

The Complex Dynamics of China's Rise: Integrating Theoretical Pluralism

الديناميات المعقدة للصعود الصيني: من منظور التعدد النظري



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Abstract:

The study seeks to understand the nature of transformation in theoretical discourse concerning China's rise within the international system, drawing on various theoretical approaches that transcend the scope of Rationalist interpretation. It sheds light on the grey areas overlooked by offensive Realism in its examination of Chinese behavior in the international system. The study argues that moving beyond Rationalist logic towards theoretical pluralism in analyzing Chinese behavior has the potential to reshape conceptions that reduce the world to a reality governed by the logic of conflict.

key words: Rise of China, International System, Realism, Pluralism, Critical Theories.

المخلص:

تسعى الدراسة إلى فهم طبيعة التحول في الخطاب النظري حول نمط الصعود الصيني في النظام الدولي، اعتماداً على مداخل نظرية متعددة تتجاوز أفق التفسير العقلاني، من خلال إلقاء الضوء على المناطق الرمادية التي أغفلتها النظرية الواقعية الهجومية في دراستها لمستقبل السلوك الصيني في النسق الدولي. تجادل الدراسة بأن تجاوز المنطق العقلاني نحو التعددية النظرية في تحليل سلوك الصين من شأنه أن يعيد تشكيل التصورات التي تختزل العالم إلى واقع يحكمه منطق واحد وهو منطق الصراع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصعود الصيني؛ النظام الدولي؛ الواقعية؛ التعددية؛ النظريات النقدية.

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Introduction:

The phenomenon of the rise of great powers stands as one of the most significant and debated topics in international politics. The rise of these powers profoundly impacts the balance of power in interstate relations, qualifying them to serve as explanatory variables for phenomena of peace and war. Many studies in international affairs suggest that China is poised to become one of the most influential poles in the international system by the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century. In his book "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics," John Mearsheimer* predicts that China will dominate the Southeast Asian region, drawing on his prognosticative analysis of historical experiences in international politics, which abound with instances of powerful states rising to prominence. Examples such as Germany and Japan in the two World Wars underscore the commonality of an aggressive approach adopted by these states, which serves as a common thread connecting them to what China may pursue in the future.

It is evident that Mearsheimer's analyses regarding China's rise are grounded in the dominant Realist perspective within the literature of IR, which views the principle of power struggle as the defining feature of state relations. This pessimistic outlook is compounded by the anarchic nature of the international system, ensuring that the security dilemma remains ever-present and potent. Thus, Mearsheimer's conclusion is that China cannot rise peacefully. In this vein, Milja Kurki suggests that the challenge facing international relations as a field of knowledge lies in developing sensitively nuanced analyses of complexity, achievable only through epistemological and methodological pluralism.¹ Similarly, Andrew Moravcsik argues that the increasing complexity of events and phenomena in global politics precludes monocausal explanations. Key events such as the two World Wars, the emergence of international human rights law and standards, and the evolution of the European Union are all complex and significant enough to justify a shift towards Pluralism and the

* John Mearsheimer, **the tragedy of great power politics**, New York: norton company, 2001.

¹ Jérémie Cornut, "**Le pragmatisme et l'analyse des phénomènes complexes dans la théorie des relations internationales: le cas des excuses dans la diplomatie américaine**", Thèse de doctorat, Paris, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2012, P.07.

pursuit of integrated explanations rather than succumbing to theoretical parsimony imposed by a singular paradigm.¹

Accordingly, the study raises the following question: How can we overcome the shortcomings of reductionist analyzes when dealing with the complexity of the Chinese rise phenomenon? What is the epistemological value added by including theoretical pluralism in analyzing the phenomenon of Chinese behavior in the international system? To address this question, the study seeks to transcend this narrow debate by analyzing the phenomenon of rise of China from a pluralistic perspective. Relying on a single theory fails to adequately analyze the complexities of international phenomena; because “theories only see what they are designed to see”, focusing on variables that ensure internal consistency while disregarding others. This limitation renders mono-theoretical analyses incapable of fully grasping reality and ill-equipped to deal with its inherent complexity.

The Rise of China from the Neorealism: John Mearsheimer's Thesis

John Mearsheimer's explanation of China's future behavior in Southeast Asia stems from Neorealist assumptions, positing China as one of the major revisionist powers striving to enhance its relative power globally. According to Mearsheimer, China's transition from a latent hegemon to an actual dominant state in the region affords it the opportunity to alter the existing status quo and consequently shift the balance of international power. Mearsheimer has nominated China to become a dominant state in Southeast Asia by the end of the twentieth century, citing its high economic conditions in the global wealth ladder and its immense population as the primary factors upon which China will rely to develop its military capabilities. Mearsheimer extrapolates a scenario of China's non-peaceful rise from the premise of a latent dominant state, a characterization currently applicable only to China among the countries in the region. By comparing China's population with Japan's, Mearsheimer dismisses the possibility of Japan or Russia building a military surpassing that of China in numbers. He argues that major power wars are ultimately decided by ground forces, making it unlikely for Japan to exceed China's military might, given its population constraints. Even if Russia were to succeed in building a stronger economy than Japan, its significantly smaller population compared to China's would remain a substantial barrier. Thus, Mearsheimer rules out the possibility

¹ Andrew Moravcsik, "Theory Synthesis in International Relations: Real Not Metaphysical", **International Studies Review** 5 (1) 2003, p. 131.

of Russia possessing a stronger military than China. Reflecting on the period when Mearsheimer initially proposed his study about 17 years ago, he based his prediction on the region's large population and stipulated that China would continue achieving similar economic figures at an accelerated pace, potentially transforming it into a "giant Hong Kong."¹ By 2017, China had indeed experienced a significant economic surge, not only surpassing Japan and Russia but even rivaling the United States by the end of the twenty-first century's second decade, with a gross domestic product reaching 10 trillion compared to Japan's 4 trillion .

Mearsheimer relies on history as a litmus test to verify his overall assumptions about China's future behavior, which he predicts will not deviate from the behavior of other major powers such as Japan (1931-1945) and Germany (1933-1945) during the First and Second World Wars. The aggressive pursuit of hegemony by these nations led to destabilization of international security and stability,² a characteristic that Mearsheimer believes will accompany China's future behavior. If China possesses the same conditions as Japan and Germany did, it will not hesitate to pursue hegemony even at the expense of international stability, as chaos is the only guarantee of survival in a world governed by fundamental disorder. While neorealists have attempted to draw on history to substantiate their theoretical generalizations, historical lessons do not always align with realist interpretations. While Mearsheimer selectively relies on historical events to corroborate his thesis, many historical events refute his assumptions, exposing logical gaps in his historical inferences that fail to withstand empirical evidence, invoking the principle of Popperian falsification. To affirm this argument, one may pose the following question: What if China had all the prerequisites for achieving regional hegemony but adopted the same peaceful behavior as Britain did in the nineteenth century? Regardless of the divergent circumstances governing the behaviors of China and Britain in different times and places—a possibility given China's constraints preventing it from adopting hostile behavior—other variables could similarly deter China from aggression. For instance, if unchecked military spending leads to economic harm, ultimately undermining state power, China's recent economic ascent, positioning it among the foremost economic powers, could easily dissipate if it engaged in a war with the United States, the balancer behind the seas, as such aggression would jeopardize its future existence as a state. War

¹ John Mearsheimer, **the tragedy of great power politics**, op.cit, P.103.

² John Mearshiemer, **China's unpeaceful rise**, current history: research library, 2006, p.161.

may be deemed the optimal means for realists to enhance relative power,¹ but they themselves acknowledge that it either ends or divides states, a fact China has only recently managed to surpass. The issue of security competition is a fundamental variable in Mearsheimer's study, representing the demarcation line between two pivotal stages—before and after hegemony. China's entry into intense security competition with Southeast Asian countries signifies the possibility of China resolving this competition in its favor to achieve actual hegemony, similar to the United States' achievement in the Western world, where security competition between the United States and its neighbors was resolved.² This prospect compels the United States to move to contain what cannot be contained by regional states, resorting to balancing, as no regional state can assume the responsibility of containing China.³

China's Rise from a Neoliberalism Lens

According to the Neoliberalism the substantial increase in trade between China and the United States since China's reforms in 1978—rising from 1 billion dollars to 120 billion by the end of the twentieth century—suggests that this pattern of relations can create mutual interests between the two countries.⁴ Neoliberals argue that such economic interdependence could lead to the prioritization of cooperation over competition, thereby mitigating conflicts and fostering economic prosperity. They contend that without international institutions, international politics could resemble a "prisoner's dilemma," resulting in suboptimal outcomes for all parties involved.⁵

Regarding institutions, Robert Keohane argues that liberals believe institutions can increase opportunities for cooperation. While realists posit that states establish institutions if they believe they will help achieve their interests, liberals argue that institutions can alter state preferences, fostering cooperation rather than competition. Even in the absence of a hegemon, liberals argue that existing systems will endure. Neoliberals contend that the prisoner's dilemma exaggerates the difficulty of cooperation in a anarchic environment. While the dilemma assumes that the game is played for a single one shot or round,

¹ John Mearsheimer, **the tragedy of great power politics**, op.cit, P. 102.

² Ibid, P.103.

³ John Mearshiemer, **china's unpeaceful rise**, op.cit, 161.

⁴ Aaron L. Friedberg, **The Future of U.S.-China Relations Conflict Inevitable?** International Security, (2) 30, 2005, p.12.

⁵ Robert Jervis, "**Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation Understanding the Debate**" in: Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, (eds.) Progress in International Relations Theory. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, p.280.

liberals argue that it is more realistic to view it as being played over multiple rounds, where future prospects influence strategic calculations. This recognition, coupled with the expectation of reciprocal punishment, can restrain states from defecting in the future, as defection by one state would trigger a Tit-for-Tat response from others.¹

As a result, while neoliberals acknowledge many realist assumptions, their interpretation leads them to believe in the possibility of cooperation between the United States and China, even as American hegemony declines. They argue that the mechanism that will bolster continued cooperation, even in the absence of American hegemony, relies on the principle of reciprocity rather than the presence of a coercive hegemonic power. Therefore, the role of institutions, long-term interactions, and the principle of reciprocal punishment are all factors that can mitigate the effects of chaos and increase the likelihood of peaceful cooperation between the United States and China.²

Rethinking China's Rise: Social Constructivism

There are very few studies that have intentionally utilized non-rationalist approaches, among them social constructivism, which diverges from neorealism regarding fundamental assumptions about human nature. Social constructivism holds greater explanatory power for phenomena such as the current shifts in the global system, particularly Chinese behavior in international organizations. Martha Finnemore argues that international organizations play a significant role in shaping states' behaviors and perceptions of issues.³ Consequently, questions about Chinese identity have become central to discussions, not only due to its regional characteristics but also because of changes in states' roles and identities within the international system. David Shambaugh suggests that China is experiencing some global identity crises as it grapples with the challenge of formulating and implementing cohesive policies to respond to its increasing integration into the global system. The ruling Chinese Communist Party faces difficulties in navigating this new global environment.

¹ Richard Little, "**International regimes**". In P. O. Baylis, *The Globalization of World Politics*. UK: Oxford University Press, 2014, P.298.

² Abdelhamid Mecheri, & Nassiba Tamma, "Rethinking Anarchy: A Theoretical Debate on Exploring Cooperative Possibilities in International Relations". **Algerian Review of Security and Development**, (13) 1, 2024, p.41.

³ Martha Finnemore, Kathryn A. Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change". **International Organization**, (4)52, 1998, p.899.

Furthermore, China today finds itself vastly different from its imperial days, having been primarily shaped by Western powers in the 20th century. Nonetheless, its national structure still relies on the teachings of the Communist Party, exemplifying the contradiction between its historical status and its new identity. After the implementation of reforms by Deng Xiaoping and the adoption of the open-door policy through the establishment of special economic zones, China could potentially become a safety valve for the Chinese state. Despite this, China must conceal its ambitions, as it does not seek leadership of the international system to the extent that it pursues the separation of domestic policy from foreign policy, especially after the Tian'anmen events of 1989, which posed another threat to Chinese social cohesion. Consequently, China consistently strives to promote non-interference standards in states' internal affairs to counter Western support for democratic movements within China.¹ This criterion aligns with the assumption of Alexander Wendt based on the concept of state-centrism. The Chinese state and the Communist Party form a single entity that makes significant decisions in defining Chinese national identity. Domestic policy always plays a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of foreign policy.

During the historic Bandung Conference of 1955, China proposed the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, encapsulating values of mutual respect for regional security, non-interference in the internal affairs of nations, and the pursuit of mutual benefits through peaceful coexistence.² Within this framework, Han Fon, Vice President of the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, contends that the diplomatic embrace of these principles has ushered in periods of temporary peace in border disputes between China and its neighboring nations. Consequently, the relationship between China and its neighbors has not succumbed to prolonged tensions; rather, it continues to evolve towards a trajectory of reconciliation and cooperative development.³ Similarly, Bellamy suggests that the agreement among states to participate and share the same standards and establish institutions like ASEAN, ARE, and ASEAN+3 has contributed to achieving their goal of undermining external threats. The absence of the use of force or its threat indicates that various confidence-building measures contribute to establishing peace in the Pacific region. While the influence of the West in Southeast Asia declined before China became more

¹ Jörn Carsten Gottwald, **Sebastian Bersick, A Constructivist Perspective on the Rise of China: Regional and Global Scope**, Working Paper, 2015, P.13.

² Ibid, P.15.

³ الفقيه الصادق، الدبلوماسية: النظرية والتطبيق، الدوحة: مركز الجزيرة للدراسات، 2015، ص5.

influential, its increasing impact as one of the most significant trade and economic partners cannot be ignored. Historical and cultural ties may play a role in shaping future identity. Critical events like the Tian'anmen Massacre and the Asian and global financial crises have prompted questioning of states, their standards, and roles.¹ The upcoming critical event may bring a common standard and convergence of identities. John Eberhard suggests that if ASEAN+3 were undermined, it would inevitably affect the collective security identity in East Asia. Thus, the predictions of constructivism are supported by the reality of many regions, especially in security issues.² A. Wendt argues that the chaos of the system is the responsibility of states, and if they wanted otherwise, they could change it.³ Therefore, the structure of the international system is determined by the distribution of ideas. Realism, focusing solely on material structures, cannot predict China's peaceful rise before it adopted new ideas aiming to change the American-dominated world order. In an effort to further approximate the idea, we pose the question: What if China had not implemented reforms? Would offensive realism find the basic variable (wealth) upon which China's non-peaceful rise relies? The absence of the reform idea, considered by constructivism as the origin of wealth, would disrupt the nature of the relationship between the international system and the actor. Moreover, Mearsheimer's latest argument suggests a significant concession to constructivism by advocating for decision-makers to adopt realist theory. This opens up an important space for ideas in international politics,⁴ allowing China to adopt the theory of responsible great powers, expressing its peaceful rise. Thus, the ideas embraced by China and the US become the controlling variable in the nature of the international system, rather than the variable of power.

Neo-Gramscianism and the Phenomenon of Chinese Rise: Deconstructing the Structure of Global Hegemony

Robert Cox defines hegemony as a structure of values and visions about the nature of the system that permeates a whole range of states and non-states. In a system subject to the hegemony of these values and visions, they appear to

¹ Jörn Carsten Gottwald, Sebastian Bersick, op.cit, P.25.

² John W. Eberhard, **Socialised or Calculated Interests? Analysing China's Regional Policy Through Constructivist and Rationalist Perspectives**, Georgia State University, p.3.

³ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics", **international organization**, (2) 46, 1992, p.1.

⁴ جون ميرشايمر، تر: مصطفى قاسم، مأساة سياسة القوى العظمى، الرياض: النشر العلمي والمطابع، جامعة الملك سعود، 2012، ص 259.

most players as part of the natural order.¹ R. Cox poses two crucial questions in his attempt to dismantle this type of hegemony: What is the origin of this system, and how did it evolve?² In this part of the research, J. Mearsheimer's thesis will be deconstructed to highlight this type of values that led many researchers in international politics, including J. Mearsheimer himself, to study the world as it is and make it unquestionable. Critics use the term "narratives" for all research in social sciences because the process of constructing them is always in the hands of one of the researchers, making them tainted by his position and biases. Thus, critics wonder which of the researches can be free from material interests, especially in America, which allocates budgets for research in the security field that exceed those of other countries, making American researches dominate significantly in the field of international relations. Critics admit that cognitive processes are influenced by political interests. Based on these principles, R. Cox embarked on criticizing the neo-realist conception in international relations. Alongside classifying it within the problem-solving theory, he deconstructed it to conclude that it aims to control human behavior in the same way that exact sciences control nature, expressing this when he linked knowledge and interest by saying: "Theory is always for someone and some purpose." When J. Mearsheimer calls on America not to leave the Pacific region to help contain China's rise, it's not because its motives are evil but because it's the optimal behavior for any state to maximize its chances of survival. This implicitly delineates what America's future should be in terms of maintaining its position and dominance. Therefore, there is a tripartite relationship between social powers, the dominant state, and the state being controlled by values that seek to maintain the dominant system they produced. R. Cox emphasizes that situational knowledge seeks to maintain the current situation, which is essentially based on inequality of power and interest.³ Therefore, there is no objective reality that can form the basis of a scientific theory. Everything related to humans is subjective. Thus, social sciences, including international political studies, are not neutral. They are historical, cultural, and political, and thus biased under the influence of their position or viewpoint within the international system controlled by dominant powers

¹ جوني عاصي، النظرية والأيدولوجية في العلاقات الدولية منذ نهاية الحرب الباردة، فلسطين: معهد ابراهيم ابو الغد للدراسات الدولية، 2006، ص ص 58-60.

² Anthony Leysenes, *The Critical Theory of Robert W. Cox: Fugitive or Guru?*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, P.40.

³ أنور محمد فرج، النظرية الواقعية في العلاقات الدولية: دراسة نقدية مقارنة في ضوء النظريات المعاصرة، السليمانية: مركز كردستان للدراسات الاستراتيجية، 2004، ص. 454.

seeking to serve their interests and values. R. Cox considers this relative knowledge, and that knowledge itself is part of social struggle and the conflict between dominant projects and counter-hegemony. He says: "Theory follows reality, but at the same time, theory precedes and shapes reality." This means that critical theory tries to portray China's rise as a serious attempt to break free from political hegemony, values, ideologies, and institutions controlled by dominant powers in the international community and to reproduce hegemony through parallel financial institutions, such as the Asian Investment Bank, half of whose founding cost was paid by China. Means of production can provide an explanation of what is happening in China. The dominant social forces in the West, especially America, have transferred their means of production to the East, particularly China. Therefore, we are not talking about China's rise as much as we are talking about a "dormant revolution," as Antonio Gramsci expressed it, meaning a development that involves mimicking economic and social structures in a less developed region. Thus, R. Cox argues that social forces are not limited to a specific state but extend beyond state borders and include non-state groups. This revolution occurs in conditions where there is no dominant class capable of imposing its dominance, following the dominant model. Critics also argue that the neo-realist interpretation ignores the implicit understanding that may arise between the interaction of units of the international system, whether as a result of common knowledge, past experiences, or rational perception of each party's capabilities. Since China's rise, materially, is a fact—a unprecedented economic and military growth in China's history—will all units, such as India, North Korea, Japan, Russia, and America, have the same reading? If Japan sees China's rise as a threat, this can be justified based on what happened in World War II between the two countries, but this justification cannot be taken by a country like America, as even if China adopts an ideology different from liberal values, it does not seek to spread it. As long as social powers contribute to shaping the individual's thought, consciousness, and make them a contributor to forming this world, the reality around us will remain like a text that we read. But each of us reaches different interpretations of the same text, as our experiences, emotions, feelings, and the interaction between us and the structure affect our interpretation of this text. J. Mearsheimer, as an American thinker, cannot research international politics with criteria outside his own will as an American carrying values that exceed his country's at all levels.¹

¹ Anthony Leysenes, *op.cit*, P.42.

Conclusion :

In her book "International Relation theory: a critical introduction," Cynthia Weber raises a fundamental question: If international relations theories have given meaning to international relations, who will give them this meaning? Through the content of our study on the subject of China's rise, relying on several theoretical approaches, we implicitly intersect with this researcher's vision. We find that each theory defines its own epistemological and ontological angle from which to interpret international politics, particularly the phenomenon of the rise of major powers. The aim of this research paper was not to favor one theory over another, but rather to highlight the idea that not everything endorsed by a theory should be accepted unquestionably by researchers in international relations. Rather, it's necessary to keep the field open for the emergence of new ideas that may have the ability to engage in discussions with all the foundational concepts that contributed to the emergence and formation of these theories. Can international relations be studied in the future outside of these theoretical frameworks? To the extent that international policies show their connection to these theories, regardless of their differences, they also exceed them as soon as their results and actors are confined within epistemologies that resemble attempts to confine a kingdom of ants in a wooden prison. China's rise is one of the most important topics that has clearly demonstrated the diversity within the field of international relations. It can serve as a yardstick for measuring other topics in international politics. Consequently, we can conclude that international relations theory is still at the beginning of its journey towards defining its true meaning.

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