution of U.S. influence was highlighted by Washington's inability to derail China's plans to create the AIIB and dissuade its allies from joining the AIIB. All in all, the role that these institutions can play is still uncertain. Nevertheless, they are important symbolically insofar their existence underscores the decline of the American-designed post-1945 international order and the rise of new powers such as China and India, demanding recognition of their status and prestige.¹⁵⁴

After all, although making predictions is hard, the coming decades are likely to witness major changes in the international order irrespective of America's preferences. In this scenario, China might try to position itself as the developing world's champion which—having been victim of western Great Powers—is determined to build a new international order reflecting the values of the developing world rather than those of the U.S. and the West.¹⁵⁵

In Schweller's view, if the U.S. had to decide to reduce its global commitment and retreat, then China may gain the upper hand and propose or even impose new rules on the existing world order. He presented this theory in his article, *Opposite but Compatible Nationalisms: A Neoclassical Realist Approach to the Future of U.S.–China Relations* (2018). Here, Schweller assumes that power transition has not to be necessarily conflictual forasmuch as rising and declining powers tend to adopt opposite but overall compatible behaviors. More precisely, the rising power may become more assertive and self-confident, pressing its new status and, thus, adopting an outward-looking strategy. In contrast, the declining power may tend to abandon its global commitments and responsibilities to focus on domestic issues, putting in place an inward-looking set of actions. So, on one side, the rising country's exalted growth contributes to inspire national pride and patriotism among its citizens. On the other side, instead, declining power's leaders, after decades of costly interventions in the rest of the

¹⁵³ The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is a multilateral development bank whose mission is unlocking new capital and investing in infrastructure that is green, technology-enabled and promotes regional connectivity. It was established in Beijing in January 2016, with 57 founding Members (37 regional and 20 non-regional). By the end of 2020, it had 103 approved Members representing approximately 79% of the global population and 65% of global GDP. AIIB is capitalized at \$100 billion and Triple-A-rated by the major international credit rating agencies. To discover more, visit the official website: <https://www.aiib.org/en/index.html>.

¹⁵⁴ C. Layne, "The U.S.-Chinese power shift and the end of the Pax Americana", pp. 99-100.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 108.

world, opt for reducing their country's global engagement and prioritizing domestic matters.¹⁵⁶

By contrast, among those who argue that China actually has no chance to unseat the U.S., one can find: Robert J. Art (Brandeis University), Michael Beckley (Tufts University), Stephen G. Brooks (Dartmouth University), Taylor M. Fravel (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Joshua Shiffrin (Boston University), Robert Sutter (George Washington University), Stephen M. Walt (Harvard University), William Wohlforth (Dartmouth University).

For Robert J. Art, China has no chance to overthrow the U.S.-led world order. To begin with, he believes that although it is impossible to predict with any certainty the content of China's future intentions and goals, it is more than likely that they will be more expansive than they now are. The point is that as long as Japan remains outside the Chinese sphere of influence and allied with the U.S., and as long as the U.S. retains its naval defense in Southeast Asia (such as in Singapore and the Philippines), China will not be able to dominate a significant part of continental Southeast Asia.¹⁵⁷ Consequently, China will manage to change neither the regional nor the world order.

According to Michael Beckley, existing studies on the presumed U.S. decline and the rise of China suffer from at least two shortcomings: (1) most studies do not look at a comprehensive set of indicators; (2) many studies are static, presenting single-year snapshots of American and Chinese power. Thus, in his article *China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure* (2011), Beckley tried to address these shortcomings by comparing the U.S. and China across a large set of economic, technological, and military indicators over the past twenty years, and discussed the dangers of the false belief in American decline.¹⁵⁸

Over the last two decades, globalization and U.S. hegemony have expanded significantly. Thus, if the U.S. has not declined relative to China during this period, then an American decline is less likely to occur in the next future. In Beckley's perspective,

¹⁵⁶ R. L. Schweller, "Opposite but Compatible Nationalisms: A Neoclassical Realist Approach to the Future of U.S.-China Relations", pp. 23-48.

¹⁵⁷ R. J. Art, "The United States and the Rise of China: Implications for the Long Haul", pp. 363-365.

¹⁵⁸ M. Beckley, "China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure", *International Security*, vol. 36(3), 2011, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/Chinas_Century.pdf.

the U.S. decline is not foreseeable for two main reasons. First, the U.S. did not overturn the existing international order; rather, it took advantage of the collapse of the then-existing order. As a result, after the two world wars, the American dominant position has been entrenched to the point that any effort to compete directly with the U.S. has become useless. Second, foreign governments that hold dollar reserves depend on U.S. prosperity for their continued economic growth and are thus unable to disentangle their interests from those of the United States.¹⁵⁹

The key argument of Beckley's article is that the U.S. is not declining in favor of China, especially because national power is multifaceted and cannot be measured with a single or a handful of metrics. IR scholars tend to view civilian and military realms as separate entities, but military power is ultimately based on economic strength.¹⁶⁰ According to Beckley, although in the last decades China has registered outstanding economic performances, GDP gap between the U.S. and China in absolute terms is still remarkable. Moreover, since the bulk of U.S. wealth is made up of intangible assets (system of property rights, efficient judicial system, highly skilled labour force, advanced knowledge), what separates the U.S. from China is not for sale and cannot be copied. Thus, he concluded, China will probably continue to lag behind the United States.¹⁶¹

In their articles *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position* (2015) and *The Once and Future Superpower: Why China Won't Overtake the United States* (2016), Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth claimed that "economic growth no longer translates as directly into military power as it did in the past, which means that it is now harder than ever for rising powers to rise and established ones to fall."¹⁶² In fact, even though the American economic dominance has eroded in the last decades, the U.S. military superiority is not going anywhere because decades of massive U.S. investments in key military capabilities have created a gap that will not be easy for China (or any other

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, pp. 55-57.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, pp. 57-58.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, pp. 60-63.

¹⁶² S. G. Brooks & W. C. Wohlforth, "The Once and Future Superpower: why China won't overtake the United States", p. 91.

country) to bridge.¹⁶³ The point is that, although economic capacity is a necessary condition of military power, it is insufficient without technological prowess, especially given the nature of modern weaponry.

In the twenty-first century, converting economic output into military power and technological capacity is a complex and time-consuming process.¹⁶⁴ In case of China, although it is rapidly enhancing its technological inputs, it also faces significant limits on its ability to quickly convert them into improvements in its overall technological capacity. For instance, educating many more science and engineering students requires increasing the number of institutions that can provide appropriate and useful training. Unfortunately, the quality of Chinese training is weak and many graduates have difficulties in finding employment. Therefore, according to Brooks and Wohlforth, the U.S. will long remain the only state with the capability to be a superpower¹⁶⁵ because it enjoys the advantage of standing on the quasi-unchallengeable position.¹⁶⁶

In other words, although China's rise is remarkable, the distance China must travel is extraordinarily large because the size of the U.S. military advantage is much bigger than the analogous gaps in previous eras. In fact, having a much larger scientific and industrial base than any other state has enabled the U.S. to gradually widen the gap with the rest of the world. Overall, subverting a settled status quo is very hard to do, also for the country that has registered one of the fastest growth in human history.

In his articles—*International Relations Theory and China's Rise: Assessing China's Potential for Territorial Expansion* (2010) and *China's World-Class Military Ambitions: Origins and Implications* (2020)—Taylor M. Fravel tried to assess whether territorial claims and military modernization may help China project its power abroad and push out the U.S. from the Indo-Pacific region.

¹⁶³ S. G. Brooks & W. C. Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position", p. 41.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, pp. 16-26.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, pp. 30-36.

¹⁶⁶ S. G. Brooks & W. C. Wohlforth, "The Once and Future Superpower: why China won't overtake the United States", p. 103.

To begin with, Fravel highlighted that territorial expansion can be seen as “threatening or using force to seize part or all of the territory controlled by another state.”¹⁶⁷ Nowadays, many scholars argue that the territorial dispute over Taiwan can be considered as the most likely cause of conflict between the U.S. and China. After all, the pursuit of national unification represents a priority for Chinese leaders since 1949. However, as Fravel noticed, to gain control over others’ territories (or regain full sovereignty over some territories), one state can follow two approaches: (1) coercive, projecting its military capacity over the targeted land; (2) non-coercive, negotiating or persuading the counterpart to give up the territory without the need to take up arms.

In general, he believes that China cannot replace the U.S in the Indo-Pacific region, subverting the established order, for two reasons. On one side, China’s ability to seize and control territory from other states remains limited, constrained largely by the lack of robust strategic lift capabilities to deploy and sustain troops beyond its borders.¹⁶⁸ In fact, even though the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has been actively modernizing, it has yet to develop platforms and systems to sustain large numbers of troops at great distances from its borders for long periods of time.¹⁶⁹ On the other side, although China has participated in more territorial disputes than any other state since the end of World War II (23), it has settled the majority of these conflicts through bilateral agreements, usually by compromising over the sovereignty of contested land. China has used force in some of those disputes, but it has generally not seized or conquered large amounts of land that it did not control before the outbreak of hostilities.¹⁷⁰

According to Joshua Shiffrin, although China’s rise seems to have inaugurated a new era of great power competition, the U.S. is not on the verge of absolute decline. Consequently, China will not succeed in surpassing the U.S. After all, even with China’s rise, the U.S. retains strengths of its own, benefitting from a large and diverse economy, educated population, vibrant military-industrial base, and inherent geographic security.

¹⁶⁷ T. M. Fravel, “International Relations Theory and China’s Rise: Assessing China’s Potential for Territorial Expansion”, *International Studies*, vol. 12(4), 2010, pp. 505-532, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40931355>.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 509

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 523.

¹⁷⁰ T. M. Fravel, “International Relations Theory and China’s Rise: Assessing China’s Potential for Territorial Expansion”, p. 507.

For this reason, U.S. policymakers must be prepared to adjust their own strategy to reinforce and exploit the unfolding developments in world affairs,¹⁷¹ making cool calculations rather than adopting the so-called neo-primacy strategy that calls for the U.S. to compete with China to reclaim American dominance in world politics by reversing current trends in the distribution of power.¹⁷²

In essence, to prevent China from unseating the U.S., American policymakers must: (1) recognize that U.S. security no longer requires primacy as it was in the past; (2) American interests in the Asian-Pacific region are important but not vital; (3) encourage local actors (such as India, Japan, and Australia) to balance China while reducing, but without eliminating, the American military presence in the region.¹⁷³ After all, reducing US activism may help eliminate many of the policies and issues that undercut the appeal of the American model around the world today.¹⁷⁴

In Robert Sutter's view, despite the outstanding economic performance and prominent role in trade, China will not manage to overthrow the U.S.-led order since its rise remains encumbered by domestic, regional, and international limitations. To give credit to his thoughts, in 2010, he wrote an article entitled *China, the United States, and a Power Shift in Asia*. In this work, Sutter assesses both American and Chinese strengths and weaknesses.

Concerning China, among the most urgent domestic issues that Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is called to deal with, Sutter enumerated: (1) preserving leadership and unity; (2) sustaining strong economic growth to ensure employment and material benefits for the vast majority of Chinese people, (3) finding efficient and economical means to gradually reduce the widespread environmental damage caused by Chinese economic development. Concerning, instead, regional and international limitations to

¹⁷¹ J. Shiffrinson, "Should the United States Fear China's Rise?", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 41(4), 2019, pp. 65-83, http://www.bu.edu/pardeeschool/files/2019/01/Winter-2019_Shiffrinson_0.pdf.

¹⁷² J. Shiffrinson, "Neo-Primacy and the Pitfalls of U.S. Strategy toward China", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 43(4), 2021, pp. 79-104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1849993>.

¹⁷³ Ibid, pp. 92-94.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 95.

China's route towards the peak of the world order, Sutter mentioned China's past record of aggression and assertiveness toward many Asian countries.¹⁷⁵

In contrast, regarding the U.S., Sutter assumed that the U.S. will remain the leading power in the Asian region (at least for the foreseeable future) for three main reasons. First, Asia is not particularly stable, and most governments are wary of and tend not to trust each other. As a result, they look to the U.S. to provide the security they need to pursue goals of development and nation-building. Second, Asia depends importantly on export-oriented growth. Although most Asian countries recognize the rising importance of China in their trade, they all also recognize that their trade heavily depends on exports to developed countries, notably the U.S. Third, for much of its history, the U.S. exerted influence in Asia through a wide range of non-governmental intercourses (business, religious, educational) rather than through official governmental channels. Active American non-government interaction with Asia continues today, contributing to building and enhancing a strong and usually positive American image.¹⁷⁶ In essence, Sutter maintains that although Asia is the international area where China has always exerted its greatest influence, it will not become the dominant power and push the U.S. out of the region.

Although Stephen Walt assumes that the American era is coming to an end,¹⁷⁷ on long-term projections, the U.S. still holds strategic advantages—such as cutting-edge technologies, the best higher education system, global currency, and relatively low median age—that will forestall new rising power, China in primis, from overthrowing the American world order.¹⁷⁸

The U.S. has been the world's largest economy since 1900 and the dominant power since 1945. Nevertheless, the past two decades have witnessed the emergence of new powers in several regions. The most significant example is China, although not the only one (Brazil, Turkey, India, to name a few). In fact, Chinese economic development embodies something so exceptional that some scholars started hypothesizing that if

¹⁷⁵ R. Sutter, "China, the United States and a Power Shift in Asia", *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, 2010, pp. 9-24, <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/767/76715642002.pdf>.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ S. M. Walt, "The End of the American Era", *The National Interest*, 2011, p. 6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42896410>.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, pp. 15-16.

China follows the same trajectory all the previous great powers (including the U.S.) went through, it will try to use its growing economic and military capacities to expand its sphere of influence. As a result, this situation will encourage Beijing to challenge the current U.S. role in Asia and Washington to strengthen its position and protect its interests in the region. The point, Walt noticed, is that although those new regional powers have achieved impressive economic growth, none of them is on the verge of becoming a true global power.¹⁷⁹

5. Is a U.S.-China war inevitable?

The antagonism between emperors, kings, rulers, and states throughout human history pushed prominent thinkers to investigate the causes of war. Whether or not a war between China and the U.S. is inevitable is one of the most recurring questions among scholars, lecturers, heads of government, diplomats, and journalists of our time.

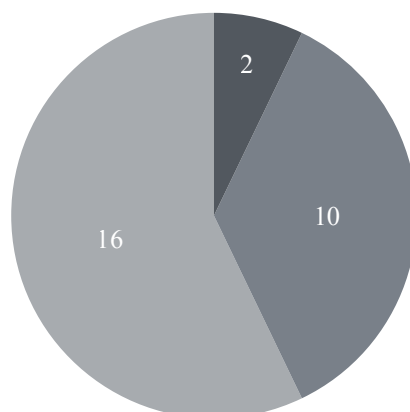
In this section, I presented the theses of those who deem that a U.S.-China war is inevitable as well as those of who advanced that, instead, war is evitable.

In this case, it is interesting noting that, despite the assumptions used to explain states' behavior (presented at the beginning of this chapter), among U.S. realists eligible for this study, only two deem that China and the U.S. are destined to war. Ten maintain that, actually, a U.S.-China war is evitable. While the rest (16) has not formulated specific thoughts in this regard. (Table 21)

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, pp. 10-11.

Table 21: Is a U.S.-China war inevitable?

● YES ● NO ● Other



Source: Author

Among who assume that war is inevitable, one can find: John Mearsheimer (University of Chicago), and Sebastian Rosato (University of Notre Dame).

John Mearsheimer is one of the leading offensive realists. His theory maintains that the basic structure of the international system forces states concerned about their security (which is their very primary—but not unique—goal) to compete with each other for power. In essence, Mearsheimer assumes that the ultimate goal of every great power is to maximize its share of world power and eventually dominate the system. The point is that since dominating the entire system results to be an extremely complicated goal even for the most powerful states, rather the latter seek to establish hegemony in their respective region of the world while also ensuring that no rival great power dominates another area. After all, the logic behind this assumption is straightforward: the more powerful a state is relative to its competitors, the less likely its survival will be at risk.¹⁸⁰

In many occasions, Mearsheimer appeared quite pessimistic about the future of U.S.-China relations. In his view, the U.S. will hardly tolerate China as a peer competitor and will go to great lengths to contain China and prevent it from achieving regional hegemony.¹⁸¹ Unfortunately, the result will be an intense security competition with

¹⁸⁰ J. Mearsheimer, “Can China Rise Peacefully?”.

¹⁸¹ J. Mearsheimer, “The Gathering Storm”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 3(4), 2010, pp. 381-396, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48615756>.

considerable potential for war.¹⁸² It is worth highlighting that the main reason why regional hegemons (like the U.S.) do not want peer competitors (such as China) is because, once they have become dominant in their region, they are free to roam around the globe and interfere in other regions' affairs.¹⁸³ Moreover, apart from China and the U.S., it is expected that there will be other nuclear powers in Asia, such as Russia, India, and probably Japan. The fact that a number of great powers are closely located does nothing but make the region (and the world as a whole) more unstable than it was in the past, increasing the opportunities for fighting with both each other and minor powers.¹⁸⁴ Finally, another potent source of a conflict between the U.S. and China is hyper-nationalism, which Mearsheimer described as a sense of specialness that may lead nations to conclude that they are the chosen people. It is worth noting that both China and the U.S. seem to show the same belief that they are superior to the rest. However, that is not all because they see inferior nations as dangerous. In such circumstances, contempt, hate, and fear envelop the hyper-nationalist nations and create powerful incentives to use violence to eliminate threats.¹⁸⁵

Sebastian Rosato asserted that the U.S. and China seem to be destined to engage in an intense security competition because one state can never be sure about the other states' neither current nor future intentions. Therefore—given the uncertain, elusive, and volatile nature of intentions—there is little Washington and Beijing will be able to do or say to persuade the other side that it has and will always have peaceful intentions. After all, only states know their own intentions.¹⁸⁶ In addition, in the article *A Realist Foreign Policy for the United States* (2011) that he wrote with John M. Schuessler, Rosato argued that interstate wars are more likely to happen when established powers fail to balance rising ones. As recommended by Roman military writer, Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, if one wishes for peace, he must prepare for war. In other words,

¹⁸² J. Mearsheimer, “Can China Rise Peacefully?”, p. 4.

¹⁸³ Ibid, p. 6.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 32.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, pp. 33-34.

¹⁸⁶ S. Rosato, “Why the United States and China Are on a Collision Course”, *Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center*, 2015, <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/rosato-us-china-pb-final.pdf> (last access 06.07.2021).

established powers should build up their military and economic resources and make clear that they will be ready to oppose potential competitors' attempts at expansion.¹⁸⁷

As a result, if the U.S. will fail to balance China, a war will be a likely outcome. To support his thesis, Rosato provided four examples of how some of the most relevant wars of the past century might have been avoided. First, World War I could have been avoided if France, Russia, and Great Britain had rallied together and built material capabilities sufficient to make Germans believe they had no chance to become the hegemon power in Europe. Second, France, Russia, and Great Britain failed to build a common front and balance against Germany in the early stages to avoid World War II. Rather they tried to buck-pass each other the costs of military building up until the war became inevitable. It is worth noticing that also the U.S. did not attempt to balance Germany, siding with Great Britain after the fall of France and entering the war officially only after the Pearl Harbor attacks. Third, the U.S. decision to take up arms and fight in Vietnam led to a costly but avoidable war. In fact, Vietnam was a minor power, and its loss would not have turned the situation in favor of the Soviet Union. Finally, Iraq War could have been avoided if the Bush administration had contained rather than declared war on Iraq. The reason is that although located in a strategically important region of the world, Iraq was a minor power. Therefore, balancing would have been sufficient to deter Iraq from building up its material capacity as well as blackmailing its neighbors.¹⁸⁸

By contrast, among who argue that instead war is evitable, it is possible to find: Graham Allison (Harvard University), Robert J. Art (Brandeis University), Charles L. Glaser (George Washington University), David M. Lampton (John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies), Deborah Larson (University of California Los Angeles), Adam Liff (Indiana University Bloomington), Xiaoyu Pu (University of Nevada Reno), Randall L. Schweller (Ohio State University), Robert S. Ross (Boston College), Alexei Shevchenko (Pepperdine University).

According Graham Allison, one of the defining questions about global order of our times is whether China and the U.S can escape Thucydides's Trap. In fact, the

¹⁸⁷ S. Rosato, & J. Schuessler, "A Realist Foreign Policy for the United States", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 9(4), 2011, p. 813, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41623695>.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 808-812.

preeminent challenge of this era is not violent Islamic extremists or a resurgent Russia. It is the impact that China's rise will have on the international order, which—thanks to U.S. leadership—has provided unprecedented peace and prosperity for the past 70 years.¹⁸⁹ In his book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (2017), Allison extensively presented this concept. Basically, he believes that the rivalry between an established power and a rising one often ends in war. To prove it, he found sixteen cases in the last 500 years in which a rising power has threatened to displace a ruling power: twelve of these ended in war. The interesting fact is that, according to Allison, none of them wished a military confrontation; in many cases, it was a third power that provoked one of them to react setting in motion a series of events that, in the end, resulted in a war.¹⁹⁰ Therefore, for one who is looking at historical records, war between the U.S. and China is more likely than not.¹⁹¹ Obviously it does not mean that war is inevitable. As previously mentioned, four of the 16 cases in Allison's review did not end in bloodshed. In other words, escaping the Trap is possible but it requires tremendous effort from part of both sides.¹⁹²

For Robert J. Art, although it is impossible to predict with any certainty one's future intentions and goals, the nature and content of Chinese growing appetites will be determined not simply by the acquisition of greater capabilities, but also by the choices made by American leaders.¹⁹³ A U.S.-China war outbreak is unlikely, according Art, because the high economic interdependence and the lack of intense ideological competition between them help to reinforce the pacific effects induced by the condition of mutually assured destruction (due to the possession of nuclear weapons by both sides).¹⁹⁴

Charles L. Glaser is relatively optimistic about the prospects for China's peaceful rise. He grounded his theory in defensive realism. In his articles—*Will China's Rise Lead to War? Why Realism Does Not Mean Pessimism* (2011) and *A U.S.-China Grand*

¹⁸⁹ G. Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?"

¹⁹⁰ G. Allison, *Destined For War: Can America and China escape Thucydides's Trap*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² G. Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?"

¹⁹³ R. J. Art, "The United States and the Rise of China: Implications for the Long Haul", p. 390.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, pp. 366-372.

Bargain? The Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation (2015) —Glaser made clear that offensive realism is not the only theoretical framework applicable to China's rise. Offensive realism predicts that China's growing power will be accompanied by a competitive behavior since one state's priority is achieving regional hegemony. The point is that achieving regional hegemony will require China to build military forces capable of defeating its neighbors and pushing the U.S. out of the region. As a result, threatened by the Chinese pursuit of regional hegemony, Americans will respond accordingly to maintain their position in Asia, leaving the region less secure and a major-power war more likely. By contrast, as explained by defensive realism, if signals that China is a security seeker exist, or even that it has more limited hostile aims than the U.S. previously believed, then the U.S. will be more secure and in turn less dangerous.¹⁹⁵ Thus, since Glaser disagrees with the assumption that conflicts are predetermined, a clash might well be avoided as long as American and Chinese leaders adjust to the new international conditions, make some concessions, and not exaggerate dangers.¹⁹⁶ Overall, the focal point of Glaser's theory is the following: although China's rise is creating some dangers, the shifting distribution of power is not rendering vital American and Chinese interests incompatible. In essence, contrary to the offensive realism argument, Glaser deems that the basic pressures generated by the international system will not force the U.S. and China into conflict as long as respective nuclear arsenals and the separation given by the Pacific Ocean enable both countries to maintain high levels of security and avoid military policies that severely strain their relationship. Notably, the challenge for the U.S. will come in making adjustments to its policies in situations in which minor interests might cause problems and in making sure it does not exaggerate the risks posed by China's growing power and military capabilities.¹⁹⁷

For David M. Lampton, although tension in some parts of Asia is and may become more and more tight, conflict between the U.S. and China is not something predetermined; it is evitable. In 2013, he wrote an article entitled *A New Type of Major-*

¹⁹⁵ C. L. Glaser, "A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation", *International Security*, vol. 39(4), 2015, pp. 49-57, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/article/isec_a_00199.pdf.

¹⁹⁶ C. L. Glaser, "Will China's Rise Lead to War? Why Realism Does Not Mean Pessimism", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90(2), 2011, p. 81, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25800459>.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 88-91.

Power Relationship: Seeking a Durable Foundation for U.S.-China Ties. In this article, he explained how American and Chinese leaders could build a new major-power relationship. According to Lampton, although areas of competition and disagreement will persist and are natural, the common strategic point of departure needs to be that the U.S. and China do not have to see each other as adversaries forasmuch as there is more to be gained from cooperation than conflict.¹⁹⁸ After all, cooperation is extremely important given that global economic, environmental, and health challenges are likely to raise security concerns that supplant in importance the traditional security preoccupations of the twentieth century.

In concrete, Lampton enumerated a number of steps that Beijing and Washington could take in order to enhance cooperation and trust. Some of them could be made by each nation separately and independently; others, instead, will require explicit bilateral coordination or agreement. First, the U.S. and China need to multiply and strengthen avenues for economic and other bilateral interdependencies at the local level. If U.S. and Chinese local leaders and their representatives see direct links between the welfare of their localities and bilateral ties, they will speak and behave in more balanced and moderate ways.¹⁹⁹ Second, bilateral relations can work far more smoothly if each side clearly designates a very senior leader with overall day-to-day responsibility for ties. This is necessary because, according to Lampton, the enemy of productive bilateral relations is the absence of an authoritative voice in each society to guide and resolve frictions within and between the U.S. and Chinese systems on a daily basis.²⁰⁰ Third, the U.S. and China should also use their military capacities cooperatively in humanitarian and crisis circumstances, establish common rules of the road for their armed forces (for instance, providing public goods on the high seas).²⁰¹ Fourth, when the divergent interests of American and Chinese friends make it difficult for both countries to maintain stability in their bilateral relations, Washington and Beijing thus need to exert

¹⁹⁸ D. M. Lampton, "A New Type of Major-Power Relationship: Seeking a Durable Foundation for U.S.-China Ties", *Asia Policy*, 2013, pp. 57, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/24905231>.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 59.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 62.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 64.

a restraining influence on those whose actions could drive towards a violent confrontation.²⁰²

In their article, *Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy* (2010), Deborah Larson & Alexei Shevchenko argue that although U.S.-China relations as well as U.S.-Russia relations have been souring in the last decades, if the U.S. could find a way to recognize China's and Russia's distinctive status and identities, the participation of both in global governance would be higher and a war avoided.²⁰³ After all, there are some issues (such as arresting climate change, controlling terrorism, curbing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, rebuilding failed states, or maintaining economic stability) that the U.S. cannot resolve without Chinese and Russian help.

In both his articles—*Racing toward Tragedy? China's Rise Military Competition in the Asia Pacific and the Security Dilemma* (2014) and *China and the U.S. Alliance System* (2017)—Adam P. Liff assumes that the rapid shifts in the distribution of material capabilities in Asia due to generalized economic growth (connected primarily, but not exclusively, to China's rise) seems to have created a volatile climate and a potentially vicious cycle of arming and re-arming. Nevertheless, war is evitable.

The point is that, since the mid-1990s, China has interpreted U.S. security commitments in the Asia Pacific as increasingly provocative, aggressive, threatening, and aimed to contain China.²⁰⁴ As a result, Beijing's negative reaction—although portrayed as defensive by its leaders—to the American alliance system has grown increasingly prominent since 2011. Unfortunately, this insecurity dynamic between the U.S. and China fomented an action-reaction spiral of military competition and arms races.²⁰⁵ All in all, Liff proposed two main types of steps that may be particularly effective in ameliorating relations between the U.S. and China. First, Washington should avoid being unnecessarily provocative in its strategic moves and rhetoric, more proactively

²⁰² Ibid, pp. 65-66.

²⁰³ D. Larson & A. Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy", *International Security*, vol. 34(4), 2010, pp. 63-95, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40784562>.

²⁰⁴ A. P. Liff, "China and the U.S. Alliance System", *The China Quarterly*, 2018, pp. 137-165, <https://asset-pdf.scinapse.io/prod/2610070876/2610070876.pdf>.

²⁰⁵ A. P. Liff & J. Ikenberry, "Racing toward Tragedy? China's Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma", *International Security*, vol. 39(2), 2014, p. 58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24480583>.

explaining the comprehensive (not military-specific) nature of its growing focus on the Asia Pacific and linking it explicitly to a stable regional status quo that serves its interests all. In contrast, Beijing should recognize that its rise is not occurring in a strategic vacuum; thus, its military buildup may trigger severe and unwelcome defensive responses from the U.S. and others. Second, both sides should increase transparency to reduce uncertainty and decrease the risks of miscalculations that may lead to war.

Although Liff recognizes that there are no guarantees that the above steps will reverse the worsening environment in the Asia Pacific, he stated that conflict is not inevitable. Therefore, current frictions will lead to war only if American and Chinese leaders cannot overcome their divergencies, sticking to competing rather cooperative strategies.²⁰⁶

Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu disagree with the assumption that power transitions (for instance, from a unipolar to multipolar system) have to be inevitably conflictual. As they explained in their article, *After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline* (2011), a shift or return to multipolarity tells that several great powers will emerge to join the U.S. as poles within the international system. Yet, it tells nothing about how multipolarity will arrive or whether emerging powers will accept or resist the inherited Western order. For this reason, how this transition will materialize depends on the roles that emerging powers decide to play.²⁰⁷ Although Schweller recognizes that states decisions are shaped by the very presence of other states as well as by interactions with them, he also believes that each state arrives at policies and decides on actions according to its own internal processes.

In an more recent article, *Opposite but Compatible Nationalisms: A Neoclassical Realist Approach to the Future of U.S.–China Relations* (2018), Schweller reinforced his theory by adding that power transition has not to be necessarily conflictual forasmuch as rising and declining powers tend to adopt opposite but overall compatible behaviors. After all, Chinese leaders may decided to be supporters rather spoilers, taking on a fair share of

²⁰⁶ Ibid, pp. 89-91.

²⁰⁷ R. L. Schweller & X. Pu, “After Unipolarity: China’s Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline”, 41-72.

responsibilities associated with co-managing an evolving but essentially unchanged world order.²⁰⁸

For Robert S. Ross, the U.S. and China are destined to compete. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they are destined for violent conflict or that cooperation is impossible. As he wrote in his article, *U.S. Grand Strategy, the Rise of China, and U.S. National Security Strategy for East Asia* (2013), the rise of China poses a serious challenge to U.S. security in East Asia because, unless balanced, China could achieve regional hegemony. The point is that the historical patterns of great-power politics may most likely drive China to seek a dominant strategic position throughout East Asia, regardless of its leaders' intentions and policies.²⁰⁹ However, recognizing that nothing is predetermined, Ross also maintained that, in the end, the course of U.S.-China competition will be determined by the policies that respective sides are going to put in place.²¹⁰

Nowadays, China's rise seems to threaten U.S. security in East Asia mainly because local powers are not able (or willing) to respond to China's growing accumulation of material capabilities and influence. On the contrary, most of them prefer to accommodate China rather than risk its hostility. In the absence of local players, the U.S. cannot do anything but balance China's rise.²¹¹ In Ross's mind, to balance China, the U.S. leaders must bear mind what follows. First, the U.S. needs to develop and maintain strategic partnerships to deploy forward-based forces rather than engage in potentially costly and unnecessary activities that could be interpreted as challenges to Chinese security and contribute to regional instability. For instance, it is not a case if China has used coercive diplomacy to shove local powers to rethink their cooperation with the U.S. in the South China Sea. Therefore, instead of seeking partnerships with Chinese neighboring countries, the U.S. should bolster its friendship with countries like

²⁰⁸ R. L. Schweller, "Opposite but Compatible Nationalisms: A Neoclassical Realist Approach to the Future of U.S.-China Relations", pp. 23-48.

²⁰⁹ R. S. Ross, "U.S. Grand Strategy, the Rise of China, and US National Security Strategy for East Asia", *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 7(2), 2013, pp. 20-40, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26270764>.

²¹⁰ R. S. Ross, "It's not a cold war: competition and cooperation in U.S.-China relations", *China International Strategy*, vol. 2, 2020, pp. 63-72, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-020-00038-8>.

²¹¹ R. S. Ross, "U.S. Grand Strategy, the Rise of China, and US National Security Strategy for East Asia", p. 24.

Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and New Zealand that can provide support for maritime operations against a mainland great power, in terms of energy resources, well-situated and modern port facilities, large landmasses for the critical deployment of forces, and sophisticated infrastructures.²¹² Second, the U.S. economic policies need to be adjusted to rising China's global economic weight. This is true for a simple reason: mutual trade and supply chain interdependence requiring continued private sector cooperation make hardly to think that the U.S. and China are ready to dismiss their economic relations. As a result, negotiated agreements and selective, targeted, and independent U.S. strategic adjustments of the terms of trade can protect American economic interests, while contributing to less hostile and costly economic competition.²¹³ Finally, the U.S. (but more generally, all major countries) cannot operate under the illusion that global problems—like climate change, pandemics, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, financial crisis—are zero-sum developments. Such issues jeopardize the international system's survival as a whole. As a result, they require collective actions and not competitive efforts to promote unilateral approaches in the pursuit of unilateral gain.²¹⁴ In essence, for Ross, moderation of competition, greater pragmatism in policymaking, as well as greater cooperation on global issues, can help Chinese and American to avoid military confrontation.

6. Alternative perspectives

In this section, I left room for those scholars who have not provided a precise answer to any of recurring interrogatives. They, instead, framed China's rise differently. Among the latter, the reader will find: Amitav Acharya (American University Washington DC), Allen R. Carlson (Cornell University), David Gattie (University of Georgia), Joshua Massey (University of Georgia), Stephen D. Krasner (Stanford University), Terence Welsey-Smith (University of Hawaii at Manoa).

Amitav Acharya tried to place the discussion of the rise of China in a broader regional context. In his work *Power Shift or Paradigm Shift? China's Rise and Asia's Emerging Security Order* (2014), Acharya argues that scholars and decision-makers

²¹² Ibid, pp. 30-34.

²¹³ R. S. Ross, "It's not a cold war: competition and cooperation in U.S.-China relations".

²¹⁴ Ibid.

should focus more on the interaction between Asian countries rather than great power relations, namely U.S.-China relations.²¹⁵

In the Acharya's eyes, China is not the only country can undermine Asia's stability. His theory rests on two main arguments. First, Asia is a region of tremendous cultural and political diversity. Second, although the rise of China is clearly reshaping the distribution of power in Asia, the region itself has also undergone a series of equally important and long-term changes in the last decades. As a result, he applied the theory of consociational security order (CSO) to identify the conditions which may help Asia in achieving stability. Acharya defined CSO as a "relationship of mutual accommodation among unequal and culturally diverse groups that preserves each group's relative autonomy and prevents the hegemony of any particular group or groups."²¹⁶ In other words, CSO is a mixed approach to political order, where competitive and cooperative behavior coexists, and states are motivated by a desire for avoiding system collapse.

The point is that CSO theory relies on four enabling conditions: (1) interdependence among states helps to overrun cultural differences and contributes to common survival and wellbeing; (2) equilibrium is reached only if groups engage in multiple balances of power to deny hegemony to any particular group; (3) no single power or group of powers dominates regional institutions, since leadership is shared between strong and weak states; (4) the more powerful states respect the rights and interests of the weaker ones, making and implementing decisions through consultations and consensus. Those four conditions are mutually reinforcing. As a result, no single factor is by itself sufficient to ensure stability; all of them must be present to some degree.²¹⁷

Allen R. Carlson investigated the rise of China from a different perspective. Instead of considering China's rise as one of the most immediate security threats to the current international order, he argued that—given its increasing interdependence with the international system—China might come to pose a unique (although unintentional)

²¹⁵ A. Acharya, "Power Shift or Paradigm Shift? China's Rise and Asia's Emerging Security Order", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 58(1), 2014, pp. 158-173, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24017855>.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 159.

²¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 160-162.

threat to the world, Asia, and the U.S. via the potential mishandling of non-traditional security (NTS) issues.²¹⁸

For decades after the founding of the People's Republic of China, Beijing's main foreign policy and national security concerns were relatively focused on re-establishing China's power on the world stage and preserving Chinese sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. For instance, Chinese elites during both the Mao and Deng eras generally viewed U.S. support to Taiwan as one of the major threats to China's national unity. Despite this, a new set of security concerns has emerged within China over the last decade.²¹⁹

While traditional security (TS) issues generally refer to a military threat stemming from an external challenge to a state's sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-traditional security (NTS) issues encompass two elements: threats to states' sovereignty and territorial integrity from non-state actors and human security. In other words, examples of NTS can be economic security, ecological/environmental security, terrorism, the spread of infectious diseases, narcotics trade, illegal immigration, and so forth.²²⁰ Notably, China faces three core NTS challenges. First, China's environmental problems have become increasingly acute since the late 1970s, as Beijing has accelerated the pace of economic modernization and vastly expanded the need for fuel to power China's growing economy. Second, infectious diseases (such as SARS and AIDS) combined with China's weak public health system present a threat both to China and to the world. Third, Beijing is concerned about acts that it labels "terrorism," perpetrated by Uyghurs and Tibetans.

According to Carlson, the point is that the bulk of the work on China's foreign relations and national security has left those NTS unexamined (or at least under-examined). These are issues that are neither internal nor international in nature. In fact, they transcend such a classification, both in their origins and in the policy efforts being made to cope with them. For this reason, a policy failure on any of these fronts could: (1) seriously jeopardize Beijing's ability to govern, (2) have a sweeping impact beyond

²¹⁸ A. Carlson, "An Unconventional Tack: Nontraditional Security Concerns and China's Rise", *Asia Policy*, 2010, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/24905001>.

²¹⁹ Ibid, p. 52.

²²⁰ Ibid, pp. 56-57.

China's borders, (3) potentially reshape fundamental aspects of China's relationship with the rest of the international system. In other words, these issues are of central importance to China and the world since their mishandling has the potential to disrupt the relatively fragile economic and political foundations of the current international order.²²¹

In their article *Twenty-First-Century U.S. Nuclear Power: A National Security Imperative* (2020), David Gattie & Joshua Massey claimed that the civilian nuclear power enterprise should be included as a strategic sector within the U.S. national security industrial base and deliberated as a foreign policy issue within a global alliance. The reason for that is simple: if the U.S. retreats from the civilian nuclear field, revisionist powers (like China and Russia) will become the global leaders in nuclear science, nuclear engineering, and nuclear technology in the twenty-first-century with adverse implications for American national security.²²²

Nuclear energy has a dual utility. On one side, it can produce energy; on the other side, it can be used to develop military weaponry. Although the U.S. has been using nuclear energy to develop one of the most powerful arsenals in human history, civilian application of nuclear power in the U.S. faces, nowadays, three main challenges. First, reactor safety, and the security of nuclear materials and technologies that could be misused for nuclear weaponry arise concern in public opinion. Second, the impact of global climate change is becoming a sensitive topic also for American politicians; thus, they started debating whether or not America's overall energy policy should move away from traditional fossil fuels and nuclear resources and fully transition to renewable energy. Third, the U.S. civilian nuclear power industry is driven by competition and is not supported by national financing to achieve foreign policy or geopolitical objectives.²²³ As a result, while in the twentieth century the U.S. was the global leader in civilian nuclear science, engineering, and technology, the twenty-first century is unfolding differently—domestically and internationally—and with many challenges. In fact, 150 nuclear reactors have been connected to the grid or are under construction in

²²¹ Ibid, pp. 60-64.

²²² D. Gattie & J. N. K. Massey, "Twenty-First Century U.S. Nuclear Power", *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 14(3), 2020, pp. 121-142, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26937414>.

²²³ Ibid, pp. 125-126.

22 countries since 2000. Of these, 97 are associated with China or Russia in 11 of those countries. Thus, in the last 20 years, China and Russia had been associated with 65% of reactor construction in half of the countries where nuclear power has been or is being deployed. In other words, Gattie & Massey believe that China and Russia are leveraging their nuclear expertise for strategic geopolitical gain and are on track to displace America as the reliable global partner in nuclear technology and international nuclear collaborations.²²⁴

Notably, China and Russia have been able to outcompete other states in the nuclear industry thanks to the huge invests their governments directs towards this sector. The Chinese and Russian nuclear power enterprises are state-owned; thus, they are being leveraged as extensions of the state to meet strategic foreign policy and geopolitical objectives. Moreover, Chinese and Russian nuclear enterprises begun to cooperate extensively in several domains: energy, military, R&D, technology, to name a few.²²⁵ This synergy raises questions about whether the U.S. can maintain its influence globally and regionally,²²⁶ forasmuch as China and Russia have been involved in much of the new reactor constructions in developing economies in Eurasia and the Asia-Pacific region. The fact that China and Russia are supporting emerging economies in satisfying their increasing energy demand might persuade them to disentangle from the United States.²²⁷

For Stephen D. Krasner, although nuclear weapons proliferation and the fact that globalization has increased free trade benefits and simultaneously diminished those associated with territorial conquests have made leaders much more cautious, the probability that strong competition between the U.S. and China arises in the next future cannot be completely excluded.

In his article *China Ascendant?* (2014), Krasner conceded that the most important determinant of relations between the U.S. and China will be internal developments in

²²⁴ Ibid, pp. 127-128.

²²⁵ Ibid, pp. 132-135.

²²⁶ Ibid, pp. 136.

²²⁷ Ibid, p. 128.

China.²²⁸ He presented three possible scenarios. In the first scenario (the most optimistic), he hypothesized that China might transition to a fully democratic market-oriented regime. As a result, in the long term, tensions between the U.S. and China would abate or even disappear since domestic values would converge, economic interests would be even more intertwined, and national identities might tend to weaken. However, he also warned that China would not instantaneously be transformed into a democracy. For instance, growing income disparities and disaffected minorities would continue to present challenges to even a political elite committed to a democratic transition. In the second scenario, although economic growth could falter or stall out, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would manage to remain in power. As a result, China might become an upper-middle-income country but never a rich country. In such a context, tensions with the U.S. would continue, but China's influence in the region and its ability to challenge the U.S. militarily and ideologically would not increase. The third scenario is the most pessimistic, although the least likely. In this case, China would continue its rapid economic growth under an autocratic regime. If this were to happen, a Chinese model would challenge liberal democracy and a market economy. As a result, China might be able to push the U.S. out of the western Pacific and force South Korea, Japan, and the smaller states East Asian states to conform more closely to the Chinese than to the American model. Overall, although stable nuclear deterrence would prevent all-out war, the world would be a very different place.²²⁹

Terence Welsey-Smith argued that China's rise to prominence in Oceania is among the most important regional developments since the end of the Cold War. In his article, *China's Rise in Oceania: Issues and Perspectives* (2013), he argued that Beijing's policy towards the Pacific is more than the sum of a specific set of interests, and is best understood as part of a much larger outreach to the developing world, a major work in progress that involves similar initiatives in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East.

On one side, Beijing's Pacific policy is not driven by strategic competition with the United States. In fact, even if China represents a credible military threat to Western

²²⁸ S. D. Krasner, "China Ascendant?", *Hoover Institution*, 2014, <https://www.hoover.org/research/china-ascendent> (last access 06.07.2021).

²²⁹ Ibid.

interests, Chinese military planning remains heavily focused on the Straits of Taiwan, on the disputed maritime resources of the South China Sea, and the strategic sea lanes functional to its burgeoning trade in raw materials and energy.²³⁰ It is worth noticing that most Pacific Island states do not lie close to marine chokepoints (such as the Straits of Malacca) or offer strategic assets in a conflict with Taiwan. Moreover, those that do (like Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas) are already firmly under U.S. control and heavily militarized. Nor is there any evidence that China has attempted to establish port or military facilities anywhere in Oceania. Therefore, according to Welsey-Smith, China's increased interest in the Pacific reflects significant changes in Beijing's policy towards the rest of the world, driven in turn by the domestic transformation of its economic and social order. As a result, it is not surprising that Beijing's recent approach—based on involvement in multilateral organizations, strategic partnerships, overseas investments, and no judgment about the internal affairs of other states—can be seen as “smarter rather than more muscular.”²³¹

On the other side, although the rivalry with Taiwan for influence in the region is perhaps the most controversial aspect of China's growing relationship with Oceania, this diplomatic competition cannot explain alone Chinese increasing involvement in the region. Today, six Pacific Island states (Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Palau, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu and Nauru) recognize Taiwan, while eight (Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, the Federated States of Micronesia and Niue) have formal relations with China.²³² Overall, Oceania is among the last of the world's regions to experience the economic and political shifts associated with Chinese rise. However, it is important to remember that in the last decades China made similar efforts in other regions, for instance establishing diplomatic relations with Latin American and African states. In other words, Chinese leaders have tried to offer a new model for South-South cooperation, providing (unlike Western countries) assistance without any political strings attached. It is not surprising that Pacific Island leaders took the advantage from recent global developments, and responded positively to contemporary Chinese diplomacy. All in all, leaders of island states opened up to China because they

²³⁰ T. Wesley-Smith, “China's Rise in Oceania: Issues and Perspectives”, *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 86(2), 2013, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43590665>.

²³¹ *Ibid*, pp. 355-358.

²³² *Ibid*, p. 364.

started to feel treated with respect regardless of their nation's size, resource endowment, or system of government.²³³

Welsey-Smith concluded his article explaining that China's recent activities in Oceania are fully consistent with its core foreign policy objectives (securing and maintaining reliable access to the raw materials and markets, preserving a peaceful environment, avoiding encirclement or isolation, creating a more evenly balanced and decentralized international system)²³⁴ necessary to support its continued economic expansion, rather than its competition with the U.S. as well as Taiwan.²³⁵

²³³ Ibid, pp. 366-369.

²³⁴ Ibid, pp. 355-356.

²³⁵ Ibid, p. 371.

Chapter 3

How Does the American Realist Interpretation Differ from Others?

Given China's extraordinary performances of recent decades, scholars of different schools of thought (not only realists) have begun to question whether and how the Chinese rise may undermine U.S. interests and the international order stability.

In this final chapter, to provide the reader with a complete overview, I will introduce the other major IR theories and present China's rise interpretations alternative to those elaborated by American realists.

1. Beyond realism

International relations (IR) theories can help us understand how nations engage with one another and view the world.²³⁶ Throughout human history, scholars have developed theories able to look beyond high politics concerns (territorial disputes, arm races, war, peace)²³⁷ and assess how low politics issues (like surplus/deficit in the balance of payments, protection/violation of human rights, environmental protection/degradation, pandemics, gender equality/inequality, terrorism, religious extremism)²³⁸ may shape state behavior.

Realism is the most ancient IR theory, forasmuch as early realist traces can be found in Greek classical culture. Nevertheless, today it is accused of being grounded on astonishingly bold claims and empirically unprovable tenets and unable to explain the

²³⁶ Norwich University, "Key Theories of International Relations", *Norwich University Online*, 16.10.2017, <https://online.norwich.edu/academic-programs/resources/key-theories-of-international-relations> (last access 12.09.2021).

²³⁷ In political science, high politics covers all matters that are vital to the very survival of the state. Traditionally, this concept has been advanced by realists who have argued that security issues simply have priority over all others, because states cannot pursue any goal if they do not meet their very basic one which is survive. A. E. Nilsson, "The Arctic Environment—From Low to High Politics", *Arctic Yearbook*, 2012, p. 180, https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2012/Scholarly_Papers/10.Nilsson.pdf.

²³⁸ Low politics, instead, is a concept that covers all matters that are not absolutely vital to the survival of the state as the economics and the social affairs. In other words, low politics is the domain of the state's welfare. A. E. Nilsson, "The Arctic Environment—From Low to High Politics", p. 180.

complex reality of world politics.²³⁹ The point is that realism is a tool to simplify the world's complexity. Obviously, it does not mean that realism can give meaning to any development of international politics. Still, it just means that a conceptual framework may prove to be more effective to comprehend aspects of given events or behaviors than others. Apart from realism, other major IR theories are liberalism, constructivism, marxism, and feminism.

The liberal theory of IR posits that individuals and groups of individuals (intended as voluntary associations) are the basic actors in world politics since they represent the interests, define preferences, and shape the behavior of the political entities wherein they live.²⁴⁰ And since, in the modern world, most of the world's population lives in states, liberals assume that individuals shape state behavior.

At this point, it is important to remember that liberal IR theory relies on the liberal political doctrine that takes protecting and enhancing the freedom of the individual to be the central problem of politics.²⁴¹ John Locke, considered as the father of classical liberalism, saw great potential for human ingenuity and technology.²⁴² While Adam Smith, considered one of the first among classical political economists, anticipated that combined (human ingenuity and technology) might have ameliorated the living standards of the vast majority of the world's population.²⁴³ In the last three centuries, introducing increasingly efficient energy sources—starting with coal and steam power, passing through oil and electricity, and coming recently to nuclear and renewable energy—has pushed forward a constant improvement in technology and science. The totality of those improvements has revolutionized both the production system and labor organization and positively impacted several human life areas, including international

²³⁹ D. Orsi et al., “The Practice of Realism in International Relations”, *E-International Relations*, 09.01.2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/01/09/the-practice-of-realism-in-international-relations/> (last access 14.04.2021).

²⁴⁰ A. Moravcsik, “Liberalism and International Relations Theory”, *Center for International Affairs*, vol. 92(6), 2001, https://datascience.iq.harvard.edu/files/wcfia/files/607_moravscik.pdf.

²⁴¹ K. Minogue et al., “Liberalism”, *Britannica*, 05.02.2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/liberalism> (last access 16.09.2021).

²⁴² P. H. Gibbon, “John Locke: An Education Progressive Ahead of His Time?”, *EducationWeek*, 04.08.2014, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-john-locke-an-education-progressive-ahead-of-his-time/2015/08> (last access 16.09.2021).

²⁴³ A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, *Metalibri Digital Library*, 2007.

relations. As a result, according to liberals, the modernization process has done nothing but enlarge the scope for cooperation across national boundaries.²⁴⁴ This argument was expanded by Jeremy Bentham, who coined the term international law. He believed that protecting and strengthening the benefits of progress was in the rational interest of states.²⁴⁵ To this extent, states prefer to adhere to international law that grants citizens' rights to life, liberty, and property. In essence, unlike realists, liberals take a positive view of human nature: they have great faith in human reason and are convinced that rationality can be applied to international affairs. For instance, although liberals recognized that individuals are self-interested and competitive, they believed that individuals share many interests and can thus engage in collaborative and cooperative social action, domestically and internationally.²⁴⁶ Overall, human reason can triumph over human fear and the lust for power.²⁴⁷

Like realism, liberalism is not a solid unit rather a collection of general statements that combined serves to explain states' behavior. In general, liberals believe that are economic interests, ideals/beliefs, and domestic and international institutions to influence state behavior rather than survival concerns.

First, liberals argue that trade promotes peace forasmuch as states are deterred from initiating conflicts against trading partners for fear of losing the benefits and gains associated with commercial exchanges.²⁴⁸ Throughout history, states have sought power employing military force and territorial expansion. However, economic development and foreign trade are more adequate and less costly means of achieving recognition and prosperity for highly industrialized countries. The principal reason is the changing character and basis of economic production which, as aforementioned, is linked to modernization. In other words, liberals argue that a high labor division in the international economy increases interdependence between states, discouraging violent

²⁴⁴ A. Moravcsik, "Liberalism and International Relations Theory".

²⁴⁵ M. Shaw, "International Law", *Britannica*, 13.09.2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/international-law> (last access 16.09.2021).

²⁴⁶ A. L. Kalleberg & L. M. Preston, "Liberal Paradox: Self-Interest & Respect for Political Principles", *Polity*, vol. 17(2), 1984, pp. 360-377, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3234512>.

²⁴⁷ R. Jackson & G. Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations*.

²⁴⁸ K. Barbieri, "Economic Interdependence: A Path to Peace or a Source of Interstate Conflict?", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 33(1), 1996, pp. 29-49, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/425132>.

conflict. The risk that modern states take up arms and engage in violent confrontations still remains; however, this is a far less likely prospect.²⁴⁹ In the late 1970s, Robert Keohane and Joseph S. Nye developed the “complex interdependence” concept. They argue that post-war complex interdependence is different from earlier and simpler kinds of interdependence. Previously, international relations were directed by state leaders dealing with other state leaders. The use of military force was always an option in the case of conflict or disagreement. The high politics of security and survival had priority over the low politics of economics and social affairs. By contrast, relations between states nowadays are not primarily relations between state leaders; they are relations between individuals and groups outside of the state. Furthermore, military force is a less useful instrument of policy under conditions of complex interdependence. In other words, under complex interdependence, states pay more attention to the low politics of welfare instead of the high politics of national security. Complex interdependence clearly implies a far more friendly and cooperative relationship between states.²⁵⁰

Second, liberalism claims that democracy is the most peaceful among political configurations. The argument is not that democracies never go to war, but rather that democracies do not fight each other.²⁵¹ Michael Doyle explained why, drawing his argument on Immanuel Kant’s thoughts. There are three elements behind the claim that democracy leads to peace with other democracies. The first is the existence of domestic political cultures based on peaceful conflict resolution. Democracy encourages peaceful international relations because democratic governments are controlled by their citizens, who will not support wars with other democracies. The second element is that democracies hold common moral values that lead to what Kant called a “pacific union”. This union is not a formal peace treaty; rather, it is a zone of peace based on the common moral foundations of all democracies. Freedom of expression promotes mutual understanding internationally and ensures that political representatives act according to

²⁴⁹ M. E. Tanious, “The impact of economic interdependence on the probability of conflict between states: The case of American-Chinese relationship on Taiwan since 1995”, *Review of Economics and Political Science*, 2019, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/REPS-10-2018-010/full/html>.

²⁵⁰ W. Rana, “Theory of Complex Interdependence: A Comparative Analysis of Realist and Neoliberal Thoughts”, *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, vol. 6(2), 2015, https://www.ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol_6_No_2_February_2015/33.pdf.

²⁵¹ I. Oren, “Democratic Peace”, *Britannica*, 28.11.2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/democratic-peace> (last access 17.09.2021).

citizens' views. Third, peace between democracies is strengthened through economic cooperation and interdependence. In the pacific union, it is possible to encourage what Kant called the "spirit of commerce": mutual gains for international economic cooperation and exchange.²⁵² However, liberals also recognize that democratic peace is not flawless. For instance, liberal democracies have gone to war rather frequently over the last decades: the U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are prominent examples. This kind of democratic war does not disprove the democratic peace theory, but it is a powerful reminder of established democracies' readiness to go to war against non-democracies.

Third, liberalism emphasizes the positive role of international institutions since they provide a sense of stability, foster cooperation between states, and alleviate the states' lack of trust and fear.²⁵³ Although liberals advance that international institutions enhance cooperation, they do not claim that such institutions can guarantee a qualitative transformation of international relations since powerful states are not be fully constrained to comply with their directives.²⁵⁴ Nevertheless, liberals disagree with the realists' pessimistic view that international institutions are useless scraps of paper and are at the complete mercy of powerful states.

Overall, liberals believe that a high level of institutionalization significantly reduces the destabilizing effects of anarchy.²⁵⁵ Moreover, institutions make up for the lack of trust between states, providing their member states with a forum wherein they share the information, which can eventually help better understand each others' interests and points of view.²⁵⁶

Marxism is a structural theory just like neorealism, but it focuses on the economic sector instead of the military-political one. In fact, unlike realists, marxists advanced

²⁵² M. W. Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 12(3), 1983, pp. 205-235, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265298>.

²⁵³ R. O. Keohane, "Twenty Years of Institutional Liberalism", *International Relations*, vol. 26(2), pp. 125-138, 2012, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0047117812438451>.

²⁵⁴ R. Jackson & G. Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations*.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ B. C. Rathbun, *Trust in International Cooperation*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

that the source of structural competition is not anarchy, but the capitalist mode of production which defines unjust political institutions and state relations.²⁵⁷

Karl Marx saw the economy as a site of human exploitation and class inequality. In Marx's theory, the capitalistic economy rests on a class struggle: on one side, the bourgeoisie that owns the means of production; on the other, the proletariat that owns only its labor power, which it must sell to the bourgeoisie.²⁵⁸ The point is that labor generates more value than the proletariat class gets back in pay from the bourgeoisie. In other words, there is a surplus-value appropriated by the bourgeoisie that embodies the capitalist profit.²⁵⁹

Although marxists recognized that politics and economics are closely intertwined, they put economics first and politics second. In fact, marxist view is materialist: it is based on the claim that the core activity in any society concerns how humans produce what they need to live.²⁶⁰ Economic production is the basis for all other human activities, including politics. The production process rolls out in: forces of production, that refer to the technical level of economic activity (industrial machinery versus artisan handicraft); and relations of production, that come to shape the social system which determines actual control over the productive forces (private ownership versus collective ownership). Taken together, forces of production and relations of production form a specific mode of production, for example, capitalism, which is based on industrial machinery and private ownership.²⁶¹

The bourgeoisie, which dominates the capitalist economy through control of production, will also tend to dominate in the political sphere because. It is worth remembering that Marx's materialistic view of the world also rolls out the difference between "base" and "superstructure". The former refers to the processes of production of everything

²⁵⁷ C. Sonda, "Guide to International Relations II: Marxism and Constructivism", *The World Reporter*, 15.05.2014, <http://www.theworldreporter.com/2014/05/guide-international-relations-ii-marxism-constructivism.html> (last access 18.09.2021).

²⁵⁸ K. Marx & F. Engels, *The German Ideology/Theses on Feuerbach/Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, Prometheus Book Edition, 1988.

²⁵⁹ Britannica, "Surplus value", *Britannica*, 15.11.2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/surplus-value> (last access 18.09.2021).

²⁶⁰ R. Hoveman, "Marxism and the Meaning of Materialism", *Socialist Worker*, 12.02.2018, <https://socialistworker.org/2018/02/12/marxism-and-the-meaning-of-materialism> (last access 18.09.2021).

²⁶¹ K. Marx & F. Engels, *The German Ideology/Theses on Feuerbach/Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*.

necessary for human life, including housing, clothing, food, transportation, education, entertainment, etc. In contrast, the latter includes the state—which exists to stabilize production conditions—and the ideology aimed to promote to maintain the existing social arrangements.²⁶² Since states are driven by ruling-class interests, struggles between states should be seen in a new light: international conflicts emerge from an economic competition between classes belonging to different states. Moreover, the capitalist economic system is expansive since the bourgeoisie class is always searching for new markets and more profit. Such expansion first took the form of imperialism and colonization but, more recently, it has taken the form of economic globalization led by giant transnational corporations. Overall, human history is seen by marxists as the history of capitalist expansion across the globe.²⁶³

More recently, Immanuel Wallerstein developed one of the major neo-Marxist theories: the “world system analysis”. In essence, Wallerstein maintained that the world system relies on a two-fold structure: one economic, one political, with the one depending on the other. In human history, there have been two types of world-systems: world-empires and world-economies. In world empires, political and economic control was concentrated in a unified center. In contrast, world economies are tied together economically in a single labor division; nevertheless, political authority is decentralized and distributed in multiple units that form the international state-system. In Wallerstein’s eyes, the modern world economy rests on capitalism. Thus, the capitalist world economy is built on a hierarchy of central, peripheral, and semi-peripheral areas. The central area includes the most advanced and complex economies. The peripheral area is at the bottom of the hierarchy and includes the less developed economies relying on natural commodities (such as grain, wood, sugar, oil, and gas) and coerced labor. The little industrial activity that may exist in these areas is mostly under the foreign multinational corporations’ control. Finally, the semi-peripheral area includes developing countries and represents the middle layer between the most developed and less developed countries. For Wallerstein, the basic mechanism of capitalist world-economy is the unequal exchange, consisting of transferring economic surplus from the periphery to the center of the world. Unsurprisingly, strong states can enforce unequal

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ R. N. Berki, “On Marxian Thought and the Problem of International Relations”, *World Politics*, vol. 24(1), 1971, pp. 80-105, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2009707>.

exchange on weak ones, generating tensions within the system. It is important to underline that the world economy is not static since any country may potentially move from periphery to semi-periphery, from semi-periphery to center, and vice versa.²⁶⁴

Besides realism and liberalism, one cannot fail to mention constructivism among major IR theories. In this case, instead of focusing on competition or cooperation, compliance with or resistance to democratic values, constructivists pay attention to the role that ideas can play in international politics. Constructivism rejects the realistic view that explains the states' behavior through the distribution of material power and economic capabilities. In essence, constructivists argued that the most important aspect of international relations is social, not material. Thus, according to them, the study of international relations must focus on the ideas and beliefs that shape international actors' behavior. In social constructivists' view, ideas can be described as mental constructs, beliefs, principles, and attitudes that provide individuals with broad orientations for behavior and policy.²⁶⁵

The starting premise is that ideas define the meaning of material power. Unsurprisingly, constructivism contrasts the neorealist theory. On one side, neorealists posit that material interests (not ideas) explain the actions of international actors. On the other side, constructivists maintain that the international system is founded on ideas, not material forces. In other words, the international system is nothing but a human invention that certain people have arranged at a particular time and place. After all, men have not always lived in sovereign states, since the latter have been instituted in Western Europe only in the sixteenth century, after the Peace of Westphalia (1648).²⁶⁶ Thus, if

²⁶⁴ I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, New York, Academic Press, 1974.

²⁶⁵ S. Theys, "Introducing Constructivism in International Relations Theory", *E-International Relations*, 23.02.2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/23/introducing-constructivism-in-international-relations-theory/> (last Accesso 19.09.2021).

²⁶⁶ The Peace of Westphalia enshrines the end of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), one of the bloodiest wars ever fought between Catholic and Protestant states that formed the Holy Roman Empire. It is worth noticing that although started as a religious conflict, in the end, it came to involve most of the great European powers, losing its religious connotation and becoming a mere hegemonic competition. For many historians, the Peace of Westphalia reduced influence over political affairs for the Catholic Church and marked the birth of the modern nation-state. HISTORY, "Thirty Years' War", 09.11.2009, *History.com*, <https://www.history.com/topics/reformation/thirty-years-war> (last access 27.09.2021).

thoughts and ideas concerning international relations change, the system itself will also change because it is a byproduct of human thoughts and ideas.²⁶⁷

Among prominent constructivists, one cannot fail to mention Alex Wendt, who maintained that materialism is a part of constructivism since material resources constitute social structures. However, material entities have no meaning in people's minds without ideas and beliefs. To explain this point better, Wendt provided a straightforward example. If the U.S. evaluates 500 British nuclear weapons as less threatening than 5 North Korean, it is because British missiles have a different meaning for Americans. They perceive the British as friends while North Koreans as enemies.²⁶⁸

Moreover, constructivists suggested a less rigid view of anarchy. In this case, Wendt advanced three different cultures of anarchy: Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian. First, the logic of Hobbesian anarchy is the war of all against all. States consider each other enemies. As a result, they look at war as the only way of survival. According to Wendt, Hobbesian anarchy dominated the international state-system until the seventeenth century. Second, in the Lockean culture, states are rivals, but they do not seek to eliminate each other since they recognize the other states' right to exist. Lockean anarchy became a characteristic of the modern state system after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Finally, in a Kantian culture, states view each other as friends. Thus, they settle disputes peacefully and support each other in the case of threat by a third party. The Kantian culture has emerged among Western liberal democracies after WWII. These three different cultures of anarchy can be internalized in different degrees. Interiorization refers to the process, thanks to which states share the same view of each other. This cultural internalization can be weak if states are unwilling to share the other states' ideas. By contrast, it can be strong if states firmly believe in sharing ideas to improve social interaction with other states.²⁶⁹ In essence, constructivists do not exclude that states in an anarchic system may possess military capabilities. However, they believe that war and violence can always be avoided since social interaction between states can lead to more benign and friendly cultures of anarchy.

²⁶⁷ R. Jackson & G. Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations*.

²⁶⁸ A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

²⁶⁹ A. Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of it: the Social Construction of Power Politics", *International Organization*, vol. 46(2), 1992, pp. 391-425, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0020-8183%28199221%2946%3A2%3C391%3AAIWSMO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-9>.

Feminism emerged in IR discipline in the late 1980s. Feminists investigate gender inequalities between men and women and the consequences of such inequalities for world politics.²⁷⁰ They argue that women belong to one of the most disadvantaged groups globally, both in material and immaterial terms. This premise comes from an observation of the system of power, which looks favoring men over women.

Gender refers to socially learned behavior and expectations that distinguish between masculinity and femininity. For feminists, humanity lives in a gendered world where qualities associated with masculinity (such rationality, ambition, and strength) are assigned higher value and status than qualities associated with femininity (such as emotionality, passivity, and weakness). This difference produces a gender hierarchy: a system of power where maleness is privileged over femaleness.²⁷¹

Cynthia Enloe tried to show how deeply the international political system was indebted to the work of women and the working of masculinity and femininity.²⁷² In her book, *Bananas Beaches and Bases* (2000), Enloe explored the numerous roles that women play in the international system and global political economy, such as industrial and domestic workers, wives of diplomats and soldiers, and sex workers. In particular, she argued that many low-paid and low-status jobs—especially in the service sectors, like cleaning, washing, cooking, and serving—are undertaken by women from developing countries. Yet, it is not merely the international division of labor that subordinates women. In Enloe’s eyes, the reason why women remain invisible in international politics and economics is due to the private relationships between men and women that, relying on conventional definitions of masculinity and femininity, keep subordinating women to men.²⁷³

In conclusion, although feminists believe that gender inequality and discrimination can be found in all societies (even in the most advanced and industrialized countries where women have high participation rates in the workforce), the international political and

²⁷⁰ S. V. Peterson, “Feminist Theories Within, Invisible To, and Beyond IR”, *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 10(2), 2004, pp. 35-46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24590519>.

²⁷¹ R. Jackson & G. Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations*.

²⁷² M. Zalweski, “Feminist Approaches to International Relations Theory in the Post- Cold War Period”, *OpenMind BBVA*, 2017, <https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/en/articles/feminist-approaches-to-international-relations-theory-in-the-post-cold-war-period/> (last access 18.09.2021).

²⁷³ C. Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000.

economic system's functioning does nothing but reproduce women's underprivileged position.²⁷⁴

2. China's Rise: Liberal interpretation

To begin with, unlike realists who maintain that a state will seek to change the international system through territorial, political and economic expansion as its power increases,²⁷⁵ liberal scholars—like Joseph S. Nye, Harvard University—believe that there is no need for the U.S. and China to go to war. After all, not every rising power has led to war: one may take the case of America overtaking Britain at the end of the nineteenth century.²⁷⁶ In other words, China's rise does not mean war, and one should prevent exaggerated fears from leading towards an ill-fated epilogue.²⁷⁷

The main argument used by liberals to support the idea of China's rise will not lead to hegemonic war is economic interdependence. Since China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, trade has skyrocketed: developing countries—relying on competitive advantages (such as high raw material availability and low labor cost)—have specialized in certain economic activities (namely export-oriented manufacturing), becoming ever-increasingly embedded in global trade. In contrast, developed countries have delocalized basic production operations (such as assembling) while specializing in activities that require high technical skills (like design).²⁷⁸ As a result, all countries (although to different extent) proved to be extremely reliant on each other. Overall, liberals argue that free trade—consisting of commercial activities carried on independently of national borders—benefits all participants since specialization increases efficiency as well as interdependency, which (in turn) generates wealth. The point is that global trade needs peace to keep working. Thus, as Andrew Hammond pointed, a new hegemonic war is unlikely to trigger in a hyper-globalized world for

²⁷⁴ R. Jackson & G. Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations*.

²⁷⁵ R. Gilpin, *War and Change in world politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

²⁷⁶ J. S. Nye, "The Challenge of China", *Tobin Project*, 2006, https://tobinproject.org/sites/tobinproject.org/files/assets/Make_America_Safe_The_Challenge_Of_China.pdf (last access 19.09.2021).

²⁷⁷ J. S. Nye, "China's Rise Does Not Mean War", *Foreign Policy*, 2011, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/b3372fb036e86efd41034bd31d0987e8/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=47510>.

²⁷⁸ World Trade Organization (WTO), "The case for open trade", *WTO*, 2021, https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/fact3_e.htm (last access 19.09.2021).

three main reasons. First, the presence of nuclear weapons deters great power from engaging in potentially catastrophic war, as during the Cold War. Second, today there is a dense web of international institutions (especially the United Nations) which continue to have significant legitimacy. Third, the gap between the U.S. (the established power) and China (the rising one) is greater today than that between the United Kingdom and Germany 100 years ago.²⁷⁹

For Kishore Mahbubani, former Singaporean diplomat, if the U.S. and the West will manage to understand how to deal with China, war can be avoided. On many occasions, Mahbubani underlined that historically, the largest economies in the world were always those of China and India. Europe and North America have taken off only in the last 200 years. Therefore, the assumption that the rest of the world—including China that is a country with 4000 years of political history—will (over time) become just like the West is arrogant.²⁸⁰ After all, country like the U.S., with history of fewer than 250 years, must approach China with humility.²⁸¹ In the end, western leaders should accept China's (and Asia's generally) rise and consider that recent developments in world affairs would lead to a restoration rather than an inversion of power.

John Ikenberry, Princeton University, hypothesized the existence of a dual hierarchical order in today's East Asia: one is a security hierarchy dominated by the U.S., and the other is an economic hierarchy dominated by China.²⁸² The point is that this dual hierarchy has the potential to be quite durable since it is in the interest of all parties involved to maintain peace and stability. As a result, a war is unlikely to occur. For Ikenberry, although the U.S. has played a leading role in shaping order in East Asia for more than half a century (providing security, underwriting stability, promoting open markets, and fostering alliance and political partnerships), over the last decades, the rise of Chinese economic and military capabilities has made the region increasingly

²⁷⁹ A. Hammond, "Another great power war is unlikely right now", *Toronto Star*, 2014, https://www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2014/07/16/another_great_power_war_is_unlikely_right_now.html (last access 19.09.2021).

²⁸⁰ K. Mahbubani, "How Dangerous Is China?", *Die Zeit*, 17.06.2020, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/2020-06/china-superpower-trade-europe-usa-english> (last access 19.09.2021).

²⁸¹ K. Mahbubani, "The U.S. Must Approach China With Humility", *Newsweek*, 04.08.2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/us-must-approach-china-humility-opinion-1622697> (last access 19.09.2021).

²⁸² J. G. Ikenberry, "Between the Eagle and the Dragon: America, China, and Middle State Strategies in East Asia", *POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY*, vol. 20(20), 2015, https://spia.princeton.edu/system/files/research/documents/Ikenberry_BetweentheEagleandtheDragon.pdf.

interconnected, fostering multilateral trade agreements. As a result, nowadays, many countries (such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines) found themselves in a tricky position: China has become their leading trade partner, but, at the same time, they still rely on the U.S. for security.²⁸³

In general, Ikenberry argued that China will not be able to push the U.S. out of the region. In fact, the U.S. and China are mutually interdependent and vulnerable in a wide array of areas (international finance, world trade, global warming, energy security, nuclear terrorism, and so forth). Moreover, they are not simply rival regional powers inasmuch—under conditions of rising economic and security interdependence—the two countries will have more and more incentives to cooperate to stabilize and manage their overlapping strategic environments. Overall, the U.S. and China will find themselves competing for leadership and influence within Asia and globally. But they will have incentives to do so within parameters of mutual restraint.²⁸⁴

Generally, liberals deem that China has benefited from the current international system, experiencing the fastest economic transformation in history. Thus, would it be so wrong to assume Beijing just wants to make the established order better (or at least modify) rather than subvert it? To alleviate concerns and suspicions, Chinese political elites in recent years adopted the “theory of peaceful rise.” This theory argues that China could take a route very different from other major powers in history. China’s rise will be peaceful and beneficial both to the Chinese and the rest of the world. The U.S. and other nations should have nothing to fear from China’s rise. In other words, China’s rise is more an opportunity than a threat to the world. It is worth noting that many realists have contested this point. In their eyes, in the last decades, China has been doing nothing but building up its soft and hard power²⁸⁵, abandoning Deng Xiaoping’s dictum “Hide your

²⁸³ Ibid, pp. 2-4.

²⁸⁴ Ibid, pp. 32-33.

²⁸⁵ In the last decades, Beijing has also begun to build artificial islands to adjust its military position in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and advancing territorial claims based on the “nine-dots line.” In 1947, Wang Ying (a Chinese marine geographer) helped to mark the Chinese territory drawing an eleven-dots line and including roughly 90% of the South China Sea. In 1952, when Chairman Mao Zedong abandoned Chinese claims to the Gulf of Tonkin, two of the original eleven dots were written off. However, in the last decade, China began to advance its maritime claims again. In 2016, an international tribunal ruled that Beijing cannot use nine-dots demarcation because it has no legal basis. As a result, Beijing reacted with outrage to the judgment and began to build artificial islands. H. Beech, “Just Where Exactly Did China Get the South China Sea Nine-Dash Line From?”, *TIME*, 19.07.2016, <https://time.com/4412191/nine-dash-line-9-south-china-sea/> (last access 24.04.2021).

capacities, bide your time” for embracing Xi Jinping’s China Dream “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” If in the 70s and 80s, Chinese leaders exclusively focused their effort on building economic power before engaging in any confrontation, nowadays, they have become more conscious about the role China can play on the international stage and determined to wipe out the “Century of Humiliation” (1839-1949). After all, China has undergone more than 100 years of subjugation by Western Powers, and it would be reasonable for China to emerge as an angry country.

Conclusion

To cite Chuck Palahniuk: “If you watch close, history does nothing but repeat itself. What we call chaos is just patterns we have not recognized. What we call random is just patterns we cannot decipher.”²⁸⁶

Since the Soviet Union collapsed, the international system has maintained the same order, firmly anchored in the U.S. leadership. However, recently, it looks it has entered a new, chaotic phase. China has recorded extraordinary performances, becoming for many a potential competitor to global leadership and—for some, like Mearsheimer, Shiffrinson, and Walt—even a more capable competitor than the Soviet Union was between 1945 and 1989. Unsurprisingly, China’s rise generated contrasting feelings, especially in world’s leaders. On one side, some of the poorest countries’ leaders welcomed its rise forasmuch as dealing with China has provided them with the opportunity to get access to international loans without any condition (unlike Western ones) as well as a wide range of previously unaffordable goods. On the other side, instead, some of the wealthiest ones’ accused China of putting in place unfair trade policies that unilaterally favored its economy. The point is that, despite one’s argumentations, the magnitude of China’s rise remains unprecedented; it is one of the major developments of world history. It has shaken the very foundation of the system that has provided stability for almost two decades.

In the first chapter, I described the features of China’s rise, providing the reader with a dataset useful to understand (independently of the theory applied) why nowadays China is generally seen as a potential superpower. Essentially, power is a relational and not absolute concept. It means that if A has power over the system (S) in which it lives with other actors (S = system consisting of A, B, C, D, ...), and A wants S to do x, then A has to have a number of elements that can increase its capacity to push S’s components to adopt desired behaviors. In the case of states, the so-called power base rests on three pillars: military capacity, economic might, political and cultural influence. First, China has managed to outpace western powers in only four decades, ranking as the world’s second military force and having at its disposal the largest army (more than two million active duty personnel) and the largest navy (350 warships). Second, no country in

²⁸⁶ C. Palahniuk, *Survivor (Traduzione di Michele Monina e Giovanna Capogrossi)*, Mondadori, 2015.

human history has managed to increase its GDP per capita by almost 30 times (from \$120 in 1970 to \$10,390 in 2019) and raise from poverty more than 850 million people as quickly as China did it. Finally, China has shown itself extremely active also in enlarging its political and cultural influence. In 2016, China became the top contributor to global scientific and technical advancement, outpacing the U.S. by the number of scientific and technical journal articles published. In 2019, instead, China surpassed the U.S. by total number of representations spread worldwide (276 China vs. 273 U.S.). Overall, although the U.S. is by far the most powerful country, China seems (at least) to be able to close the gap and increase its relative power.

The second chapter represents the core of this work. Here, I carried out a quantitative analysis that has been articulated in four steps. In the first step, I realized an advanced search on the JSTOR database to collect preliminary information about authors who have published at least an article or a book on China's rise from 2010 onwards. The year 2010 has not been chosen by chance. In 2010, China had already become the world's second-largest economy, surpassing Japan, and the biggest exporter ahead of Germany. Thereafter, interest in China's affairs has surged. In the second step, I consulted authors' bios, resumes, and areas of interest, selecting only those that fit into the IR scholar definition provided by Daniel Maliniak et al. (2011). In other words, I considered only scholars with an active affiliation with a university (in this case, American university) and whose interest lies in economic, social, and political interactions between states. As a result, I excluded researchers employed in government, think tanks, and private firms at the time of their writing. In the third step, using information previously gathered, I dug in-depth authors' bios and careers. Then, I prepared a list to prove that the aforementioned advanced research settings have been quite effective in shrinking the research field to those interested in IR theories and security. Thus, for each scholar, I reported his/her areas of interest and academic affiliation. (Table 17) Finally, in the fourth and last step, after reading their works and identified recurring inquiries, I presented the reader with U.S. realists' answers to the following questions: (1) Will China try to challenge the status quo? (2) Does China has a chance to successfully overthrow the U.S.-led world order? (3) Is a U.S.-China war inevitable? Only 28 scholars were eligible for my analysis, for a total of 53 between articles, books, and papers written after 2010.






Here, in Table 22, the reader will find what I called the “matrix of interpretations”. In essence, this table shows if and how each scholar eligible for my analysis has responded to recurring issues. Besides, this table helps the reader to visualize major patterns on combinations of answers.

Table 22: The matrix of interpretations

Scholars	China will try to challenge the status quo	China will not try	O T H E R	China has a chance to successfully overthrow the U.S.-led world order	China has no chance	O T H E R	U.S.-China war is inevitable	War is evitable	O T H E R
Acharya			1			1			1
Allison	1					1		1	
Art	1				1			1	
Beckley			1		1				1
Brooks		1			1				1
Carlson			1			1			1
Fravel			1		1				1
Friedberg	1			1					1
Gattie			1			1			1
Glaser			1			1		1	
Ho		1				1			1
Krasner			1			1			1
Lampton			1			1		1	
Larson	1					1		1	
Layne	1			1					1
Liff			1			1		1	
Massey			1			1			1
Mearsheimer	1					1	1		
Pu		1				1		1	
Rosato	1					1	1		
Ross			1			1		1	
Schweller		1		1				1	
Shevchenko	1					1		1	
Shifrinson		1			1				1
Sutter		1			1				1
Walt	1				1				1
Welsey-Smith			1			1			1
Wohlforth		1			1				1
TOTAL	9	7	12	3	8	17	2	10	16

Source: Author

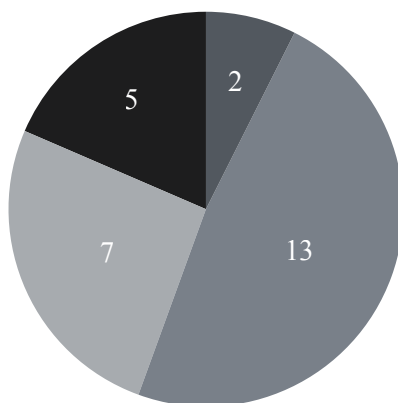
Legend of patterns:

	China will try to challenge the status quo and has (at least) a chance to succeed at doing it.
	China will try to challenge the status quo but its attempt will lead to war.
	China will try to challenge the status quo but its attempt will not lead to war.
	China has no chance to overthrow the U.S.-led world order even though it wanted to.
	Alternative interpretation

In general, only two out of 28 scholars (7%) provided answers to all recurring inquiries; thirteen (48%) provided two out of three answers; seven (26%) provided only one; while five out of 28 (19%) provided zero answers. (Table 23)

Table 23: Answers provided by eligible scholars to recurring inquiries

● 3 answers ● 2 answers ● 1 answer ● 0 answers



Source: Author

Interestingly, the relative majority has been reached just once. Precisely, in assessing whether or not China will try to challenge the status quo. Nine out of 28 responded affirmatively (32%), while seven negatively (25%). At the same time, the rest (12 out of 28, 43%) has not formulated specific thoughts in this regard. Nevertheless, that is not all. As already mentioned, crossing data, I found some patterns in recurring inquiries' answers. (Table 22's legend) At this point, a premise is needed. According to Cambridge Dictionary's definition, a pattern can be defined as "a particular way that something is often done or repeated."²⁸⁷ For this reason, I decided to take into account only combinations of answers—to recurrent inquiries concerning China's rise—shared by at least two scholars.

²⁸⁷ Cambridge Dictionary, Definition of "pattern", <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/pattern> (last access 29.09.2021).

First, two out of 28 scholars eligible for this study deem that China will try to challenge the status quo and that it has (at least) a chance to overthrow the U.S.-led order. The scholars I am speaking of are Aaron Friedberg (Princeton University) and Christopher Layne (Texas A&M University), who I identified with a yellow label. On one side, Friedberg maintains that China's opportunity to challenge the status quo is due to U.S. miscalculations. Therefore, if the U.S. and its allies had to fail to balance Chinese accumulation of material power in the Indo-Pacific region, China might take control of the waters off its coasts and (eventually) even absorb Taiwan gaining, in such a way, control of some of the high-tech manufacturing capabilities necessary to strengthen its military and economy. On the other side, Layne points out that the combination of economic decline and the shift in the distribution of power to which the world has witnessed in the last decades has led to the creation of new institutions that could constitute a parallel international order, outside the framework of the Pax Americana. The most important of these may be the Beijing-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In fact, the diminution of U.S. influence has been highlighted by Washington's inability to derail China's plans to create the AIIB and dissuade its allies from joining the AIIB. All in all, although the role that these institutions can play is still uncertain, they certainly signal the U.S. relative decline and the rise of new powers such as China and India, demanding recognition of their status and prestige.

Second, two out of 28 scholars expect that China will try to challenge the status but, unfortunately, its attempt will lead to war. In this case, the scholars I am speaking of are John Mearsheimer (University of Chicago) and Sebastian Rosato (University of Notre Dame). I highlighted them with a red marker. John Mearsheimer is the most prominent offensive realist. In essence, offensive realism maintains that the basic structure of the international system forces states concerned about their security to compete with each other for power. Mearsheimer assumed that the ultimate goal of every great power is to maximize its share of world power and eventually dominate the system. Concerning U.S.-China relations, in many occasions, Mearsheimer appeared quite pessimistic. In one of his articles, he asserted that if it will keep growing at the pace of the last decades, China will most likely act the way the U.S. has acted over its long history. In other words, China will attempt to dominate the Asia-Pacific region the way U.S. dominates the Western Hemisphere. By contrast, the U.S. will hardly tolerate China as a peer

competitor and will go to great lengths to contain China and prevent it from achieving regional hegemony. Unfortunately, a U.S.-China war will be inevitable. In addition, he warned that another potent source of a conflict between the U.S. and China is hyper-nationalism. Basically, Mearsheimer noticed that China and the U.S. seem to show the same sense of specialness in comparison to the rest of the world. However, that is not all because both Americans and Chinese see inferior nations as dangerous. In such circumstances, contempt, hate, and fear envelop the hyper-nationalist nations and create powerful incentives to use violence to eliminate threats. Sebastian Rosato agreed with Mearsheimer that if China will continue to grow economically, it will also try to challenge the status quo and attempt to dominate Asia. In Rosato's eyes, the U.S. and China seem to be destined to engage in an intense security competition because one state can never be sure about the other states' neither current nor future intentions. Therefore—given the uncertain, elusive, and volatile nature of intentions—there is little Washington and Beijing will be able to do or say to persuade the other side that it has and will always have peaceful intentions.

Third, four out of 28 scholars maintain that China will try to challenge the status quo but its attempt will not lead to war. Those are Graham Allison (Harvard University), Robert J. Art (Brandeis University), Deborah Larson (University of California Los Angeles), and Alexei Shevchenko (Pepperdine University). I signaled them using a green label. Graham Allison believes that China will try to challenge the status quo, as all other rising powers did throughout human history. In one of his latest books, Graham Allison presented sixteen cases in the last 500 years in which a rising power has threatened to displace a ruling power: twelve of these ended in war. The interesting fact is that, according to Allison, none of them wished a military confrontation; in many cases, it was a third power that provoked one of them to react setting in motion a series of events that, in the end, resulted in a war. Therefore, for one who is looking at historical records, war between the U.S. and China is more likely than not. However, he explained that war is not inevitable. As previously mentioned, four out of the 16 cases in Allison's review did not end in bloodshed. In other words, escaping the Trap is possible but it requires tremendous effort from part of both sides. Robert J. Art's argumentation is not far from that Allison's one. In essence, Art argued that historically dominant powers have not readily given up their position of number one to rising challengers, and rising challengers have always demanded the fruits of their growing capabilities. In the

case of China, there is no reason to expect that it will follow a different path. However, Art recognized that the nature and content of Chinese growing appetites will be determined not simply by the acquisition of greater capabilities, but also by the choices made by American leaders. In the end, a U.S.-China war is unlikely because the high economic interdependence and the lack of intense ideological competition between them help to reinforce the pacific effects induced by the condition of mutually assured destruction (due to the possession of nuclear weapons by both sides). For Deborah Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, China (as well as other emerging powers not aligned with western values like Russia) has already started challenging U.S. leadership forasmuch as it is frustrated by the American refusal to accord great power status. The point is that if the U.S. could find a way to recognize China's and Russia's distinctive status and identities, the participation of both in global governance would be higher and a war avoided. After all, there are some issues (such as arresting climate change, controlling terrorism, curbing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, rebuilding failed states, or maintaining economic stability) that the U.S. cannot resolve without Chinese and Russian help.

Fourth, four out of 28 scholars believe that China has no chance to overthrow the U.S.-led world order even though it wanted to. Among those, one may find Stephen G. Brooks (Dartmouth University), Joshua Shiffrin (Boston University), Robert Sutter (George Washington University), and William Wohlforth (Dartmouth University), who I put in evidence with a blue label. To begin with, Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth claimed that "economic growth no longer translates as directly into military power as it did in the past, which means that it is now harder than ever for rising powers to rise and established ones to fall." In fact, even though the American economic dominance has eroded in the last decades, the U.S. military superiority is not going anywhere because decades of massive U.S. investments in key military capabilities have created a gap that will not be easy for China (or any other country) to bridge. In other words, although China's rise has been remarkable, the distance China must travel is extraordinarily large because the size of the U.S. military advantage is much bigger than the analogous gaps in previous eras. Joshua Shiffrin agrees with Brooks and Wohlforth that the U.S. is not on the verge of absolute decline, although China's rise seems to have inaugurated a new era of great power competition. Consequently, China

will not succeed in surpassing the U.S. After all, despite China's rise, the U.S. still retains strengths of its own, benefitting from a large and diverse economy, educated population, vibrant military-industrial base, and inherent geographic security. Robert Sutter maintained that, despite the outstanding economic performance and prominent role in trade, China will not manage to overthrow the U.S.-led order since its rise remains encumbered by domestic, regional, and international limitations. To give credit to his thoughts, in 2010, he wrote an article entitled *China, the United States, and a Power Shift in Asia*. In this work, Sutter assesses both American and Chinese strengths and weaknesses. In essence, although Asia is the international area where China has always exerted its greatest influence, it will not become the dominant power and push the U.S. out of the region.

Finally, five out of 28 scholars framed China's rise in alternative terms. It means that, in their analysis, they did not leave room for the recurring interrogatives but instead focused on other aspects. Those are Amitav Acharya (American University Washington DC), David Gattie (University of Georgia), Joshua Massey (University of Georgia), Stephen D. Krasner (Stanford University), Terence Welsey-Smith (University of Hawaii at Manoa). I evidenced them with a gray label. Amitav Acharya placed the discussion of the rise of China in a broader regional context. Basically, he argued that scholars and decision-makers should focus more on the interaction between Asian countries rather than great power relations, namely U.S.-China relations. In the Acharya's eyes, China is not the only country can undermine regional stability since Asia is a region of tremendous cultural and political diversity. David Gattie and Joshua Massey claimed that the civilian nuclear power enterprise should be included as a strategic sector within the U.S. national security industrial base and deliberated as a foreign policy issue within a global alliance. The reason for that is simple: if the U.S. retreats from the civilian nuclear field, revisionist powers (like China and Russia) will become the global leaders in nuclear science, nuclear engineering, and nuclear technology in the twenty-first-century with adverse implications for American national security. Stephen D. Krasner conceded that the most important determinant of relations between the U.S. and China will be internal developments in China. He presented three possible scenarios. In the most optimistic scenario, he hypothesized that China might transition to a fully democratic market-oriented regime. As a result, in the long term, tensions between the

U.S. and China would abate or even disappear since domestic values would converge, economic interests would be even more intertwined, and national identities might tend to weaken. In contrast, in the most pessimistic scenario, Krasner assumed that China would continue its rapid economic growth under an autocratic regime. If this were to happen, a Chinese model would challenge liberal democracy and a market economy. As a result, China might be able to push the U.S. out of the western Pacific and force South Korea, Japan, and the smaller states East Asian states to conform more closely to the Chinese than to the American model. Finally, Terence Welsey-Smith argued that Beijing's policy towards the Pacific is not driven by strategic competition with the U.S. In fact, even if China represents a credible military threat to Western interests, Chinese military planning remains heavily focused on the Straits of Taiwan, on the disputed maritime resources of the South China Sea, and the strategic sea lanes functional to its burgeoning trade in raw materials and energy. Therefore, according to Welsey-Smith, China's increased interest in the Pacific reflects significant changes in Beijing's policy towards the rest of the world, driven in turn by the domestic transformation of its economic and social order. In essence, Welsey-Smith explained that China's recent activities in Oceania are fully consistent with its core foreign policy objectives (securing and maintaining reliable access to the raw materials and markets, preserving a peaceful environment, avoiding encirclement or isolation, creating a more evenly balanced and decentralized international system) necessary to support its continued economic expansion, rather than its competition with the U.S. as well as Taiwan.

In the third and last chapter, to provide the reader with a complete overview, I introduced the other major IR theories and present China's rise interpretations alternative to those elaborated by American realists.

Although realism is the most ancient IR theory (forasmuch as early realist traces can be found in Greek classical culture), IR scholars have developed several theories to understand how nations engage with one another and view the world. Among them, one cannot fail to mention liberalism, constructivism, marxism, and feminism. Notably, the debate between liberals and realists is particularly lively.

When it comes to analyzing China's rise, liberals deem that China has benefited from the current international system, experiencing the fastest economic transformation in history. Thus, for them, it is not so unreasonable to assume Beijing wants to make the

established order better (or at least modify) rather than subvert it. The main argument used by liberals to support the idea of China's rise will not lead to hegemonic war is economic interdependence. In the late 1970s, Robert Keohane and Joseph S. Nye developed the complex interdependence concept. They argue that post-war complex interdependence is different from earlier and simpler kinds of interdependence. Previously, in the case of disagreement, the use of military force was always an option since the high politics of security and survival had priority over the low politics of economics and social affairs. However, nowadays, interstate relations are not primarily relations between state leaders. They are relations between non-state actors (individuals, multinationals, NGOs). As a result, military force is a less helpful instrument of policy under conditions of complex interdependence. For instance, Andrew Hammond pointed that a new hegemonic war is unlikely to trigger in a hyper-globalized world for three main reasons. First, the presence of nuclear weapons deters great power from engaging in potentially catastrophic war, as during the Cold War. Second, today there is a dense web of international institutions (especially the United Nations) which continue to have significant legitimacy. Third, the gap between the U.S. (the established power) and China (the rising one) is greater today than that between the United Kingdom and Germany 100 years ago. For Kishore Mahbubani war can be avoided, if the U.S. and the West will manage to understand how to deal with China. While John Ikenberry argued that the U.S. and China are not simply rival regional powers inasmuch—under conditions of rising economic and security interdependence—the two countries will have more and more incentives to cooperate to stabilize and manage their overlapping strategic environments. Overall, the U.S. and China will find themselves competing for leadership and influence within Asia and globally. But they will have incentives to do so within parameters of mutual restraint.

By contrast, realists maintain that the sovereign states' primary goal is survival. Obviously, it is different from saying that survival is the only goal. In fact, states have a great variety of particular interests that motivate their behavior. Consequently, states cannot pursue any goal if they do not meet their very basic one. Nevertheless, for realists, high politics has priority over low politics. As a result, in their eyes, China has been doing nothing but building up its soft and hard power, abandoning Deng Xiaoping's dictum "Hide your capacities, bide your time" for embracing Xi Jinping's

China Dream “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” Therefore most of them postulated that, nowadays, Chinese leaders have become more conscious about the role China can play on the international stage and are determined to wipe out the “Century of Humiliation” (1839-1949). After all, China has undergone more than 100 years of subjugation by Western Powers, and it would be reasonable for China to emerge as an angry country.

To conclude, I cannot fail to recognize that this qualitative analysis has two main flaws. First and foremost the fact that I inevitably left behind some scholars that instead had to be included. Second, drawing a clear line that distinguishes realists from liberals and others is challenging. I tried to overcome these challenges by pairing quantitative with qualitative analysis’ features. According to Ochieng Pamela Atieno, the aim of qualitative analysis is a complete, detailed description. No attempt is made to assign frequencies to the linguistic features which are identified in the data.²⁸⁸ To this extent, I tried to be extremely punctual in describing IR scholars’ (eligible for my study) theories. Yet, I used graphs and charts to gather organize their thought and provide the reader with a detailed overview. Moreover, given the number of papers to read and analyze, one can assert that my method is time-consuming and, thus, it cannot be extended to wider populations. Although it is undeniable that it is true, my counter-argument is expected but not banal: research is an activity that takes time since the researcher’s work involves formulating scientific questions as well as taking a step back in order to see the bigger picture.²⁸⁹ Overall, the theories that this work has gathered and presented can provide the reader with a sharp outlook of the state of the art of U.S. realist interpretation of China’s rise. In future works, one may try to sharpen this qualitative-quantitative method with the aim of applying it to a larger sample of scholars/papers.

²⁸⁸ O. P. Atieno, “An Analysis of the Strengths and Limitations of Qualitative and Quantitative Research Paradigms”, *Problems of Education in the 21st century*, vol. 13, 2009, https://www.scientiasocialis.lt/pec/files/pdf/Atieno_Vol.13.pdf.

²⁸⁹ I. Borenstein, “Research should take time”, *University of Boras Magazine*, 15.03.2015, <https://www.hb.se/en/research/news-and-events/magazine-1866/news-articles/issue-1-2016/research-should-take-time/> (last access 01.10.2021).

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