Why A Rising China Is Not Disrupting World Order

Bruce Gilley
Assistant Professor
Division of Political Science
Mark O. Hatfield School of Government
Portland State University

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//Abstract

The question of how to measure and explain the implications of China’s rising power on the international system is considered with respect to theories of “peaceful rise” immanent in three mainstream international relations theories – realism, liberalism, and constructivism. The outcome is parsed into three separate issue areas – rights, trade, and security – and three separate process variables are considered – China’s foreign policy, the foreign policies of other states, and the operation of international institutions and the international system. The conclusion reached is that while all three theories provide explanatory power over various dimensions of the “peaceful rise”, constructivism alone is operative across all three issue-areas and all three process variables. Theoretical and policy implications follow.
In the mid to late-1990s, long-simmering fears that a rising China would destabilize world order became prominent in public debates. Two journalists warned of a “coming conflict” with the United States (Bernstein and Munro, 1997), while a prominent scholar warned of a “struggle for mastery in Asia” (Friedberg, 2000). Today, while prospectival concerns about a rising China remain, there is little evidence that any major disruption to world order has occurred. Across three broad areas of international affairs – trade, rights, and security – dominant international institutions and norms remain largely unchanged by China’s growing power.

In this paper, I want to consider the reasons for this “non-disruptive rise”, or “peaceful rise” (*heping jueqi*), to borrow the term coined in China (Xia and Jiang, 2004). My purpose is to address the question in a consciously theoretical manner from the standpoint of international relations theory. While there have been many new works on China’s recent foreign policy, these are insufficient to explain China’s peaceful rise. To answer this question, we need to consider competing approaches to the international system itself and how it operates. As we will see, all three major paradigms of international relations – realist, liberal, and constructivist – can generate theories of a peaceful rise. This leaves the precise explanation indeterminate and by implication the factors that might upset it unknown. Uncovering the precise explanation requires considering which paradigmatic theory of peaceful rise most closely approximates the actual mechanisms at work across the three issue-areas. In part, then, this paper is an exercise in theoretical clarification, showing how the question of China’s peaceful rise should be addressed. I devote the first half of this paper to this question.

The second aim is to get the answer right. In the second half of the paper, I argue that realist, liberal, and constructivist approaches all point to important factors that explain the outcome in question. However, their relative importance varies. In particular, I argue that the constructivist approach offers the most consistent and powerful insights into China’s peaceful rise because it captures the normative accommodation that has driven the dynamics of institutions and interests in the world system.

I begin this paper by tracing China’s rising power and then describe its lack of disruptive influence on the international system thus far. I then show that all three major
paradigms of international relations can generate theories that predict such an outcome and discuss how those theories should be tested. The second half of the paper evaluates the theories in light of the actual mechanisms at work across three main issue areas. I then summarize the results and sketch the theoretical and policy conclusions that follow.

//China’s Rising Power

I assume certain values on both the background variable China’s rise and on the dependent variable non-disruption in this paper. Yet these descriptive inferences are not uncontroversial, and they plainly matter to the analysis that follows. If China is not rising, for instance, then the explanation of non-disruption is complete. Indeed, on certain theories non-disruption is a substitutive or “effect” indicator of China’s lack of power itself (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2002). Given the import of these measurement claims, it is important to justify them, however briefly.

By China’s rise, I mean the growth of China’s international power to a position of preeminence in the international system alongside the United States and the European Union. China’s rise has, of course, been widely anticipated throughout the 20th century (Burbidge, 1943, Hsu, 1970, Overholt, 1993, Purcell, 1962). However, it is only in the period since the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre that there has been decisive evidence that China’s power is actually rising.

The measurement of power in an age of multiple international power hierarchies constitutes a source of ongoing research and debate in international relations (Kadera and Sorokin, 2004, Rothgeb, 1993, Tellis, 2000, Treverton and Jones, 2005). Measurements have typically been divided into three main spheres: material capabilities, organizational capabilities, and normative capabilities.

China’s rising material capabilities are perhaps the least controversial. The Correlates of War Composite Index of National Capability which uses economic, military, and population data gives China a 13% share of international power in 2001, compared to 15% for the U.S. (both powers having risen relatively in the previous decade) (Correlates of War, 2005). A similar composite indicator produced at RAND gave China a 14% share versus 20% for the U.S. in 2005, but predicted that China would close that gap by around 2015 (Treverton and Jones, 2005). China’s share of global economic output has quickly
closed in on that of the United States, while its military spending in 2006 surpassed the combined spending of Asia’s next four biggest spenders Japan, South Korea, India and Australia (Hackett, 2008).

The organizational approach to power centers instead on the ability of domestic systems to convert their material capabilities into power projection capabilities (Tellis, 2000). This approach is grounded more in the comparative politics of state power. It is here that China’s rise comes most seriously into question. Its dependence on global markets, its low position in the global value-added chain, its poor human capital, its lack of freedoms and internal feedback, and its uncertain political future all contribute to doubts about its ability to convert material capabilities into international power (Breslin, 2005, Chan, 2005). Archibugi and Coco’s technological capabilities index, which tracks the innovational capacity of each country, ranked China as only 85th out of 162 countries in the 1990 to 2000 period versus the 5th rank for the U.S. (Archibugi and Coco, 2004). Nonetheless, most recent studies find that China is improving its organizational weaknesses, especially its institutional ones (Nathan, 2003, Yang, 2004). In the Archibugi and Coco index, China’s innovative capabilities grew faster than any other country except for Indonesia in the 1990s compared to the 1980s.

Finally, normative approaches center on the ability of states to influence other actors in the international system through a process of rational or moral persuasion. China’s capabilities in this regard have been rising rapidly (Lampton, 2008). One example is the unexpected success of its Confucius Institutes program -- launched in 2004 and with 246 outlets in institutes of higher education all of them requested by the host institutions in 72 countries by mid-2008. Another is the success of its Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, which attracted 41 African heads of state or government to its opening meeting in 2006, more than the 36 that attended the African Union’s own leaders’ meeting in Khartoum the same year.1 The editor-in-chief of Japan’s mass circulation Asahi Shimbum calls China’s annual National Day receptions at its missions in Asia “the hottest political-social event in any Asian country today” and a big contrast to the waning importance of July 4 receptions in the region (Funabashi, 2007: 38). In the 2007 and 2008 Pew Global Attitudes surveys, respondents in several key countries like Russia and Australia (along with most large Muslim countries including Pakistan, Egypt,
Turkey, and Indonesia) had decisively more favorable views of China than the U.S. while respondents in core U.S. allies like Britain, Canada, Germany, France, Spain, and South Korea were evenly split. As Zhao and Ding both show, the attitudes of foreign countries towards China have become a central part of its power capabilities (Zhao, 2007) (Ding, 2008).

Beyond these objective measures of material, organizational, and normative capability, there is also an important subjective measure. China is today widely perceived to be a rising power. Among the 22 countries other than China and the U.S. in the 2008 Pew survey, the country average of decided respondents who believed that China had already or would eventually replace the U.S. as the world’s leading superpower was 51% versus 49% who believed it would not. It is impossible to imagine any serious analyst today asking the question that Segal did in 1999 – “Does China Matter?”—so widespread has this belief become (Segal, 1999, Segal et al., 2004). A multi-year, multi-institutional research project called The China Balance Sheet, based in Washington D.C., seeks to understand “China’s emergence as an international power.” Analysts in Asia in particular take China’s rise as a given (Wang et al., 2004). Though some analysts have espied parallel processes of “Japan rising” (Bunker and Ciccantell, 2007, Pyle, 2007) or “India rising” (Cohen, 2002, Das et al., 2005, Schaffer, 2002, Voll and Beierlein, 2006), it is this subjective basis of its rising power that makes China different. Talk of a rising China animates citizens and policy-makers (Overholt, 2008), while talk of a rising Japan or India does not. While it may be socially-constructed (Brittingham, 2007), a rising China is no less real for all that.

//China’s Peaceful Rise

Simultaneous with the dramatic rise of China’s overall international power has been what is largely a null set: the international system has not been fundamentally, or indeed even moderately, affected by that rise. This itself is not an uncontroversial claim. Indeed, the starting point for many analyses of China’s rise is quite the opposite (Kurlantzick, 2007). Since it is the outcome that this article seeks to explain, it is worth noting the evidence on which it is based.
The international system can be defined as the norms, rules, agreements, and principles that guide world politics, both globally and, in this case, within Asia itself. It is important to adopt such a “norm-based” or “process-oriented” rather than a “power-based” or “relative positions-oriented” definition of world order since the latter approach makes a rising power virtually tautological with the disruption of world order. World order, in Ikenberry’s phrase, is a system in which “rules, rights, and protections are widely agreed upon, highly institutionalized, and generally observed” (Ikenberry, 2001: 36). Power shifts only become disruption if they translate into changes in norms and their associated institutions and alliances. Mearsheimer’s (Mearsheimer, 2006, Mearsheimer, 2001) and Christensen’s (Christensen, 2001) discussions, for instance, make China’s rise virtually synonymous with disruption because of the new constraints placed on U.S. capabilities. Yet on the norm-based approach, such constraints may or may not be disruptive. While there has been much talk of the emergence of “a new regional order” (Shambaugh, 2005:23) in Asia or even “a new global order” (Shambaugh, 2005:7) (Burstein and De Keijzer, 1998) as a result of China’s rise, such power shifts do not constitute system disruption.

Disruption is also a continuous concept. While “low disruption” would entail only marginal adjustments to the international system, a “moderate disruption” would entail major changes in some issue areas, while a “high disruption” would entail major changes in all issue areas.

Thus defined, most evidence points to the conclusion that so far the effects of China’s rise on the international system since the mid-1990s have been only low or negligible disruption. Across three main issue-areas – economics, trade, investment, and development “trade”; human rights and democracy “rights”; and national defense and international security “security” – China’s rise has either reinforced or not affected existing norms and institutions.

In trade, the World Trade Organization has emerged from China’s rise both strengthened and with its Western dominance largely intact and unchallenged (Pearson, 2006). The WTO has accommodated China’s inclusion. Expectations of a new North-South confrontation have proven unfounded. East Asian regionalism in economic and trade matters, meanwhile, has tended to complement rather than challenge the WTO-led
liberalization regime (Lincoln, 2004, Rosen, 2008). To the limited extent that East Asian regionalism has displaced the WTO, it is a result of the disruptive policies pursued by ASEAN core leadership, and thus, like the East African Community, cannot be attributed to the rise of China.

On rights, fears of a corrosive impact from the “Beijing consensus” that encourages the repression of civil and political rights in order to achieve economic growth and stability have proven unfounded. The continued rights-oriented drive of the United Nations has been highlighted both in institutional reforms – the formation of the new Human Rights Council in 2006 – and in a series of resolutions – for instance a 2004 resolution on democracy promotion that passed with the support of 172 out of 187 voting members. Within Asia, the greater role of China within ASEAN whose treaty of Amity and Cooperation it signed in 2003 has not made that body less rights or democracy-friendly or more unfriendly.

On matters of security, the U.S.-led hub-and-spoke system of security alliances in Asia remains wholly in tact (Sutter, 2005: 266-67). While there has been some modest defense strengthening in Japan, India, Singapore, and the Philippines (Ross, 2007), Swaine notes that there is little evidence of “deliberate force build-ups or other types of compensatory or anticipatory moves indicative of an arms race or security dilemma” among Asian nations (Swaine, 2005: 273). Nor is their evidence of deliberate balancing of China on the part of NATO members. Global non-proliferation efforts and the spread of UN peace-keeping missions have not been undermined by the rise of China. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization of China, Russia, and four Central Asian nations, meanwhile, has not emerged as a military alliance, since it lacks a mutual defense clause and has operated mainly on trans-border crime issues. China has been quickly integrated into multilateral security forums (Kent, 2007, Wu and Lansdowne, 2007).

Of course, there is always the possibility of prospectival change. German relative power began to rise in the 1850s and 1860s but was not obviously disruptive until 1914. A lack of disruption relating to China’s rise also may be transitory. It may be an artifact of the U.S. over-commitment in Iraq. It may be a result of China’s temporary restraint of its revisionist foreign policy aims, stated as one of the tenets of Deng Xiaoping’s 24-character dictum of Chinese foreign policy of 1991: taoguang yanghui (hide our capacity
and bide our time). Or it may simply be a result of some functional form assumptions about the time lags between rising powers and system disruption. “Could” is the operative word here. Sutter, for example, warns that China’s non-disruptive foreign policy “could…shift to different and perhaps more hard-line positions” in future (Sutter, 2005:292). The China Balance Sheet project warns that China’s growing power “could form the basis for more assertive leadership to counterbalance the United States.” (Bergsten, 2006: 14) Legro outlines no less than five disruptive “could” scenarios (Legro, 2007).

Goldstein (Goldstein, 2007) is probably right that uncertainty about the current level of disruption relating to China’s rise is high. But as with all social questions and unlike the pure sciences, the dangers of false negatives (Type 2 error) are as great as those of false positives (Type 1 error). Assuming a pessimistic null hypothesis has its own risks. We must proceed based on the most reasonable guess, whatever the uncertainty. That evidence so far points to low or negligible disruption. Explaining this outcome in a theoretically rigorous manner should be a primary objective of students of international affairs.

// Theories and Methods
Scientific paradigms direct attention to different sets of variables as being the most salient ones for explaining outcomes. In this paper, I limit the discussion to three mainstream paradigms of international system outcomes -- realism, liberalism, and constructivism -- and to the theories of peaceful rise immanent in each.

The realist paradigm has been one powerful source of fears of a rising China (Gertz, 2000, Mearsheimer, 2005, Menges, 2005, Yahuda, 1986). Its three core assumptions – that states are identical and unitary actors acting amidst anarchy, that state preferences are relatively fixed, and that relative power determines international system outcomes – tend to generate theories that predict that rising powers will cause disruption to the international system. In the case of China, realism has been deployed through power transitions theory in particular to predict that a rising China will challenge and disrupt world order (de Soysa et al., 1997, Goldstein, 2008, Houweling and Siccama, 1988, Organski and Kugler, 1980, Tammen and Kugler, 2006)
Despite this dominant “tragic vision” (Lebow, 2003, Mearsheimer, 2001), realism can also be deployed to predict the peaceful integration of a rising power (Powell, 1999) if it is assumed that state interests are not conflictual in light of other commitments and given relatively full information and low signaling costs. Under these conditions, a rising state may strategically opt to pursue a cooperative foreign policy (“soft bandwagoning”) since it believes this serves its interests, while other states as well as the international institutions that states control will accommodate that rise consistent with their own interests. Kupchan’s concept of “benign regional unipolarity” (Kupchan, 1998) is a realist theory of accommodation of a rising power.

Johnston (Johnston, 2003) and Sutter (Sutter, 2005) both argue that China is at present a status quo power because the world order serves its interests reasonably well. Lampton (Lampton, 2005) and Chan (Chan, 2007) have made similar arguments about the U.S. accommodation of a rising China. “Peaceful power transitions” are now widely studied (Kupchan et al., 2001, Zhu, 2006). It has been argued that a “win-win” dynamic is in play in Asia in particular, where for economic and/or security reasons all key actors can benefit from China’s rise (Danilovic and Clare, 2007, Kang, 2008). Realism’s explanation of peaceful rise thus rests on the view that there is a strategic accommodation of China occurring in which all major actors have a stake.

The liberal paradigm puts primary emphasis on the domestic preferences of societies – whether purely economic or more pluralistic -- and how those preferences shape the foreign policies of states and the operation of international institutions. Like realism, liberalism has its own “tragic vision” of the rise of China. Some analysts believe that the economic demands of the new middle class will force Chinese companies and investors into a willy-nilly conflict with the world’s other states as a result of the push for raw materials and markets (Fishman, 2006, Kynge, 2006). Others see signs that rising nationalism or domestic political unrest in China will “derail its peaceful rise” (Shirk, 2007), especially because China’s autocratic institutions tend to give greater voice to disruptive or nationalist domestic influences. A similar argument highlights the dangers posed by domestic interests outside of China --- whether acting through international institutions hostile to the new “Beijing Consensus” or through “anti-China” lobbies in Western nations (Peerenboom, 2007).
Liberalism’s “tragic vision” can be reversed by changing two key assumptions: that the most salient interests both inside and outside of China are those prone to conflict; and that the mechanisms of representation are those that give greater voice to conflictual rather than cooperative interests. Thus some analysts argue that China’s economic expansion generates an array of positive-sum interactions across borders that not only create a thick web of non-state cooperative interests but also ensure that the foreign policies of China and of other nations remain basically cooperative as well (Keller and Rawski, 2007, Lo, 2006, Shambaugh, 2004). Others stress a confluence of wider cooperative interests: the “panda-huggers” in foreign lands and the *haipai* (“ocean faction”) in China (Johnston, 2004, Koehn and Yin, 2002, Roehl, 1990). A nascent liberal school in China argues that domestic political liberalization will spill over into a more cooperative foreign policy -- the so-called “inside-out” or *you nei er wai* foreign policy theory (Liu, 2006: 63).

Finally, the *constructivist* paradigm directs attention to the role of ideas, understood as relatively autonomous, in forming the interests, identities, structures, and institutions that define world order. Constructivism predicts conflict or cooperation depending on how ideational differences are managed. Extreme normative dissonance will produce conflict, as Bukanovsky argued of revolutionary France (Bukovansky, 2002), as Ninic argued of “renegade regimes” (Ninic, 2005), and as Fukuyama has argued with respect to contemporary radical Islamic states (Fukuyama, 2002). Many writers have warned of a fundamental ideational divergence between China and the dominant West or China’s Asian neighbors (Downs and Saunders, 1998, Goldstein, 2006, Lynch, 2006, Peerenboom, 2007). In Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis, the renewal of China’s civilizational beliefs “will place tremendous stresses on international stability in the early 21st century” (Huntington, 1996: 312). Nationalism in this case is not merely a domestic interest but a defining element of China’s strategic culture. Others see the “tragic vision” of constructivism as resulting from the “liberal imperialism” of the West marching rhetorically on China like a Napoleonic army. Rousseau offers a constructivist view of the rise of “China threat” perceptions in the West that provides an ideational explanation of conflict (Rousseau, 2006).
A fundamental premise of the “tragic” constructivist vision of China’s rise is that China’s domestic norms are deeply illiberal while those of the wider international system are decisively liberal. Thus if one or both of these conditions is untrue, then there is no necessary reason to expect disruptive consequences from China’s rise, other things being equal. Either China’s domestic norms have become relatively liberal, or else the international order is sufficiently pluralistic to accommodate a modestly illiberal China. Alternatively, from a foreign policy perspective, constructivist theories have been offered that center on the ability of Beijing to pursue a norm-consistent and consensual foreign policy that is delinked from its illiberal domestic order (Wang, 2003). If the state’s external identity is pacifistic and cooperative, then those ideas could constrain Chinese behavior and responses to it.

Given the ontological incompatibility of constructivism with realism and liberalism, Goldstein warns that “adjudicating among the sternly defended positions in this ongoing debate may be an impossible task, since it goes well beyond factual questions to questions of political values and epistemological beliefs.” (Goldstein, 2007: 640). Yet without attempting such an adjudication, we are left only with mutually indifferent explanations. Each paradigmatic theory has clear and distinctive predictions that can and should be tested on as wide a canvas of evidence as possible.

The dependent variable of China’s peaceful rise can be parsed into three separate issue-areas in order to increase within-unit variation. For this purpose, I will use the same three-part division mentioned above, which is widely invoked in foreign policy debates: economics, trade and development (“trade”); human rights, democracy, and domestic governance (“rights”); and national defense and international security (“security”).

The independent variables, meanwhile, are those intervening variables through which the causal process – China’s rise leading to non-disruption controlling for other factors – has resulted. From the discussion above, two obvious intervening variables are China’s foreign policy and the foreign policies of other states. In addition, one antecedent variable -- the structures and institutions of the international system – must be part of any causal chain.

This then gives a three-by-three matrix of independent and dependent variables, or nine different causal pathways to investigate. The three “peaceful rise” theories
derived from each of the paradigms can then be tested on each of these nine pathways. Thus even in this simplified form, explaining China’s rise requires us to consider 27 different specific causal hypotheses.

Given the enormousness of this challenge, many scholars have chosen to focus on a smaller sub-set of these 27 hypotheses. Goldstein, for example, confines his explanation to security issues, to Chinese foreign policy, and to two strands of realism (Goldstein, 2007). While this selectivity is understandable, it means that he is considering only 4% (one of 27 hypotheses) of the entirety of the question itself. Since there is no reason to suppose that this particular 4% holds the key to the outcome as a whole, precision is achieved at the price of validity. In the remaining half of this paper, then, I employ a highly-schematic approach to consider the entire tableau of 27 hypotheses about China’s peaceful rise.

In the choice of empirical data, we want “mean-centered” data, in two senses: (1) choosing the specific issues within each of the three issue-areas that centrally define that issue-area; and (2) choosing data on those issues that fairly represents the bulk of evidence relating to it (Lustick, 1996). To do this, I begin each section with a statement of what the central issues are and then follow this with another statement of what I believe the accumulated evidence shows.

//Trade
On economic and trade matters, three defining issues have animated discussions of China’s rise since the late 1990s: China’s role in the World Trade Organization, China’s role in Asian economic regionalism, and China-U.S. bilateral economic relations (Calder and Fukuyama, 2008, Feng, 2006). As argued, China’s rise has been non-disruptive in the trade area in general and thus in these three core areas in particular. Where China’s rise has been more disruptive – the scramble for African resources, for example, or Central Asian pipeline politics – the issues are arguably comparatively marginal.

China has pursued a largely status quo foreign trade policy, accepting wide commitments under WTO accession (Bergsten, 2007: 180, Chan, 2006: ch.4, Pearson, 2006: 256). China’s cooperative foreign policy on trade matters is difficult to attribute to domestic interest pressures the liberal explanation for a simple reason that I will argue
applies with even greater force on rights and security issues: the absence of any organized and effective interest group influences (Feng, 2006, Fewsmith and Rosen, 2001, Pearson, 2006). While there has been a significant pluralization of the number and importance of various state actors on Chinese foreign economic policy-making (local governments, state-owned enterprises, central bureaucracies, etc.) (Chen, 2005, Lampton, 2001, Zeng, 2007, Zweig, 2002), this represents a complexification of the state not an introduction of society. For the most part, there is no “attentive public” (Rosenau, 1968) that watches and shapes the state on foreign policy matters in China, aside from scattered instances that gain attention because of their irregularity. That the state often acts in the interests of some groups does not imply that those groups determine that policy. While there are interesting sprouts of organized influence (Kennedy, 2005, Liu and Hao, 2005), the general picture remains one of an overwhelmingly dominant state setting China’s foreign policy priorities and policies.

That leaves realist and constructivist explanations. As a clear beneficiary of economic globalization in general and economic access to the markets, capital, and technology of the United States in particular, the Chinese state has an obvious “national interest” in preserving access through credible commitments to cooperative behavior in various trade forums (Ruan, 2007). Internal policy debates show a clear realist motivation of creating a “favorable international environment” for its domestic development by holding to such commitments (Nathan and Gilley, 2003: 232, 34). This accounts for some instances where Beijing has compromised its narrow trade interests in order to protect broader trade interests: its failure to devalue during the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, for instance, or its sweeping commitments to market liberalization under its WTO accession agreement.

Yet in many other instances the compromises are more central to Chinese national interests. Beijing, for instance, accepted continued quotas and monitoring of its textile exports to the EU and U.S. following the expiration of the Multifibre Agreement in 2005; has allowed the governance structure of the IMF to continue to be largely Western-dominated and overweighted on Europe in particular; has not objected to Taiwan’s growing political role in the WTO most recently as head of the Recently-Acceded Members group; and is a clear loser from a proposed ASEAN-China Free Trade
Agreement ACTFA (Moore, 2007, Pu, 2006). China launched only two formal complaints with the WTO in its first six years of membership despite claiming an interest in 61 more cases between other parties primarily developing countries complaining about developed ones. There is evidence that this is because China’s state officials have developed an “irrational” belief in the cooperative spirit of the international trade system (Pearson, 2006). The same norm-orientation explains why it has taken a follower role in East Asian regional trade liberalization (Lampton, 2005: 341).

China’s foreign policy, however, is only one piece of the non-disruption picture. Indeed, a cooperative trade policy by China could lead to more global trade disruption if in pursuing its interests and norm beliefs, China’s economic expansion triggers protectionist pressures or institutional instability. The IMF, meanwhile, in 2007 revamped its 30-year old Country Surveillance Framework with a new demand obviously aimed at China “encouraging national policies that do not disrupt or compromise external stability”. Thus non-disruption also requires that the foreign policies of other states as well as the character of international economic institutions retain their open, fair, and market-oriented character in response to the massive changes in the world economy accompanying China’s rise.

Trade policy is one area where the policy of major economic powers reflects the predictions of liberal theory. Economic interests are deeply enmeshed in the policy-making process. China’s rise has generated many positive structural conditions in the international economy – lower global interest rates, lower consumer prices, etc. – that have contained the influence of protectionist lobbies to those areas where imports are clearly disruptive (Facchini et al., 2007). Interdependence theory – the system-level account of the ways in which growing economic interdependence creates structural incentives for states to cooperate on trade and other matters because of the shared domestic interests at stake – can be seen operating across a range of areas. It is a “capitalist peace” (Gartzke, 2007) rather than a “democratic peace” that is breaking out between China and the West. That a potentially hostile China is allowed to own 10% of outstanding U.S. treasury bills and to buy a multi-billion dollar stakes in Australian miner Rio Tinto $13 billion, oil giant BP $2 billion, or American investment bank MorganStanley $5 billion (collectively far exceeding the rejection of a $18 billion
takeover of U.S. oil refiner Unocal) reflects the force of liberal interests that trump the higher-profile but ultimately less powerful protectionist lobbies (Sutter, 1998).

As for international institutions, the liberal logic is complemented in this case by a constructivist one: a normative commitment to principles of multilateralism, non-discrimination, and procedural fairness that goes beyond interests. The revamped IMF Country Surveillance Framework aimed at China, for instance, also stated that “surveillance must be evenhanded, whether countries are large or small, advanced or not.” In its first year of operations, those normative principles trumped the threat of retaliation on China’s exchange rate insofar as the mechanism was not deployed as expected. The U.S. could not mobilize the IMF to sanction China under this new mechanism because the new guidelines were perceived as a violation of principles of non-discrimination (Bergsten, 2008). The appointment in 2008 of China’s Justin Lin as chief economist of the World Bank (the first from a developing country) and 2006 revisions that enhanced the voting power of China in both the IMF and the World Bank reflected a normative commitment within international trade institutions to the accommodation of China.

// Rights
The rights issue can be parsed into one core normative issue – the debate on rights versus sovereignty and its application to domestic politics in China -- and one international system case that looms large in this debate -- China’s relations with Myanmar. In both cases, the “non-disruption” value pertains: China’s rise has not made any notable dent in the strong liberal orientation of international law and institutions relating to democracy, human rights, and governance; and China’s rise has not afforded greater protection for rights abuses in Myanmar.

China’s foreign policy is the obvious first place to start. Since the late 1990s, Chinese foreign policy has progressively abandoned absolute notions of state sovereignty in favor of an acceptance, however muted, of the importance of rights in international order. This shift was first evident in Beijing’s support of two UNSC resolutions in intervention in East Timor in late 1999 and then in 2001 by its ratification of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Since 2001, the rights
discourse has spiraled quickly domestically. The protection of human rights was written into China’s state constitution in 2004, while China has supported UN efforts to establish electoral democracy in East Timor, Cambodia, and Afghanistan, for example. It is likely to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights soon (Lee, 2007).

In the case of Myanmar, Beijing’s previous view that it “opposes the action of interfering in the internal affairs of other countries in the name of ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’” had by the early 2000s shifted to appeals to the junta to “push forward democratization” and “achieve democracy and development.” In both the 2007 crisis over protests by monks and the 2008 crisis over typhoon relief, Beijing played a central role in pressuring the regime to accept UN-led assistance missions, a role that put it ahead of the hands-off responses favored by Southeast Asia and India.

Again, the lack of any system of domestic representation makes the liberal explanation of this cooperative stance unsustainable. Liberal rights activists in China are the least likely public intellectuals to be consulted by government compared to their better-known neo-authoritarian colleagues. China’s policy-relevant middle class, meanwhile, takes little interest in rights at home, much less abroad.

The realist hypothesis, meanwhile, also faces greater hurdles than it does in the case of economic and trade issues. While it is possible to rationalize Chinese compromises on trade as “strategic” moves, the same is not the case for rights and democracy, which are an unalloyed challenge to the most fundamental core national interest of China, the preservation of the CCP’s monopoly on power (Wang, 2005). Indeed, Carlson notes that the main “constraints” on China’s shifting ideas on rights policy are, if anything, other ideas themselves: an enduring belief in a “century of humiliation” at the hands of Western powers in the 19th century coupled with near-mystical beliefs in the sacred “lost territories” of Taiwan, Tibet, and the South China Sea. On Myanmar, at most a realist explanation would be that China changed tacks because its policy was bad for its reputation and thus not in its “interests”. Yet objectively, its interests were far more threatened by the shift, which could have been avoided in the name of coordination with other Asian powers. China has important energy and military interests in Myanmar, and a re-democratization there would have obvious border effects in China.
Thus to explain both the constraints and the changes in China’s stance on rights issues, we must make recourse to constructivist explanations – the manifold ways in which China, like previous rising powers before it (Legro, 2005), has “rethought” issues like sovereignty, rights, and legitimacy in international affairs. Chen and Wan have both documented the “identity transformation” that has overcome the Chinese state in which it has rethought human rights as largely consistent with its “national interests” (Chen, 2007, Chen, 2006, Wan, 2005). A leading party thinker in China shows how the party’s internal shift towards rights-centered domestic norms of governance has been “externalized” in China’s foreign policy (Liu, 2006). This has been reinforced by international norms. In Carlson’s words “the diffused reinterpretation in the international arena of the legitimate intersection between state’s rights, individual rights, and multilateral institutions … reframed how Chinese leaders approached sovereignty-related issues”, consistent with constructivist theory (Carlson, 2005:247, 31, 31) See also (Foot, 2000, Paltiel, 2007).

Still, China’s foreign policy is hardly enthusiastic about spreading rights. While it supported the new UN Human Rights Council, it abstained along with 14 other states such as North Korea, Turkmenistan, and Zimbabwe from the 2004 UN resolution on enhancing the role of regional organizations in democracy promotion. Thus to explain the outcome of non-disruption, one must consider the foreign policies of other states as well as the international institutions that undergird rights.

The global spread of democracy continues to exert a strong influence through the liberal interests as well as normative commitments of both established and newly-democratic societies (Halabi, 2004). The latter such as Poland or Chile are often the strongest proponents of international rights agreements and democracy promotion and of the norms that infuse international institutions. China’s rise has occurred in an era in which norms of humanitarian intervention and universal legal jurisdiction have strengthened, while new institutions like the rights-centered African Union, the democracy-promoting Inter-American Democratic Charter, and the revamped UN Human Rights Council, have emerged amidst continuing pressures in democratic societies for “saving strangers” (Wheeler, 2000). In Asia, democracy has been strengthened as the basis of the foreign policies of major states like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, and India (Green, 2006).
At the same time, international institutions as well as the foreign policies of other states have purposively not engaged in a dead-end agonistic struggle with China over its illiberal domestic institutions. Unlike the Soviet Union, China does not make universalistic claims for its system, and accepts a developmental perspective on the evolution of that system. Foreign actors are “betting on the long term” as Foot describes the system-level response to the effect of China’s rise on rights issue (Foot, 2000:224). See also (Thomas, 2001). There is no “clash of civilizations” on rights issues arising from China’s rise because international and foreign actors have subjectively deemed such a clash to be neither necessary nor inevitable. China’s peaceful rise in the area of rights, then, is also because of constructivist forces shaping and sustaining the dominant rights-oriented world order (Risse et al., 1999). Buzan and Gonzalez-Pelaez have detailed the unexpected strength of the rights-oriented “international community” even in the wake of the trans-Atlantic split over Iraq (Buzan and Gonzalez-Pelaez, 2005).

// Security

Three main issues centrally define the international security area relevant to China’s rise: the U.S.-led security system in Asia, the reunification of Taiwan, and North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. In all three areas, a rising China has coincided with either a lessening of system tensions or with no major changes in the status quo of norms, principles, and agreements. The U.S.-led security system is secure, the 1990s crisis era in cross-straits relations has come and gone, and North Korea is hemmed in by an effective six-party alliance of deterrent states.

Liberal explanations of the Chinese foreign policy shifts that have contributed to these outcomes are again wanting. Security is the one foreign policy area most thoroughly arrogated to the state (Lampton, 2001). In two of these cases – the U.S. military role in Asia and Taiwan reunification – foreign policy has flown in the face of domestic preferences. To be sure, there are stirrings of citizen mobilization over foreign affairs that occasionally constrain foreign policy (Gries, 2004, Liu and Hao, 2005). But for the most part, Beijing has demobilized its citizens on security issues. As Wang Jisi, director of the CCP’s Institute of International Strategic Studies, puts it: “The absence of
electoral, cyclical politics helps keep China’s foreign policy more consistent and strategically-oriented than those of many other governments” (Wang, 2007:27).

In all three cases, Beijing has re-balanced its priorities in ways that produce cooperative rather than conflictual foreign policies, consistent with a complex realist theory that allows for the possibilities of learning and for interactions with external changes in its security environment(Glaser, 1992). Beijing’s abandonment of calls for a non-U.S. centered security order in Asia helped its cooperative reputation in the region, denied re-armament motives to Asian nations, and reflected its rising dependence upon U.S.-led maritime security (Goldstein, 2005: 35, Lampton, 2005: 37). Its quiet shift from a policy of coercive reunification to one of diplomatic containment of Taiwan likewise made sense in terms of broader strategic aims, namely mollifying concerns among Asian neighbors (Wang, 2007). Meanwhile, U.S. unilateralism on North Korea in the 1990s and its ineffectiveness were both contrary to core Chinese interests in promoting multipolarity, in denying Japan a reason to re-arm, and in averting a preventive U.S. attack on North Korea (Chang, 2007: 26, Goldstein, 2006, Zhao, 2006). Realism provides important insights into the rationales behind these shifts.

Security is however one area where it is difficult to sort out realist and constructivist mechanisms because in most areas China has both prudential and normative motivations. Its relatively good compliance with arms control agreements, for instance, helps it to maintain sovereignty and boost multilateralism but also reflects the socializing effects of those agreements (Gill, 2007: ch.3, Johnston, 2008, Kent, 2007). In all three of our issues, China’s policy shifts have compromised some fundamental interests -- to gain preeminence in Asia over the U.S., to reduce the likelihood of Taiwan’s de jure independence, and to avoid a democratization of North Korea. Constructivist explanations are needed to understand how Beijing has subjectively redefined its interests in order to make these compromises. Shambaugh, for instance, documents how Beijing’s abandonment of calls to oust the U.S. from Asia resulted from discursive interactions with other Asian states that taught Beijing that the U.S. presence was widely deemed in the region to be stabilizing and thus legitimate (Shambaugh, 2005: 28). On Taiwan, the shift from a “high mimesis” to a “low mimesis” cultural frame (Smith, 2005) was a necessary precondition to unlock the realist re-prioritization of the
Taiwan issue. Chinese foreign policy thinkers, more concerned with China’s international role, now refer to the Taiwan issue as “a pain in the neck” (Zheng, 2006:200) – rather as former U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright referred to Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein as “migraine Hussein” in the low mimesis days prior to 9-11. “Victory” on the Taiwan issue is now defined as maintaining the status quo rather than achieving reunification. This reflects a subjective reconceptualization of the Taiwan security problem in limited, manageable terms. In contrast to Christensen’s characterization of China as the “high church of realism” (Christensen, 1996) or Johnston’s as “a hard-realpolitik state”(Johnston, 2008: 32), one could as well describe it today as the “high church of constructivism” or a “hard-constructivist state”, especially given the absence of societal pressures.

The foreign policies of other states on these issues are no less complex. From a realist perspective, China’s rising military power would seem destined to cause balancing and bandwagoning among Asian nations. But the response has been non-armament and inclusion premised on an assumption of a continued U.S. presence (Alagappa, 2003, Cooney and Sato, 2008). For Kang, there is a particular norm of accommodation of China in Asia that leads Asian states to embrace its power (Kang, 2008, Kang, 2003). Shambaugh espies “increasing signs of normative convergence around the region.” (Shambaugh, 2004:96-97) Similarly, Acharya has traced the normative accommodation of China by Southeast Asian nations (Acharya, 2001, Acharya and Goh, 2006).

The failure of the U.S. in particular to engage in more serious balancing is most notable given its position at the top of the power hierarchy. Frustrated realists in the U.S. such as Friedberg (Friedberg, 2007) argue that their country is simply not making use of available resources. It is Washington, not Beijing, that is today deterring Taiwan’s independence.

Closely linked are the structural aspects of the international system. This is one place where realist approaches to relative power are wholly apposite. The failure of “hegemonic stability theory” or unipolar stability theory as evidenced in the trans-Atlantic rupture over the Iraq war, and earlier concerns arising from, for instance, the U.S. abrogation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2001, have generated countervailing tendencies for a re-balancing of power in the international system towards
a multipolar U.S, EU, Russia, and China model (Hinnebusch, 2006, Kugler et al., 2004, Mowle and Sacko, 2007). Waltz’s assertion (Waltz, 1979) that balance is as close to an iron law of international politics that we have consistent with “structural realism” is being realized in the ascendancy of China as balancer. Indeed, fears that a unipolar U.S., jealous of its unrivalled position, might engage in a destabilizing attempt to contain a rising China, have informed the shift towards still nascent multipolarity, as Shambaugh shows (Shambaugh, 2006). This leads to systemic pressures for an accommodation, even encouragement, of a rising China. The logic of nuclear deterrence continues to stabilize world order not by containing a rising China as Goldstein (Goldstein, 2000) argued, but rather by making use of a rising China to contain a unipolar U.S. Thus, adding to the intentional state-level constructivist reasons why other states seek to accommodate even arm a rising China are unintentional system-level realist ones.

// Results and Conclusions

Based on the analysis above, then, each of the nine causal pathways can be scored as shown in Figure 1.

These results serve as a reminder that all three mainstream international relations paradigms are an important part of any explanation (indeed that is why they are paradigms). However, their contributions vary. Realism works in limited ways, mainly in the security area. Liberalism provides greater leverage across issue areas and across process variables. Constructivism operates across all three issue areas and across all three process variables.

To some extent it would be sufficient to accept this complex account. Aggregating this nine-box picture into an all-things-considered explanation of China’s peaceful rise would require further theories. However, it would require a dramatic re-scoring to eliminate constructivism’s advantage, given that its “opposition” is split between liberal and realist theories. The only way to conclude that constructivism is not the more powerful theory is to attach a heavy emphasis to the foreign policies of other
states in the trade sector – a kind of economic liberalism along the lines of journalist Thomas Friedman’s “Golden Arches” or “Dell” theories of world peace (Friedman, 1999: 195) (Friedman, 2005: 421).

Thus China’s rise is peaceful, I conclude, mainly because of a mutually reinforcing and subjectively constructed confluence of foreign policy outputs and systemic factors. Recent shifts in China’s domestic politics have re-oriented Chinese foreign policy towards a more norm-sensitive role in the international system, while the response of foreign powers and of the international system to China’s rise is to a large extent a result of broader ideational factors that sustain the system itself.

This case study cannot offer insights into the general causes of peaceful rises of great powers. But such events are sufficiently rare in international relations that is it doubtful that homogeneity assumptions could ever be met. Instead, it explains the first rising power event of the 21st century. It also sheds light on the nature of the contemporary international system and the paradigms used to study it.

As far as theory is concerned, while there have been calls for a new international relations theory to explain the apparent anomaly of China’s peaceful rise (Chu and Huang, 2008, Kang, 2003, Ren, 2008, Song, 2001)6, the analysis here shows that the case of China can be easily understood through existing IR theory. Indeed, to the extent that this paper shows how it is possible to provide both a parsimonious yet complex explanation of China’s peaceful rise, it is a strong affirmation of existing theory. As with demands to “Africanize” IR theory (Dunn and Shaw, 2001), demands to “Sinicize” or “Asianize” IR theory often turn out to be appeals for specific foreign policy analysis or some form of cultural assertion bereft of new analytical categories (Lee, 2000).

That said, the rise of China is sufficiently momentous to international relations that it will certainly contribute to a furthering of existing international relations theory (Callahan, 2001, Katzenstein and Sil, 2004). The findings here suggest two main theoretical contributions. First, while realism and constructivism are generally seen as polar opposites, the study of China shows how closely related they are: Great Powers that have a strong core of fairly objective national interests, as does China, are almost by virtue of that bound to be highly ideational in their foreign policies, especially in the absence of domestic or trans-national interest group pressures. If they wish to maintain
any sort of peaceful coexistence with other powers, they must be highly subjective in
their understandings of the world system, so numerous are the potential conflicts and
competitions they face. Great powers like China that are realist by nature become
constructivist by necessity.

Secondly, foreign policy outputs may be of minimal importance to international
system outcomes even in the case of a rising power. The importance of China’s foreign
policy in this outcome is varied and often quite unsubstantial – even though virtually all
work on China’s peaceful rise is a study of China’s foreign policy. The study of China’s
peaceful rise needs to take equal consideration of systemic level factors that may make a
peaceful rise more or less likely, as Erickson has done (Erickson, 2006).

The most obvious policy conclusion to draw from this analysis is one of good
news: China’s peaceful rise is not a temporary blip caused by contingent factors but a
durable result of both the consensus within the existing international order and of
transformations within the Chinese state. The corollary is that change in one or both of
these conditions could unseat the peaceful rise.

As far as China’s domestic transformation is concerned, there is little evidence in
general to support the fear raised by Snyder and Mansfield (Mansfield and Snyder, 2005)
that liberalizing powers are more externally aggressive (McFaul, 2007, Narang and
Nelson, 2008). In China’s case, domestic society may be more cooperative than the
regime itself (Johnston, 2004, Liu and Hao, 2005). But it is also true that the regime’s
quest for legitimacy in the international system could be unseated by less cooperative
ideas from within the state itself. Legro has emphasized the importance of being ready to
respond to “potential replacement ideas circulating in China and their backers – ones that
may someday be conceptual kings.” (Legro, 2007: 527).

In terms of international institutions and other foreign policies, the critical danger
is likewise threats to the constructivist norms that presently shape the international order.
A premium must be attached to attempts to enhance the legitimacy of the international
system (Buchanan and Keohane, 2006, Clark, 2007). Commonly-heard advice for the U.S.
to strengthen the multilateral liberal order in order to ensure the peaceful rise of China
(Brzezinski, 2004, Ikenberry, 2008) is thus apposite not only because of its impact on
those institutions and norms, but also for resocializing American foreign policy in
cooperative terms. A 2007 bipartisan report in the U.S. concludes that “China can only become preeminent if the United States continues to allow its own powers of attraction to atrophy.” (CSIS Commission on Smart Power, 2007:26) More broadly, as Carlson and Suh argue (Carlson and Suh, 2004) and consistent with the findings of this paper, if China’s peaceful rise is a result of an ungainly combination of realist, liberal, and constructivist factors, then the willingness of the U.S. to accept this ambiguity – shared security, shared interests, and shared identities – is critical. U.S. policy will remain effective by remaining sensitive to the complex ways in which China’s peaceful rise is occurring. ENDS
Figure 1: Evidence for Theories of China’s Peaceful Rise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process Variables</th>
<th>Outcome Variables</th>
<th>Trade</th>
<th>Rights</th>
<th>Security</th>
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<td>China’s Foreign Policy</td>
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<td>Other States’s Foreign Policies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Operation of the International System</td>
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<td>L and C</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R=realist theory; L=liberal theory; C=constructivist theory
References


Zhao, Quansheng. (2007) 'Managed Great Power Relations: Do We See 'One-up and One-Down'? *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30:609-37.


1 Author’s calculations based on official data.


6 To be fair to Kang, his later work emphasizes the need to properly apply existing IR theory rather than to overthrow it. See Kang, David C. (2008) *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia*. New York: Columbia University Press.