POWER AND INFLUENCE: IDEATIONAL AND MATERIAL FACTORS IN THE INTERNATIONAL POSTURE OF CHINA RISING AS A GREAT POWER

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of
The School of Continuing Studies
and of
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Doctor of Liberal Studies

By

Massimo Ambrosetti, LLM

Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.
May 1st 2012
POWER AND INFLUENCE: IDEATIONAL AND MATERIAL FACTORS IN THE INTERNATIONAL POSTURE OF CHINA RISING AS A GREAT POWER

Massimo Ambrosetti LLM

DLS Co-Chairs: Francis J. Ambrosio, Ph.D; Michael C. Wall, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The thesis tries to assess the possible “transformative impact” of the rise of China on the international system by analyzing material and ideational elements which shape this process and are reflected in the revisionist and status quo components of the PRC’s international behavior. On the basis of a post-positivist epistemological approach which underscores the necessity of connecting theory to its practical implications - in a logic of hermeneutical rediscovery of the dimension of “phronesis” - the thesis deconstructs neo-realist and neo-liberal paradigms which have examined the rise of China through analytical approaches mainly centered on hegemonic transition and interdependence theories. By arguing that the rise of China is a multifaceted process influenced by domestic and international factors, the thesis analyzes the possible structural transformation of the international system linked to the relative but significant shift of hard and soft power driven not only by the ascendancy of China on the world’s scene but also by other emerging powers. In this perspective the thesis’ conclusive argument is that the China alone can play in the future a leading role similar to that of the United States in the second half of the 20th century - the rise of new global actors on the world’s stage may prove to be a challenge to a structure of the international system still shaped by Western values, rules and practices. Even though the consensus on a “common
revisionist agenda” among these rising powers is not in sight in the present phase, the “rise of China and of the rest” seems to confirm that we have entered a period of transition of the international system which not only entails a complex process of redistribution of power and influence among its main actors but which could also lead to the emergence of a more heterogeneous and multi-polar concert of nations as the new gravitational centre of 21st century international relations.
Writing about a multifaceted and ever evolving issue such as the rise of China is not an easy task for several reasons. On one hand, You have the impression that your subject of research is placed on a “shifting platform” which keeps on changing the standpoint from which You look at it. On the other hand, You feel that this platform is rather crowded and there is a lot of people who have already done - probably in a much better way - what You would like to do.

I was fully aware of this “crowded analytical space” when I have started writing my thesis: I have therefore decided, with a less ambitious approach, to address my research subject as a “tour d’horizon” of the more recent theoretical debate on the rise of China. I hope that my considerations on the need of a pluralist epistemological approach - which links theory to the dimension of “praxis” in analyzing the rise of China can be regarded as an useful reflection on the material and ideational elements of this process. This is a reflection that I began delineating when I wrote my master’s thesis (The Rise of China: New Nationalisms and Search of Status) which has extensively set the foundations for my further work on this challenging subject.

All the opinions, ideas, evaluations that I have elaborated in my thesis are only personal views expressed in a personal capacity. They do not represent in any way official or unofficial positions and assessments of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Equally I want to stress that my research has not been based and does not reflect any document, analysis, policy paper elaborated by the Italian Government.
In this interesting intellectual journey I have had the best possible companions supporting and encouraging me: my co-chairs Professor Frank Ambrosio and Dr Michael Wall; my outstanding reader Professor Minxin Pei; Assistant Dean Anne Ridder, who has guided me in the intricacies of editing and formatting my thesis.

I would like to thank also Dr Stefan Halper who has shared with me, on occasion of many friendly conversations, his thought-provocative reflections on the broader implications of the rise of China.

I am grateful to my family, my wife Elena and my children Bianca and Ludovico, for the patience that they have shown in their daily relationship with a very mature student.

This thesis is dedicated – in loving memory – to my father Antonio Ambrosetti.
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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of China as a global power raises a set of important questions for analysts and policy-makers who seek a better understanding of its international objectives, of how it is pursuing them and of the ultimate implications of this process. Even though there is a widespread consensus that Beijing’s international behavior is clearly altering the dynamics of the current international system, a key question is whether the rise of China is going to gradually transform the structure of the international system itself.¹ The potential transformative impact of the rise of China – a possible redistribution of power and influence reflected in a changing architecture and hierarchy of the international order - is relevant not only because it challenges the United States’ leading role in international affairs but also because it could offer an alternative model to some fundamental values, rules, practices and institutions that have been shaped by the political, economic and cultural leadership of the United States since the “victories” in World War II and in the Cold War.

My first argument in answering this key question is that the process underway has been so far a force of relative rather than structural change because Beijing’s objectives and ambitions can be accommodated within the existing structure of the international system. In addition to that it seems to me that a public discourse mainly focused on China’s impressive economic growth in quantitative terms has had the misleading effect of assuming the irreversible decline of the “comprehensive power” and influence of the United States, Europe and other liberal democracies around the world.

¹ Evan Medeiros, China’s International Behavior: Activism, Opportunism, and Diversification (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2009), viii.
To put it another way, it takes more than economic power to transform the international system. If China does not possess the requisite power capabilities, either hard or soft, to transform the international system, in the longer run, its rise can contribute - along with the rising role of other great powers (emerging like India and Brazil or re-emerging like Russia) - to a gradual shift of the international system toward a more multi-polar balance of power, possibly characterized by multi-cultural pressure on the Western core principles, rules and practices at the international level. But this is a very different process of transformation and entails completely different power dynamics from a traditional scenario of hegemonic transition.

A starting point for analyzing this issue is the recognition that, from economic governance to human rights, one can easily identify a set of “structural elements” for which the Chinese vision of the international system is different from that of liberal democracies. This difference of vision is not surprising because the present system is still largely rooted in the international architecture shaped by the United States in the 1940s (centered on the primacy of the United Nations and, in the economic sector, of the “Bretton Woods” international financial institutions) to which the People’s Republic of China did not contribute. This happened for well-known historical reasons: the PRC was born in 1949 - when the main international organizations had been already created - and it had to coexist in the first phase of its history with the international recognition of the nationalist regime in Taiwan as the rightful representative of the “whole” China at the United Nations. A system organized by the powers of that period to serve – first and foremost – their interests, thus not necessarily those of China (and certainly not those of
the PRC in its earliest days after its establishment in 1949). This made the PRC the “great outsider” in international relations not only vis-à-vis the Western-centered structure of the system but also with regard to the leading role of the Soviet Union on the communist front.

In addition to these aspects, I intend to underscore that a potential transformative dimension of the rise of China could stem from its unique national identity which powerfully influences China’s perspective on the outside world. This is true both in a present and in a past perspective. Referring to the present, the PRC is indeed the only great power ruled by a still formally Communist party-state which does not share several basic values, rules and practices of liberal democracies. Referring to the past, China’s consciousness of its millenary history as the most powerful empire in Asia and as a glorious civilization makes it more difficult for Beijing to simply adhere to an international system still influenced by the primacy that the West acquired in the 19th and in the 20th century.

To set in context the key question about the “transformative” role of the rise of China, I intend to analyze China’s international behavior from the point of view of the material and ideational aspects which characterize it. These aspects represent the complementary dimension of power and influence of the rise of China. The material factors determining Beijing’s international posture are indeed those related to a dimension of power politics in which the growth of China’s “comprehensive power” plays a significant role. The ideational factors, equally important in my view, are related to China’s national and cultural identity, its search of status and influence as a great
power, the ideological and nationalistic forces which characterize its international behavior. In analyzing these factors I try to assess China’s rise from the specific point of view of its “revisionist” and “status quo” effect on the present international system, connecting thus my analysis to the key question of the research: is the rise of China going to transform the structure of the international system? My argument in this respect will be that, by itself, China’s capacity to reshape the international system is limited but it could be magnified if Chinese international behavior and objectives are leveraged with the rise of other emerging powers.

To make clear my analytical approach in this respect, it is useful to refer to the issue of global governance as a benchmark of the revisionist and status quo attitudes of China. In the political sector China – as the only non Western permanent member of the United Nations Security Council - is indeed a status quo power because it is not interested in expanding the UN governing body to include either regional rivals such as Japan or potential peer competitors such as India. On the contrary, with regard to global economic governance China is strongly interested in the structural reform of the International Financial Institutions which it believes do not fully recognize and accommodate its new role as the second largest economy in the world. In this respect the revisionist impact of China, in terms of practices and power relations, has been illustrated by Beijing’s behavior within the world Trade Organization, where a powerful coalition of developing countries has effectively influenced the agenda of the organization.

The increased weight of large developing countries such as China, but also India and Brazil, has complicated efforts in completing the Doha Round. These countries were
at the forefront of the creation of the G-20 negotiating bloc (not to be confused with the recently established G-20 leaders’ meetings) at the WTO ministerial meeting in Cancun in 2003 and they played a key role in demanding greater agricultural liberalization from developed countries. The idea that large developing countries should take some responsibility for the global economic architecture including the WTO, which underpins the open trading regime that these countries have gained so much from, does not seem controversial. However, a statement in the U.S. president’s 2010 Annual Report on the Trade Agreement Program suggests that this will require China and others to take into account global economic interests beyond their own. Therefore, China needs to fully realize that in securing its own economic interests, it must also look to take a responsible international role in promoting global economic growth and ensuring the sustainability of the WTO. China is now too large to free ride off of international institutions like the WTO. There will certainly be potential challenges even if China chooses to take more responsibility in supporting the global economy and the WTO. While China could one-day become the world’s largest economy in terms of overall GDP, its GDP per capita will still remain a fraction of that of the U.S. This suggests that the type of leadership role that the U.S. has played since the 20th century in supporting the international trading system will not be a kind of role China can readily fulfill. The possibility of a world where the largest economy does not exercise leadership is something we should take into careful consideration. Lessons from the interwar period, when the United Kingdom lost its capacity to lead and the U.S. had not yet developed a taste for leadership, provide a stark warning of the potential risks to global economic health of a leaderless world.
In terms of structure, the first chapter of the thesis addresses some preliminary epistemological questions. The guiding principle in this respect posits that studying international relations “requires thinking in terms of mutual feedbacks among material, institutional and cultural elements.”¹ In this perspective, the first chapter explains the merits of analyzing China's international behavior through a pluralist epistemological approach able to analyze those material and ideational factors which can offer an interpretive potential to address both the dimension of "hard power" (economic growth, military capabilities, role in the international organizations) and that of influence (soft power, search of status, identity). In this context it is explained the need of a better epistemological consciousness - based on the works of critical thinkers in the field of International Relations – as an essential prerequisite to analyze the rise of China through a multi-faceted prism which links theory to “praxis”, the phase of interpretation (analysis) to that of application (policy-making).

The second chapter analyzes the deficiencies of neo-realist theories on the rise of China, focusing on a necessary shift of paradigm which goes beyond not only a "security dilemma syndrome" but also the deterministic assumptions on the rise and decline of great powers and on hegemonic transitions. The critical consideration of neo-realist theories is complemented by the analysis of the interpretative limits of neo-liberal theories, in light not only of the new paradigm of “complex interdependence” but also of a lasting misleading approach which tends to isolate the significance of the economic

dimension of China’s growth from the context of its broader rise as a global power (following a rationalist and empiricist paradigm).

The third chapter contextualizes the rise of China in terms of “regime perspectives,” underscoring the relevance of China’s cultural features, its historical background, the needs and constraints of its economic growth, its peculiar political structure and surviving ideological apparatus. These “sub-systemic” elements contribute significantly to define the country’s national identity and its international goals in the present transitional phase. On the basis also of a constructivist theoretical analysis, the third chapter focuses on what have been defined the “historically determined lenses” that “color and shade China’s perceptions of its…role in global affairs.”\(^3\) The representations and narratives stemming from China’s national and cultural identity (the “civilizational” dimension) are examined as a possible revisionist factor in the Chinese international behavior also in the context of the PRC’s growing international influence and its active soft-power projection.

The fourth chapter - on the basis of the review of the main theories related to the “rise of China” developed in the previous chapters – argues that the present international behavior of the PRC as driven by a mix of status quo and revisionist aspects which make it a “partner-opponent” in the framework of a still Western-centered international system. In this perspective the concluding chapter underscores that some ideational elements of China’s rise – its national and civilizational identity, its search of status, its hybrid regime’s success in advancing a form of “authoritarian capitalism”, a nationalistic

\(^3\) Medeiros, *China’s International Behavior*, xx.
discourse which can influence its policy-making – can be the most genuinely revisionist forces possibly conducive to change in the framework of an evolving global order. In parallel, it is argued, the growth of China’s “comprehensive power” has already become a fundamental factor of novelty influencing the landscape of international relations in the 21st century. At the same time, elements related to the rise of China which can potentially contribute to changing the structure of the international system are constrained by a set of counterbalancing factors. Firstly, the priority for China of continuing to rise under conditions of internal and external stability to safeguard the regime’s survival: hence the Chinese threat reduction and partly status quo approach aimed at that “peaceful development” which is regarded in Beijing as an essential instrument in order to advance the PRC’s vision and role on the world’s scene.

China’s status quo attitudes continue therefore to be motivated by its main core-interest – the party-state survival and search of a renewed legitimacy – and by considerable success and strategic interest in “largely working within - indeed, deftly leveraging - the current international system to accomplish its foreign policy objectives.”

By recognizing the significance of the ongoing process of relative change in terms of balance of power, the concluding remarks of the chapter underscore that China’s steadily growing “comprehensive power” and influence have a limited potential of moving contemporary international relations toward a “post-Western world” if not

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4 Ibid.
leveraged with the “rise of the rest”. In this respect the potential for China of fostering a “Beijing consensus” on a common revisionist agenda seems to be not an easy task.

In this context the thesis’ conclusions argue that a possible transformation of the international system needs to be assessed from the point of view of a broader process of “redistribution of power and influence”. For these reasons the “transformative impact” of the rise of China, on the basis of its mix of power and influence, should be viewed rather than as a mere challenge for the American leadership in the 21st Century” as a factor which is related to an emerging new concert of great powers which could contribute to define a necessary model of “enlarged leadership” in the framework of a changing hierarchy of international actors and of regional and global dynamics.
CHAPTER I

Foreign Policy is an integral part of culture as a whole and reflects its theory and practice. Hence it is only through the analysis of the general philosophy of a given time that it is possible to understand the foreign policy of this particular time.

Hans Morgenthau, Politics among Nations

An epistemological reflection on the rise of China

As anticipated in the introduction, the following analysis is focused on the changes which the “rise of China,”¹ and the country’s interactions with other emerging powers, could bring about in contemporary international relations. We shall consider not only the principal driver of such changes – China and its behavior on the international scene – but also the context in which those changes are taking place and their

¹ We will use in our thesis – for practical reasons - the conventional definition “rise of China” to refer to this multifaceted process even though, as we will see in the third chapter, it has been replaced in the last decade by the Chinese authorities with other definitions which reflect the Chinese vision of it. Zhang Tiejun, “China’s East Asian Policy,” Quaderni di Relazioni Internazionali 14 (May 2011): 18-19. As Zhang Tiejun notes in this respect, Zheng Bijian in 2003 introduced “a new concept for China’s foreign strategy, which he termed China’s peaceful rise. Three essential elements, Zheng argued backed then, would characterize China’s ‘peaceful rise.’ Firstly, China will be rising peacefully introducing and applying ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics,’ while actively participating in and contributing to economic globalization. Secondly, while China needs a peaceful international environment to continue accomplishing its goal of lifting its enormous population out of a condition of underdevelopment and poverty, it would rise to great power status without destabilizing the international order or oppressing its neighbors. Thirdly, as regards to China’s role and position in Asia, Zheng argued that China’s peaceful rise will be part of an overall historically important and significant peaceful rise of Asia. The peaceful rise dogma was later changed to ‘peaceful development’ by Chinese president Hu Jintao’s during his speech at the Bo’ao Forum in 2004. The concept of China’s ‘peaceful development’ was primarily used to reassure the nations of East Asia and the United States that China’s economic and military rise will not become a threat to peace and stability, and that other nations will benefit from China’s rise. China’s economic and military development, the ‘peaceful development’ dogma suggests, is not to be understood in zero-sum game terms, but as a development offering above all economic opportunities and benefits to those dealing and doing business with China. The Chinese discourse on China’s peaceful development is to understood – at least in part – as response to the China threat and China collapse debates which circulated in the West and amongst Chinese neighbors suggesting amongst others that China’s economic and military rise will inevitably make China a regional and indeed global economic and military threat.”
implications for the international system. Reflecting upon “transformative” political change, Niccolò Machiavelli wrote that “there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things.” Recognizing that the rise of China as a global power is an ongoing and to some extent uncertain process, we shall investigate whether and how China can help “initiate a new order of things” at the international level. However, in order to contextualize the elements of considerable uncertainty that characterize this possibly transformative process, we must first address some theoretical issues that can help us better analyze the “forces of change” presently at work in the international system and the role in that system of a phenomenon such as the rise of new global actors.

Different, often competing, paradigms have been offered to provide a theoretical basis for explaining and better understanding this multifaceted process: various analytical approaches have tended to discuss - explicitly or implicitly - the response to China’s rise largely in terms of policy options. Such paradigms bear the influence of a broader reflection on key issues developed through historical “great debates” on the so-called


3 In this sense we can say that the present debate on the implications of the rise of China look at this process through an alternative way that can be summarized by paraphrasing the old Latin definitions which read either “incertus an, incertus quomodo,” or “certus an, incertus quomodo.” This partial antinomy means, on one hand, that both the “if” and the “how” are uncertain; on the other, that “the ‘if’ is certain, what is uncertain is the ‘how.’”

4 Milja Kurki and Colin Wight, “International Relations and Social Science,” in International Relations Theories, Discipline and Diversity, eds. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15. These meta-theoretical debates surrounding the philosophy of social science in IR have focused, as Kurky and Wight write, “on the question of whether IR can be a science only on the basis of some or other account of what science is, and an account of what we think IR is.
“meta-theoretical questions” (i.e. the influence of philosophical and scientific theories on the development of the discipline known as IR [International Relations] theory).\(^5\)

What is particularly relevant for our purposes – analyzing the rise of China and its impact on the international system through a theoretical approach reaching beyond rationalist and positivist assumptions – is the awareness, as Kurki and Wight write, that for a large part of IR’s history positivism as a philosophy of science shaped not only the way to theorize about subjects but also helped form valid bodies of evidence and knowledge.

Indeed, the influence of positivism on IR’s “disciplinary imagination” has been so pervasive that even those who would reject this kind of approach have often tried to do so from positions that broadly accept the positivist model of science.\(^6\) We cannot but agree with the abovementioned authors when they rightly underscore that there are two points worthy of note here:

[f]irst, despite the acceptance of the positivist model of science by both advocates and critics alike, it is clear that the account of positivism that

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Hence, the questions of what science is, and what IR is, are prior to the question of whether IR can be a science”. The fact that this debate inevitably takes the discussion into philosophical terrain should be perceived, in our view neither as “a long way from the concerns of a discipline focused on the study of international political processes” nor as a justification of the frustration “of some within the discipline concerning meta-theoretical debate”. These issues are extremely relevant for IR theoretical and practical analysis and for this reason “all contributors to the discipline should understand the assumptions that make their own position possible; as well as being aware of alternative conceptualizations of what IR theory and research might involve.”

\(^5\) This sometimes rather egocentric approach of IR theory refers, for instance, to Macchiavelli’s or Kant’s thought as meta-theory” while the works of IR theorists represent the specific “theoretical corpus” of the discipline. One could say that these “meta-theoretical” debates have also been a way to narrate the evolution of the discipline through the lens of its relationship and approach to key issues in the field of social sciences.

\(^6\) Kurki and Wight, “International Relations and Social Science,” 15.
dominates the discipline is rudimentary. Second, within the philosophy of science positivism was long ago discredited as a valid account of scientific practice. Had the discipline been prepared to take the philosophy of social science, and by extension the philosophy of science, more seriously, a long and potentially damaging commitment to positivism might have been avoided. ⁷

Since the positivist dominance in IR has had protracted effects on the epistemological approach of many influential theories which have also analyzed the rise of China, it is useful to briefly examine how this issue has been addressed within the “great debates” that have marked the evolution of the discipline. ⁸ As we know, the first debate is usually identified with the contrasting views that before, during, and immediately after the Second World War opposed realists and idealists primarily over the role of international institutions and the causes of war. An interesting aspect – for our reflection - of the realist critique is their dismissal of the idealist theories focus on “scientific grounds” and, in particular for their supposedly “unsystematic” and value-driven approach to IR. As Kurki and Wight note, it is significant, though, that great realists like Edward H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau did not uncritically embrace a naive view of science: Carr was indeed “well aware of the problematic status of facts and associated truth claims. His celebrated notion of the ‘relativity of thought’ and his sophisticated treatment of historical method can hardly be said to constitute an uncritical commitment to science.” ⁹

⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁸ Ibid. On the “great debates” we amply refer to the insightful “tour d’horizon” developed by Milja Kurki and Colin Wight in this respect.

⁹ Ibid.
The second debate - which arose in the 1960s - mainly centered on methodological questions arising from the “behaviorist revolution”, which sought to apply a “scientific” approach to the social sciences, henceforth to be considered “sciences of the human behavior.” As against the strictly positivist principles propounded by the behaviorists, a more humanistic methodology was defended by traditional thinkers such as Hedley Bull and Hans Morgenthau who underscored that “systematic inquiry was one thing, the obsession with data collection and manipulation on positivist lines was another. Study of International Relations for Bull and Morgenthau involved significant conceptual and interpretative judgments, something that the behaviorist theorists in their focus on systematic data collection and scientific inference seemed not to adequately recognize.”

In general terms and with regard to the subject of our research, we cannot but agree with the argument that an analysis of the rise of China deprived of its historical dimension – of a perspective of “longue durée,” as Fernand Braudel would say - as well as of its diversified cultural and “civilizational” context is inevitably limited and possibly misleading. This position takes into account the analytical shortcomings of theoretical approaches which, mainly focused on the economic aspects of the rise of China, have not been immune to a “quantitative syndrome,” which has often prevented a more insightful reading of the complex reality that lies behind mere statistics and aggregated data.

10 Kurki and Wight, “International Relations and Social Science,” 19.

11 We will use the adjective “civilizational” in trying to better define the complex issue of China’s national identity by arguing that it has been defined not only by the Chinese identity as a nation-state but first and foremost – in a perspective of “longue durée” as a civilization.
The debate of the 1970s and 1980s – which witnessed a new wave of realism, Marxism, and pluralism competing for theoretical dominance - revealed a deep divide among theorists of different persuasions on how best to understand and explain international processes.\(^{12}\) The ramifications of this debate – especially in terms of critical thinking – opened the doors to the ongoing discussion on how to overcome the positivist view of science which has influenced IR theory for decades. In this framework, the so-called “fourth debate” in International Relations has often been defined in terms of the difference between “explaining and understanding” – a reference to the opposing epistemological schools of positivism and post-positivism, of rationalism and reflectivism.\(^{13}\) As it is well known, the contrast between “explaining and understanding” originates in Max Weber’s distinction between Erklären and Verstehen, and was first introduced in IR by Martin Hollis and Steve Smith in the early 1990s to differentiate a “scientific” approach from an interpretative or hermeneutic one.\(^{14}\)

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 20.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 24. The term reflectivism, in opposition to rationalism, was first utilized by Robert Keohane with reference to the explanation/understanding and positivist/post-positivist divides but also with additional connotations stemming directly from rational choice theory. Robert Keohane, “International Institutions: Two Approaches,” *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1988): 379-96. As Kurki and Wight note, rational choice theorists such as Keohane – adopting a positivist methodology – tend to accept “the general complexity of the social world” but ignore “the majority of it in order to produce predictions based on a particular understanding of individuals. According to rational choice theorists we should treat individuals, and by extension states, as utility maximizers, and ignore every other aspect of their social being. This does not mean that rational choice theorists actually believe this is a correct description of what an individual is. However, they do believe that if we treat individuals in this manner we may be able to generate a series of well grounded predictions concerning behavior on the basis of observed outcomes”. Even though Keohane acknowledged some epistemological limitations in this approach, he tried to justify it by arguing that it had been “spectacularly successful in terms of knowledge production”, a statement which is highly questionable, in our view.

\(^{14}\) Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). Ibid., 21. Referring to these authors, Kurki and Wight note that they “were in
This very brief overview of the so-called IR great debates is intended to stress, as do Kurki and Wight, that meta-theory is essential for “being aware of the issues at stake in meta-theoretical debate, and of their significance in terms of concrete research” because it “serves as an important starting point for understanding IR theory and facilitates a deeper awareness of one’s meta-theoretical orientation.” Nonetheless, as these authors note, the fundamental role of the philosophy of social science in the formation and development of International Relations theory has been frequently misunderstood:

Some see meta-theorizing as nothing more than a quick precursor to empirical research. Others see it as a distraction from the real issues that should concern the discipline. However, it is impossible for research to proceed in any subject domain in the social sciences in the absence of a set of commitments embedded within positions on the philosophy of social science. In this sense, meta-theoretical positions direct, in a fundamental way, the manner in which people theorize and, indeed, “see” the world.

As already noted, we believe this also holds true for some relevant aspects of the theoretical debate over the rise of China, which has been analyzed in the last two

15 Ibid., 15.

16 Ibid.
decades through the prism of influential strands of thought largely based on a set of positivist and rationalist assumptions. But as the concluding part of this chapter seeks to demonstrate, a more far-sighted realist view of the rise of China can be based on a less monolithic epistemological approach to international relations. Such an approach emphasizes the importance not only of the material but also of the ideational factors which influence international politics and takes into account the “meta-theoretical” dimension required to interpret them properly. In this context, we will therefore examine the subject of our research keeping in mind that an epistemological assumption is at the heart of every matter, in this as in the field of social sciences.

We thus hope to define the ontological elements of the problems we shall analyze while being fully aware not only that our work is based on a specific “theory of knowledge” - on a distinct epistemological choice - but also that certain theoretical assumptions can have both intended and unintended consequences. An epistemological assumption does indeed contribute to defining the ontological dimension of the main

17 Ibid. In this respect Kurki and Wight somehow state the obvious when they write that “not...all research underpinned by positivist principles is invalid. Indeed, we believe that scholars, who might be considered to be working in the positivist tradition, have made some of the most important and lasting contributions to the discipline. Nonetheless, this view of science is highly contested and there is no reason to insist that all research should fit this model. Equally, a rejection of the positivist model of science need not lead to the rejection of science.”

18 Ibid. It is useful to note that we will use in this thesis a philosophical terminology which assumes that “all theoretical positions are dependent upon particular assumptions about ontology (theory of being: what is the world made of? What objects do we study?), epistemology (theory of knowledge: how do we come to have knowledge of the world?), and methodology (theory of methods: what methods do we use to unearth data and evidence?). On the basis of these assumptions researchers may literally come to ‘see’ the world in different ways: ontologically in terms of seeing different object domains, epistemologically in terms of accepting or rejecting particular knowledge claims, and methodologically in terms of choosing particular methods of study.”
elements of a problem: in our case, we shall underline once more that concepts such as “balance of power,” “change,” “hegemony,” “core interests” – and the very notion of the international system – have a specific meaning according to the theoretical approach to which they refer. The corollary to this theoretical premise is the need to reconsider the role of “practical philosophy” in the field of social sciences. Since theory ultimately influences the practical response to a problem we should indeed consider the implications that this process can have in terms of policy advocacy and policy options.

A post-positivist analytical perspective

From the considerations put forward so far, it is clear that the epistemological approach we have adopted in examining our subject of research encompasses the new perspectives which both constructivism and post-positivism have brought to bear on the study of international relations and foreign policy. In order to define post-positivism Christopher Hill writes as follows:

Post-positivists are another broad church, but in general they reject the fact-value distinction most prominent among realists and behaviorists, and consider that there is little point in attempting to work scientifically towards a “truthful” picture of human behavior. This is because politics is constituted by language, ideas and values. We cannot stand outside ourselves and make neutral judgments.¹⁹

As opposed to the positivist insistence on a “science” of human behavior, post-positivist positions are based on approaches that, while drawing on a wider range of intellectual traditions, all reject positivism as a valid way of going about the study of

social processes. In light of the foregoing it is clear that our epistemological perspective will in part contribute to defining the reality we intend to examine. In this context we should take due note of Hans Morgenthau’s observation that Foreign Policy (and indeed the whole of international relations) is deeply rooted in the cultural background of a historical period and reflects the theory and practice of that context. Equally important is Morgenthau’s insistence that we look at the “general philosophy of a given time” in order to have the interpretive tools on hand to analyze the foreign policy/international relations of that time. In considering world political issues such as the rise of China, we must therefore acknowledge that the key to approaching them is not only to be found in the debate about the role of agency and structure, or internal understanding and external explanation. Hollis and Smith echo Morgenthau when they argue that our views of international political events are inevitably highly dependent on the philosophical underpinnings we adopt, whether in an implicit or explicit way. Extremely relevant is what this extra dimension can give to the study of International Politics, as Christopher Hill observes, since all these approaches should not be seen as competing with one another but should, on the contrary, be considered as a useful part of an “analyst's armory.”

Ibid., 23.


Ibid. An important aspect of post-positivism in foreign policy studies that Christopher Hill has highlighted is that it should be regarded not simply as a competing approach vis-à-vis realism, “but as one which confirms to some extent the importance of the state. Writers like David Campbell, Roxanne Doty and Henrik Larsen have examined the language of foreign policy and what they see as its dominant,
In assessing the potential contribution to our research objectives of the broader theoretical dimension mentioned above it is interesting first to take note of an epistemological approach based on “critical” constructivism and on its points of contacts with subsequent post-positivist theoretical reflections. This makes it easier to understand, in our view, some conclusions propounded by the school of thought known in IR as post-structuralism, which shows the influence of some strands of postmodern theorizing within the discipline. If “many post-positivists are keen to repudiate the positivist account of science that has dominated the discipline and accept the importance of meanings, beliefs, and language” some of them do not want to adopt a hermeneutic perspective that we consider, on the contrary, the most natural outcome of a theoretical reflection of this kind.24 In order to evaluate the significant points of contacts and “epistemological synergies” between the social construction of critical constructivism and some interpretive aspects of post-positivist theorizing, it is first and foremost useful to circumscribe and briefly locate – within the philosophical and social sciences usually disciplinary, discourses. These are, however, still national. Language is seen as crucial to national identity, on which the representation of outsiders (‘the Other’) will be a significant influence. Indeed, foreign policy is important precisely because it reinforces (undesirably, in the view of Campbell) national and statist culture. If this approach can be linked more effectively to the analysis of choice, and can confront the problem of evidence, then it may yet reach out from beyond the circle of the converted to contribute more to our understanding of foreign policy. Language, whether official or private, rhetorical or observational, has a lot to tell us about both mind-sets and actions, and it is a relatively untapped resource.”

All these themes are clearly relevant to setting our analysis of the rise of China in the context of a broader theoretical framework.

24 Kurki and Wight, “International relations and Social Science,” 24. As these authors underscore, this interpretative approach “rests on the conviction that meanings and beliefs are the most important factors in the study of social processes and that social inquiry could play an important role in uncovering the deep meanings that exist beneath the surface appearance of observed reality. This conviction relies on the belief that there are hidden meanings to be grasped. Poststructuralist theorists are skeptical of this viewpoint and have no wish to return to what they term the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. Poststructuralists are also skeptical of the validity of all knowledge claims and reject the idea that science produces anything like true knowledge, even in terms of the natural sciences.”
discourse – the term social constructivism which is often used generically. What is defined as “epistemological construction” has indeed a very wide range of philosophical antecedents, varying from Kantian and neo-Kantian thought to some forms of historicism and idealism (Vico, Hegel) to some aspects of pragmatism (Lewis) and logical neo-empiricism (Carnap), with another significant elaboration related to the genetic epistemology of Jean Piaget. In very broad terms the basic assumption of epistemological constructivism is that reality does not exist independently of the cognitive subject and that the objects of human knowledge are constructed either by our intellectual activities, or by the society and its institutions or by language. In International Relations theory the term social constructivism has been, in turn, used with a conceptual background and meaning closely related to these meta-theories, which can be conveyed by the notion “that there is a fundamental distinction to be made between brute facts about the world - which remain true independent of human action - and social facts which depend for their existence on socially established conventions.”

As Karin Fierke points out,26 constructivism has emerged in the 1980s as an important theoretical reaction to the deficiencies of the dominant neorealist thought in the field of IR theory. This theoretical debate was shaped in a historical context characterized by growing challenges, in terms of analysis and policy, to the core explanatory assumptions related to the Cold War. The end of the Cold War reinforced the need for


new theoretical approaches because of the evident shortcomings of structural realism in predicting and convincingly explaining this crucial turning point in international politics. In this framework, constructivism’s fundamental emphasis underlined the social dimension of international politics assuming that social phenomena (states, alliances, institutions) have a material dimension but that they “take specific historical, cultural and political forms that are a product of human interaction in a social world.”

Even though the strongly deterministic features of neo-realism (also referred to as structural realism) and its theoretically “unilateral” approach came under considerable strain because of its substantial analytical failure after the end of the Cold War, this school held continuing influence until recently, perhaps because it appeared to provide comprehensive and coherent systemic theorizing and a substantive IR theory. The problem of a "theoretical legitimacy" might appear at first sight to be of some relevance in evaluating the relationship between the constructivist approach and the neorealist positions. But that is probably misleading as the issue ultimately turns out to represent a stumbling block in the way of building a theoretically coherent approach. To this end it is useful to refer to Alexander Wendt’s Social Theory of International Politics as a good example of the anxiety to provide a substantive theory offering a systemic view of international politics. In Wendt’s main work, he proposes a “map of structural theorizing” putting forward what he calls “four sociologies of structure” - materialist, idealist, individualist and holist - which are related to two fundamental questions. The first question is about “the extent

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27 Ibid., 168.
to which structures are material or social, and the second about the relationship of structure to agents."\textsuperscript{28} On this basis, Wendt addresses, from an ontological point of view, the "situation of radical incommensurability" between rationalists and constructivists over the crucial question of "what kind of stuff the international system is made of."\textsuperscript{29} Constructivism is an interesting point of reference for our epistemological standpoint for it can be regarded as posing a challenge not simply to neo-realism and neo-liberalism but to the underlying rationalist assumptions which characterize both. Rationalist theories, as Fierke points out, "have an individualist ontology,"\textsuperscript{30} meaning thereby that the basic unit of analysis is the individual. Neo-realists such as Kenneth Waltz consider individual states trying to maximize the ultimate goal of survival as the structural components of an international system characterized by a state of anarchy (the absence of a superior authority to the individual state).

For rationalists, structure is a function of competition and the distribution of material capabilities, constraining the actions of states. For constructivism the focus is on ideas, norms and shared understandings of legitimate behavior contained in a social ontology: structures not only constrain (as for rationalists) but also constitute the identity of actors. In this sense the process of social construction strengthens the possibility of agency in response to the over-determination of structure in neorealist and neoliberal

\textsuperscript{28} Alexander Wendt, \textit{Social Theory of International Politics} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 22-23.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 35.

\textsuperscript{30} Fierke, "Constructivism," 169.
The protagonists of international politics are thus not uniformly and universally rational egoists but have distinct identities shaped by the cultural, social and political - as well as material - circumstances in which they are embedded. On this basis it is not meaningful for the analyst to refer to general categories of actors such as “emerging powers,” “challengers,” “hegemons,” etc. It is also important to note that social construction, suggesting difference across context rather than a single objective reality, underlines the importance of change at the international level, with subjects that are not static but ever-evolving as they interact with each other and their environment.

The theme of change is clearly central to our research on the rise of China and on its impact on the international system. In this sense we need to overcome the basic neo-realist assumption that the very nature of international politics tends to discipline foreign policy and the behavior of international actors by reducing its degree of variation. International politics, in our view, is not insulated in a black box within an international system driven by constant structural forces. Time in international relations can be thus regarded not as an abstract factor but as the measure of historical change because international politics is shaped, as Morgenthau reminded us, by an ever-changing historical and cultural context. This context inevitably influences – with a different

\[31\] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston, MA: McGrawHill, 1986), 343. In this respect it is useful to recall that the most influential neorealist thinker, Kenneth Waltz, in his *Theory of International Politics*, clearly argues that all sources of change stem from units not from systems: "Changes in, and transformation of, systems originate not in the structure of a system but in its parts. Through selection, structures promote the continuity of systems in form; through variation, unit-level forces contain the possibilities of systemic change.... Systems change, or are transformed, depending on the resources and aims of their units and on the fates that befall them."
degree of continuity and variation – the identity of international actors driven by a mix of material and ideational forces. As Peter Katzenstein has rightly pointed out, “[o]n this point the contrast with neo-realist could not be greater. Much of the writing on state structures is in fact informed by a historical perspective. State structures are not only the products of competition in the international system but also of history. And the legacy of history leaves a deep imprint on their character.”33 This is obviously true for a country such as China whose thousands-year history is an eloquent example of continuity and change.34 In this respect it is interesting to note that according to Katzenstein (one of several authors who have opposed the neorealist notion of change over the past 20 years) structural realism has misinterpreted change and interests in the international system because it “conceives of states as actors and international regimes as variables that affect national strategies.”35 Alternatively, Katzenstein has argued that it is possible to “think of states as structures and regimes as part of the overall context in which interests are


34 Only a rather constant “ideological” view of Chinese history has created a “mythological” image of the Chinese past regarded as a “cultural genealogy” functional to legitimize the existing structure of power (this happened in Imperial China and it is still true for the present party-state). In this sense the Chinese nationalistic discourse on the country’s historical identity and national interests has become to some extent a “prisoner of the past.” The risk of either neglecting or misinterpreting significant elements of context such as history can indeed have for China – as we will see in Chapter III - various implications also in terms of foreign policy-making: the definition of China’s core-interests on the basis of national narratives, perceptions and misperceptions which do not take fully into account the evolving objectives of a country rising as a global power can make, for instance, Chinese international behavior more influenced by a new nationalistic discourse.

35 Ibid., 2
defined. States conceived as structures offer rich insights into the causes and consequences of International Politics. And regimes conceived as a context in which interests are defined offer a broad perspective of the interaction between norms and interests in International Politics.” He writes:

For an understanding of change in the international system realism and its variants…is incomplete. In the search for parsimony realism encourages scholars to adopt categories of analysis that assume the existence of states as unitary actors pursuing interests assumed to be unproblematic. A considerable body of research, however, suggests that states are rarely unitary actors and are often best thought of as structures. Furthermore, the process by which interests are defined is not always unproblematic but may often be adequately grasped by analyzing the context which norms provide.36

In light of the role of context, the contrast of this theoretical approach with neo-realism, as Katzenstein noted, is enormous. Considering Katzenstein’s above-mentioned suggestion of abandoning “an exclusive reliance on the Euro-centric, Western state system for the derivation of analytical categories,” we cannot but agree with him when he argues that we “may benefit also from studying the historical experience of Asian empires (such as China) while developing analytical categories which may be useful for the analysis of current international developments.”37

36 Ibid., 26.

37 Ibid. In a research perspective aimed at analyzing the rise of China in connection with other non-Western emerging powers, we should reflect on Katzenstein’s consideration that “(a) European historical perspective is embodied in the analytical categories of realism. The logic of the Western system blinds us to important changes in contemporary international politics. We may thus be better off to derive our categories in part from the international systems of other empires: Ottoman, Moghul or Chinese. In contrast to the Western system the principle of state autonomy was in these cases modulated by complex arrangements of normative obligations, fiscal dependencies and military vulnerabilities. States were not self-contained actors. And the process by which they defined their interests was problematic. Neo-realism views the international state system as horizontally ordered between similar states. A variant of neo-Marxism views the international economy as vertically organized between core and peripheral economies. Such simple categories help us little to grasp a complex international system experiencing rapid change. It
The notion of change we shall adopt in our research on the rise of China will try therefore to consider both the material-structural dimension of this process - in terms, for instance, of a relative shift in the balance of power – and its ideational dimension, related to the potential transformation, driven by the behavior and objectives of new global actors, of some aspects of the international system in terms of influence, values, identities. At a systemic level this notion of change can be identified with that of “transition” in order to convey the idea of an evolutionary process which takes place not in an abstract context but in a specific historical phase. The concept of change we have outlined is also intertwined with a dynamic notion of interests based on a constructivist approach that underscores how interests are tied to the identity of the subject and rejects the rationalist view of a static world of asocial egoists primarily concerned with permanent material interests. In this framework a world of social and cultural meaning encompasses interests and identities.

If a rationalist perspective privileges the rationality of decisions in terms of self-interest - thereby minimizing the role of context - from a constructivist perspective the social dimension is, on the contrary, central. In order to better understand the social phenomena which constitute the international system, the analytical merits of a constructivist ontology over the “abstract systemic universe” of structural realism are evident.

As Christopher Hill writes, it is in fact hard to envisage “immutable national interests” nowadays in the domain of foreign policy because “in an era in which the
intellectual and moral shortcomings of realism have been exposed, it is difficult to believe in self-evident objective interests.”

This theme of supposedly immutable national core-interests (and its critique) is, of course, very relevant to understanding and analyzing how China’s objectives are formulated in terms of its international behavior. In this respect, as Beeson notes, our approach will consider that “the very idea of a discrete national interest, let alone a universally supported strategy for pursuing it, is an increasingly problematic, socially-constructed artifact of cross-cutting political and economic interests.”

In search of an epistemological “middle-ground”

If a constructivist approach can undoubtedly offer productive analytical instruments – as in defining the notions of change and interest - a crucial problem for what Fierke has termed “conventional constructivism” stems from its emphasis on a social ontology which is not supported by an adequate epistemological awareness. The attempt to create a “middle ground” (a term introduced to IR theory by Nicholas Onuf, 

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38 Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, 43. In this respect Katzenstein, from his perspective, has noted that “state interests and capacities are not simply specified theoretically. And the state is not viewed a-historically thus risking to universalize a voluntarist conception of politics in an atomistic society. In contrast to neo-realism the conception of state structure differentiates analytically between structure and actor. It views the states as part of social structures. State interests and capacities become the object of empirical work. And since the state is understood in its historical context, voluntarist conceptions of politics in an atomistic society are analyzed as no more than one particular historical case among many. In short, a central category of neo-realism, the state, is not simply stipulated to analyze political reality. It becomes instead the focus of sustained theoretical analysis and empirical investigation.” Ibid., 14.


referring broadly to a range of post-positivist perspectives) seems to be partly undermined by the inconsistencies arising from the combination of an inter-subjective ontology: this kind of ontology, while it highlights the role of norms, social agents and structures in a framework of mutual constitution of identity, refers to an epistemology still indebted to positivism, resting on a language of causality and explanation and, from a methodological point of view, on hypothesis testing. As Fierke stresses, the epistemological approach of conventional constructivism seems to obscure, with its focus on ontology, the autonomy of the social sphere and the role of language while the emphasis on the individual unit (whether human or state) fails to deal with the problem of how this unit is constituted. It is meaningful that some influential rationalists and constructivists – such as Wendt, Keohane, Krasner – have claimed that no significant epistemological or methodological differences divide them. In particular, Alexander Wendt, in explaining his attempt to find a “via media” affirms as follows:

...when it comes to the epistemology of social inquiry I am a strong believer in science, a pluralistic science to be sure in which there is a significant role for ‘understanding’, but science just the same. I am a positivist.41

As already noted, the preference for a positivist epistemology in “conventional constructivism” might be linked, on the one hand, to the implicit need to provide this approach with more theoretical legitimacy. Even though Wendt’s inconsistency is evident from a meta-theoretical point of view, it seems to be clearly motivated by the author’s desire to create a comprehensive constructivist theory, a social theory of international politics as the title of his most important book underscores. However it is

41 Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics, 39-40.
fair to note that Wendt himself seems partly aware of the difficulty of building a substantive constructivist theory on a positivist epistemology when he writes:

I hope to find a via media thought the third debate by reconciling what many take to be incompatible ontological and epistemological positions… some will say that no via media exists…. what really matters is what there is rather than how we know it….42

With regard to this last proposition it is quite surprising to find such a display of epistemological naïveté from Wendt. Referring to an “objective world,” he seems to minimize the constitutive role of the cognitive process and ultimately the very meaning of a social construction. In contrast to Wendt’s assumption and theoretical objectives, other constructivist scholars, such as Onuf himself, have pointed out that constructivism is not a substantive theory but a way of studying social relations.43

This is also our point of view. To consider constructivism first and foremost an epistemological approach can indeed have significant bearing on our research objectives. For instance, substantive theories such as realism could be reconsidered and integrated on the basis of constructivist assumptions. To this end, it is therefore crucial to build a kind of constructivism that is consistent from the point of view of epistemology as well. The focus of “critical constructivism” is - not surprisingly - on the role of language as a constitutive element. In this context, constructivists such as Fierke have tried to develop an approach to language that is consistent with the social ontology of constructivism,

42 Ibid., 40.

occupying in turn an epistemological “middle ground”. In this sense Fierke views
language and action as rule-based and infused with norms, trying thus to create distance
between constructivism and post-structuralism’s supposedly interpretive relativism.44
The concept of relativism/reflectivism was addressed – as we have seen - in a famous
speech by Keohane who, taking note of the emergence of theories sharply critical of
mainstream rationalist approaches, defined “these approaches reflectivist, due to the fact
that they rejected the classical positivist/explanatory approach to IR theory and research,
emphasizing instead reflexivity and the non-neutral nature of political and social
explanation.”45

Mainstream rationalist and positivist thinkers have been reluctant to take the
knowledge claims of reflectivist scholars seriously, because they challenged the very
status of the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions upon which
their paradigm depended.46 In contrast not only with positivist and rationalist theories but
also with both conventional and critical constructivism - which accept the possibility of
reality being constructed - post-structuralism has been indeed regarded as problematizing
this assumption. Referring to Wittgenstein’s argument that following a rule is different

44 Kurki and Wight, *International Relations and Social Science*, 25. As Kurki and Smith write,
Keohane noted the potential of reflectivist “approaches to contribute to the discipline but, in a direct
reference to Lakatos’s account of science, suggested that they could be taken seriously only when they
developed a ‘research programme’. This was a direct challenge to the new theories to move beyond
criticism of the mainstream and demonstrate, through substantive research, the validity of their claims.
Many of the so-called reflectivists have seen this as nothing other than a demand that they adopt the model
of science to which Keohane and the mainstream are committed.


46 Kurki and Wight, “International Relations and Social Science,” 25.
from interpretation, this “consistent” constructivist approach to language as rule-based requires therefore that we “look and see” how language is put to use by social actors as they construct their world. Language use is seen as fundamentally social, as part of acting in the world: for this reason a “consistent” constructivist approach to language should shift emphasis - according to Fierke - to the generation of meaning, norms and rules as expressed in language.\(^4\) Even though this kind of “consistent” constructivism tends to differentiate itself from the “relativistic danger” attributed to post-structuralism, it is worth noting that these approaches have substantial elements in common, being deeply indebted to the linguistic turn and the post-empiricist epistemology brought about by hermeneutic thought in European philosophy (Heidegger, Gadamer) which made possible a new understanding of the relationship between language and reality. In this sense one could conceive an “epistemological middle ground” based on the critical constructivist approach and some fundamental post-positivist/poststructuralist epistemological assumptions such as the social constituting of meaning, the linguistic construction of reality and the historicity of knowledge. In this context the rationalist reaction to what Keohane defined “reflectivism” seems to underscore – as David Campbell points out – a critical anxiety which “mistook arguments about the historical production of foundations for the claim that all foundations had to be rejected.”\(^4\) This reaction seems to indicate that in a post-positivist perspective “there is something larger at stake than different epistemologies, indicating a “Cartesian anxiety” at what the

\(^{47}\) Fierke, “Constructivism,” 172.

absence of secure foundations means for ethics and politics. Referring to their meta-theoretical background, it seems to us that there is no “situation of radical incommensurability” between critical constructivist and a post-positivist approach. Ontology and Epistemology can be reconciled in a coherent framework which also links – with regard to a specific subject of research - theoretical assumptions in terms of analysis with the correlated practical implications in terms of policy. In this sense – if we acknowledge the contribution of meta-theories which posit the central role of language – we can look at the potential of this “critical approach” in the field of social sciences through the lens of what Hans Georg Gadamer has defined “the ontological dimension of language.”

**A hermeneutical approach to the analysis of the rise of China**

The theoretical overview we have developed so far in order to clarify the overarching epistemological perspective of our research is aimed at inscribing an analysis based on a constructivist and interpretive approach within the “hermeneutical circle.” In this respect, of key importance is the reflection developed by Gadamer in his masterwork *Truth and Method* on the fundamental problem of “understanding” by referring to the cardinal idea elaborated by Martin Heidegger and expressed by the notion of “circle of understanding” (Zirkel des Verstehens). According to Heidegger, the “ontological structure” of understanding is defined by a pre-understanding process


(Vor-Verstandnis), which is preliminary to reality and is formed by the “ordinary opinions of the people and of the world where they live.” The basic assumption underlying the concept of a “hermeneutical circle” is that whenever we try to understand something, we understand something which we already understand in part because of our background of given ideas, opinions, previous experiences and prejudices. This epistemological perspective can be fruitfully applied, in our view, not only to the cultural and historical relationship between the West and China but also to the present discourse on the rise of China. Indeed we tend to categorize ascent on the global stage through ontological criteria which have been elaborated - in terms of historical and political background, cultural identity, models of statehood and society - in the West, neglecting in this way an obvious preliminary consideration of context: China is the first contemporary extra-European power to rise as a global actor on the basis of a model with its own particular characteristics (in contrast with the rise of Japan, a highly Westernized country, to major power status). Referring to the ontological dimension of our understanding, Gadamer explains that being aware of how the “circle of pre-understanding” works makes it possible for us to experience a process of true interpretation in the search for autonomous truth in the field of social sciences as in other areas. The hermeneutical circle thus avoids becoming a “vicious circle” and suffering paralysis from a totally relativistic approach. Going back to Wendt’s preoccupation of finding “a middle ground,” we could therefore say that a “via media” should necessarily start with an awareness of how the process of social construction works and how its subjects and objects are mutually constituted. In order to create, as Onuf said, “a world of
our making,” we should have a basic preliminary awareness of the limits and of the scope of our understanding (and of how Language defines it). Otherwise – to use Bernard de Morlay’s famous phrase – we may well find that at the end of our research only “omnia nuda tenemus.” With reference to the rise of China, this hermeneutical approach (which develops the post-positivist perspectives mentioned above) can help us to avoid using concepts such as power, hegemony, interests etc. as abstract components of an abstract idea of the international system, without a coherent understanding of their meaning and without a theory linking to the practical dimension which should always be inherent to social sciences.

On the basis of the epistemological perspective we have delineated, we intend therefore to examine some of the main theories about the “rise of China” connecting them to what has been defined the hermeneutical dimension of “praxis” by Gadamer.  

51 The complete phrase of the 12th century scholar Bernard de Morlay – made famous by Umberto Eco in his The Name of the Rose – reads as follows: "Stat rosa pristina nomine; nomina nuda tenemus.” It can be translated as “what is left of the rose is only its name”: this sentence underscores that a meaning deprived of its true substance cannot express anything which goes beyond its mere “nominal appearance.”

52 Richard J. Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 34. As Richard Bernstein notes, Gadamer has been a seminal figure in the philosophical debate on post-empiricism which has played a significant role also in International Relations theory. We must recognize that within the discipline it has been often neglected an in depth reflection on the philosophical antecedents of this paradigm-shift, probably because the most significant of them were rooted in 20th century European continental philosophy rather than in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. In this framework, the magnum opus is represented by Hans-Georg Gadamer’s “Wahrheit und Methode” (published in 1960 and translated in English with the title Truth and Method in 1975). As Richard Bernstein writes, “building on the work of Heidegger, or rather drawing on themes that are implicit in Heidegger and developing them in novel ways, Gadamer's book is one of the most comprehensive and subtle statements of the meaning and scope of hermeneutics to appear in our time. Hermeneutics, for Gadamer, is no longer restricted to the problem of Method in the Geisteswissenschaften; it moves to the very center of philosophy and is given an ontological turn; understanding, for Gadamer, is a primordial mode of our being in the World.”
As we have anticipated, our critique of these positivist and rationalist theories will be developed through the application of the “ontological turn” given by Gadamer to philosophical hermeneutics, with significant consequences on our understanding of the social sciences.  

In the field of International Relations theory the rediscovery of the importance of “philosophia practica” (a practical philosophy which links theory to praxis) can thus be connected to the epistemological perspective of IR constructivist and post-structural thinkers. As Richard Bernstein notes, “one of the most challenging, intriguing, and important motifs in Gadamer’s work is his effort to link his ontological hermeneutics with the tradition of practical philosophy, especially as it is rooted in Aristotle's understanding of praxis and phronesis.”

In particular it is not a coincidence that the “specific context in Truth and Method...”

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53 Ibid., 35. The reference to Gadamer’s philosophical work is also important in that it helps, as Richard Bernstein has written, to “touch upon a crucial ambiguity caused by the disparity between the Anglo-American and the German understanding of the nature of the social sciences. In the Anglo-American tradition, intellectual disciplines fall into the trichotomy of the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, but on the Continent they are categorized according to the dichotomy between the Naturwissenschaften and the Geisteswissenschaften (the expression that was introduced into German as a translation for what Mill called the "moral sciences"). In the main tradition of Anglo-American thought - at least until recently - the overwhelming bias has been to think of the social sciences as natural sciences concerning individuals in their social relations. The assumption has been that the social sciences differ in degree and not in kind from the natural sciences and that ideally the methods and standards appropriate to the natural sciences can be extended by analogy to the social sciences. But in the German tradition there has been a much greater tendency to think of the social disciplines as forms of Geisteswissenschaften sharing essential characteristics with the humanistic disciplines. One of the reasons why Gadamer's work received so much attention is because it appeared at a time when many thinkers were arguing that a proper understanding of the range of the social disciplines requires us to recognize the essential hermeneutical dimension of these disciplines.”

54 Ibid., 36. As Bernstein explains in this regard, “according to an earlier tradition of hermeneutics, three elements were distinguished: subtilitas intelligendi (understanding), subtilitas explicandi (interpretation), and subtilitas applicandi (application). But Gadamer argues - and this is one of the central theses of Truth and Method - that these are not three distinct moments or elements of hermeneutics.”
Method where Gadamer explores the relevance of Aristotle to hermeneutics is the investigation of the moment of "application" or appropriation in the act of understanding. We clearly subscribe to this approach which considers that “every act of understanding involves interpretation, and all interpretation involves application.”

**Power, influence and search of status in the rise of China**

After this fairly long “discours de la méthode” and, hopefully, the clarification of the epistemological approach of this research, we think that it is useful now to proceed to a preliminary “act of interpretation and of application” of these theoretical premises to the substance of our analysis. In doing so we will bear in mind that our approach, as noted in the introduction, “requires thinking in terms of mutual feedbacks among material, institutional and cultural elements.” In this context our fundamental argument is that the rise of China as a factor of change in the international system can be viewed as a process of “transition” driven by the growth of Beijing’s comprehensive power coupled with its increased influence in terms of “soft-power projection.” This process – the ultimate impact of which is not defined yet – should, however, be seen in the context of a broader, gradual transition of the international system towards a structure

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55 Ibid. “It is Aristotle’s analysis of phronesis that, according to Gadamer, enables us to understand the distinctive way in which application is an essential moment of the hermeneutical experience. The intimate link that Gadamer seeks to establish between hermeneutics and the tradition of practical philosophy that has its origins in Greek philosophy is not an afterthought or merely incidental to his understanding of philosophic hermeneutics. It is a key for appreciating what he means by philosophic hermeneutics.”

centered on a more diversified core of great powers. As Alessandro Colombo writes, this group of emerging leading nations will not necessarily be much larger than the present one but will certainly be more heterogeneous from a geographical and cultural point of view. In this sense the rise of China – along with the rise of other extra-European powers - is part of a possible de-Westernization of the balance of power in the 21st century. We will address the possible systemic consequences of this process for the transformation of the international system in greater detail in the conclusions developed in the conclusions of this research paper, by arguing that the potential of change related to this process could stem from a “common revisionist agenda” which does not looks likely to be easily defined.

By assessing the potential “transformative aspects” of China’s ascent on the world scene, it is useful to recognize, as does Minxin Pei, that “the most important - and obvious - dynamic at work” in this context is “the rapid shift of the balance of power between the West and China.” As we have tried to define the notion of change and interests in the light of an epistemological approach which takes into account material and ideational elements, we now need to better delineate, along the same lines of reasoning, what we mean when we refer to terms such as “power” and “balance of power.” In trying to circumscribe the notion of power, the analytical approach that we have chosen conveys a concept of intrinsically “relative power,” in contrast to the neorealist view of a deterministic maximization of power by actors bent on their survival


in an anarchical international system. This “relativization” and diversification of an ontology of the international system merely based on power-politics, allows us to address both the dimension of "hard power" (economic growth, military capabilities, security alliances, potential of technological innovation) and that of influence (role in the international organizations, “soft power,” cultural projection, search and recognition of status, national identity) as drivers of change in China’s international posture. In this context an interesting distinction is that elaborated by Barnett and Duvall between “structural power” and “productive power.”\(^{59}\) From this perspective it is indeed possible to better evaluate the realist assumption that some countries are more powerful than others because they “are advantaged as a consequence of their capacity to exercise a form of 'structural' power that flows from their position in the international system.”\(^{60}\) This distinction can be useful also because it highlights the crucial relationship between power and political legitimacy, which has been so far one of the characteristics of the leading role assumed by the United States and of its capacity to impose and institutionalize particular economic and political practices within the international system. In this sense the recognition of political legitimacy and of the international role and status is correlated to the degree of influence that a country is able to exert within the international system. In the last decade the United States’ “preponderant power” has not only been increasingly contested by emerging actors with regard to its structural dimension but also

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\(^{59}\) Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, eds. *Power in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 15. Barnett and Duvall indeed distinguish “structural” power from “productive” power, by considering the latter as the source of the “diffuse constitutive relations [that] produce the situated subjectivities of actors.”

\(^{60}\) Beeson, “Hegemonic Transition in East Asia?,” 99.
from the point of view of its cultural primacy, which has been partly eroded “by the emergence of competing ideas and models about the basis and conduct of international relations.”61 As Beeson notes, “China has begun to enunciate an alternative vision of development and of international order,”62 aiming to achieve a pivotal position at the centre of a changing regional system in Asia, possibly at the expense of the US. Such developments raise not only important questions about China’s growing regional influence vis-à-vis the historical American presence in the area - as we will see in the next chapter - but also address the fundamental issue of the limits of American global primacy despite its still significant strategic dominance. This scenario is naturally conducive to a more in-depth consideration of a key concept such as the balance of power. Even though the idea of the balance of power has been evolving continuously for the last five centuries at least and has been interpreted in various ways (as Jonathan Haslam explains with great erudition,)63 we can consider it as grounded in the realist tradition of political thought, indicating a status of equilibrium among competing international actors in a polycentric international system. (In this sense, as Haslam, notes, the concept of balance of power was not used at the time of the Roman Empire because there were no real challengers to Rome’s “imperium.”) In Chapter III we shall examine in greater depth the significance of balance of power theories for the rise of China in the

61 Ibid., 96.
62 Ibid., 100.
context of the debate on sovereignty, the nation state and national identities in an era of globalization.64

64 Richard L. Hough, The Nation States. Concert or Chaos (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003). Daniel Philpott, “Ideas and the Evolution of Sovereignty,” in State Sovereignty. Change and Persistence in International Relations, ed. Sohail H. Hashmi (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997). Robert Cooper, “The New Liberal Imperialism,” The Observer, 7 April 2002. It is also interesting to consider the notion of the balance of power in a perspective which analyzes the model of the Westphalian nation-state on the basis of its diversified constitutive historical elements and in the perspective of its meaning and evolution in the framework of 21st century international relations. M. Horsemann and A. Marshall, After the Nation-State - Citizens, Tribalism and the New World Disorder (London: Harper Collins, 1994). The underlying assumption in this analysis is that the Westphalian model has a twofold dimension: the descriptive, historical one, which is linked to the end of the medieval ideal of “universal power” (both political and religious) and the prescriptive, “conventional” one, which has been used, also in retrospect, to define the legitimacy of the national state’s sovereignty. Referring to Richard Hough’s analysis of the evolution of the nation-state (it seems to me useful to contextualize the notion of nation-state, underscoring how it has developed mainly in a euro-centric perspective. To broaden this chronological and conceptual horizon it is important to better understand its implications for the present interaction between the surviving “Westphalian modern” state and the post-modern evolution of state sovereignty in the era of globalization. In this respect an interesting distinction between modern and post-modern states is adopted by Cooper in his article on the new liberal imperialism. In this context one could argue that, historically, the model of nation-state can be somehow traced back to a more diversified background: can we consider the Roman Republic an example of nation-state in classical antiquity? (the answer to this question is also relevant to exploring the roots of the medieval city-state); can the Chinese Empire (defined in the 2nd century BC by the Qin Shi Huang Emperor as a highly centralized structure and an ethnically homogeneous society) be simply considered – to use Nye’s well-known phrase – a “civilization which wanted to be a state”? These two examples are intended to underline the “ideological” character of the Westphalian model, with the implicit exclusion of a more nuanced and diversified concept of sovereignty which was adopted for clear political reasons, as Daniel Philpott explains referring to Jean Bodin’s “On sovereignty.” In connection with the notion of balance of power based on the Westphalian order, we need to better understand the notion of empire, of universal power, in contrast to which the Westphalian nation-state defined itself. This opposition was expressed by the definition of sovereignty which postulated that “rex in regno suo, superiorem non recognoscens, est imperator” (“the king in his kingdom, not recognizing any superior, is like the emperor.”) The ideas of a “universal power” – typical of the Middle Ages – rested in fact on the assumption of a universal legitimacy and hierarchy of power, both in the political and religious sphere. This was the idea of the “translatio imperii” (“transfer of imperial power”), the universal power of the Roman Empire made universal from a religious point of view too by Constantine’s decision to make Christianity the religion of the state. As explained by Hough, this universal dimension in the Middle Ages was strictly associated with the Holy Roman Empire and the Catholic Church. In this respect, though, it is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of the balance of power, including in terms of legitimacy, of the two universal medieval institutions. The imperial heritage of Rome, after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, was formally held by the byzantine Emperor, whose official title was, until the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, “Emperor of the Romans”. When Charlemagne was crowned first Holy Roman Emperor, his act was regarded in Byzantium as usurpation. Later on, the schism between the Oriental Church and the Latin Church of Rome further deepened the divide between the institutions which claimed to represent a “universal power”. This problem of legitimacy in terms of ultimate universal power in the Middle Ages is significant in the framework of the “alternative power” constituted by the model of the towns, the communes, and the city-states. A case in point is Venice, which at the beginning of its long independent history proclaimed that it did not want to be
On the basis of the idea previously introduced of a relative power which can shift according to its changing distribution (and the perception thereof) among the actors of the international system, one may argue that situations of equilibrium and possible transition are shaped not only by material forces but also by ideational elements which broaden the notion of power to that of influence. This approach clearly overcomes the theoretical limits set by neo-realist authors such as Kenneth Waltz who conceived of the balance of power as the result of “balance of power politics” driven by a dynamic only at the systemic level (as it is well known, an analysis defined by elements at a sub-systemic level is regarded as useless by this school of thought.) We on the other hand would seek to include in the typically realist concept of the balance of power elements which define state behavior at a sub-systemic level: this allows us to adopt the above-mentioned either “Greek” (submitted to the Byzantine Empire) or “German” (submitted to the Holy Roman Empire), thus refusing a hierarchical idea of universal power.

65 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 116-123. Waltz explains this position by arguing that “[a]nalytic reasoning applied where a systems approach is needed leads to the laying down of all sorts of conditions as prerequisites to balances of power forming and tending toward equilibrium and as general preconditions of world stability and peace. Some require that the number of great powers exceed one; others that a major power be willing to play the role of balancer. Some require that military technology not change radically or rapidly; others that the major states abide by arbitrarily specified rules. But balances of power form in the absence of the ‘necessary’ conditions, and since 1945 the world has been stable, and the world of major powers remarkably peaceful, even though international conditions have not conformed to theorists' stipulations. Balance-of-power politics prevail wherever two requirements are met: that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive. For those who believe that if a result is to be produced, someone, or everyone, must want it and must work for it, it follows that explanation turns ultimately on what the separate states are like. If that is true, then theories at the national level, or lower, will sufficiently explain international politics. If, for example, the equilibrium of a balance is maintained through states abiding by rules, then one needs an explanation of how agreement on the rules is achieved and maintained. One does not need a balance-of-power theory, for balances would result from a certain kind of behavior explained perhaps by a theory about national psychology or bureaucratic polities. A balance-of-power theory could not be constructed because it would have nothing to explain. If the good or bad motives of states result in their maintaining balances or disrupting them, then the notion of a balance of power becomes merely a framework organizing one's account of what happened, and that is indeed its customary use. A construction that starts out to be a theory ends up as a set of categories. Categories then multiply rapidly to cover events that the embryo theory had not contemplated. The quest for explanatory power turns into a search for descriptive adequacy.”
constructivist and poststructuralist categories and so enhance our understanding of how the international system really works.\textsuperscript{66}

In this way the concept of balance of power is not simply used in a descriptive manner – as Waltz would argue – but according to an ontological view of the international system which includes material and ideal forces as the drivers of state behavior. On the basis of these notions of power and of balance of power we can go on to define the concept of hegemony by considering it “per relationem:” rather than referring to an abstract concept of hegemonic transition we will focus in our analysis on the implications of this process as regards the leading role of the United States within the international system and its interaction with emerging global actors. America’s “preponderant power” and its leadership on the world scene has indeed been perceived as a fundamental lens through which to evaluate the impact of the rise of China both in Washington and in Beijing. A key dimension of American “hegemony”\textsuperscript{67} has traditionally been identified not only in “the way a particular set of ideas or values were operationalized” by Washington as part of the international institutions but also in the “more informal, diffuse and intangible aspect of American hegemony which is reflected in the institutionally embedded dominance of a range of cultural and economic practices.

\textsuperscript{66} From an opposite perspective it is interesting to note that Samuel Huntington’s theory of the “Clash of Civilizations” can be regarded as an attempt to redefine a neorealist ontology of the international system through an unsophisticated constructivist epistemology.

\textsuperscript{67} We will use in our analysis the term “hegemon” and “hegemony” mainly with reference to the realist notion that defines “hegemon” an international actor – a state – which dominates the system through its political, military and economic preponderant power. We will also refer, though, to the Gramscian concept of “cultural hegemony” as a way to secure dominance by getting other actors to subscribe to the hegemon’s ideological vision, making unnecessary the use of widespread coercive power.
associated with the US.” In this respect it is useful to draw attention - as neo-Gramscian scholars among others, have done – “to the intersection of material power and ideas, and their crystallization in formal and informal institutions.”

And especially so at a time when questions, prompted in part by the continuing economic crisis of 2008, are increasingly being raised concerning an architecture of global governance still characterized by the dominance of the West and by the comparative under-representation of the major emerging nations. In this context we can say that in the last decade the theoretical and public debate on the rise of China has undergone a further “paradigm shift.” In the 1980s and early 1990s the Chinese process of reform and its opening up to the outside world was mainly perceived in the West as gradually conducive to a deeper integration of the PRC in a system of international

68 Beeson, “Hegemonic Transition in East Asia?,” 101.

69 Ibid., 97. Barry K. Gillis, “The Hegemonic Transition in East Asia: a Historical Perspective,” in Gramsci Historical Materialism and International Relations, ed S. Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 186-212. Referring to this debate, Beeson argues that “[w]hether or not one sees this as a manifestation of a self-conscious class pursuing an increasingly global set of interests, there is plainly a transnational dimension to contemporary processes of governance that may favor some nationally-based elites more than others, without necessarily being unambiguously under the direct control of any of them. This is an especially challenging possibility for those state-centric interpretations of hegemonic competition that consider it to be driven by nationality-based, competing elites, intent on promoting 'their' national interests. While the increased unilateralism and militarization of American foreign policy serves as a salutary reminder that - in the context of national security, at least - there are still such parochial impulses, in other areas the very idea of a discrete national interest, let alone a universally supported strategy for pursuing it, is an increasingly problematic, socially-constructed artifact of cross-cutting political and economic interests.”

70 Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970). Thomas Khun, The Essential Tension. Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977). We use the well-known term used by Thomas Kuhn in his influential book The Structure of Scientific Revolutions to describe an epistemological change in basic assumptions within a theoretical and public debate. The notion of paradigm shift, as a change in a fundamental model of explanation of events, has become widely applied in social sciences as in other fields, even though Kuhn himself restricted the use of the term to the natural sciences, underscoring that "a paradigm is what members of a scientific community, and they alone, share."
relations based on the principles and practices of the free market and of liberal democracy. This assumption was made in particular from the standpoint of neo-liberal theories. The underlying argument of this school of thought was, as Francis Fukuyama wrote in his *The End of History and The Last Man*, that the progression of human history as a struggle between ideologies had come to an end after the Cold War with the eventual global triumph of political and economic liberalism. Change was thus associated to a scenario of “convergence.” In this context China was indeed expected to gradually converge toward the structures and internalize the rules and practices, including at the international level, of this new “Western hegemony.” As we know and Fukuyama himself subsequently acknowledged, the reality of the post-Cold War period has proved to be much more complex, though. The “preponderant power” of the United States seems to be challenged by a dynamic in which the peculiar uni-polarity of the 1990s is replaced by

71 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). Fukuyama expressed his main idea arguing at the time that “what we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such.... That is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”

72 Azar Gat, “The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers,” *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 4 (July/August 2007). Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2008). Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). Fukuyama’s theory has been widely criticized, “from the Right” by authors such as Azar Gat who argued in his article “The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers” that the success of rising authoritarian countries could “end the end of history.” In this respect Gat considers the challenge of China to be a major threat since its international rise can offer a viable rival model to the West for other states. This view has been echoed by Robert Kagan’s book *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, whose title was a clear critique to Fukuyama’s *The End of History*. From the “Left” Fukuyama’s theory has been harshly criticized by many authors: an example of this reaction is Jacques Derrida who, in his *Specters of Marx* (1993), has termed the American political scientist as a "come-lately reader of Alexandre Kojève in the tradition of Leo Strauss” who has tried to offer a new theoretical basis to Western liberal hegemony in the post-Cold war period.
an increasingly multi-polar international order which is mainly characterized by emerging great powers and by the contrasting forces of globalization and regionalization.

This discourse – which tends to underscore the dynamic of an evolving balance of power - has influenced the course of Beijing’s foreign policy in the last two decades in terms of strategic planning and policy-making. The Chinese leadership has indeed recognized since the end of the Cold War “the unique set of constraints and opportunities in world politics characterized by an authority structure centered on US hegemony and an open, contested great-power politics embedded in globalization.”\(^\text{73}\) As Deng Yong notes, in this new framework “Beijing has begun a quest for great-power status which set it apart from both the predominant patterns of Chinese foreign policy in the previous eras and traditional great-power politics as posited by mainstream international relations (IR) theories.”\(^\text{74}\) Since the 1990s the Chinese government has indeed identified as a long-term priority the recognition of China as a “responsible major power” with an emphasis on status - a nonmaterial attribute of states – which is, in Evan Medeiros’ opinion, significant:

…given China’s traditional preoccupation with the relative position of major powers in the international system and the jockeying for power among them. This is so because many Chinese strategists see status as critical to China’s position among the major power centers and to ensuring Chinese accrual of both power and influence. Chinese policymakers and scholars argue that efforts to improve China’s international status are important because other nations are already expressing concerns about China’s growing influence in global politics. In other words, improving China’s image and reputation (and the

\(^{73}\) Deng Yong, *China’s Struggle for Status, The Realignment of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 270.

\(^{74}\) Ibid.
policies entailed therein) will help China to ameliorate external concerns of “the China threat” and, thus, will help avoid obstacles to becoming a strong, wealthy, and influential member of the international community.\textsuperscript{75}

By focusing on China's changing foreign policy paradigm in the post-Cold War era, we can see how the balance of power in current world politics has been increasingly affected by a process which – on the basis of a partly reconfigured national identity and interest conception - has characterized the PRC's struggle to “extend its influence beyond Asia, and ultimately move from the periphery to the center stage in regional and world politics.”\textsuperscript{76} The implications of this theoretical framework in terms of “praxis” underline that China’s international behavior has been informed in this more recent period, as Evan Medeiros writes,\textsuperscript{77} by a mix of material and ideational elements and priorities (reflecting a dimension of hard and soft power) such as protecting sovereignty and territorial integrity, promoting economic development, generating international respect and status, perpetuating the legitimacy of the Communist party-state. If these priorities have been collectively driving China’s foreign and security policy since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, it is important to note that the policy manifestations of these strategic objectives and the Chinese leadership’s relative emphasis on them have differed over the last 30 years.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{75} Medeiros, \textit{China’s International Behavior}, 18.

\textsuperscript{76} Deng Yong, \textit{China’s Struggle for Status}, 270.

\textsuperscript{77} Medeiros, \textit{China’s International Behavior}, 13.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 7-18.
In order to assess the complex mix of revisionist and status quo aspects which make China’s approach to the existing international arrangement, in Deng Yong’s words, an “amalgam of conformity and revisionism with persistent uncertainties,” we will look at China’s international behavior as “a deeply transitional phenomenon.” In this regard Evan Medeiros writes as follows:

China’s perceptions, objectives and policies are fixed for now but they are also evolving. Chinese policymakers clearly have objectives in mind, but they are groping their way forward with newfound power, influence, responsibilities, expectations, and constraints. China’s international behavior is increasingly driven, as well as constrained, by both domestic imperatives and a dynamic global security environment. Chinese foreign policy reflects a precarious balancing of competing internal and external demands, which are growing in number and variety. These demands, ultimately, will determine the content and character of China’s future international behavior - contributing, at times, to seemingly contradictory or inconsistent behaviors.

In this context “an inevitable consequence of this shift [in relative power] which has strengthened China rapidly in relative terms, is how Chinese elites perceive their interests and pursue them.” For this reason we will not underestimate in our analysis the role of perceptions, representations and national narratives because - as noted by Minxin Pei - the response of the international community to China’s rise as a global power can also be seen “as a problem of conflicting perceptions: the Chinese and the West simply see the same set of issues from starkly different perspectives.”

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79 Deng Yong, *China’s Struggle for Status*, 20.

80 Medeiros, *China’s International behavior*, 201–207.


82 Ibid.
For this reason we must be aware that in a transitional phase “as long as these dynamics continue to shape Chinese definitions of their interests and Western responses, repeated disagreements or even acrimonious confrontations between China and major Western powers”\textsuperscript{83} could occur in a context which will be at the same time increasingly affected by the international behavior of the other emerging powers.

Against this background it is particularly important to take account of the present Chinese theoretical reflection and public debate on the rise of China, in order to minimize what has been called an “ethnocentric distortion” in interpreting this process from a solely Western point of view.\textsuperscript{84} In line with our epistemological approach we cannot but agree with Edward Said when he points out in his \textit{Orientalism}, that “all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of their representer.”\textsuperscript{85} Our interpretation of the significance of the rise of China in terms of contemporary international relations will take into account this important dimension from a “double perspective” (a view from within and from without) which underlines - as Gadamer does in his \textit{Truth and Method} - that it is precisely in and through an understanding of alien

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{84} Paul A. Cohen, \textit{Discovering History in China} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). This important methodological caveat refers to what Paul Cohen has defined a “China-centered approach” in his “Discovering history in China”: Cohen’s book stresses the importance of beginning Chinese history in China rather than in the West and adopting thus also Chinese criteria for determining what is historically significant in the Chinese past.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{84} Jack Snyder, “Anarchy and Culture: Insights From the Anthropology of War,” \textit{International Organization} 56, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 37.}

cultures that we can come to a more sensitive and critical understanding of our own and of those prejudices that may lie hidden from us.  

This preliminary reflection on some epistemological and ontological aspects which constitute the “theoretical boundaries” of our research will hopefully help us better understand how at a deeper level the complex interaction between China, the West and other emerging powers originates in powerful and multifaceted dynamics which are influencing perceptions, relationships, and organizations all over the world. This situation seems to confirm that, as Christopher Hill has written, we have entered not only a possibly “long period of transition with respect to the foundational principles of the international order” but also a complex process of redistribution of power and influence among its main actors which could ultimately lead to the emergence of a more heterogeneous concert of nations as the new gravitational centre of 21st century international relations.

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86 Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 36.

CHAPTER II

CHINA'S RISE BEYOND HEGEMONIC TRANSITIONS AND THE “SECURITY DILEMMA”

The historical background: perceptions and misperceptions

In the last two decades the rapid and spectacular transformation of China's role in global economic and security affairs and its greatly increased influence have not been greeted with universal enthusiasm. Indeed they have often prompted fears of a “China threat in the West.” This threat has often been associated by IR neorealist theorists with the inter-related phenomena of “hegemonic transition” and “security dilemma” which refer - as noted in the previous chapter - not only to a specific ontology of the international system but also to a correlated set of policy options. In this chapter we shall develop a critique of these theories on the basis of the “pluralist” and post-positivist epistemological approach developed in Chapter I.

Since neo-realists thinkers consider that they display superior theoretical coherence in reflecting upon international relations, we shall begin our “deconstruction” of their abstract and deterministic approach by demonstrating the importance of the historical context in an analysis of events and processes rooted in the concrete and evolving context of international politics. We shall argue that theoretical elaboration, policy-making and public debate on the rise of China have been significantly influenced by perceptions and misperceptions. The Tiananmen crisis represented a first watershed in terms of Western perceptions, amounting to a paradigm shift in the evaluation of the
broader implications of China’s unparalleled economic expansion. The political crisis of June 1989 indeed made it clear that the opening-up of the Chinese economy, started under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, was not bound ultimately to democratize the Chinese party-state. For after Tiananmen the process of reform and

1 Craig Dietrich, *People’s China. A Brief History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 236-295. Chi Wang, “China: from Communism to Commercialism” (course at Georgetown University, Washington DC, Fall 2008). Chi Wang, *America and China: a Brief History* (Washington DC: The US-China Policy Foundation, 2009). In chapters 8 and 9 Dietrich underline that the first phase of reforms - 1978-1982 - was driven by a process which was perceived within the country and abroad as marked by significant “turning points”, both from a political and economic point of view. In 1978 there was a debate on the 5th modernization while the “Democracy Wall” protests influenced Chinese domestic politics. In 1979 the process of economic reform was reinforced with the creation of the first Special Economic Zones. In the meantime Deng Xiaoping continued to consolidate his power, assuming the Chairmanship of the Military Committee. After the Cultural Revolution a major process of reassessment of Mao’s policies – with a review of the so called “wrong verdicts” – was driven by the views and historical experience of Deng Xiaoping himself. Economic modernization faced many challenges in terms of policy-making: the economy needed a functioning legal system which had been totally dismantled during the Cultural Revolution. The Ministry of Justice was therefore restored and Law was reintroduced in the curricula of Chinese universities. In the social field, a serious demographic problem was addressed by the adoption of a “one child policy”, designed to control China’s birth rate. The new direction of China’s politics was underlined by the approval of a new Constitution and by the fact that the reformist Zhao Ziyang was named Premier. Those years also saw the political rise of important leaders such as Hu Yaobang and Li Peng. In a more general perspective, in the 1977-1982 period Deng Xiaoping concentrated his energies on making sure that China avoided falling prey to residual Maoism and that the country was prepared to participate in the complex arenas of international business, diplomacy and technology. The results achieved by Deng’s policies gained recognition, with China, significantly, becoming a member of the IMF in 1980. For the historical analysis of this period we have also referred to chapters 24 and 25 of Jonathan D. Spence’s, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton & Company, 1999), 618-676.

2 Ibid. Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China. From Revolution through Reform* (New York: Norton & Company, 2004), 123-156. As Jonathan Spence and other authors point out, the process of political reforms in the post-Mao period started in earnest with Deng Xiaoping’s speech “On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership” to an enlarged meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CCP in August 1980. Many of the problems and suggestions which Deng put forward on party-state relations, tenure of cadres, leadership and bureaucratic styles etc. were further discussed by Deng himself, notably in 1986, and resulted in a formal proposal to proceed with political reforms by the then General Secretary Zhao Ziyang at the Thirteenth Party Congress in October 1987. The plan was to put these proposals on the table at the 13th Party Congress, deepen the reforms at the 14th Party Congress, and basically complete them by the 15th Party Congress. Deng’s criticisms and suggestions were followed up seriously and after a period of research and investigation, the Party considered the time was right to put political reforms on the agenda of the 13th Party Congress in October 1987. Thus, Zhao Ziyang, Deng’s protégé at that time, formally proposed that efforts be made to separate the responsibilities of the party and the state, build up a socialist legal system, reform the personnel system, streamline the state apparatus and put through other reforms. However, the proposals, tabled at the 13th Party Congress, never really have a chance to take off. The clampdown on demonstrators in the 1989 Tiananmen crisis and the dismissal of Zhao Ziyang were de facto fatal blows to advocates of political reforms. In fact, public discussion of
internationalization of the Chinese economy continued on a separate track from that of the political and institutional liberalization of the Chinese system which the reformist sector of the CCP, led by Zhao Ziyang, and many in the West had hoped for. From then on, and especially in the light of the profound change in the bi-polar balance of power brought about by the end of the Cold War, the “structural” consequences of the rise of China began to be analyzed and assessed by prominent observers of international affairs who, particularly in the United States, tended to see them as “a harbinger of inevitable and unwelcome change.” From a theoretical standpoint this view was put forward by scholars who, albeit from different perspectives, agreed that hegemonic competition and transition are intrinsic cyclical features of the inter-state system. In this context neo-realist theorists, such as John Mearsheimer, posited that a rising China would not seek to maintain the status quo and would act aggressively to achieve regional hegemony. Indeed positions such as Mearsheimer's are representative of a school of thought – still political reform was thereafter considered to be politically unwise and looked upon with suspicion and skepticism. Although political reform was not completely excluded, the tempo was slowed and the scope narrowed. In the meantime, economic reforms pressed on full steam ahead. The leadership, notably Deng, apparently reaffirmed the need to gradually introduce political reforms, maintaining that the resolutions of the 13th Party Congress should not be altered. In this context, while the pace of political reform was evidently slowed, in October 1992 the 14th Party Congress did formally reiterate the need for political restructuring, socialist democracy and the development of China’s legal system, among other things.

3 Joseph Fewsmith, China since Tiananmen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Fewsmith develops an interesting analysis of the conservative critique of the reform process after Tiananmen and the emergence of neo-conservatism, neo-statism and popular nationalism.


influential in the US and elsewhere – which holds that the re-emergence of China as a “great power” could presage a hegemonic transition based on growing competition, if not outright conflict, between the US and China as the two major actors on the world’s stage of the 21st century. In terms of foreign policy-making this school of thought supports the view that the PRC should be contained and its economic development slowed in order to avoid, or at least delay as long as possible, a concomitant decline of US global leadership. Together with Mark Beeson we argue that “there are grounds, however, for questioning whether such predominantly state-centric analyses capture the complex nature of China's incorporation into the contemporary international order, or the multi-dimensional nature of ‘American’ power either…”

We shall accordingly try to show that the complexity and the relative uncertainty concerning “the rise of China” cannot be reduced to formulae built on theories focusing either on the “security dilemma” or on hegemonic transition, which take for granted an inexorable waning of American influence and global power. On the contrary, the complex and multi-dimensional dynamic of the rise of China is better examined in the framework of the “variable geometry” of contemporary international relations which are experiencing processes of globalization but also of regionalization.

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6 Massimo Ambrosetti, “The Rise of China: New Nationalisms and Search of Status” (master’s thesis, University of Cambridge, 2009), 8-37. The analysis of neo-realist thought on the “rise of China” in this chapter expands and deepens - by keeping, though, some of the main arguments - the considerations that I have developed in this respect in chapter I of my master’s thesis.

7 Beeson, “Hegemonic Transition in East Asia?,” 97. Y.-W. Sung, The Emergence of Greater China: The Economic Integration of Mainland China (Taiwan and Hong Kong: Basingstoke Palgrave, 2005). Criticizing the mere state-centered analyses of the rise of China, Beeson points out that, although the growth of mainland China's economy has attracted most attention of late, the possible emergence of a “greater China” incorporating Taiwan, Hong Kong and the fifty million or so “overseas Chinese” in South-East Asia highlights the potentially transnational nature of Chinese influence and power.
In this perspective, examining the limits of exclusively state-centric analyses can be a useful exercise because it provides a framework for exploring the epistemological deficiencies of influential theoretical explanations of the political, economic and strategic changes stemming from the rise of China. Furthermore it can help to better set in context the “complex, frequently contradictory and paradoxical nature” of the growing interdependence between China and the United States.\(^8\) The various theories analyzing China’s rise on the basis of an ontology of the international system relying on concepts such as the balance of power, hegemonic transition and security dilemma thus need to be rethought critically without failing to take account of the Chinese perspective of the problem. In this regard, it is useful to underscore, as Yong Deng and Wang Fei-ling have written, that in the last two decades China’s foreign policy stance and behavior have reflected “a concerted effort to overcome the security dilemma intensified by its fast-growing power.”\(^9\) The various theoretical perspectives outlined in the previous chapter can help us to better understand how the rise of China is influenced by material and ideational factors that mirror China’s international behavior that, in turn, appears characterized both by status quo and revisionist attitudes. In this context we shall also examine whether the rise of China is the outcome of an incremental strategy in which priorities and objectives are adapted to the domestic and international context or whether it has been from the outset driven by a “grand strategy.”

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The neo-realist structural perspective

As noted above, since the early 1990s the rise of China has often been viewed, especially in the United States, from a structural perspective by neorealist theorists who read it as a “power shift” capable of reshaping the international balance of power at regional and global level. We need therefore to devote some preliminary considerations to the theoretical framework which underpins this analysis, focusing in particular on the problems of balance of power, hegemony and polarity through which neo-realist theorists have mainly addressed the question. John Mersheimer explains the structure of the international system as follows:

Realists believe that power is the currency of international politics. Great powers, the main actors in the realists account, pay careful attention to how much economic and military power they have relative to each other. It is important not only to have a substantial amount of power, but also to make sure that no other state sharply shifts the balance of power in its favor. For realists, international politics are synonymous with power politics.¹⁰

In this theoretical framework, as Avery Goldestein points out, “concerns about the implications of China’s ascent often rested on arguments whose logic, at least implicitly, reflected strands of International Relations theory about the causes of military conflict.”¹¹ Various realist theories have indeed assumed that against a background of international anarchy powerful states mechanically embark on an out-and-out struggle for material superiority, leading inexorably to war. IR scholars subscribing to this view

¹⁰ Mearsheimer, “Structural Realism,” 79.

therefore argue that China's foreign relations could well go down that road as part of a
great-power game of survival. However, within the broader framework of neorealist
thought, somewhat divergent approaches have also been registered. One of the main
elements of diversification arises from the question “why do states want power?” and
how that question is answered. Even though some structural realist theories posit that “in
essence great powers are trapped in an iron cage where they have little choice but to
compete with each other for power if they hope to survive,”12 neo-realists have offered
different answers to the crucial question of what share of world power states should try to
obtain. Considering the rise of China from this particular point of view, “offensive
realism” generally offers a pessimistic assessment, questioning whether China is willing
or prepared to play a cooperative role. For its part, “defensive realism” has put forward a
rather different view resting on the assumption that Beijing could seek to shift the
balance of power in a more cooperative way, without necessarily aiming at acquiring a
potentially destabilizing hegemonic position. Structural realism’s diverging interpretative
approaches have been noted by Mearsheimer himself, who points out that there is no
single structural realist answer to the basic question “can China rise peacefully?” He
writes:

Some realist theories predict that China’s ascent will lead to serious
instability, while others provide reason to think that a powerful China
can have relatively peaceful relations with its neighbors as well as the
USA. 13

The first step in any analysis is to leave behind the “Hobbesian” conception of


13 Ibid.
the “security dilemma” applied to the rise of China, which argues that confrontation, in a framework of “bellum omnium contra omnes,” is inherent to the material structure of the international system and its deterministic forces. As noted, structural realism’s “ontological vision” considers the structure of the international order as an “anarchic system” in which the main actors are great powers “superiorem non recognoscentes.” This scenario further assumes that, possessing offensive military capabilities, these powers tend to act rationally in single-mindedly pursuing their own survival in a context of uncertainty about the other actors’ intentions. Even though we believe it essential, from a theoretical point of view, to look beyond offensive realism’s basic assumption that the ultimate goal of rising powers is to pursue hegemony so as to guarantee their survival, it should also be noted that this highly deterministic analytical framework offers a “realist” consideration (based on the historical analysis of the rise of hegemonic powers) that hegemony can be achieved at regional and not at global level. In this respect it is not surprising that the hegemonic perspectives of China are analyzed, in terms of historical antecedents, particularly in relation to the experience of the United States. This attempt of validating a theory about contemporary international relations through the lens

14 Robert Kagan, “Ambition and Anxiety. America’s Competition with China,” in The Rise of China. Essays on the Future Competition, ed. Gary Schmitt (New York: Encounter Books, 2009), 2-3. The application of this ontology – based on the pursuit of power as an immutable law of the international system – to our issue is explained by Robert Kagan who argues that “it is on the subject of power that America and China have the most in common. Both seek power and believe power is necessary to defend and promote their interests and beliefs. Both deny this, of course, because the 21st-century world recoils at discussions of power. Yet the United States spent more on its military than the next dozen powers combined even before September II, 2001. Nor has it been shy about using it, with ten military interventions in the past two decades alone. In the same two decades, China has been increasing military spending by more than ten percent per year. It will soon spend as much on defense as all the nations of the European Union combined. Power changes nations. It expands their wants and desires, increases their sense of entitlement, their need for deference and respect. It also makes them more ambitious. It lessens their tolerance to obstacles, their willingness to take no for an answer.”
of history has necessarily taken America’s “quasi-hegemonic role” in the post-Cold War era as an object of comparison in assessing the relative shift of international power and influence seemingly implicit in China’s global growth. It is interesting to see how this historical argument was recently developed along neo-conservative lines by Robert Kagan:

Indeed, if Americans want to understand Chinese power and ambition today, they could start by looking in the mirror. They could look back at the 19th century, when their own increasingly powerful nation, like China today, began knocking at the door of an existing international system in which it had until then played but a small part. After the Civil War, Americans were more secure than at any time in their history. They faced no threat of invasion and were rapidly becoming one of the richest nations on earth. Their expanding domestic market attracted vast amounts of foreign investment. The European empires that once surrounded the United States on all sides were retreating from the Western Hemisphere, effectively ceding it to American hegemony. And no sooner had Americans acquired this unparalleled security and regional dominance than, starting in the early 1880s, they began a peacetime naval buildup and the creation of a new battleship fleet that within two decades made America one of the top naval powers in the world. The buildup was not a defensive reaction to foreign threats, which were practically nonexistent. It was the product of expanding ambitions. American presidents talked about becoming "the arbiter" of the Pacific, "the controller of its commerce", a "power to be reckoned with." For all their security and power, many Americans in the 1890s felt challenged, constrained, even suffocated by other powers both great and not great. They imagined Great Britain and other European powers were standing in their way, denying them what was rightfully theirs. They felt a hostile world closing in and building barriers around them. But it was they who were pushing out into the world.\(^{15}\)

Kagan and other neo-conservative analysts use this historical argument to support their view that China’s rise is driven by forces – power, interest, ambition – which have shaped international relations since the age of Thucydides. We shall examine

this approach in greater depth later on, particularly in light of its theoretical assumption that in an international system based on power politics, ideational factors - such as pride, honor, status - play a crucial role.\textsuperscript{16} For the moment what we are interested in is focusing on the weaknesses of the historical comparison between the rise of the United States in the Western hemisphere and China in East Asia, which seems to us to be inherently flawed. The expansion of the young American Republic in North America and the regional influence projected by the United States in its hemisphere took place in completely different circumstances: in the second half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} Century the United States rose in a continent where the Native Americans had proved increasingly powerless to stop the expansion of a technologically more advanced industrial power, given also the absence of any other potential regional hegemon. The former European colonial powers were declining in influence while a process of independence in Latin America led, in contrast to what had happened in North America, to the political fragmentation of the sub-continent. Compared to the United States’ ascent, China’s regional growing role in Asia faces the challenge of a consolidated group of potential “peer opponents” such as Japan and India, not to mention the leading role played in the Asia-pacific region by the

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. This conception is clearly stated by Kagan when he writes: “If ambition is a sin, then all great powers in history have been sinners. Throughout recorded history, when powerful peoples, city states, and nations have arisen, they have often found themselves in a struggle to shape the contours of their world. These historical struggles are never about power alone, territory, or even physical security. The great struggles of history have also been about definitions of morality and justice, about competing visions of the role of the individual and society, about tradition and change, about images and interpretations of the divine. The struggle between China and the United States that will dominate the 21st century is about both power and belief. Two rising, ambitious powers are contesting for leadership in East Asia. As the world’s strongest democracy and the world’s strongest autocracy, however, they are also engaged in a contest about ideas, about definitions of justice, morality, and legitimacy, about order and liberalism.”
United States and its historical allies. Sharing the view that the rise of great powers and their relations with existing hegemons have been marked by violence throughout history, Richard Bitzinger and Barry Desker note that “the emergence of China as a peer competitor to the United States in the Asia-Pacific over the next two decades will test this precedent. If China’s rise is to be an exception, it will stand alongside the Anglo-American transition at the end of the nineteenth century as a fascinating case study of peaceful transition.”

Nevertheless the basic weakness of its historical analysis indicates today that as a theory structural realism was partly defined by an “ideological” approach stemming

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17 Medeiros, China's International Behavior, xxiii. At the same time it is important to note, as does Evan Medeiros, that “China’s ascendance in the Asia-Pacific region is changing the nature of U.S. relations with its allies and partners in the region. As China becomes more relevant to their economic, financial, and military affairs, the needs of U.S. allies and partners and their demands on Washington will change. In some cases, this makes U.S. policy and U.S. commitments more relevant, allowing Asian nations to engage China with more confidence. At the same time, none of these nations wants to choose between the United States and China; none wants the United States to leave the region; none wants China to dominate the region; and none wants to be drawn into an effort to contain China. As China looms larger in their economic development and regional security planning, this will complicate Washington’s ability to set exclusively the terms of interaction and cooperation with allies, partners, and others in the Asia-Pacific region and likely beyond.”

18 Richard A. Bitzinger and Barry Desker, “Why East Asian War is Unlikely,” Survival 50 (2008): 122. In their analysis these authors argue that the strategic objective of the PRC is a peaceful rise which does not, however, exclude a high degree of competition with the United States and of assertive behavior on the international stage. “A rising China will present a critical foreign-policy challenge, in some ways more difficult than that posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. While the Soviet Union was a political and strategic competitor, China will be a formidable political, strategic and economic competitor. This development will lead to profound changes in the strategic environment of the Asia-Pacific. Still, the rise of China does not automatically mean that conflict is more likely; the emergence of a more assertive China does not mean a more aggressive China. While Beijing is increasingly prone to push its own agenda, defend its interests, engage in more nationalistic – even chauvinistic – behavior (witness the Olympic torch counter-protests), and seek to displace the United States as the regional hegemon, this does not necessarily translate into an expansionist or warlike China. If anything, Beijing appears content to press its claims peacefully (if forcefully) through existing avenues and institutions of international relations, particularly by co-opting these to meet its own purposes. This ‘soft power’ process can be described as an emerging ‘Beijing Consensus’ in regional international affairs. Moreover, when the Chinese military build-up is examined closely, it is clear that the country’s war machine, while certainly worth taking seriously, is not quite as threatening as some might argue.”
from the Cold War. Largely ignored were essential factors such as the cultural and historical differences among states (which were treated, as we saw, as kind of “black boxes”). And structural realists also exhibited profound disinterest with regard to another important variable, regime-type, on the basis that states differ only because they are more or less powerful and not depending on whether they are ruled by democratic or totalitarian institutions. This abstract theoretical approach fails to give an accurate account of the decision-making process of different regimes as regards foreign policy and other areas. The case of North Korea – which is a significant factor not only in the East-Asia security scenario but in terms of China’s growing role at regional level – seems to us a good example of the relevance of regime-type to a state’s international behavior. Pyongyang’s “brinkmanship strategy” vis-à-vis its nuclear proliferation is indeed a crucial component of the regime’s efforts to guarantee its survival which has relevant implications at the international level.

As anticipated, this consideration stresses the need for an analytical approach which takes into account both systemic and sub-systemic elements. It should be acknowledged, though, that within structural realism there has been a partial awareness that world politics are influenced by forces and trends which cannot be explained solely in terms of the ontological systemic elements traditionally offered by the theory itself. “Defensive realists” have, for instance, acknowledged that, there are historical examples (such as Imperial Germany and Japan) of great powers exhibiting irrational international behavior: with irrational decisions not only undermining the goals of such states in terms of balance of power but also resulting in their final collapse.
For this reason, Kenneth Waltz admits that his structural realist theory of international politics has to be complemented by a theory of foreign policy in order to better understand the behavior of single states rather than the general laws governing the international system. In this way, one of the main theorists of structural realism implicitly acknowledges that the IR theory propounded by his school of thought cannot satisfactorily explain how the international system works in practice. Christopher Hill has convincingly underscored Waltz’s “inconsistency” as follows:

In neo-realist theory, foreign policy, with its associated interest in domestic politics and in decision-making, was simply not relevant, and indeed barely discussed….Neo-realism therefore deals in levels of

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19 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1st ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 121-122. The explanation to his analytical approach offered by Kenneth Waltz in his *Theory of International Politics* clearly underscores that the objective of this author is to offer an abstract model showing how an abstract international system functions. There is something of a paradox in the fact that this “realist” approach makes everything rather clear but also “unreal”. The rationalist paradigm underlying Waltz’s theory prevents him from fully understanding, in our opinion, the true dynamics of the international system because he refers to an epistemological approach which considers that as a social science International Politics can be explained in the same way as a natural science. In this context he asserts that “balance-of-power theory is often criticized because it does not explain the particular policies of states. True, the theory does not tell us why state X made a certain move last Tuesday. To expect it to do so would be like expecting the theory of universal gravitation to explain the wayward path of a falling leaf. A theory at one level of generality cannot answer questions about matters at a different level of generality. Failure to notice this is one error on which the criticism rests”… “another is to mistake a theory of international politics for a theory of foreign policy….Offering the bureaucratic-politics approach as an alternative to the state-as-an-actor approach is like saying that a theory of the firm is an alternative to a theory of the market, a mistake no competent economist would make….Any theory covers some matters and leaves other matters aside. Balance-of-power theory is a theory about the results produced by the uncoordinated actions of states. The theory makes assumptions about the interests and motives of states, rather than explaining them. What it does explain are the constraints that confine all states. The clear perception of constraints provides many clues to the expected reactions of states, but by itself the theory cannot explain those reactions. They depend not only on international constraints but also on the characteristics of states. How will a particular state react? To answer that question we need not only a theory of the market, so to speak, but also a theory about the firms that compose it. What will a state have to react to? Balance-of-power theory can give general and useful answers to that question. The theory explains why a certain similarity of behavior is expected from similarly situated states. The expected behavior is similar, not identical. To explain the expected differences in national responses, a theory would have to show how the different internal structures of states affect their external policies and actions.” The problem with Waltz’s theory is therefore that his answers offer a general theory which can be not usefully applied to the concrete world of international politics. To be really useful, as he implicitly admits, his theory should be complemented by an analysis at a “sub-systemic level” which should encompass a foreign policy theory.
analysis, with foreign policy analysis operating at the level of the explanation of particular units…. It is important to show that it [neo-realism] is unsatisfactory – because highly limiting – as an approach to foreign policy.\(^{20}\)

**The debate on “hegemonic transitions”**

To set the theoretical debate about “hegemonic transitions” in context it is useful to take note of Beeson’s following considerations which underscore the following:

…expectations that East Asia would generate rising powers and become the site of a process of hegemonic transition are not new. What is relatively novel, is the idea that China, rather than Japan might be the East Asian nation that achieved this. As recently as the 1990s, many observers confidently expected that Japan would overtake the US to become the world's largest economy and assume a political status and influence that matched its economic weight, fundamentally reconfiguring East Asia's intra-and inter-regional relations. Japan's failure to assume this position tells us something about the respective nature of China's rise, America's enduring power, and the character of hegemony more generally.\(^{21}\)

As we saw, the Tiananmen watershed influenced theoretical and public debate in the United States and in other Western countries by refocusing it on the conflicting dynamics of “power perspectives” related to the changing role of China on the world stage. Increasingly, rather disquieting predictions were voiced subsequently as to how China was liable to become the most serious challenger to the leadership of liberal democracies after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even though in the early 1990s the problem of China competing with the United States as a peer did not appear imminent, the debate over a future “China threat” was driven by a growing consideration of the possible shifts in the “relative” balance of power between Washington and Beijing. In

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\(^{21}\) Beeson, “Hegemonic Transition in East Asia?,” 97.
contrast, the benign narrative about the rise of China was based on a prolonged positive reading in the West, even after Tiananmen, of the Chinese reform process as a preliminary phase for substantive changes in the political and institutional structure of the Chinese party-state. \(^{22}\) In this respect the Chinese leadership adroitly kept on adopting policies which could be read as a renewed commitment to a broader reformist agenda.

By the time of the 14\(^{th}\) Party Congress in October 1992, the CCP clearly stated

\(^{22}\) Richard Evans, *Deng Xiaoping and the Making of Modern China* (London: Penguin Books, 1995). Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China. From Revolution through Reform* (Norton & Company, New York 2004), 127-159. Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 19-46. In retrospect, it is interesting to reflect upon the utilitarian approach that Deng Xiaoping, the father of Communist China’s modernization process, adopted from its very beginning. In a 1982 speech, he observed that not a single country in the world, no matter its political system, has ever modernized while operating a closed-door policy: “self-reliance in no way means “self-seclusion” and rejection of foreign aid. We have always considered it beneficial and necessary for the development of the national economy that countries should carry on economic and technical exchanges on the basis of respect for state sovereignty, equality and mutual benefit, and the exchange of needed goods to make up for each other’s deficiencies”. This statement reflects the pragmatic policies which, under the leadership of Deng and his successors, have transformed, in little more than three decades, both the Chinese economy and its society. The historical and political premise of the fundamental process of growth and transformation of post-Maoist China can be traced back in the gradual normalization of Sino-American relations begun by Nixon and Mao, which lay the foundations - in the mid-term - for strong economic cooperation between Washington and Beijing. To better understand in a historical perspective some of the implications of China’s reform process it is also useful to bear in mind the underlying political dimension. After Tiananmen, when the Chinese communist leadership has talked about political reform, it has never referred to Western democratic arrangements like the separation of power, bi-party or multi-party systems, Western parliamentary democracy, or other aspects of the Western political life. To Deng Xiaoping and his successors, the Western model represented a recipe for instability, for the destruction of socialist norms and values and for political crisis. Since 1989 and with the decline of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the concern with “peaceful evolution” and “bourgeois liberalization” reinforced the communist leadership's determination to adhere closely to its "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics". According to party’s theorists China, while adopting some useful capitalistic tools, still needed to go through "the primary stage of socialism" in order to reach socialism. During the reform process Beijing was prepared to accept modern technology, science, investment and trade from the west for the sake of its four modernizations, while being a lot more resistant to Western political traditions, values and practices. In this sense Beijing was persistent in following its four cardinal principles as it launched its political reforms: 1. keep to the socialist road; 2. uphold the dictatorship of the proletariat; 3. uphold the leadership of the Communist Party; 4. uphold Marxism-Leninism and the Thought of Mao Zedong and the doctrines laid down by Deng and successive leaders. All these principles eventually confirmed the leadership and dominance of the CCP. And Deng Xiaoping made no secret that this had to be the case. One of the most important reasons for the political reforms was no doubt related to the economic reforms and the opening of China to the outside world. China's dramatic recognition of the use of market forces and the private sector over the years had indeed made the political structure based primarily on the needs of a centrally planned economy obsolete.
its desire to establish what it called a socialist market economy, officially endorsing the necessity of borrowing from the experiences and practices of the capitalist market economy. More importantly, when the 15th Party Congress was convened in September 1997, the first Party Congress after the death of Deng Xiaoping, the CCP seemed interested in continuing Deng Xiaoping’s unfinished agenda on political reform.\textsuperscript{23} At the 15th Party Congress, Deng’s thoughts and policies were promoted to Deng Xiaoping Theory, making it the ideology for China's modernization. As such, the party constitution stipulated that the CCP had to take Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory as its guiding principles. However the real thrust of Jiang Zemin's report was only on economic reforms. Indeed, political reforms trailed behind as the Chinese leadership showed itself liberal and willing to borrow from capitalist economic experiences but most reluctant to follow Western political practices. When Deng Xiaoping passed away, Jiang Zemin, in his eulogy, mentioned his mentor’s contributions on political reforms and declared it the intention of the Chinese Communist Party to continue the reform of the political structure and to run the country according to the rule of law. At the 15th Party Congress in September 1997, and at the subsequent Congresses in 2002 and 2007 the debate on political reforms continued but without fundamental breakthroughs as compared to what seemed in the offing at the end of the 1980s.\textsuperscript{24} The pragmatism of the Chinese process of reforms can be viewed in retrospect as a policy of flexible adaptation to changing domestic and international variables. Even though the

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
leadership in Beijing has had a clear perception of some priorities and constraints affecting the rise of China from its beginning, it is true that the process had an incremental character which until recently prevented the Chinese from thoroughly considering its systemic implications. Ashley Tellis writes in this respect as follows:

…when Deng Xiaoping unleashed market reforms in 1978, neither he nor his successors could have imagined how revolutionary those decisions would turn out to be for China's geopolitical fortunes. Freed from cataclysmic Maoist political upheavals and a controlled Soviet-style economy, China would over the next three decades experience, in the words of The Economist, the most dynamic burst of wealth creation in human history.25

But the question of why China failed to anticipate the far-reaching consequences of its rise has been addressed in different ways by realists. For instance Michael Green argues as follows:

…the seeds of some present contradictions were planted by Deng Xiaoping three decades ago. Deng’s Four Modernizations departed markedly from the Maoist path, but Deng provided no vision of where his path would lead. Subsequently, Jiang Zemin’s ‘Three Represents’ and President Hu Jintao’s ‘Peaceful Development’ and ‘Harmonious Society’ have been regarded as similarly opaque about China’s ultimate role in the world. The leadership remains overwhelmingly preoccupied with internal challenges to continued economic development and sustained CCP rule.26

A substantially different view in this respect is expressed by Tellis who considers the reforms process as driven by a Chinese “grand strategy”. In this respect he writes as follows:


right from the beginning of the reform period, when Deng launched the four modernizations intended to transform China's agriculture, industry, science and technology, and military at the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978, the principal objective of China's grand strategy has been the accumulation of “comprehensive national power.” Although this phrase itself was not formally articulated until the 1980s - and, when articulated, referred principally to specific Chinese quantitative efforts to assess the relative power of states - the underlying notion of developing national capabilities in an all-encompassing fashion to include the material, institutional, and ideational elements of power was clearly inherent in Deng’s vision.27

This view echoes that of John Garver who stressed that "the broad purpose of China's Deng-inspired drive for modernization [was] to make China rich and powerful, thereby restoring it to the position of high international influence and status that it enjoyed throughout most of the several millennia of its existence."28 Tellis’ reference to the “material, institutional and ideational elements of power” appears to underline an important aspect of the process. China’s vision has been and is indeed inevitably shaped not only by pragmatic considerations of its growing “comprehensive power” but also by a profound consciousness of its historical identity and role (the “civilizational” dimension of the Chinese national identity). We shall try to develop this argument further in the concluding remarks of this chapter.

As already noted, on the Western front the lack of political reforms in China became a crucial element in the perception of the significance of China’s rise as a global power, helping reinforce the idea that the Chinese model of development - politically


authoritarian but open to international economic integration and free-market practices –
could be regarded as an alternative (and possible threat) to liberal democracy. Nonetheless widely different Western views on the rise of China continued to be voiced. The difficulty of coming to terms with all the implications of China’s rise has been ascribed polemically by James Mann to the general acceptance in the United States of a persisting “China fantasy” and of a “soothing scenario” for dealing with it.\textsuperscript{29} Mann’s central proposition in this respect is that “if China’s political system stays a permanently repressive one-party state, that will mean that US policy toward China since 1989 has been sold to the American people on the basis of a fraud – that is, on the false premise that trade and engagement with China would change China’s political system.”\textsuperscript{30} The focus on specific business interests\textsuperscript{31} arising from ever-growing economic ties between the United States and China is thus considered by a number of analysts to have been a significant factor in delaying a comprehensive assessment of the strategic implications of China’s impressive economic growth. Hugh White comments the problem in this way:

\begin{quote}
Behind many of these views and attitudes lies a comparison between China and the Soviet Union. Many Americans seem to think that if they could see off the Soviets, they can see off the Chinese. Alas, this metaphor is deeply flawed. China differs from the Soviet Union in many ways, above all in its economic dynamism and integration with the global economy. China made itself economically indispensable to the United States before the scale of its challenge to US primacy was ...
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid. With an economy expanding at about 10 percent annually, US and Eastern corporations saw China’s cost-effective manufacturing base and massive new consumer market as keys to survival, while countries rich in natural resources saw the Chinese market as a key to their competitiveness.
recognized. For a long time, Americans believed that they could forestall any challenge from China by controlling its access to the international markets and institutions essential to its growth, but it is too late for that now. Today, the United States has no choice but to continue trading with and investing in China, and thus underwriting the growth of an economy which poses the biggest challenge to America’s global role.32

Over the last decade the Asian giant’s impressive economic growth has been viewed, though, in increasingly problematic terms. China’s economic expansion has come to be seen as competitive rather than simply functional to the economic interests of the developed countries. Indeed a growing political debate on the implications of Chinese economic globalization has developed, fueled by forecasts that China would have the world’s largest aggregate GDP in the first half of the twenty-first century, while US deficits in bilateral trade persisted, and delicate problems related to the “currency manipulation” of the Yuan Renminbi remained unsolved, as did the question of the impressive amount of US foreign debt owned by Chinese state investors. Increasingly, American observers concerned with economic competition from China pointed out that China’s rise could no longer be regarded merely as a phenomenon favoring the “Westernization” of the country.

In the security and military sectors too, warnings of a looming “China threat” further intensified in the second half of the 1990s due to significant Chinese purchases of advanced air and naval equipment. Meanwhile America grew increasingly aware of the intensity and spread of Chinese espionage, aimed at acquiring advanced technologies.

Avery Goldstein writes in this respect as follows:

In the military realm China’s modernization program by the mid-1990s was focused on dramatically strengthening its capability to advance its interests in the Taiwan Strait, which China believed American preponderance put at risk. Meanwhile Beijing’s actions in some respects also conformed with the expectations these theories generate about a “challenger” dissatisfied with the dominance of a “hegemon.” China vociferously criticized U.S. human rights policy as an effort to impose American values on the rest of the world, and criticized U.S. international economic policy, especially with respect to the terms under which China could accede to the WTO, as an attempt to preserve American dominance.33

Amid growing negative perceptions of the “rise of China” conservative analysts, rather than focusing on the novel aspects of the situation, first turned to the past – the Cold War – to explain what was happening. Analysts and policy-makers began to consider the Chinese party-state’s growing capabilities and international role – along with its enduring communist political structure and ideology – as “a potential substitute of the defunct Soviet Empire in terms of potential great power threats to U.S. interests.”34

In this context, Beijing’s military modernization and regional assertiveness in the South China Sea and especially the Taiwan Strait were increasingly perceived as possible “scenarios for conflict with China, a country that had been a virtual American ally during the last two decades of the Cold War, quickly becoming important for assessing the adequacy of U.S. conventional and nuclear forces.”35

33 Goldstein, Rising to the Challenge, 84.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.
Power-transition theories

Realist thinkers have resorted to a “hegemon-challenger” dialectic in approaching these problems, while also referring to concepts developed during the Cold War such as Robert Gilpin’s “power preponderance theory” and Organski and Kugler’s “power-transition theory.” If these theories help to illustrate some of the various ways hegemony has been understood, at the same time they underscore – since they are a typical elaboration of the realist tradition – some of the well-known strengths and weaknesses of that interpretive paradigm. Robert Gilpin is perhaps the foremost exponent of the model on hegemony. His theory is based on the idea that “it is the differential rate of change between the international distribution of power and the other components of the system that produces a disjunctur or disequilibrium.” Such disjunctures - especially changes in the relative economic standing of different states - undermine the balance of power, introduce instability and tension, and encourage rising states to try and transform the international system to reflect their interests. In this reading, conflict is inevitable as declining powers seek to resist a process that inevitably diminishes their relative position. In his “War and Change in World Politics,” Gilpin’s view of international relations is indeed based on the idea that the international system is influenced by the role – in terms of governance – of a leading state which is able to “set

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37 Beeson, “Hegemonic Transition in East Asia?,” 97.

38 Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 50.
the rules of the game.” Challenge to the hegemon can stem, over time, from a process which empowers other states through the spread of economic and technological benefits and which weakens the leading nation because of the burdens - in terms of international governance – of having to maintain its preeminent role. At this point, according to Gilpin, either the hegemon or its rising challenger could be tempted to resort to force to exploit its relative position in terms of power, in a context where “the rise and fall of the great powers” (as Paul Kennedy puts it)\(^\text{39}\) can set the scene for “hegemonic wars.”

Applied to the rise of China, Gilpin’s theory tends to underline some negative implications for the preponderant power, the United States. In such a context cooperation with the PRC in terms of international trade, investment, and technology transfer could well be regarded as a significant erosion of US economic power and of America’s advantage over emerging competitors.\(^\text{40}\) Moreover, the classic problem of over-extension in the security and military sector (as US involvement in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars has shown) could make it increasingly difficult for Washington to preserve the global order that emerged after the end of the bi-polar era of confrontation with the USSR. The view that the rise of China is a “transformative process” in contemporary international relations – with the risks and challenges deriving therefrom has also found theoretical support in the “power-transition theory” proposed by Organski and Kugler.\(^\text{41}\) These authors look at the international system as a hierarchy of contending states in which the

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distribution of benefits reflects the influence and interests of the system’s hegemon. Focusing on the extent of shifts in the capabilities of a dominant state and a rising challenger, they define the breaking of the balance of power as a “crossover,” the phase in which a rising great power is determined to overtake the established hegemon. This process of competition and transition clearly underscores the conflicting dynamic which can lead to power shifts and ultimately to a new international order. Referring to this analytical approach when considering whether a rising China may ultimately pose a threat to international stability as a peer competitor of the United States, it is worth noting that the power-transition theory provides a less clear picture of the dangers posed while a possible challenger is still rising. Even though China’s overall capabilities are still not comparable to those of the United States – making a direct challenge highly unlikely in the near term - this theory has attracted attention as it suggests the possibility of a latent or open phase of friction before any predicted “crossover,” when preventive action could be considered. Yet, as Mark Beeson notes, “recent East Asian history suggests that there is nothing preordained about the way such relationships will develop or about the impact of economic, political or strategic power: Japan's post-war subordination to the US is markedly at odds with the expectations of realists and serves as a reminder that international relations in the East Asian region might not follow a universal template.”

The overarching thrust of these theories has always been that a rising China

42 Beeson, “Hegemonic Transition in East Asia?,” 97.
would demand - not surprisingly - a larger role in international affairs hitherto dominated by the United States, thus setting the stage for growing and potentially dangerous competition. The limits of these theories seem to us basically linked to the realist ontology whereas a possible China’s revisionist “grand strategy” appears in fact to be driven by a number of different factors rather than simply by the logic of “power politics” aimed at hegemony. In this respect, as we have seen, “defensive realism” also considers the pursuit of hegemony by a state as mistaken in strategic terms because it can generate a negative counter-reaction in the international system. For this reason Kenneth Waltz maintains that states should aim to use an appropriate amount of power in order to prevent a “balancing” reaction by other nations. Defensive realists seek to demonstrate historically the pursuit of hegemony was fatal for those states which tried to attain it (Napoleonic France, imperial Germany, Hitler’s Third Reich, imperial Japan). However, the attempt to present China as a threat by introducing shaky comparisons with previous cases of hegemonic transition is typical of a school of thought that Stefan Halper calls “great power historians.”

Using historical analogies to back up their theories on hegemony, these analysts often point to the rise of Imperial Germany – with its impressive industrialization and militarization – as a possible antecedent the process which now sees China as the challenger of the incumbent American hegemon. It would

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44 Ibid. As Halper writes, this view has been expressed by several “China watchers”. Examples of this over-simplification in historical analysis can be found in statements such as those of Gary Schmitt of the American Enterprise Institute who writes that “if it walks like a duck and it quacks like a duck, then it must be a duck. China quacks quite a lot like Wilhelmine Germany in keeping with the classical rising power pattern. For this reason, it’s really bound to bump into the US at some stage.” Robert Zoellick, warned a decade ago that “failure to deal effectively with Germany’s rise led to seventy-five years of
be probably more pertinent in this respect to recall the distinction made by Barnett and Duvall between “structural power and productive power” in evaluating the case of “Wilhelmine” Germany as a possible precursor of a rising China. After the demise of Bismarck as the genial architect of Prussian and German diplomacy, Berlin did not translate its huge and growing structural power into greater influence on the world scene: the “Welt-politik” developed during the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II (the colonial expansion, the buildup of the “krieg-marine”, the mismanagement of the system of diplomatic equilibrium and influence created by the Iron Chancellor) not only turned out to be incapable of achieving its ambitious goals but also proved a growing source of friction which ultimately weakened Germany’s “preponderant power” in continental Europe. The comparison with Wilhelmine Germany also serves as the basis for less dire predictions: Bismarck’s diplomatic architecture offered in fact an example of balance of power which, for a while, made Germany the most powerful state in continental Europe and at the same time prevented a “balancing effect” against it. As Stefan Halper notes, the general problem with these kind of analyses is that they rest on an outmoded, Western-centric view of international politics which portrays rising nations as confronted with a stark and deterministic choice: “either challenge the United States for leadership (a path leading to conflict), or integrate with the U.S.-led system which will lead to a peaceful evolution in which rising powers conform to the Western liberal order.”

Conflict.” Presidential candidate Pat Buchanan declared in 2005, “what America and China must avoid is the fate of Wilhelmine Germany and the Britain of George V, when the world's rising power and receding power stumbled into a thirty-year war that destroyed both.” John B. Henry of the Committee for the Republic, put it even more bluntly: “there's bound to be conflict. I can't think of an example of when the great power system accommodated a rising power. History says that conflicts will happen. The U.S. fits the pattern of the hegemon, and China fits the pattern of the inevitable challenger.”
We cannot but agree with Halper that these “great game watchers - making questionable assumptions and asking the wrong questions, worry about a confrontation with the hegemon, but the real world of international relations is less simple.” History itself is less simple, in particular when considering China, a complex country and civilization that has been defined “caught in a…prison of history.” Historical comparisons such as those mentioned above not only suffer from an “ethnocentric distortion” in analyzing history, as noted previously, but are plainly aimed at validating over-abstract theories about hegemonic transitions. On the contrary, we think that an in-depth consideration of the contribution that historical analysis can offer stems first and foremost from an epistemological approach which considers it a fundamental component of “the act of interpretation” that Aristotelian thinkers defined “subtilitas intelligendi.”

In the framework of structural realism, a sort of “middle-ground” concept used by defensive realists to analyze hegemonic transitions is the “offense-defense balance” which tends to show how difficult and ultimately futile it is for a state to pursue an expansionist policy based exclusively on an offensive approach. It is interesting to note that this theoretical assumption refers to sub-systemic aspects in terms of the neo-realist ontology of the international system. Nationalism - in the sense of possible “nationalistic resistance” to a hegemonic invader - has indeed been regarded by these theorists as a factor capable of effectively countering a new status quo founded on offensive and hegemonic policies.

45 Ibid.

In this way a phenomenon such as nationalism finds its way into the neo-realist theoretical narrative despite the fact that it is linked to an ideational dimension – for which there should be no room in an analysis which supposedly assumes that the international system is determined only by structural forces. Neo-realist views on hegemonic transition and China’s role as the main challenger of American world leadership have, not surprisingly, been questioned by several Chinese authors.\textsuperscript{47} They reject theories such as Mearsheimer’s, who asserts that “the rise of China will not be peaceful at all,”\textsuperscript{48} as long as China’s power continues to grow, because “China, like all previous potential hegemons, [will] be strongly inclined to become a real hegemon.”\textsuperscript{49}

It is interesting to note that the Chinese response to these classical neo-realist positions, Zhongqi Pan’s for example, questions the “problematic assumption about the uncertainty of a state’s intention”\textsuperscript{50} that Mearsheimer considers possibly “benign one day and hostile the next” because “intentions are impossible to define with 100 percent certainty.”\textsuperscript{51} By questioning these claims not only in factual terms, Zhongqi Pan argues that Mearsheimer’s approach contradicts the realist assumption that states “as rational actors behave according to cost-benefit calculations of national interests,” making states’ intentions predictable.


\textsuperscript{50} Zhongqi Pan, “Defining China’s Role in the International System,” 2-3.

\textsuperscript{51} Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics, 35.
In this respect Zhongqi Pan, while acknowledging that China has benefited from the international system, considers Mearsheimer’s claim ungrounded because the “benign intention of a state is often in line with its positive attitude towards the international system, and vice versa.”

Thus, by adopting a constructivist notion of a “state’s intention” - that is “the extent to which it benefits from international norms and rules and how it perceives itself in the international system - either as a beneficiary or as a victim,” the Chinese author assesses a state’s benefit from the international system according to the related categories of material growth and social growth:

…while material growth is the growth of national material power and strength, social growth is the progress of state socialization (normative internalization) in international society i.e. the progress that is made by accepting and internalizing international norms.

It is interesting to note such Chinese theoretical enunciations (to be examined in greater depth in the following chapter) because they criticize the neo-realist approach for focusing “simply on China’s material growth, [and] failing to take into account its social growth.”

This position emphasizes that, since the opening and reform process launched in the late 1970s, “China has become a significant beneficiary of joining the international system, even if Chinese officials are typically reluctant to admit this on the record,” enjoying in addition to its impressive material growth an “equally remarkable social

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52 Ibid. Zhongqi Pan’s definition of “intention” posits that it is a “contingent variable that will change along with a state’s evolving cost-benefit calculations of national interests” assuming, though, that in a given period of time, state’s intentions “remain relatively stable.”

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.
growth.”

These aspects are clearly relevant in the framework of our reflection on the revisionist and status quo attitudes of China’s international behavior. The question of the degree of the PRC’s engagement in the present structure of the international system and its internalization of various international norms through “a process of state socialization” is indeed a key factor for assessing the Chinese views on the possible transformative processes of the international system. With regard more specifically to our analysis of hegemonic transition theories, a significant process of internalization of international norms would be a clear indicator that China’s is driven in its actions by a logic which rests on more than a power-politics vision of contemporary international relations. Beijing’s record in this respect is, however, highly debatable, as the crucial issue of human rights, among others, seems to underscore: we shall need therefore to analyze this set of issues in greater depth in the next chapter.

**Balance of power theories**

Coming back to the realist analytical armory applied to the rise of China, we need now to examine how the concept of “the balance of power”\(^{56}\) has been widely used to analyze the breaking of the equilibria of the international system due to the growing power of one of its actors. Theoretical reflections defining “balancing” behavior vis-à-vis a rising power can in fact be found in some classical works, such as Kenneth Waltz’s “Man, the State, and War” and “Theory of International Politics” and Stephen Walt’s

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55 Ibid.

56 Jonathan Haslam, *No Virtue like Necessity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002). This is an excellent analysis on the history of the realist tradition.
“The Origins of Alliances.” From the point of view of our analysis, what is interesting is that – in addressing the question of “anticipatory balancing either against projected power” (e.g. regional actors seeing a need to prepare to cope with a rising China) or against a preponderant “current power” (China’s interest in reducing the influence of a dominant United States), theorists such as Stephen Walt\textsuperscript{58} admit that this interaction is also shaped by national interests, not just by power. In this way a “sub-systemic” element - the foreign policy choices of states - is again taken into consideration: this would therefore imply the analysis of factors at the national level, including perceptions, shared history, ideology, and national identity. Walt adds indeed “offensive intentions” to the three main material criteria - aggregate strength (size, population, and economic capabilities), geographical proximity and offensive capabilities - that states are supposed to use in order to evaluate the threat posed by another state. He argues that the more states view a rising state as possessing all these qualities, the more likely they are to see it as a threat and balance against it. Stephen Walt’s “balance-of-threat theory” has been regarded by his author as a better account than neo-realist theories on hegemony of how the international system works on the basis of “empirical” evidence. Yet his theory also underscores the limits of a “dogmatic” view of the balance of power theory, thus implicitly supporting the argument that it is necessary to contextualize the “rise of China” in a theoretical framework which comprises both material and ideational elements. On the basis of Walt’s assumption that states are not interested in balancing


\textsuperscript{58} Walt has defined himself a “realist in an ideological age.”
against those who are rising in power but do not display offensive intentions, one of the driving elements to assess the rise of China should be the objectives and motivations of Beijing’s foreign and security policy. In this perspective Walt’s attempt to enrich the analytical elements of his theory undermines, though, the “ontological” coherence of the neo-realist approach with his implicit acknowledgement of the need to take into account sub-systemic elements.

Another approach intrinsically based on a “balance of threat” assumption (typical of the Cold War dynamics) was elaborated by the so called “nuclear peace” theorists who argue that major security dangers associated with the rise of China are limited because of the destructive potential brought about by the advent of nuclear weapons. In a context of “hegemonic wars” the possibility of total destruction related to

59 Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: a Renewed Debate* (New York: Norton, 2002). Nuclear peace’s main argument is that under some circumstances nuclear weapons can induce stability and decrease the chances of crisis escalation, as happened during the Cold War. The “equilibrium of terror” was assured because both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. possessed mutual second-strike retaliation capability, eliminating any possibility of nuclear victory for either side. Proponents of the nuclear peace have asserted that controlled nuclear proliferation may be beneficial for inducing stability. On the contrary the critique of the nuclear peace theory underscores that nuclear proliferation not only increases the chance of inter-state nuclear conflict, but increases the chances of nuclear material falling into the hands of non-state groups who are free from the threat of nuclear retaliation. The major debate on this issue took place between Kenneth Waltz and Scott Sagan. Waltz’s argument rested on the assumption that “more may be better,” contending that new nuclear states will use their acquired nuclear capabilities to deter threats and preserve peace. Sagan’s view that “more will be worse” underscored that new nuclear states often lack adequate organizational controls over their new weapons, which makes for a high risk of either deliberate or accidental nuclear war, or nuclear theft by terrorists. The nuclear peace basic argument was clearly influenced by the by-polar world shaped by the confrontation between USA and USSR. In a condition of mutual assured destruction, there were civilian “hostages” on both sides. This facilitated cooperation in this sector by acting as an informal mechanism of contract enforcement between states. Nuclear weapons have also been regarded as an instrument to lessen a state’s reliance on allies for security, thus preventing allies from dragging each other into wars (a phenomenon known as “chain-ganging”, frequently said to be a major cause of World War I). The main criticisms of the nuclear peace argument have underlined that actors are not always rational; bureaucratic procedure and internal dynamic may cause sub-rational outcomes; unwanted escalation, misperception, and the security dilemma have been regarded as factors which favor a certain degree of inherent instability in deterrence.
the use of nuclear weapons and their operational range by means of ballistic missiles, have structurally changed international politics by raising the costs of conflict among great powers. This “nuclear revolution” has been embodied in the concept of deterrence which is based on the assumption of a possible mutual annihilation of the powers engaged in unrestrained nuclear warfare. This “equilibrium of terror” has provided, as Goldstein notes, a “robust buffer against general war,” tightly constraining “crisis behavior and the fighting of limited wars.”

He continues as follows:

…crises and limited wars between nuclear states with survivable retaliatory forces may yet occur, but their outcomes will no longer be determined mainly by traditional estimates of the balance of military power. Instead, in the nuclear age, such encounters become a competition in risk-taking whose outcome is likely to be determined by the balance of political interests that underpins each actor’s resolve. Nuclear peace theory, then, suggests that the alarmist implications for international security of China’s rise to power were being overstated, mainly because analysts failed to explain why the familiar nuclear constraints would not apply for a Chinese decision-maker and his counterpart in a rival great power.

The “nuclear peace” theory underscores therefore the stark strategic reality which dramatically limits the probability of major scenarios of conflict that more pessimistic neo-realist perspectives have suggested. In this framework - with the enduring strategic consequences of the nuclear revolution - the need to prevent any serious escalation would be motivated by “the same pressure to find a negotiated solution that leaders in Washington and Moscow had felt during their various Cold War crises.”

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60 Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge*, 100.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.
In the evolving scenario of 21\textsuperscript{st} century international relations the “nuclear peace” theory applied to the rise of China seems to be for the time being a remote hypothesis if conceived on the basis of the traditional “mutually assured destruction” doctrine. What is more relevant in a balance of power scenario focused on strategic arms is instead the role of Chinese nuclear capabilities in the perspective - confirmed by the signing of the new START treaty – of a significant reduction of the arsenals of the two nuclear superpowers\textsuperscript{63} and of a parallel growth of the Chinese one. As Glosserman and Ekmektsioglou write, U.S. cuts have in fact shifted “the strategic balance with other countries, China in particular: the ratio of U.S. to Chinese weapons has gone from 40:1 (in 1997) to 10:1 (in 2010), and should close further still. U.S. reductions are occurring as the Chinese modernize and increase their strategic arsenal. While the actual number of Chinese strategic warheads has remained relatively flat, the addition of road-mobile ICBMs and the reinforcement of its sea-based capabilities mean that the number of weapons that can strike the U.S. has increased.”\textsuperscript{64} Instead of reinforcing a “security dilemma scenario” this situation seems to underscore the growth of Beijing’s comprehensive power as a possible “challenger” of the U.S. on the basis of its growing nuclear capabilities as in other areas.

\textsuperscript{63} Brad Glosserman and Eleni Ekmektsioglou, “Strategic Stability in U.S.-China Relations,” ISPI Policy Brief 210 (May 2011). As Glosserman and Ekmektsioglou write, at the height of the Cold War, “the U.S. and the Soviet Union had nuclear arsenals of 31,255 and 45,000 stockpiled weapons, respectively. In the two decades since the end of the superpower standoff, both countries have made significant cuts into those stock-piles: Russia now has 2,430 nuclear warheads while the U.S. has 1,968. U.S. officials insist that reductions in the strategic arsenal do not imperil its security, nor that of its allies. The U.S. retains (and continues to develop) capabilities to both deter and defeat enemies and adversaries across a range of contingencies.” According to the New START treaty, the numbers of deployed strategic nuclear warheads will fall to 1,550 by 2018. For the size of the U.S. arsenal see: http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/10-0503_Fact_Sheet_U.S._Nuclear_transparency__FINAL_w_Date.pdf; for estimates of the Soviet arsenal see http://www.fas.org/spp/starwars/ crs/91-144.htm.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
In the framework of evolving security relations in East Asia, the present situation contradicts late 1990s analyses which tried to corroborate the security dilemma’s assumptions through supposed empirical evidence stemming from China’s policies in the region and the reaction to them. In this respect Avery Goldstein has argued as follows:

Beijing’s investment in power-projection capabilities, reassertions of sovereignty over waters and territory from the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands to Taiwan to the Spratlys, and the limited military actions China had undertaken contributed to growing consternation in Tokyo, Taipei, the capitals of the ASEAN countries, and most openly in Washington, D.C. While the buildup of the PLA’s air and naval forces might simply have reflected Beijing’s belief that it needed to be able to mount a forward defense in the event conflict were forced upon a reluctant China, these capabilities could also be used to undertake offensive military operations. It is precisely such uncertainty about intentions and how they might change over time that drives the security dilemma.

By the mid-1990s the situation in East Asia was influenced by worsening mutual perceptions that nonetheless did not trigger predicted “dangerous spirals of conflict” as expected by the theorists of an “intensifying security dilemma” with China. David Shambaugh summarized the situation at the time as follows:

From China’s perspective, its build-up [was] a legitimate effort to acquire armed forces commensurate with its rising status as a global economic power and protect its perceived national interests. But from the perspective of many of China’s neighbors an alarming trend [had] begun.

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65 Goldstein, Rising to the Challenge, 87.

66 Ibid.

Even though “the intense rivalry that reemerged in the Taiwan Strait in the 1990s was judged at the time as a classic example of the security dilemma - illustrating why some worried that the growth of Chinese power and reactions to it would result in dangerous balancing behavior and increase the chances of military conflict”\(^68\) – more than a decade later this crisis can be read instead as a sign of broader problems which sometimes featured elements of significant friction but were not necessarily conducive to military confrontation. In this context the “security dilemma” which still influences relations between Beijing and Taipei, stems, in our view, first and foremost from a problem of national identity – and the related definition of Chinese core interests - which is not simply a question of material security factors. The possibility of an alternative Chinese state system and the question of its legitimacy at international level has been perceived in Beijing as a threat to the “one China policy,” which constitutes an absolute priority for the PRC’s leadership. It is also seen as a dangerous “vulnus” to a vision of Chinese state sovereignty which celebrates (beyond the specific ideological nature of present and past regimes) the unique continuity of Chinese civilization. Whereas the prominent role of perceptions, representations and intentions in the Beijing-Taipbi security relations crisis has been increasingly reinforced by a newly credible Chinese power projection across the Taiwan Strait, nevertheless the process has never followed the deterministic laws of the neo-realist “security dilemma theory,” invoked at the time to justify a policy of containment towards Beijing. This policy has been set out by Peter Rudolph in the following very clear terms:

\(^{68}\) Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge*, 88.
The entire American policy toward China should be subservient to a single goal, namely to prevent China’s rise in power or at least to slow it down. Economic relations would thus be entirely subordinate to security policy, trade and investment would be limited and the transfer of dual U.S. technology severely restricted. Politically, the goal would be to limit the expansion of China’s influence in Asia. In terms of security policy, such a strategic course would mean strengthening existing alliances in Asia, directing them towards containing China, and seeking strategic partners in the region.\textsuperscript{69}

While the policy-making option of simply containing China has never been completely ruled out in the last decade such a dramatic reorientation of American diplomacy has been perceived as increasingly difficult to implement. One reason is that it would conflict with important U.S. political and economic interests while another is the need to cooperate with Beijing on transnational issues of common concern ranging from climate change to global economic governance. The latter is of particular importance in the context of the present economic recession which has reinforced the PRC’s relative power on the world’s scene.

In the rapidly changing context of contemporary international relations, the balance of power and hegemonic transition theories that emphasized the potentially disruptive effects of a rising China appear much less convincing. Those theories drew on the logic of balancing in a context characterized not only by Beijing’s worries about U.S. global and regional power but also by reactions of other actors towards a growing

Chinese influence.\textsuperscript{70} But the logic of balancing can be better used to support a “threat reduction” argument in the present East-Asia security scenario. Admittedly realist balance-of-power theories do not always conclude that the outcome of hegemonic transition processes has to be war. Some hold instead that resort to force is merely possible in a theoretical framework of power-politics where the causes of conflict are basically associated with material elements. As noted, the limits of this approach can be deduced from the need to refer – as in Walt’s case - to a wider set of driving factors in order to analyze more closely a scenario characterized not only by “friction” but also by collaboration and integration.\textsuperscript{71} The theoretical approaches on hegemony and the balance of power examined so far have therefore underscored once more some of the limits of a neo-realist ontology and epistemology in explaining the rise of a new great power in the international system. As a corollary of these critical considerations, we will now examine how this analytical approach can set the rise of China in context.


\textsuperscript{71} With the notion of “friction” we refer to a situation of diverging positions and interests in different sectors (trade, economy, security) between two or more states which in not conducive, though, to an open military confrontation or a major diplomatic crisis. The causes of potential conflict or friction can in fact be better assessed in a context which takes into account also the “cooperative” and threat-reduction factors which influence the process.
Polarity and the “security dilemma”

Bearing in mind the final objectives of our research – the possible transformative impact of the rise of China on the international system – it is now useful to reconsider the tenets of the “security dilemma” while focusing on the aspects of structural change connected to this kind of theoretical approach. In this sense polarity - a traditional structural element mainly used to explain the possibility and consequences of “balancing” in the case of hegemonic transition – can be regarded as an important interpretive tool if deprived of its strictly neo-realist connotation. A basic argument of our analysis is that adding to the many uncertain aspects of the rise of China, is the fact that the world is moving towards a more multi-polar international order. Support for a greater international multi-polarity has been and is one of the overarching objectives of Chinese foreign policy and is reflected in China’s search for status and recognition as a great power on the world scene. China has expressed its views clearly in this respect in documents such as Beijing’s 2008 national defense white paper:

Economic globalization and world multi-polarization are gaining momentum. The progress toward industrialization and informationization throughout the globe is accelerating and economic cooperation is in full swing, leading to increasing economic interdependence, inter-connectivity and interactivity among countries. The rise and decline of international strategic forces is quickening, major powers are stepping up their efforts to cooperate with each other and draw on each other’s strengths. They continue to compete with and hold each other in check, and groups of new emerging developing

powers are arising. Therefore, a profound readjustment is brewing in the international system.\(^{73}\)

The problem of polarity has been thoroughly analyzed by neo-realist theorists in close connection with the questions of balance of power and hegemony. In a post-Cold War world which many thought would be an era of American uni-polarity, the rise of China has been regarded as a possible driver toward a new more multi-polar situation. But at the end of the first decade of the new millennium the facts seem to contradict some of the main neo-realist assumptions about polarity. Even though post-Cold War American “uni-polarity” was weakened during George W. Bush’s Presidency (for reasons including an overstretched U.S. military capacity in various crisis theaters to the poor handling of a major world recession, to the decline of America’s “moral authority” and international influence)\(^{74}\) the potential of Washington’s leadership in diplomacy and security – revived by the action of the Obama administration - still seems very resilient in the face of competition from new international actors. As Deng Yong notes, it is important to develop a “realistic appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of the U.S. international role.” If U.S. leadership cannot be taken for granted in the present evolving international scenario, it is also true that the United States still occupies “the central position beyond material supremacy, with unrivaled leverage at its disposal.”\(^{75}\) For these reasons Deng rightly points out that “in responding to China's growing influence in Asia

\(^{73}\) China’s National Defense in 2008 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2009).


\(^{75}\) Deng Yong, China Struggle for Status, 293.
and the world at large, it is important for the United States not to succumb to the simple
balance-of-power logic, as such thinking tends to stem from incomplete understanding
and an underestimation of U.S. strengths, as well as from misconstrual of the Chinese
challenge.”

In this context it does not seem a very likely option that bipolarity could return
in the form of a G-2 consisting of the United States and China, even though the idea was
recently re-proposed by Chinese authors such as Yan Xuetong, who perceived a growing
gap between, on the one hand, Washington and Beijing and on the other the rest of the
rising actors on the world scene. If we consider international relations from the point of
view of the emerging 21st Century security equilibrium, this set of rising regional actors
in fact contribute to a strengthened trend towards multi-polarity: India, Brazil, a newly
assertive Russia, a European Union politically weak but increasingly ready to take on
greater regional responsibilities (as in Libya for example) and a potentially less timid
Japan facing growing “peer competition” in Asia. Another factor to be taken into
consideration to assess a trend towards a more multi-polar international system is the
growing process of regionalization sustained not only by state-actors but also by
organizations such as ASEAN, APEC and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, just
to name the most active in Asia. In this framework we can better evaluate the limits of
neo-realist theories which have focused on the possible risks associated with multi-

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76 Ibid.

77 Yan Xuetong, “China’s Rise and International Order” (lecture, Carnegie Endowment for
polarity in East-Asia\textsuperscript{78} by arguing that the balance of power was shifting in a direction which could ultimately weaken the U.S. role in the region. That analysis underestimates, in our view, the fact that the U.S. power projection in the region coupled with the potential of acting as a “honest broker” vis-à-vis the international interests of the other regional actors guarantees to Washington a protracted leading role in the area, notwithstanding the rapidly growing Chinese comprehensive power. For these reasons, as Goldstein writes, Beijing has, since the last decade of the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century, recognized

\dots that it had neither the option of flexibly allying with others (an option that would have been available under multi-polarity), nor the option of self-reliance (an option that would be available if China were to become a peer competitor of the United States under bipolarity). Consequently, Beijing rather quickly backed away from any serious attempt to balance U.S. power in ways that might have provoked conflict. Instead, China’s leaders embraced a more subtle grand strategy designed to advance their country’s interests while also coping with the potential dangers they faced during a protracted period of American preponderance.\textsuperscript{79}

Moreover, if we consider the situation from the standpoint of regional dynamics we cannot but agree with David Shambaugh when he stresses that substantive changes in the balance-of-power system looming in the background of Asian security not only “would require considerable adjustments among regional actors” to fully emerge but also would imply a choice between Beijing and Washington which is “the nightmare scenario


\textsuperscript{79} Goldstein, \textit{Rising to the Challenge}, 86.
for the vast majority of Asian states.”\textsuperscript{80} A significant factor reducing the risk of security confrontations in East Asia is in fact linked to the reluctance of several Asian states to any “bandwagoning with a rising China…on a full regional basis (although it might in certain bilateral cases, as some may seek to balance against China).”\textsuperscript{81} The fact that almost all Asian states are interested in maintaining “sound, extensive, and cooperative relations with both the United States and China” makes it a priority for them to “avoid being put into a bipolar dilemma.”\textsuperscript{82} The more recent developments in Myanmar-U.S. relations seem to be a further signal in this direction, with the possible weakening of China’s relationship with one of its traditional “proxy states.” If the rise of China is thus set in the context of the evolution of international relations at the end of the first decade of the new century, the process seems to be heading in a direction which clearly goes beyond structural realism’s notion of the “security dilemma”. Even though there are several persisting factors of friction both in the security and in the economic sectors, the more recent developments in the strategic relationship between Washington and Beijing have in fact been characterized by trends and realities which question the neo-realist paradigm which in the 1990s posited the United States’ “preponderant power” as almost inevitably confronted with the “zero-sum game” ascendancy of China. The advantages of closer cooperation with Beijing – the subject of much theoretical debate – are also


\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid. According to Shambaugh “some states in fact play a kind of balancing role between the two regional powers - tilting first toward Washington and then toward Beijing - so as to hedge their bets, protect their interests, and keep both engaged.”
suggested to some degree by defensive realism, which posits that an increasingly powerful China could seek to shift the balance of power in its favor without necessarily fomenting tension and conflict in the Asian region. Defensive realism, in its less deterministic version, assumes that states do not necessarily pursue hegemony because they grasp that international status and security can be achieved less aggressively. As noted previously, this approach also takes into account the regional role of China’s peer-competitors – some of them armed with nuclear arsenals - a factor seen as significantly minimizing the “security dilemma logic”. Alongside such considerations, a new “Cold war” with China has increasingly come to be seen as having significant negative implications for U.S. It would involve escalating defense expenditure, drawbacks for the American economy, possible stalemates in the UN Security Council and, more importantly, the potential radicalization of China’s international stance on many global issues.

Notwithstanding a growing consensus around these theoretical views, the phoenix of the “security dilemma” continues to rise from the ashes, more recently by way of the debate on Beijing’s new assertiveness and the concept of “strategic stability” between China and the United States. Michael Swaine has written in this respect as follows:

During the past two years, and particularly since China’s quick and strong recovery from the global recession, the long-discussed topic of China’s rise has come to be dominated by a new theme among both Chinese and foreign observers: the image of the supposedly cautious, low-profile, responsibility-shirking, free-riding Beijing of the past giving way to one of a more confident, assertive (some say arrogant), anti-status quo power that is pushing back against the West, promoting its own alternative (i.e., restrictive or exclusionary) norms and policies
in many areas, and generally seeking to test the leadership capacity of the United States.\textsuperscript{83}

The basic assumption here is that international relations have entered a new phase defined by a U.S.-China strategic relationship which is still in flux and viewed by the two countries from fundamentally different perspectives. For this reason finding a “mutually acceptable definition of strategic stability” is considered “one of the key challenges” of contemporary international relations.\textsuperscript{84} It is interesting to note, though, that this theoretical approach blends “security dilemma” and “interdependence” arguments, as we can see in opinions such as Glosserman’s who, blaming the PRC’s for its confrontational stance, asserts that “engagement, not containment, is longstanding U.S. policy.” For this reason he considers the following:

…the Chinese claim that the U.S. does not accept China’s rise is paranoia, not fact. The U.S. would not have invested billions of dollars in China, bought hundreds of billions of dollars of goods from China, or educated thousands of China’s best minds if it sought to contain the country.\textsuperscript{85}

Even though the present phase of the U.S.-China relationship is characterized to some extent by mistrust and suspicion because of several factors of friction in the economic and security sectors,\textsuperscript{86} we doubt that there are “ample opportunities to turn that

\textsuperscript{83} Michael D. Swaine, “Perceptions of an Assertive China,” \textit{China Leadership Monitor} 32 (Spring 2010).

\textsuperscript{84} Glosserman and Ekmektsioglou, “Strategic Stability in U.S.-China Relations”.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid. According to these authors the possibility of a U.S.-China armed conflict could occur “either as a result of conscious decisions or by miscalculation or misperception. Given this potential for conflict, strategic stability is not just an abstract notion” and it is related to Beijing’s perception that “the realization of one of China’s ‘core interests’, the reincorporation of Taiwan, is actively blocked by the
tension into [a] conflict.\textsuperscript{87} In a context where “many nations question Chinese assurances that its rise will be peaceful, [as] the Chinese challenge the U.S. claim that it is ready to deal with China as an equal partner,” persistent factors of potential conflict and friction are mitigated by the counterbalancing elements that we have so far examined such as economic interdependence, China's integration and responsibilities in a web of international institutions, the need to face common global threats and problems and the fact that both the United States and China are fully aware of the disruptive side-effects of any kind of serious military confrontation.

As David Shambaugh points out, the prospect of a major power rivalry - “owing to the asymmetric structural properties of the regional system” and based on a zero-sum competition for dominance - “is difficult to envision in the near and medium term. It would also require that the United States and China experience conflicting interests and policies over a wide range of regional and global issues” developing a dysfunctional relationship that would not be in line with the need of a pragmatic cooperative state of Sino-American relations and with the several overlapping interests and concerns that the two countries share.\textsuperscript{88} The argument – recently re-proposed by Aaron Friedberg in his \textit{A Contest for Supremacy}\textsuperscript{89} - that the narrowing power gap between the once-clearly-

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{88} Shambaugh, \textit{Power Shift}, 11.

\textsuperscript{89} Aaron Friedberg, \textit{A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia} (New York: Norton, 2011).
dominant United States and China, compounded by the "yawning ideological chasm that separates the two nations" is "an obstacle to measures that might reduce uncertainty and dampen competition, and a source of mutual hostility and mistrust" is not necessarily conducive to a scenario of open confrontation. This is confirmed by the fact that the possible security aspects of the evolving U.S.-China relationship have been assessed in somewhat reassuring terms by several analysts including the Pentagon. In the report on the Military Power of the PRC drafted in March 2009 by the Office of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates it is stressed that while "China is seeking technology and weapons to disrupt the traditional advantages of American forces...its ability to sustain military power at a distance remains limited." Considering that the Chinese military has undergone a "comprehensive transformation," to achieve the capability of fighting "short-duration, high intensity conflicts along its periphery" against "high-tech adversaries" in a framework of "local wars under 'informationized' conditions," one critical factor is represented by the secrecy surrounding the PLA, its opaque practices and inadequate military exchanges which could create the potential for miscalculation. However, also against this background, circumscribed military confrontation would be

90 Ibid.

91 Halper, *The Beijing Consensus*, 181.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid. As Stefan Halper notes in this respect, “the Chinese navy, for example, refused in 2008 to enter into an incidents-at-sea protocol with the United States-a protocol that would establish procedures for avoiding potential confrontations. The international community continues to have limited knowledge of the motivations, decision making, and key capabilities supporting the modernization program. But on the basis of discernible data, the evidence suggests that the "important driver of its modernization" remains "preparing for contingencies in the Taiwan Strait, including the possibility of U.S. intervention."
more likely to stem from accidental scenarios such as a collision between Chinese and Taiwanese jet fighters, or naval skirmishes, rather than from an open conflict between China and the United States. Beijing security policy is still aimed basically at reinforcing its power projection by establishing an “area of denial” around China and Taiwan and extending its maritime influence. The credibility of China’s military capacity at the regional level does not yet directly pose a strategic challenge to the American security umbrella in East Asia. One reason is that the Chinese leadership, as we have seen, is still sensitive to an approach of threat reduction which minimizes major factors of conflict which could affect the PRC’s internal stability and economic development. This is an important theme that we will develop further in the next chapter by analyzing the impact of regime-type on China’s definition of core interests.

Under these circumstances we can therefore look from a systemic point of view at the “security dilemma” as a perspective structurally minimized by the web of structural links between the United States and China which are commonly referred to as the phenomenon of “complex interdependence”. Such a position holds, as Evan Medeiros notes:

The U.S.-China relationship is also unique...because it is currently characterized by a great deal of cooperation and competition - on both economic and security issues....The dueling cooperative and competitive dimensions of bilateral ties are structural features of U.S.-China relations. On the one hand, stable bilateral relations are important to both nations’ economic and security interests; outright

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conflict would be costly for both. On the other hand, Beijing feels threatened by U.S. global predominance and some aspects of U.S. Asia policy…Washington is equally concerned about China’s growing economic and military power, and U.S. leaders remain deeply uncertain about China’s future intentions.95

**Between the security dilemma and the interdependence paradigms**

In a still-evolving situation the response to the rise of China on the basis of effective and far-sighted policy options seems therefore to be defined by a horizon which goes beyond not only the realist paradigm launched at the international level by the China policy of Nixon and Kissinger in the early 1970’s (and magnified, also at the domestic level, by Deng Xiaoping’s era of opening and reforms) but also the recurrent “China threat” theories linked to the rise of China. As we have seen, the interpretive value of a theoretical approach based on neo-realist “hegemonic transition” has been challenged by the “economic interdependence paradigm,”96 which, in turn, is now being reconsidered in light of the diversified implications of this “complex interdependence.”

More recent trends have indeed raised questions over the traditional tenets of a cooperative approach envisaged by neo-liberal theories which, since the 1980s, have argued that the degree of interdependence between states in the economic field, both at the bilateral and multilateral levels, can be important in shaping not only a country’s foreign policy but also the decision-making process of its leadership. These theories have in principle underlined the possible positive effects of economic interdependence,

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95 Medeiros, *China’s International Behavior*, 96.

96 Niall Ferguson, *The Ascent of Money, a Financial History of the World* (HC: The Penguin Press, 2008). This unprecedented network of cooperation and integration between two competing systems has been defined by Niall Ferguson “Chimerica.”
international institutions and, in the longer run, democratic transformation on the future role played by China in the international system. Neo-liberal theories on interdependence have thus offered a generally optimistic view of the rise of China not only rejecting “security dilemma” scenarios but considering it a significant aspect of a general trend towards a “benign” globalization. And while, as noted above, this paradigm has been seriously shaken by more recent trends in globalization itself and our interpretation of it, it is useful to consider further this strand of thought in International Relations Theory, which can be traced back to the publication in the early 1980s of two influential volumes: *International Regimes* edited by Stephen Krasner and *After Hegemony* by Robert Keohane.97 These two books contributed to bringing about a theoretical change, casting international institutions in a new light and offering a novel explanatory approach to the study of the international system and patterns of international behavior. Keohane and other authors started off by observing that the existence of institutions and international organizations (such as the Bretton Woods institutions and at the time the GATT) had a significant stabilizing effect on the international economic system, including in periods of severe crisis, and helped produce substantial shifts in the distribution of international economic power.98 The presence of this multilateral framework was indeed viewed as an essential factor in guaranteeing international economic cooperation in a period of turmoil such as the 1970s. The problem now is that the very framework of global economic


98 Martin Wight, “Neoliberalism,” 112.
governance is under scrutiny not only because of the impact of the world crisis of 2008 but also due to the emergence of new significant actors such as the BRICS. The first casualty of this trend was the G 8 replaced by a G 20 which should better represent the new balance of economic power in contemporary international relations.

The lasting analytical contribution of the “interdependence paradigm” is the intellectual reaction of neo-liberal theorists who exposed the significant limits of structural realism. Keohane and Nye, focusing on transnational relations, “rejected the neorealist assumption that states were the sole important actors on the international stage, suggesting that actors such as non-governmental organizations might also have systematic effects on patterns of international behavior.”

Offering “one line of reasoning justifying optimism about the likely impact of China’s growing capabilities,” theories of interdependence focused on the incentives for states to avoid military confrontation if the costs of conflict are great (e.g. the breach of relations with important economic partners) and the benefits from the use of force are limited and not

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99 Bitzinger and Desker, “Why East Asian War is Unlikely,” 111-112. In this respect Richard Bitzinger and Barry Desker underline that “China’s engagement with global and regional institutions has resulted in revisions to its earlier advocacy of strict non-intervention and non interference. Chinese support for global initiatives in counter-terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, anti-drug trafficking and AIDS prevention; its general reluctance to exercise its veto as a permanent member of the UN Security Council; and its active role within the World Trade Organization since its accession to membership indicate that China is aware that responsible participation in global institutions can be influential in shaping perceptions of its rise. While China avoided participating in peacekeeping operations in the first two decades following its admission to the United Nations in 1971, it has engaged in 15 operations since the 1990s. China’s rapid emergence as a global economic power has resulted in increasing informal influence as other states attempt to accommodate Chinese interests and concerns. Expanding Chinese trade and investments, as well as the relocation of Western and Asian manufacturing capabilities to China, has resulted in an increasingly economically interdependent China that is part of a network of integrated global manufacturing operations. China has also participated actively in cooperative regional institutions, winning new friends and disarming old adversaries. The focus in China’s regional relationships has been on maintaining regional economic growth and facilitating China’s integration into regional and global affairs.”

100 Ibid.
decisive (because the “comparative advantage” of power is linked less to the material gains attainable by aggression and more to the maintenance of a mutually beneficial network of economic relations, even with competing international counterparts). This line of reasoning has thus been applied to the rise of China, mainly seen as driven by the country’s impressive and rapid economic growth supported by huge increases of international trade and foreign direct investment. For these reasons one of the main arguments of the “interdependence approach” versus the “security dilemma” is that if China behaved internationally in such a way as to disrupt or undermine international economic activity it would put at risk China’s ability to sustain the high rates of growth needed for it to emerge as a great power in political and military as well as economic terms. It would equally put at risk the CCP’s monopoly on political power. Evan Medeiros addresses the problem as follows:

A persistent and consistent economic logic drives China’s foreign policy and foreign relations…. [As] Chinese leaders have often stated over the past 30 years, China seeks to maintain a favourable international environment conducive to continued domestic reform, development, and modernization. This goal was set out by Deng and has been the core foreign policy objective during the entire reform era. This slogan is not merely propaganda; it has real meaning behind it. Chinese diplomacy seeks to minimize threats on its peripheries (e.g., Russia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia) that would cause China to divert national resources away from economic reform and the leadership’s management of China’s developmental challenges. Insofar as maintaining robust growth and balanced development are central to the CCP’s continued legitimacy, Chinese foreign policies seek to stabilize China’s regional security environment and address emerging threats (e.g., territorial disputes and transnational challenges) to ensure that the leadership can continue to focus on economic development and growing China’s comprehensive national power.\(^{101}\)

\[^{101}\] Medeiros, *China’s International Behavior*, 50-51.
This paradigm has significantly influenced also the last two decades of American foreign policy towards a rising China. Both the Clinton and Bush Administrations, after some degree of hostile rhetoric at the beginning of their first terms, decided to pursue a pragmatic policy which tried to reconcile some unresolved questions of principle (the respect of human rights in China, relations with Taiwan, the situation in Tibet) with the priorities set by American national interests advanced, on the economic front, by a powerful China lobby. As Stefan Halper writes, this lobby of “commercial panda huggers” - intrinsically opposed to a security dilemma scenario - consisted of various groups, “from politicians to the business councils and the academy” which proposed variations of the same basic argument: the more economic cooperation with China there is, the more Beijing is pushed to “increasingly conform to the norms of Western liberal behavior, both abroad and at home.”

This view “on the transformative magic of economic engagement” with China has frequently been expressed, as Halper points out, even at the highest political level in the last two decades. President Clinton at the end of his second term promised that economic liberalization in China would "increase the spirit of liberty over time...just as inevitably as the Berlin Wall fell," while during the 2000 campaign George W. Bush, making the case for free trade with China, asserted that "economic freedom creates habits of liberty, and habits of liberty create expectations of democracy." In 2005, he added there was "a whiff of freedom" in the Chinese marketplace, which would "cause there to be more demand for democracy." In

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102 Halper, The Beijing Consensus, 188.
the 2008 election, Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee typified this kind of optimism, arguing that China was "becoming much more a part of the mainstream, in its economic development and even in giving greater liberties to its people." It is interesting to note that this view has been shared by both liberal and conservative standpoints, irrespective to a large extent of the broader implications of these assumptions in terms of security. Analysts of the American Enterprise Institute have for instance argued that "the means for achieving democratic change in China" had apparently "increased" through "external economic engagement."103 This context has reinforced policy-makers in pursuing engagement with Beijing, which was regarded as also serving the political and security interests of the United States and Europe in East-Asia. On the other side, the Chinese leadership has expressed an overarching sensitivity to the needs of an international projection which takes account, even in the case of disputes, of China’s essential trade relations with its most important economic partners - the U.S., Japan and Europe. Goldstein has written in this regard as follows:

As long as China’s leaders were concerned about preserving the conditions essential for promoting their country’s welfare under circumstances where international trade and investment remained crucial, they would be reluctant to resort to the use of force. In this view, the arms of an interdependent state like China might not be tightly chained by economic concerns, but they are likely to be loosely bound in ways that reduce the prospects for military conflict and increase the incentives to sustain international cooperation.104

103 Ibid. This American Enterprise Institute’s analysis seems to hope that one of the outcomes of this process could be the unleashing of “forces that will push toward political pluralism even though the prosperity derived by the PRC’s economic growth and integration in the international market system “has lent legitimacy to the Chinese Communist Party.” This opinion, as well as the statements of President Clinton, Bush and of presidential candidate Mike Huckabee are quotations by Stefan Halper.

104 Goldstein, Rising to the Challenge, 99.
Beijing’s international stance has in fact reflected the importance of these economic priorities. After three decades of economic reform driven by widening and deepening international cooperation, China’s integration into the international economic system has become a significant and irreversible reality – as China’s accession to the World Trade Organization made plain at the beginning of the new millennium. In the 1980s the growing network of intense economic ties between the PRC and its Western counterparts was driven, on the one hand, by the massive process of industrial delocalization implemented by the most advanced Western countries, while on the other it was legitimized by the Nixon-Kissinger realist policy of strengthening the political dialogue with Beijing in order to counterbalance the Soviet Union. As noted, this scenario has been substantially re-assessed in recent years on the basis of the recognition that China has become much more than a minor partner in a relationship of interdependence which thus can no longer be shaped simply by the priorities and objectives of its Western counterparts.

The crucial question now is - as Minxin Pei underlined\(^\text{105}\) - that “the relative balance of power has been changing at a pace that is bound to produce real geopolitical consequences” because of the magnitude of the process. This is clearly exemplified by the fact that “in terms of the size of the economy measured by exchange rates, China was about 7 percent of the United States when Bill Clinton was elected to the White House in 1992. In 2001, when George W. Bush became president, the Chinese economy was 13

percent of the American economy.

When Barack Obama won the White House in 2008, the Chinese economy was about 30 percent of the U.S. economy. Today it is about 40 percent.”106 The implications of this change in the relative power between the world’s two major economies, as Elizabeth Economy and Adam Segal have argued, not only tend to evidence some “structural” limits of a mere policy of engagement between Washington and Beijing, but also that “the G-2 Mirage” is neither a realistic choice for American foreign policy107 nor a perspective so far pursued by the Chinese leadership. Such a hypothetical “condominium of power” should indeed imply that both countries “remaining suspicions of the other as a strategic competitor or security threat” could substantially resolve some significant elements of friction, clarifying the perspectives of their strategic relationship.108 It is difficult to deny that in the present phase of their relationship the significant potential for more effective cooperation between the U.S.-China cooperation in managing regional and global challenges - which would require common interests and mutual trust - “clearly has enough common interests but insufficient mutual trust.”109

After the definition by the Obama administration of a “China policy” which takes into account all the complexities of the “most important bilateral relationship for the U.S.” in

106 Ibid.

107 Elizabeth Economy and Adam Segal, “The G-2 Mirage: Why the United States and China are not Ready to Upgrade Ties,” *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 3 (May/June 2009).


109 Ibid.
the 21st century (as Secretary Clinton has defined it) the two countries have had a series of disputes on regional and global issues which have kept high this level of reciprocal mistrust.\(^{110}\) This situation has put pressure on options such as a policy of “congagement” aimed at "engaging but hedging" a rising PRC.

Gary Schmitt in this respect has expressed the following opinion:\(^{111}\)

Government officials are under constant pressure to keep engagement with China on a steady course because there are numerous, important issues to be talked about, and a massive amount of private business to be conducted. What results is a general reticence by policymakers to do anything that might disrupt that process, and a propensity to overlook longer-run trends that potentially are more significant. What this means, in practice, is that it provides Beijing with leverage to threaten to withdraw from that engagement process if it deems any hedging measures (such as selling modern weapons to Taiwan) as going too far. In short, while you can shove two words together to coin the term "congagement," they remain two distinct policies that rest uneasily with each other.

In this context China has been perceived by the United States as increasingly assertive while the United States has been seen in China as trying to build an anti-China regional framework of new containment. Nevertheless, Evan Medeiros expresses the following consideration in this respect:

Mainstream Chinese strategists argue that, on balance, China’s most important bilateral relationship remains with the United States but in a world characterized by more diffuse types of power and a greater

\(^{110}\) Ibid. As Minxin Pei writes, “When translated into their management of regional and global challenges, this complexity means that Washington and Beijing cooperate on some issues but clash over others. One example is North Korea. The United States and China are both rivals and partners on the Korean peninsula. They work together to prevent conflict and war there. But they also work against each other at the same time—the Chinese provide aid to the North Koreans to maintain a strategic buffer against American influence, while the Americans maintain a powerful military presence and alliance structure in the region to balance against growing Chinese power.”

\(^{111}\) Ibid.
number of important relationships, including with states, groups of states, and institutions. This calculation about U.S.-China relations stems from three views. First, the United States is still a key source of trade, investment, and technology for China’s economic development. The United States remains China’s largest trading partner, for example, and China is the largest holder of U.S. government debt and is also the fastest growing export market for the United States. The degree of China’s interdependence with the U.S. economy is high and not likely to change significantly in the next two decades. Second, the United States provides key international “public goods” to Asia in the form of regional security and stability and freedom of navigation from which China benefits…. This view has lessened in recent years as China has become more concerned about U.S. efforts to expand its alliance with Japan and its security cooperation with India. Third, avoiding conflict and overt geopolitical competition with the United States is critical to China’s effort to ensure a stable and peaceful security environment; major strategic competition or outright military conflict with the United States—more than with any other nation—would significantly disrupt China’s security environment.\textsuperscript{112}

In a perspective which goes beyond the security dilemma constraints, it is also important to note that the "engagement versus containment" framework imprisons American policy-making “in a false dichotomy. For the fact is that a security strategy based upon military deterrence - i.e., an improved U.S. military posture, revitalized alliances, and strategic partnerships - would not detract from diplomacy, trade, or other forms of exchange with China.”\textsuperscript{113} A new interpretive paradigm should realistically take into account that, as Minxin Pei rightly points out, the China-U.S. relationship “is neither strong nor weak. It is complex, dynamic, and multi-faceted. The United States and China are rivals and partners at the same time. In geopolitical terms, they are more rivals than partners; in economic terms, they are more partners than rivals.” The present dynamic

\textsuperscript{112} Medeiros, \textit{China’s International Behavior}, 34-35.

seems therefore to evolve beyond both the models of the “security dilemma” and of the “complex interdependence.” The fact that the process is characterized by perceptions and representations of China as a “partner-opponent” confirms a persistent uncertainty over the long-term implications of the process. The systemic dimension of the process is, in fact, not only driven by material factors but also by ideational elements, such as perceptions and misperceptions.

David Shambaugh has written in this regard that “a number of observers, particularly in the United States, Japan, and India, remain skeptical about China’s motivations and the sustainability of its new cooperative posture. These skeptics see China’s ‘new face’ as a tactical ploy to lull the region into a false sense of complacency, until China builds up its comprehensive strength in anticipation of the day when it can dominate and dictate to the region. Such a strategy is captured in Deng Xiaoping’s admonition taoguang, yanghui (bide one’s time while building up capability).”¹¹⁴ For these reasons, as Beeson notes, uncertainties epitomize the current and future strategic landscapes of East Asia, where the rise of China has emerged as the biggest variable of all. The new challenges posed by a rising China develop in the following scenario:

…the regional states are expected to display corresponding levels of flexibility…. While, on the surface, most of these nations are closely engaging China, some are clearly more calculating than others, ready to adjust their stances on China whenever deemed necessary. Others wish to maximize the knowns (i.e., security ties with the U.S.) while minimizing the potential costs associated with the unknowns (i.e., strategic intentions of China).¹¹⁵

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¹¹⁴ Shambaugh, Power Shift, 12.

¹¹⁵ Beeson, “Hegemonic Transition in East Asia?,” 99.
In drawing conclusions from the analysis developed in this chapter, we can say - addressing the central question of our research - that change in the direction of a new regional hegemonic system in Asia centered on China seems an unlikely perspective, particularly as regards a hierarchical model with China as the major power. As Shambaugh rightly underlines, two major elements militating against a 21\textsuperscript{st} century version of the ancient “tribute system” are not only the Chinese leadership’s awareness of all the risks and burdens of pursuing a “hegemonic” role but, more important, the very improbable “complete diminution of American power and influence and its withdrawal from the region.”\textsuperscript{116} On the contrary, the United States still maintains a significant advantage vis-à-vis China in all major areas, even though the gap has been narrowing rapidly. A rising China does not appear therefore to have “significant potential to become a pole, nor do incentives for others to ‘bandwagon’ seem significant, first and foremost because its power projection is confronted with the American-centric system of bilateral military alliances (comprising the United States, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia).”\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid. David Shambaugh defines this model the “hub and spokes”, with the United States the hub of a wheel and with each of the bilateral alliances the spokes of it. He notes that “although this system has stabilized the region well and has the potential to continue to do so in the future, the structure is not sufficient to constitute a true regional system. A large number of countries - and this includes China - remain unallied or unaffiliated with the system and have no compelling reasons to join. Thus, although the structure goes a long way toward integrating a number of key nations in the region in a common security network, it is highly unlikely that the ‘hub and spokes’ system will enlarge to become a full regional system in the future...Thus by itself, the U.S.-led alliance system is insufficient to constitute a full regional security structure but still sufficient, one could add, to prevent China becoming a pole.”
Minxin Pei writes in this respect as follows:

…in managing the changing balance of power between the United States and China, Washington has advantages that Beijing does not have. The United States plays an important role as a strategic balancer in Asia. China’s rise has struck fear among its neighbors, and Beijing’s assertive behavior in 2010 only reconfirmed their worst worries about a powerful China. As a result, these countries—particularly Japan, India, South Korea, Indonesia, and Vietnam—are motivated to strengthen their ties with the United States. So when we talk about the U.S.-China balance of power, we must also factor in the power of America’s allies and friends in Asia that can be called upon to counter China.\footnote{Ibid.}

This U.S.-led system thus inhibits the emergence in Asia of a true “concert of powers” which would imply not only a dramatic decline of U.S. influence in the region but a substantially equal distribution of “hard power” and the maintenance of stability shared among several major players.\footnote{Henry Kissinger, “Reigning in North Korea,” The Washington Post, June 8, 2009. For these reasons, formats such as the six-party talks do not reflect the strengthening of a regional cooperation that Henry Kissinger has compared to a working “concert of powers”: this is due to the diverging core-interests of Washington (the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula) and of Beijing (the maintenance of regional stability avoiding a disruptive collapse of the North-Korean regime).} In this context the model that has been termed “complex interdependence” could further evolve in a manner whereby state sovereignty and international relations increasingly revolve not only around power politics but also “around the dense web of economic, technological, and other ties between nations in the era of accelerating globalization.”\footnote{Robert Cooper, The Post-Modern State and the World Order (London: Demos, 2000). Robert Cooper, The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-First Century (New York: Atlantic Press, 2003). Shambaugh, Power Shift, 12. It must be recognized that neither Washington nor Beijing have a “post-modern” vision of their relationship. The distinction between modern and post-modern states has been analyzed by Robert Cooper. In this sense it is debatable, in our view, as Shambaugh argues, that the core actor in the complex interdependence model “is not the nation-state, but a plethora of non-state actors and processes - many of which are difficult to measure with any precision - that operate at the societal level. These multiple threads bind societies together in complex and interdependent structures.”} This dynamic can play the role of a deterrent to
conflict and might favor a reciprocally beneficial coexistence on the basis of a “multi-
textured and multilayered hybrid system” that shares elements of “hard and soft power.”
In the present Asian context where any one of the major dynamics at work “is by itself
insufficient to establish a dominant regional system…the U.S.-led alliance system
remains the predominant regional security architecture…(relying) on hard power, and the
threat of it.” As Beeson points out, the alliance relationships that the U.S. maintains in
East Asia is an essential factor in determining the regional states’ modes of response to
the rising China. A crucial implication of this situation is that America looks increasingly
inclined “to strengthen its alliance ties with East Asia, in order to address possible
contingencies in which China becomes a revisionist challenger that might threaten the
existing security order in the region.” The Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia”
policy is a significant confirmation of this strategic vision.

The present situation at the regional level seems to underscore that the potential
of change linked to the rise of China is better represented by a realist dynamic which
contradicts the deterministic security dilemma assumptions and is partly complemented
by “the emergence of a soft power architecture in the region, based on a series of
increasingly shared norms about interstate relations, security, and the emergence of state

\begin{footnotesize}
121 Ibid.

122 Beeson, “Hegemonic Transition in East Asia?,” 99.
\end{footnotesize}
and non-state institutions to advance these norms.”

This scenario sets the rise of China in a context characterized by a growing interdependence and a multi-polar balance of power inscribed in a globalized “thick space” which is defined by diversified political, economic, cultural actors, norms and institutions blended, though, with significant elements of “Westphalian” sovereignty at the state level and of realist dynamics in terms of international relations.

The functioning of the “anarchical society” seems to be, in this sense, more based on a “mosaic of models” - in terms of political and economic structures - which denote once more the transformative phase which has been emerging since the weakening of America’s unilateral post-Cold War leadership. In this framework, as we have tried to make clear, the state-centric vision of the international system and the interconnected security dilemma assumed by power-politics neo-realist theories begin to look like rather abstract approximations while the interdependence paradigm is characterized by an increased degree of complexity which deprives it of merely economic connotations. For this reason we shall proceed, in the next chapter, to further

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123 Joseph S. Nye Jr., Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics (New York: Public Affairs, 2004). Amitav Acharya, “Will Asia’s Past Be Its Future?,” International Security 28, no. 3 (Winter 2003/2004): 149-64. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno, International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). Shambaugh, Power Shift, 14. The presence of policies aimed at pursuing national interests and spheres of influence is evident in the life of regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization which a senior Russian diplomat has defined “China in central Asia”. Nevertheless the trend towards the constitution of a multilateral network of international institutions in Asia is a significant process. In this respect Shambaugh writes that “ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), backstopped by the nongovernmental Committee on Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP), is the cornerstone of this emerging regional community, but the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the South Asia Association for Regional Security (SAARC) are also important components. These organizations are forms of cooperative, rather than collective, security, and they augment the more formal “hub and spokes” alliance-based system.”

analyze our subject of research through an interpretive lens which sets the rise of China between “home and abroad,” identifying the possible drivers of structural change “from within”, that is from the crucially important point of view of the interaction between factors at the domestic and international level.\textsuperscript{126}

Minxin Pei has noted – referring to the perspectives of Chinese growth – that “forecasters of the fortunes of nations are no different from Wall Street analysts: they all rely on the past to predict the future.”\textsuperscript{127} This wise insight seems once more to caution that a different epistemological approach is needed to better analyze the significance of the rise of China, considering, among other factors, the internal dynamics and constraints which take place in an unprecedented situation which sees the Asian giant - for the first time in its history – in a position of a potential global power in contact with other world powers.

Such a perspective will guide our analysis in the third chapter which – after giving an account of the interaction between “regime perspectives” and the rise of China

\textsuperscript{125} Hill, \textit{The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy}, 37.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid. As Shambaugh has rightly argued, “one key dimension of this interdependence not often considered by analysts is the impact of China’s own internal stability on regional stability. That is, if China’s domestic reforms were to stall, or if there were significant social upheaval internally, it would have major - and decidedly negative - implications for the region. Looking ahead over the next two decades it is evident that China has entered a new phase in its development in which the principal challenge will be to provide a range of public goods to the populace in order to improve the nation’s quality of life. The current Chinese government, under the leadership of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, seems to be acutely attuned to meeting these challenges and is beginning to devote increased attention and resources accordingly.” More complex and debatable is Shambaugh’s argument that China’s governance challenges will also increasingly become the responsibility of China’s neighbors, as well as other nations and international organizations - on the basis of the “interdependence paradigm” described above – in order to prevent destabilizing factors affecting the regional order.

- underscores the merits of an analytical approach which includes a set of ideational factors (such as the national identity and the civilizational dimension of the country).

In line with the final argument of this research paper we will therefore examine in the next chapter these elements not only as significant drivers of China’s international behavior but also as possible forces of change for the evolution of the international system towards a more multi-polar and multicultural dimension.
CHAPTER III

LOCATING THE RISE OF CHINA BETWEEN “HOME AND ABROAD”

Foreign and domestic perspectives in the analysis of the rise of China

The tentative conclusions that we can draw from the previous chapters on the “ontological” elements which characterize the rise of China reduce and challenge, as Christopher Hill has written,¹ the distinction between the “inside” and the “outside” within international relations. In this context this chapter will try to look at “the domestic and the foreign” as two ends of a continuum rather being two sharply demarcated opposites. We cannot but agree with Christopher Hill’s remark that this continuum between the domestic and the foreign – including in the case of China - “is likely to generate more issues than it did in the past, not less.”² For this reason the theoretical perspective of this chapter will consider the implications of “the two-ways flows which arise from the distinction between the foreign and the domestic: foreign policy has its domestic sources and domestic policy has its foreign influences.”³ By locating the rise of China, between “home and abroad” we therefore also need to consider as an important element of the process also the “regime dimension,” which significantly influences the PRC’s international behavior in its revisionist and status quo aspects. In this way we can address the potential effects of China’s rise not only from the

¹ Hill, The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy, xviii
² Ibid.
³ Ibid., 38
systemic point of view of its impact on the distribution of power among states interacting in an anarchic international system. More important, however, is considering it at the “unit level” by analyzing the influence of the particular political regime which rules China on its domestic and foreign policy making. In this respect we will try to advance the argument that one of the most significant factors of possible change driving the rise of China is in fact the peculiarity of China’s regime and of its national identity which - in connection to the structural constraints of an economy bound to grow in order to guarantee the regime’s survival and legitimacy - contribute to defining the Chinese vision of the international system and of the PRC’s role in it.

On the basis of this theoretical approach we can thus stress once more – in line with our epistemological premises - that the possible factors of change in the present US-led international “distribution of power” are not simply linked to polarity and balance of power but also to state interests and identities which are dependent – as Wendt has written – on the social structure of the international system, on the “culture of anarchy” which is dominant in the system itself. From this standpoint the merit of broadening our analysis to include “regime perspectives” is motivated by the fact that this approach underlines the relevant role played – in addition to material factors – by the ideational elements related to the PRC’s ideology and national identity which significantly contribute to determine its core interests. In this framework the “fil rouge,” the unifying core interest which links China’s domestic politics to its foreign policy-making is the survival of the CCP Party-State as a regime.
Although the Chinese debate on the nation’s so called “core interests” is still partly open, as Suisheng Zhao notes⁴, it is meaningful that at the first China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue in July 2009, State Councillor Dai Bingguo told his US interlocutors “that China’s number one core interest is to maintain its political system and state security,” a formula which clearly encapsulates the notion of “regime survival.” This priority has been traditionally complemented by additional “core interests” i.e., the defence of “China’s state sovereignty and territorial integrity,” and finally by “the promotion of stable development of the economy and society.”

According to Suisheng Zhao, these “clear-cut defined interests centered around regime survival in China,” leave “little space and capabilities for Beijing’s leaders to dedicate to becoming a global “great power.” For this reason Zhao argues as follows:

The survival of China’s Communist Party (CCP) regime is…Beijing’s most important “core interest” because – given the authoritarian nature of the Chinese political system – the CCP is constantly concerned about foreign actors and domestic discontent threatening its regime. While the second core interest of state sovereignty and territorial integrity referred almost exclusively to the Taiwan and Tibet issues for many years, the South China Sea was recently added to this category when China became increasingly determined and prepared to defend disputed territories in the South China Sea. Taking a firm position on territorial disputes plays a special role in maintaining the nationalist credentials of the communist regime. Continued economic development and social stability becomes the “third core” interest because it is the foundation of the CCP’s legitimacy to justify its continued rule in China.⁵

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⁵ Ibid.
Suisheng Zhao’s realist argument is interesting in our view but it needs to be further elaborated by considering how the “existential issues” related to China’s national identity interact with these core interests. The assumption that the paramount core interest of the CCP party-state is its own regime survival tends to underscore a rather conservative approach - aimed at safeguarding stability - to the implications of the rise of China for the international system. The assumption in this respect is that Chinese diplomacy should be used to “serve domestic economic construction” and in that sense “foreign policy is seen as secondary to domestic concerns,” as Susan Shirk notes. In this perspective Suisheng Zhao considers that the PRC’s search of status as a great power is therefore not the top priority, while the two other core interests that he delineates – sovereignty and territorial integrity along with continued economic development – are regarded as functional objectives to guarantee the ultimate goal of regime survival, hence not great power status.

Nevertheless it is worth noting that some further aspects linked to these “ancillary” core interests, namely the necessity for the CCP party-state of maintaining “nationalistic credentials” and “legitimacy,” refer to a crucial dimension of China’s national identity, a factor which is clearly intertwined with the process of the country’s rise as a world power. In this respect we think that the partly convincing realist consideration of core interests basically centered on the present regime’s survival needs to be complemented by a thorough consideration of the potential of change related to the

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“ideational” elements which are intrinsically linked to the growing role of the PRC as a global player.

Our argument in this respect is that China’s stance on the international scene is characterized by a “dual identity:” although regime survival is the main “conservative” core interest of the CCP party-state, this does not make the PRC an entirely standard status quo state. Instead, the peculiarity of the Chinese regime and of its national identity - coupled with a significant “comprehensive power projection” at the international level – has been transforming the PRC from an “outsider and antagonist” of the Western-centered international system into a “critic and advantage taker” and presently into a potential promoter of change and, indeed, a “shaper of the international system” in line with the Chinese vision of it. This complex mix of priorities and objectives has influenced, as Evan Meideros has persuasively written, China’s international behavior through at least the following “three historically determined lenses that colour and shade its perception of…its role in global affairs:”

First, China is in the process of reclaiming its status as a major regional power and, eventually, as a great power—although the latter goal is not well defined or articulated. Chinese policymakers and analysts refer to China’s rise as a “revitalization” and a “rejuvenation.” Second, many Chinese view their country as a victim of “100 years of shame and humiliation” at the hands of Western and other foreign powers, especially Japan. This victimization narrative has fostered an acute sensitivity to coercion by foreign powers and especially infringements (real or perceived) on its sovereignty. Third, China has a defensive security outlook that stems from historically determined fears that

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foreign powers will try to constrain and coerce it by exploiting its internal weaknesses.⁹

This fairly comprehensive list informs China’s longstanding core interests - protecting national sovereignty and territorial integrity, promoting economic development, and generating international respect and status - which, in conjunction with regime survival have been collectively driving, China’s domestic and foreign policy since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 even though - as Medeiros notes - “the policy manifestations of these…strategic priorities and the leadership’s relative emphasis on them have differed over the last 30 years.”¹⁰

In this chapter we will therefore examine firstly how the regime survival of the CCP party-state has been considered by some analysts – such as the “democratic peace” and the “democratic transition” theorists - as a factor of variance vis-à-vis the Western-centered order of the international system. Secondly we will address the discourse of the significance of China’s national identity by developing a theoretical approach based on the constructivist ideas of Alexander Wendt, who has argued that a nation’s “self-esteem” is a powerful driver for its behavior. Thirdly we will expand our considerations about the interaction between China’s national and “civilizational” identity and its rise as a global power in order to investigate both the notion of China’s “influence” on international relations and how the diversified manifestations of this process (including

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⁹ Medeiros, *China’s International Behavior*, xvi. One could argue that such “lenses” and core interests pre-date the establishment of the PRC if we consider the foreign policy objectives of the Republic of China founded by Sun Yat Sen.

¹⁰ Ibid.
the PRC’s new forms of nationalism, its search of status and soft power projection) can work as drivers of possible change at the international level.\textsuperscript{11} We will conclude this analysis of the rise of China “between home and abroad” by arguing that the aspects examined from this standpoint need to be anyhow set in context also in light of systemic parallel processes such as the rise of other global players and the redistribution of what Alessandro Colombo defines “the comprehensive structure of international power and influence.”\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Neo-liberal theories on the rise of China: a critique}

Neo-liberal IR theories focused on regime types have been often based, as Zhang Tiejun has noted, “upon the assumption that economic interdependence and political convergence to liberal democracy are the main factors contributing to international peace and prosperity.”\textsuperscript{13} In this framework the interaction of the actors of the system has been judged on the basis of their degree of economic interdependence (assessed “in part by the ratio of intra-regional trade and investment and the breadth and depth of intra-regional financial cooperation”) and of the process of political convergence which, it is believed, will transform “states from authoritarian and non-

\textsuperscript{11} This part of my analysis will be based also on the overarching argument and the considerations that I have developed in this respect in my Master’s thesis. In particular see Massimo Ambrosetti, “The rise of China: New Nationalisms and Search of Status” (master’s thesis, University of Cambridge, 2009), 38-54.

\textsuperscript{12} Alessandro Colombo, “L’ordine Globale e l’Ascesa delle grandi Potenze Regionali,” 5.

\textsuperscript{13} Zhang Tiejun, “China’s East Asian Policy,” Quaderni di Relazioni Internazionali 14 (May 2011), 17.
democratic countries to liberal democracies favouring regional political cooperation and the building of regional security community.”

If, on one hand, “over recent years, East Asian economic interdependence has increased enormously, due primarily to the evolution of soft regionalization, above all the regional internationalization of production” we must admit that “political convergence from authoritarian to democratic structures in East Asia on the other hand lags behind, explaining the yet very limited East Asian political and even more limited regional security integration.” This kind of theoretical liberal approach – by focusing on economic interdependence and political convergence – tends to underscore that, because of the different regime types, it is not yet foreseeable in East Asia to conceive of a concert of powers which can develop “a security community, i.e. develop and adopt instruments and mechanisms and indeed institutions addressing and dealing with regional security issues.” In this context the so called “Democratic Peace Theory” has postulated that the non democratic nature of the Chinese regime might be a factor of international friction in the perspective of an internationally more powerful and assertive China. This theory’s main assumptions were clearly influenced by some “ideological” aspects underscoring the superior political values and practices of liberal democracies and their potential of conflict with authoritarian regimes, even though, after the end of the Cold

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
War, the logic of this approach minimized the idea that all communist states were necessarily determined to expand their political and security area of influence.¹⁷

Even though the democratic peace theory’s salience has been questioned from both a theoretical and an empirical point of view, this approach has represented a fairly common negative vision of China’s rise “from within”, shared in the West both by conservatives and liberals who regarded - in particular after the Tiananmen events - the communist ideology and political structure of the Chinese state as the pillars of a regime prepared to resort to force to settle domestic tensions and international disputes.¹⁸

¹⁷ Goldstein, *Rising To the Challenge*, 93. Daniel M. Kliman, “China’s Reluctance to Reform at Home Is a Liability Abroad”, *German Marshall Fund Expert Commentary* (July 13), 2011. http://blog.gmfus.org/2011/07/chinas-reluctance-to-reform-at-home-is-a-strategic-liability-abroad/ (accessed February 13 2012). As Avery Goldstein explains, this theoretical approach posits that “the distinctive domestic institutions and political values of liberal democracies ensure peace among them, though not between such states and non-democracies. Because leaders of liberal democracies face domestic institutional restraints and are committed to the norm of resolving political disputes through discussion and compromise rather than violence, they share the expectation that the use of military force is neither necessary nor desirable in their bilateral relations. Leaders of liberal democracies view the policies of their counterparts in other liberal democracies as legitimately representing the will of their people and thus worthy of respect. They also are likely to have confidence in the reliability of international agreements negotiated with such leaders, despite the absence of a supranational enforcer in the anarchic international system, because commitments among democracies are made not just by individuals but by individuals accountable to effective institutions. Leaders of democracies do not presume that the leaders of dictatorships represent the views of their people, and they worry about the reliability of agreements negotiated with rulers not bound by the institutions of representative government. Against authoritarian states, democracies may have to use force in self-defense, or they may choose to use force to expand the zone of peace by defeating and then converting authoritarian enemies.” As a consequence of these theoretical assumptions the attitude of these thinkers vis-à-vis the rise of China – even though Beijing would like to believe that past is not prologue – tends to exclude that, unlike other autocracies, China can rise and reassure. As Daniel Kliman writes referring to the present situation “this is wishful thinking. Economic interdependence and references to peaceful development and harmonious society have failed to curb growing concerns about China’s intentions in Washington and Asian capitals. Europe, too, has begun to express new reservations about the direction of China’s rise.”

As we have seen, among theorists and policy makers there was the perception in the mid-1990s that China’s growing capabilities – not coupled with democratic characteristics - justified a reasonable degree of caution vis-à-vis the implications of its rise. China, once become a great power, was seen - because of the authoritarian nature of its regime - as an international actor not only positioned outside “the zone of peace” centered on liberal democracies but also a regime inclined to pursue its own agenda on the basis of a set of ideological and national priorities potentially conflicting with the post Cold War neo-liberal order. This kind of reasoning – notwithstanding the evidence that the PRC has more recently better pursued its objectives “through working within existing frameworks and norms”19 - has been echoed recently by analysts such as Daniel Kliman who, once more, has advanced the following arguments:

An autocracy’s rise inevitably and predictably sows mistrust. Without an independent media capable of extracting information from government authorities, a credibility gap exists between stated objectives and actual intentions, which remain opaque. Moreover, autocracy limits opportunities to influence a rising power’s strategic behavior. Pervasive secrecy hinders outsiders from identifying and bolstering moderates among top-level decision-makers. With business and civil society groups relegated to the sidelines of foreign policy and interactions with external powers regulated, there are inherent limits to engaging domestic actors inside an authoritarian state. Conversely, a democratic government functions as a source of reassurance as a new power rises. Democracy clarifies intentions: a free press guarantees that information about a state’s ambitions cannot remain secret for long. In addition, the combination of transparent governance and decentralized authority creates opportunities for outsiders to shape a rising power’s trajectory. Other states can locate and freely engage domestic actors

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who might influence the foreign policy of the ascendant state. Thus, democratic government mitigates the mistrust a new power’s rise would otherwise generate.\(^{20}\)

As we have already noted, such a perception in the West was historically increased after the Tiananmen crisis, which marked a turning point also for the process of political reforms within China, symbolized by the ousting of Zhao Ziyang, the “liberal” Secretary General of the CCP.\(^{21}\) It is fair to note that the PRC, sensitive in that delicate phase to the urgent need of “threat reduction” in terms of perceptions reasserted its “good neighbor” policy (mulin zhengce, often referred to in China as “peripheral policy,” zhoubian zhengce) based on the fear of international isolation.\(^{22}\) The Taiwan crisis in 1996 – with the US support for Taipei during the missile crisis – is another key year in terms of a change of perceptions in China and toward China and it is identified by several analysts as a turning point for the PRC’s regional policy.\(^{23}\) In the West a policy of containment has found, from time to time, in the “democratic peace” ideas further theoretical support against a Chinese regime which was blamed not only for having

\(^{20}\) Ibid.

\(^{21}\) Zhao Ziyang, Prisoner of the State. The Secret Journal of Premier Zhao Ziyang (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009). On this crucial period of contemporary China’s history the memoir by Zhao Ziyang sheds further light on the decision making process and the single leaders’ responsibilities during the crisis of June 1989. As we have seen in chapter II, the turning point of the late 1980s - a two-year process which began with the Tiananmen “incident” and ended in 1992 with a stabilization of the Chinese leadership and CCP’s direction in a more “conservative” sense - basically decoupled the economic reforms of the emerging “socialist market economy” from a process of gradual transformation of the political system, that Zhao Ziyang and the reformist wing of the party had favored. The debate about political reform which took place at the time restated that the PRC was not interested in having Western democratic arrangements like the separation of power, bi-party or multiparty system, Western parliamentary democracy, or other aspects of the Western political system.

\(^{22}\) Breslin, “Understanding China’s Regional Rise,” 819.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.
stopped the mid-1980s trend towards a more democratic evolution but also for being presently determined to defend a political structure in which the domestic and foreign policy decision-making on fundamental matters is in the hands of a very small group of leaders (the Standing Committee of the Politburo) not accountable to representative institutions but rather to the CCP’s élite, present in the Central Committee and in the Central Military Commission. For these reasons authors such as Kliman have argued that the United States should emphasize the following position:

...real reassurance requires domestic political reform at home. America’s partners in Europe should echo this message in their human rights dialogues with China. The West cannot force China to democratize, but working in concert, the United States and Europe can inform Beijing’s internal debates about political liberalization and thereby support gradual reform. Although periods of flux in the hierarchy of nations often end in war, China’s ascendance is not destined to culminate in conflict. The only way for China to rise and reassure, however, is to institute gradual political reforms at home.

24 Ibid. Also this kind of neo-liberal theoretical approach has tended to corroborate its arguments by means of historical comparisons, in line with similar neo-realist examples on hegemonic transitions. Kliman has asserted in this respect “that the transatlantic world can look to its own history for affirmation that regime type matters as nations rise and fall. At the turn of the twentieth century, Great Britain, then the transatlantic world’s dominant power, entered a period of relative decline as the United States and Germany burst onto the global scene. Although both of these emerging giants challenged Great Britain on diverse fronts, the level of mistrust they generated sharply differed. Democratic government illuminated American intentions and enabled Great Britain to shape U.S. foreign policy from within by cultivating influential friends in the executive branch, Congress, and the business community. As the United States rose to power, the British anticipated their eclipse with relative equanimity. Autocratic Germany, however, elicited a different reaction from Great Britain. With foreign policy determined behind closed doors by the Kaiser and his advisors, Germany’s naval buildup triggered an outpouring of British mistrust. The result was a maritime rivalry and, eventually, war.”

25 Ibid. Francesco Sisci, “Asia’s Real Invasion,” The Asia Times, December 2011. Referring to these arguments it is interesting to consider the evaluation of the degree of reciprocal influence in terms of soft power between the US and the PRC. In this respect Francesco Sisci thinks that “the US concerns can be easily sold to the American public. The United States has an open political system; China does not. Beijing could take advantage of America’s openness to infiltrate and influence the US political decision-making process, while Washington cannot do the same with the Chinese system. In fact, China, because of its tight controls over media and culture, proved unable to influence the American public, and thus its soft power has little grasp over that country. Conversely, despite Beijing’s political restrictions, the US media
It is worth noting that the “democratic peace” debate and its implications in terms of policy making has regularly fueled in China – since the collapse of the Soviet Union – a vicious circle of negative perceptions on “foreign interference” in the country’s internal affairs, designed to subvert the political structure of the communist state through external pressure aimed at a “peaceful evolution.” This is not surprising if we consider the persistence of “democratic peace” theorists in underscoring that for Beijing the lack of domestic political reform is “a strategic liability” which fuels “widespread mistrust” and handicaps “its ability to take a leadership role in the international community.”

Even though, as Kenneth Lieberthal has recently written, “strategic distrust of China is not the current dominant view of national decision makers in the U.S. government, who believe it is feasible and desirable to develop a basically constructive long-term relationship with a rising China,” he anyway underlines the following situation:

China’s one-party governing system also induces distrust in various ways. Americans believe democratic political systems naturally understand each other better and that authoritarian political systems are inherently less stable and more prone to blaming others for their domestic discontent. Authoritarian systems are also intrinsically less transparent, which makes it more difficult to judge their sincerity and intentions. What Americans view as human rights violations (especially

and culture have far more clout in China. Therefore, Beijing may fear that if it were to give in to US demands, Washington could de facto take over China’s political command and control system. Therefore, there are risks for the Chinese leadership both in resisting and giving in to the US.”

26 Ibid. As Kliman writes in this respect: “Put bluntly, there is no substitute for evidence of greater transparency and liberalism at home. Chinese leaders are right to argue that democracy overnight would prove vastly destabilizing, but gradually embracing rule of law and participatory government would reduce mistrust, while enabling China to address some of its internal problems more effectively.”
violations of civil rights) make it more difficult for the U.S. to take actions targeted at building greater mutual trust. While the U.S. welcomes a wealthier, more globally engaged China, it no longer regards China as a developing country that warrants special treatment concerning global rules. Washington also looks to Beijing to take on some of the responsibilities for international public goods that major powers should assume, and it worries when Beijing declines to do so.27

On the Chinese front, though, the mere convergence of the PRC’s system toward the increasing adoption of Western political models has been perceived in Beijing as a recipe for instability and the destruction of socialist norms and values, which could ultimately lead to political impasse and turmoil. As Wang Jiesi notes by addressing the delicate issue of “US-China strategic distrust,” these negative perceptions are still widespread in sectors of the Chinese establishment which look at America's democracy promotion agenda “as designed to sabotage the Communist Party’s leadership.” In this respect he writes as follows:

The leadership therefore actively promotes efforts to guard against the influence of American ideology and U.S. thinking about democracy, human rights, and related issues. This perceived American effort to divide and weaken China has been met by building increasingly powerful and sophisticated political and technological devices to safeguard domestic stability.28

These feelings underscore how “Chinese strategic distrust of the United States is deeply rooted in history.”29 As we have seen, after the eclipse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the concern with "peaceful evolution" and "bourgeois


29 Ibid.
liberalization" reinforced Beijing's determination to adhere closely to its "socialism with Chinese Characteristics" to continue to grow. Although the regime was willing “to borrow strength from capitalism,” this approach was rationalized by the behest that China needed to go through "the primary stage of socialism" in order to reach socialism 30. While it continued to be relatively more relaxed in accepting modern technology, science, investment and trade from the West for the sake of its four modernizations, the CCP party-state became more reserved and resistant to the possible destabilizing influence of Western political traditions, values and practices. 31 This discourse was developed in China with implicit but meaningful connections to the neo-liberal debate on the international order in a post-Cold War international system which, it was hoped, would be characterized - according to the vision of its Western liberal members - by the expansion of the “democratic peace” zone in a globalized world.

30 Dan Blumenthal, “Why China Isn’t Democratizing?,” The American, 26 April 2011. This approach, as we will see later on in this chapter, has been criticized by analysts, such as Dan Blumenthal, who argue that the PRC’s lack of democratization derives from the CCP refusal of accepting capitalism conceived also as a social and moral order which, “by ordering economic as well as social life,” is supposed to provide firstly the opportunity for all citizens to become wealthier, secondly to enjoy individual liberty and thirdly “to ennoble public virtues by encouraging free exchange among citizens and opportunities for self-betterment.” In Blumenthal’s view these virtues should be “conducive to a system of political liberty and democracy. That is why democracy theorists and policy makers assume that free markets are a necessary if not sufficient condition of democracy.” The absence of Chinese democracy is therefore linked to China’s political-economic system based on a new form of “state or authoritarian capitalism” which – although it has allowed markets to operate in the Chinese economy lifting out of poverty hundreds of millions of Chinese – still curtails individual liberty consistent with a capitalist order.

31 We could say that of the “four cardinal principles” which the post-Tiananmen Chinese leadership identified to guide any political reforms (namely 1. keep to the socialist road; 2. uphold the dictatorship of the proletariat; 3. uphold the leadership of the Communist Party; 4. uphold Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought), only the last one has been significantly eroded (and to some extent the second one). Laid down by Deng in 1979, these principles were aimed at safeguarding the leadership and dominance of the CCP in a logic of regime survival.
The PRC, though, has constantly responded to “regime change” pressures by emphasizing - as Breslin rightly points out – the following aspects:

…domestic stability is maintained partly through engaging the region to guarantee the economic growth that is considered essential to safeguarding domestic social stability, but also through ensuring that there are no external challenges - political or economic- so that the leadership can devote its attentions to pressing domestic concerns. Thus diplomatic initiatives towards and within the region are driven partly by domestic economic concerns, but more squarely by the priority of regime survival rather than national security.32

In this context the “New Left” was one of the Chinese intellectual and political movements which tried to elaborate in the 1990s a response not only to this kind of neo-liberal theories but also to China’s transforming national identity and to the challenge posed by the country’s increasing Westernization.33 This debate also signaled the relevance, within the country’s domestic and international process of development, of new forms of Chinese nationalism. As Zheng Yongnian has observed,34 the New Left’s approach was not simply based on an anti-Westernization agenda aimed at reviving China's traditional “anti-foreignism” in the way of those movements of the past – often

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34 Zheng Yongnian, Discovering Chinese Nationalism: Modernization, Identity and International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 46-66. Cui Zhiyuan, “Mao Zedong’s Idea of Cultural Revolution and the Restructuring of Chinese Modernity,” Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences 7 (Spring 1996): 67-92. As Zheng Yongnian notes, revolution was a major theme of the New Left which questionably argued that Mao Zedong’s main purpose of “mass democracy” was not political struggle, but a real democracy based on mass participation that could offer a response to the crisis of Western modernity and an alternative to the Western forms of democracy. The New Left thus proposed a transformation and institutionalization of Mao's mass democracy through a process of democratization which should not follow any single Western model for political democracy. The institutionalization of Mao's mass democracy was considered a means to make it possible for China to restructure Western modernity based on its own political practice, to establish a democracy with Chinese characteristics, and thus to become a strong nation-state prepared to play the role of a great power in world affairs.
organized by political elites - which wanted to resist “the intrusion of foreign forces and the inflow of foreign ideas.” 35 On the contrary, the New Left regarded anti-foreignism as a lost battle because the rise of China necessarily implied a greater degree of integration into the world system from a material and cultural point of view, in spite of possible negative consequences at the national level. Since the crucial question for the New Left was whether China's domestic development should be guided by Western-oriented government policies, the priority - in order to prevent Westernization from becoming a dominant discourse of China's modernization – was to set an agenda centered on China's own development experience. For the New Left, in the framework of the rise of China, it was time to develop a new Chinese discourse against the Western discourse of development, enhancing China's national identity and raising its influence and status in the international system. 36 In this context the Western-oriented reforms were perceived as a major cause of possible decline of a modern Chinese national identity based on traditional Marxist-Maoist ideology. The search of a new unifying ideology able to maintaining national integration and strengthening the people's national identity clearly emerged in the mid-1990s as a fundamental theme in the framework of the rise of China and as a response to neo-liberal theories. If Deng Xiaoping had called for a liberation of people's "thoughts” and used all possible means - whether Western or national - to open China to the world and develop its economy, the thinkers of the New Left considered a second round of the liberation of thoughts as imperative in order to emphasize the

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
“Chineseness” of the process of reforms, thus avoiding the risks of collapse and Westernization that the former Soviet Union had experienced.37

Even though the New Left’s approach to the twofold dimension of China's international rise and domestic reform appears in retrospect mainly an ideological response, it is interesting to underscore that it addressed some important issues in China's post-Mao era, such as the definition of a Chinese model of governance in the economic sector and the implications of phenomena such as anti-Westernization and new forms of nationalism in the agenda of the PRC rising as a great power.38

This discourse has been further elaborated more recently through a set of debates on China’s national identity which have taken into account not only the PRC’s distinct notion of modernity but also the weight of Chinese history – recent and less recent – on the process of reform and modernization of the country. In this respect we are convinced that an analytical approach which focuses on the role of national identities should necessarily be aware of the role of the historical past in shaping the present of

37 Ibid. He Gaochao and Luo Jinyi, “The Nature of Knowledge Is its Openess,” Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences (July 1995). Existing Western theories, which focus on free market, non-government intervention, privatization, and free trade, were regarded by these Chinese theorists as not being able to explain the process and dynamism of China's rapid economic growth, nor could they provide any guidelines for China's future reform and modernization. If Western free market theories could improve the understanding of China's traditional planned system, they were considered inadequate to guide China's reform because they were not able to explain practice. In order to explain the success and failure of China's reform, it was deemed therefore necessary to establish new theories of reform based on China's reform experience.

38 Ibid. The New Left’s ideas appealed only to some social groups left behind by China’s economic development and were welcomed at the time among some Chinese government officials, especially the old ideologues who blamed the post-Mao reforms for having led to negative consequences such as disparities among different regions and social groups, economic corruption, and money worship. However, the New Left did not have a major impact on China's reform policies because, after two decades of economic reform, the “socialist market economy” had become one of the structural drivers of the country’s political, social and economic transformation and of its rise to the status of global power.
international relations. This is an aspect that the English School of IR has rightly underlined, but one that is often missing in the analysis of neo-liberal theories assessing the implications of the rise of China. On the contrary this “historical narrative” has become “a major driver of Chinese soft power projection in recent years as a means of legitimizing current practices by establishing links with ‘sometimes imagined’ historical precedents,” as we will see more in detail later on in this chapter. This component of a “relatively new era of ideational persuasion” relies also on the creation of the idea of “a historical regional order that prospered when China was strong and in a leadership position.”

Chinese values are being promoted (and not just in the region) by referring back to idealized golden ages in a form of occidentalism or “reverse orientalism”, in that they are depicted as the mirror image of all that the West (for which primarily read the US) stands for. Historical China’s appeal to harmony, peace and virtue is seen as providing a cultural alternative to Western materialism and individualism” [and to] Western hegemony.

In this context it seems to us necessary to underscore – with a preliminary reflection – the complexity and the contradictions in the narratives of Chinese history

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39 Barry Buzan, “China in International Society: Is “Peaceful Rise” Possible?,” The Chinese Journal of International Politics 3 (2010): 5-36. The focus on historical understanding is a distinctive feature of the English School of IR which has reflected on the central problem of how to construct a form of international society which is orderly and just. A key concept for the English school is the mutual recognition of sovereign states and the notion of “great powers” as an institutional component of world politics. In this framework the British scholar Barry Buzan points out that the history of the past 30 years has not only proven the feasibility of China’s “peaceful rise” but also indicated that China has “steered a new course (of rise) much more in harmony with the surrounding international society”. He has also argued that while China is now widely regarded as a “good citizen” at the regional level, it is less so at the global level.


41 Ibid.
and, at the same time, the lack of historical perspective of those theories which underestimate the fact that China was the historical hegemon of East Asia for practically two millennia. In this perspective it is useful to connect a reflection on the Chinese regime-type’s implications with the intertwined themes of historical and national identities. The Chinese identity is indeed part of cultural, historical, political roots not only as a state but also as a civilization which “pretended to be a state”, according to the famous definition of Lucian Pye. Indeed, the “Middle Kingdom” has been not only the historical East Asian great power in “material” terms but also the leading civilization of the region. This is clearly a significant component for the image of China as “an alternative” which is also based on a “charm offensive” supporting its new state ideology, its soft power projection and its “reputational capital” as a “responsible great power.”

As Medeiros notes, “China’s confidence in its accomplishments and its global influence is palpable in the comments of policymakers and analysts. Many Chinese argue that as the world becomes more multi-polar and U.S. power declines in relative terms, China is becoming a more influential international actor.” It would be wise, though, to make these predictions with the necessary consciousness of the complexity of historical processes. As Simon Sarfaty has rightly pointed out, Japan - the third member of contemporary Asia’s geopolitical troika (with China and India) and until mid-2010 still the second largest economy in the world - “is a reminder that changes in world power are slow and unpredictable. Only 20 years ago, Japan was heralded as the most obvious


43 Medeiros, China's International Behavior, 41.
newcomer in an emerging post-American and post-Soviet power structure. Instead, the evidence accumulated since the Cold War appears to have turned Japan into an economic afterthought and a geopolitical footnote compared to its bigger neighbors in Asia.\(^{44}\)

A reflection in a broader historical perspective helps us to set in context important aspects of the rise of China. The ascendancy of modern Japan as a great power and the crucial presence of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region are indeed fairly recent counterbalancing forces in the perspective of Chinese history. The “birth of the modern world” in 19\(^{th}\) Century Eastern Asia can be analyzed in retrospect as a process characterized by a sort of “clash of civilizations.” It involved not only the political and economic relations between two ancient and highly civilized countries, China and Japan, and their Western counterparts, but also a confrontation between cultural systems defined by profound differences. It is also interesting to note that nationalism has been one of the crucial ideational forces which have driven the response to the challenges posed by the interaction with Western modernity and have dramatically influenced the history of the two great Asian countries in the last 150 years. For this reason we will examine also the role of nationalism in the framework of the present process of China rising as a great power. In this sense there is a link of continuity between the Chinese past and the present situation. Michael Yahuda has made in this respect the following reflections:

The emergence of Chinese nationalism and the development of the Chinese modern state is intrinsically linked with meeting the challenge of the West, or rather that of modernity. There has been a tendency to

confuse the two, a confusion that of course is not unique to China, but which has been a particular obstacle to Chinese attempts to establish their political identity.45

Japan’s ability to create a new national identity was crucial; it allowed the Meiji regime to integrate the modernization process through a rapid Westernization of its institutions and economic structures, granting Tokyo a prominent role not only in Asia but on the world stage which is still nowadays a problem for China’s rise. The Chinese dynastic state, on the other hand, first unwilling and then unable to thoroughly accept modernization, suffered a disruptive and humiliating political decline and a collapse of its society. China would have to pass through a different form of modernity, communism - which developed a fundamental discourse on nationalism and statehood - before reaching the modernization standards and the nation-state structure that a reformed Japan acquired much earlier in its modern history.46


46 John K. Fairbank, Storia della Cina Contemporanea (Milano: Rizzoli, 1996), 19. Jurgen Osterhammel, Storia della Cina Moderna (Torino: Einaudi, 1992), 16. This “confrontation with Modernity“ was also a fundamental process in bringing about the Middle Kingdom’s evolution from a self-centered, universal dimension based on the “centripetal” elements of the Chinese civilization to a nation-state in which traditional cultural values have been used together with other ideological aspects to forge a new national identity. At the same time, as previously noted, both Chinese and Japanese societies have to some extent retained important aspects of their traditional culture and historical heritage. In this framework, China and Japan have begun to redefine important aspects of their contemporary national identities and cultures based on “Asian values,” which tend to encompass a traditional background with the model of development that has proven so successful in more recent years. To better understand some essential aspects of China’s and Japan’s history in the light of their relationship with modernity, it seems useful to recall the definition by the great American sinologist John K. Fairbank, who underlined that modernization is not an autonomous process: “if we define it as a country’s and people’s development in the framework of a comprehensive response to modern technologies, we must recognize that it is linked to profound and complex interactions with cultural values and national trends.” For Fairbank this meant, on one hand, that modernization tends to produce some degree of “convergence” in all countries, since modern science and technology, particularly in the present times of globalization, are international realities influencing all societies in a similar way; and, on the other hand, that individual countries respond to the modernization process according to their institutional and cultural backgrounds. As a methodical
The complex historical dynamic of China's modernization as a national state was thus influenced by the "paralyzing syndrome" represented by the weight of its past civilization. As Fairbank has written, with a substantial historical continuity in the same vast "physical space" Chinese civilization had for centuries adopted a self-centered and to some extent “inward-looking” trends of development as opposed to the “outward looking” approaches of the West’s ancient classical civilizations and, later on, of the great European nation-states (this aspect is obviously not a secondary factor in assessing China’s idea of hegemony). For both China and Japan, modernization was inevitable because rather than stemming from free choice it was perceived as a fundamental means of controlling the new dynamics of change resulting from the imposed interaction with the West.\(^\text{47}\)

\(^{47}\) James McClain, *Japan, A Modern History* (New York: Norton and Company, 2002), 153. The big difference in the response of China and Japan to these external forces was that China engaged in the modernization process reluctantly, while Japan, after the first shocking confrontation, resolutely undertook a season of momentous reforms. In this sense, to the Japanese reformers of the Meiji period, modernization was inevitable and even desirable in the face of domestic crises and foreign threat (*Nàiyù gaikan* “trouble from within and without”) while to China, in the early period of confrontation with the West, modernization was considered neither inevitable nor desirable. Basically, it can be argued that the Meiji ishin reformers were able to successfully install a “new order” because the system they had to reform was much less complex - in political, cultural, social terms - than that of the Middle Kingdom. Moreover, as James McClain writes in his History of modern Japan, “the men who seized power…were profoundly dissatisfied with their world and they wanted to change it.” In China’s case too, modernization was not perceived as first and foremost a cultural process but as a process of acquisition of western technologies. In fact, even though China had been more technologically advanced than the West during the Middle Ages, by the beginning of the 19th century the technology gap with Western industrialized countries was already significant and growing rapidly. The Chinese ruling class, aware of the importance of Western technologies, was nonetheless determined to fully control the country’s modernization process, while Meiji’s Japan opened the new state’s structures to Western influences. The high degree of integration in China between institutions, society and traditional Confucian culture was therefore a powerful factor in inhibiting its process of modernization. The Chinese bureaucracy of officials-literate, a pillar of the Empire
In a world of complex interdependence, both contemporary China and Japan tend to emerge, albeit in different ways, not only as models of Asian values, which blend traditional and new elements, but also as somewhat “hybrid systems” which have been able to undergo a process of successful modernization and integration into the international community, while retaining and redefining some aspects of their specific cultural identities.\footnote{48}

This model is not only appealing to many non-Western developing countries but, in the case of China, is meant to represent a possible alternative - in an increasingly multi-polar and multicultural world - to certain basic characteristics of Western modernity, such as liberal democracy and a free market economy. For the first time in centuries, a further stage of modernization might be a process influenced by the rising role of countries - such as China - which could act as champions of a “modernity” based on non-Western values. As we have already stressed, this is, in our view, one of the most important elements of potential transformation of the contemporary international system since the Han Dynasty, was instrumental in perpetuating traditional Confucian-based culture of its institutions. China’s written language was another crucial factor in retaining a highly formalized education and means of conveying traditional knowledge, which resulted in preventing mass literacy and stifling more popular culture. The “search for modern China” after the end of the Empire and the birth of Sun Yat Sen’s Republic is an eloquent example of all the difficulties in finding a viable political and cultural model in a country where the crisis was due also to the fact that while the old world was partly dead the new one was not yet born. Spence, \textit{The Search for Modern China}, 602.

\footnote{48} Iwabuchi Koichi, \textit{Recentering Globalization} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002). Without underestimating the role of contemporary Japan as a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures, it is nevertheless important to underline the influence of some persistent, traditional elements in the present Japanese national identity: for instance, the country’s modern history started with the Meiji restoration, is still viewed by some political forces as a significant heritage, notwithstanding the many negative aspects of the nationalistic and imperialistic attitudes of the pre-World War II period. The figure of the emperor himself and the institution of the monarchy play a role of guarantors of Japan’s historical continuity, symbolizing the ties with the country’s mythological origins. In this sense, Japan’s “old modernity” is not a negligible factor in the shaping of Japanese contemporary national identity, even in a society increasingly permeated by transnational elements.

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related to the rise of China. As Shaun Breslin rightly point out, a meaningful example of this trend are the efforts aimed at “redefining and reinventing Confucianism (in China and beyond) as a means of redomesticating national capitalisms in response to the dominance of Western global norms.”\textsuperscript{49} In this context it is important to understand the possible impact of this approach in the broader context of the transformation of the international system by distinguishing “between the creation of an idea of the past to suit official policy, on one hand, and intellectual endeavours to rethink China's place in the world on the other. The latter enterprise involves an ongoing process of (re)thinking the nature of Chinese identity - an identity perceived to be under threat from either 'globalization' (however defined) or Western cultural hegemony, or both.”\textsuperscript{50} Even though this process cannot be easily circumscribed to a single school of thought, we have focused on the “New Left” because it has been a relatively widely used point of reference – as Breslin notes for “those who have highlighted the negative consequences of the transition from socialism and propose alternatives to embracing globalization as a means of promoting development. But not all these commentators are concerned with economic paradigms, and some of the most influential critical thinkers attempt to go beyond a simple “left-right” dichotomy to search for distinctive Chinese understandings of Modernity.”\textsuperscript{51} For Chinese thinkers like Guo Jian, “the main goal of these 'Chinese postists' is to deconstruct Western knowledge of China and at the same time to explore

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
various possibilities to reconstruct China’s own cultural identity and national subjectivity.”

This is a theme we need to take into account when we address the meaning of an evolving Chinese national identity in the context of the rise of China but it is necessary to reflect on it also for its relevance in terms of regime perspectives from an “ideational” point of view. At the same time – in terms of “praxis” – we must recognize that this discourse influences the Chinese strategic vision of the structural changes underway in the international system. Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jiesi note that this vision is based on the following elements:

…the feeling in China that since 2008 the PRC has ascended to be a first-class global power; the assessment that the United States, despite ongoing great strength, is heading for decline; the observation that emerging powers like India, Brazil, Russia and South Africa are increasingly challenging Western dominance and are working more with each other and with China in doing so; and the notion that China's development model of a strong political leadership that effectively manages social and economic affairs provides an alternative to Western democracy and market economies for other developing countries to learn from. In combination, these views make many Chinese political elites suspect that it is the United States that is “on the wrong side of history.”

Democratic transition theories

As we have already seen, in the framework of regime theories the “hybrid nature” of the PRC system is an element of obvious interest and, to some extent, of concern. In particular, China’s lack of democratization and its Communist Party’s continued firm monopoly on political power has renewed, more recently, views of the

52 Ibid.

peculiar PRC’s “political-economic system as a new form of state or authoritarian capitalism.” This approach propounded by US conservative analysts – who consider capitalism and liberal democracy intertwined – argues that China is not democratizing because it is not a capitalist system. The rationale of this argument is that, even though “much of China’s economy is organized around market principles and the country is deeply embedded in the international trading and production system...the presence of markets and economic exchange does not make a country capitalist.” Dan Blumenthal expresses his critique in this respect with the following argument:

…the Chinese Communist Party has managed to benefit from the employment of some market principles to grow the Chinese economy and essentially buy off many of its people through the provision of material gains. But this social compact is increasingly unsatisfactory to many Chinese, who are searching for meaning beyond riches. The current economic arrangements in China are not capitalist—“authoritarian,” “state,” or otherwise. Rather, China mixes markets with heavy doses of mercantilism and corporatism. This socioeconomic order is meant to strengthen the state rather than the individual. Until Premier Wen (Jiabao) and his comrades allow Adam Smith’s capitalism to take root, China will simply remain a more prosperous dictatorship.

On the basis of these rather critical considerations, Blumenthal considers the formation of democracy in the PRC “very unlikely” because - among other factors - there

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54 Dan Blumenthal, “Why China Isn’t Democratizing?,” *The American*, 26 April 2011. According to this author, the fact that the PRC could be “wealthy and authoritarian” can have profound implications “for the future of democracy and capitalism”. A new, successful “Beijing Model” of what some call “authoritarian capitalism” would break the relationship between free markets and political liberty. If Beijing has found a way to sever the capitalism-democracy link then the United States should re-think many of its foreign and economic policy assumptions. But fortunately for proponents of democracy and capitalism, China has not invented a new political-economic system of “authoritarian capitalism.” China is definitely authoritarian but it is not really capitalist at all.

55 Ibid.
isn’t a “class of burgeoning democrats”, of capitalists who can play a leading role in a democratic transition, representing a powerful force for change vis-à-vis the present structure of power of the CCP party-state. The notion of “democratic transition” has been elaborated theoretically by Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder who have tried to evaluate the possible international dangers that an emerging great power’s domestic political order might pose in terms of systemic “disequilibrium.” The main argument of this theory is that regimes undergoing a transition from authoritarianism to democracy can adopt disruptive foreign policies because the competitors for leadership may be willing to endorse aggressive policies for nationalistic reasons. This theory could perhaps find some empirical evidence for its assumptions in the late 1980s Chinese situation - with an internal dynamic between the regime’s efforts to reform its centrally planned economy and the attempts of the “liberal” wing of the CCP to launch a gradual agenda of political relaxation and institutional restructuring – but, as we have seen, after Tiananmen the risks of this potentially destabilizing transition have been substantially reduced. As Minxin Pei and several analysts have underscored, the Chinese Communist Party, after the crucial challenge of the 1989-1991 period, has proved to be “remarkably resilient, strengthening its rule through learning and adaptation.”

56 Ibid.

57 Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War”, International Security 20, no. 1 (Summer 1995): 5-38. Goldstein, Rising To the Challenge, 94. Mansfield and Snyder have subsequently refined their argument by indicating the institutional conditions under which the belligerence they explain is most likely to arise. In this context “aggressive foreign policies are regarded as instruments to garner popular support by tapping nationalist sentiments or to garner elite support by placating the institutional remnants of authoritarian rule, especially the military.”
The CCP has thus become a regime that Minxin Pei describes as follows:

…the world's largest and most powerful one-party regime which has been politically nimble and skillful enough to overcome difficulties that would have overwhelmed lesser autocratic rulers. For two decades, the party has compiled an impressive list of achievements: at home it has kept the economy growing at a gravity-defying double-digit rate, while abroad it has pursued a pragmatic foreign policy, avoiding confrontation and methodically gaining prestige and influence” in its search for international status.58

For these reasons, even the revised version of the “democratic transition theory” does not seem to reflect the present situation and trends affecting the Chinese regime, since the political structure of the party-state is not threatened for the moment by transition pressures towards more democratic institutionalization.59 Indeed, China’s rulers do not face either the sort of intense internal elite competition or the increasing degree of accountability to a mass electorate that Mansfield and Snyder have emphasized.

The main aspects characterizing the PRC’s political evolution in terms of internal structures are a more collective form of leadership at the helm of the CCP, as the last party’s Congress has confirmed; a less pervasive scope of political control over the Chinese society, which enjoys a greater degree of personal and cultural freedom, due to several factors, including the people’s better access to information as a result of decades

58 Minxin Pei, China’s Trapped Transition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 45-95.

59 Ibid. As we have seen the CCP continues to stress the importance of adhering to the “four upholds.” The regime has referred to two of these principles, “upholding the dictatorship of the proletariat” and “upholding the leading role of the Communist Party,” to prevent competing sources of institutional power from taking root.
of economic and social reforms; the continuing search of a partly new ideological basis to justify the legitimacy of the CCP’s grip on power after the weakening of the Marxist-Leninist foundations of the party-state.

By analyzing these aspects in contrast to neo-liberal regime theories underscoring the problematic implications of the system centered on the CCP party-state for the rise of China, there are other analytical approaches focused on “the internal logic of the Chinese power” which have stressed indeed the capability of the Chinese decision and policy-makers to guide and sustain the complex process of development of a still “fragile super-power,” keeping under control, in the meanwhile, the factors of friction and of possible tension at the international level. The basic reason why the PRC has been successful in this herculean task for such an extended period has been identified by analysts like Stapleton Roy in the incremental change which has affected also the CCP leadership as follows:

China's leaders have been remarkably adaptable in adjusting the system to accommodate the changes that are taking place. The altered mindsets in China are enormous, far greater than many Americans realize. In essence, the party has been bold and imaginative in responding to the challenges it faced. It is too little appreciated in the United States that for the last 30 years, China has been constantly adapting as its domestic and international circumstances have changed. This has included major government reorganizations every five years for three decades. Ministries have been created or abolished. State agencies have been turned into quasi-private corporations.60

This view of the evolution of China’s internal affairs clearly questions the conventional wisdom “that China’s political system has remained frozen and that there

have been no significant political reforms to match those in the economic sphere.” On the contrary, as Stapleton Roy writes, “political change in China has occurred on a vast scale, in a number of vitally important areas affecting the day-to-day existence of ordinary Chinese.”61 These changes, according to Roy, encompass several aspects of the Chinese system ranging from the evolution of the relationship between the government and the society (which is influenced by phenomena such as the spreading of information and social networking which cannot be entirely controlled by censorship) to the emergence of a new generation – in terms of age and educational background - of national leaders.62 Such evolving trends are cause and effect in the same time of the changes which have affected not only the ideology of the communist party itself but also the way the Chinese establishment and vast areas of the society think about political issues. This process has been accelerated by powerful dynamics such as the country’s ruling class generational transformation, its greater familiarity with the outside world and growing integration in the global economy.63

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid. In this respect Stapleton Roy notes that “China is alone among modern countries in having a system of rigorously enforced age limits that apply even to its top political leaders. The top-level age limits have only been applied consistently since the 16th Party Congress in 2002. But at national, provincial and local levels, they have dramatically and visibly altered the age structure of the leadership. As long as this practice continues, it means that the successors to top leaders are a minimum of ten years younger than their predecessors. As for the characteristics of the leaders themselves, not only are they younger, they are much better educated. In 1982, in the early stage of reform and openness, the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party did not have a single university-educated member. In 2007, just 25 years later, 23 of the 25 members of the Politburo that emerged from the 17th Party Congress had formal university educations, and the two others were educated at an equivalent level.”

63 Ibid. Social and cultural change is the result of many factors which are not “cosmetic,” including – as Roy points out – “the hundreds of thousands of students who have studied abroad and the millions who travel abroad on official trips for business or for tourism every year. This allows for greater
In this broader context it is important to note that – in terms of regime perspectives - political change in China is likely to stem, on one hand, by generational changes in the top leaders within the CCP party-state and, on the other, by their capacity for managing “the economic and social changes that will occur in China over the next two or three decades, including the continued emergence and maturing of the middle classes” which could entail growing pressures for systemic political reforms. In this sense the challenge for the Chinese regime remains the same that Deng Xiaoping had to face at the beginning of the process of reforms in the late 1970s, namely to further guarantee the country’s internal development and international rise under conditions of stability without unleashing uncontrollable domestic and external dynamics which could imperil the CCP party-state adaptation and survival. The consensus not only within the communist regime but also in vast sectors of the Chinese society, with varying political access to information and greater freedom for discussion. Tens of millions of Chinese can compare conditions in China with conditions in other countries on the basis of personal experience and observation. While the government can and does monitor expression, restrict information in certain areas and ruthlessly suppress organizations that lack government and party approval, this is far less pervasive than it was three decades ago.”

64 Ibid. As Ambassador Roy observes, “the fifth-generation leaders who will take over next year will be the first leaders in China to have spent most of their adult careers during the period of reform and openness. Xi Jinping, the current vice president and the presumed heir apparent to the top position of general secretary of the party, was just 25 years old at the time of the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee, which launched the reform and openness policies. Thus, most of his formative experiences as an adult occurred during this period. Li Keqiang, the presumptive replacement for Wen Jiabao as premier in 2013, is two years younger than Xi Jinping. Within the Politburo, if the age limits now in place are adhered to, seven of the nine members of the standing committee will have to step down to be replaced by younger leaders. And the same is true for over 40% of the full 25 members of the Politburo. The sixth-generation leaders who will take over in 2022 - 11 years from now - will be too young to have any memories of the Cultural Revolution.”

65 Ibid. Deng Xiaoping’s thesis was that China could only succeed in economic development under conditions of stability — and only continued one-party rule by the Chinese Communist Party could ensure stability. Whatever the merits of that thesis, circumstances later in that decade suggest that continued one-party rule could not ensure stability in the absence of significant adaptations. That is likely to be the case in the future as well. But that still leaves the question of what sorts of adaptations will be necessary in order to provide for continued stability.
views, that stability is a precondition for the country’s continued growth has been also related – in terms of international implications of regime perspectives - to those theories which have developed “institutionalist approaches.”

In assessing the possible effects of a great power rising outside the liberal “zone of peace” these theories have assumed that formal and informal organizational practices can to some extent reduce the degree of anarchy in the international system, making conflicts less likely and enhancing the potential for cooperation. Even though the degree of integration of the PRC in the international order seems to be a factor which is gradually transforming its regime, it is still highly debatable that the PRC is bound to follow the course of other governments in Asia which, remaining open to the outside world and being active participants in the global economy have “given rise to representative forms of governance after 30 to 40 years of rapid economic development”, as happened in South Korea, in Taiwan, in Thailand and in Indonesia. If we consider – as Stapleton Roy does - that China has only moved 15 to 25 years along this path and “to the extent that these Asian models have any relevance for China” this means that it’s premature to “expect significant systemic political change to occur in China in the near future” while in the mid-term it might be more likely “the result not of outside pressure, but of continued rapid economic growth and generational changes within the Chinese leadership.” In this context we need now to examine a further element which makes more complex, in our view, the PRC’s mere convergence toward Western models of

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66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
representative democracy, that is the specific national and civilizational identity of China which continues to shape its idea of modernity, statehood and its political and economic system.

**Multilateralism, economic interdependence and the rise of China**

It is worth noting that the evolution of the Chinese regime is reflected, in turn, also in its attitude toward international regimes. China’s international posture has traditionally favored bilateral rather than multilateral approaches - based also on regional institutions - to develop its economic relations (the US-China relationship is paradigmatic in this respect) and to resolve its international disputes. A selective preference for international regimes has proved to be a constant in Chinese foreign policy, which has participated in multilateral coordination efforts provided that China’s national interests, especially historically sensitive issues such as territorial sovereignty, were not put at risk. This was also due to the fact that - compared to the pacifying path of institutionalization in post-World War II Europe - East Asia has lacked in the early post-Cold War period the same favorable conditions. Nevertheless Beijing’s growing status has made its leadership more sensitive to exert a greater multilateral role, in line with its ambitions of favoring the establishment of an increasingly multi-polar system. A more assertive power projection at a regional level – forcefully pursuing an agenda based on national interests – is evident in disputes such as Beijing’s claims in the South China sea,

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68 Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge*, 98. It has been indeed underlined how “organized attempts at international cooperation on economic and security affairs in Asia had a comparatively short history in comparison to Europe: conflicting rather than common interests were salient, cultures were diverse, and an overarching transnational identity and sense of community that might undergird institution building were lacking.”
which in fact were motivated by a set of factors ranging from concrete economic reasons to nationalistic attitudes and the willingness to underscore Beijing’s great power status in the area.  

Even though the strong pessimism about the future of multilateralism in Asia which was shared in the mid-1990s by several analysts has been reduced by recent trends, it is undeniable that its future development will depend also on the possibility of greater coherence and cooperation within that mosaic of regional security models which coexist in the area. In this respect the multilateral attitude of a rising China continues to be – at a regional and global level – basically utilitarian and functional to Beijing’s objectives in terms of national interest and international recognition. In this perspective the Chinese leadership seems determined – as Breslin suggests – to “using trade and investment as a means of obtaining security objectives by establishing a more Sino-centric regional economic order…more through conforming than through confronting, and [in line with] the changing ideational basis of Chinese foreign policy and the increasing acceptance of ‘neoliberalism’s core belief that economic interdependence creates common interest and lessens the probability of conflict.”

In contrast to the possible danger associated to the rise of China – also from a regime perspective –

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69 Ibid. As Goldstein notes, China seemed to have “generally undermined the region’s most significant effort at building international institutions to dampen security conflicts, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). In response, states concerned about China’s maritime aspirations initially resorted to more traditional real-politik methods for coping with their insecurity. The ongoing efforts of regional and extra-regional states to nurture the ARF continued, but its weak institutional arrangements did not seem to promise much of a constraint on the international behavior of an increasingly powerful China. Pessimism prevailed about the prospects for Beijing’s meaningful participation in East Asian international institutions and about their effectiveness for managing the numerous interstate disputes involving China.”

70 Breslin, “Understanding China’s Regional Rise,” 831.
stemming from the appeal of the “Chinese alternative model” of authoritarian capitalism, some analysts wonder whether “ironically, one of the great challenges to US power could lie in China's acceptance of at least some of the global norms that successive US governments have tried to promote. So China's threat to the US in the region and elsewhere might emerge not from its promotion of an alternative model as suggested in the “Beijing versus Washington Consensus” debate, but instead…because, by playing by the rules that Westerners themselves have formulated, the Chinese are beating them at their own game.”

Nevertheless the capacity of integration of the PRC in the economic international system has not altered so far the following main pillars on which the Chinese foreign policy has been based:

…a commitment to multilateralism underpinned by the central role of the UN as the guarantor of global security; a commitment to consultation and dialogue rather than force as a means of settling disputes; a commitment to global economic development, with the developed world taking a greater share of the responsibility for promoting growth elsewhere; and a 'spirit of inclusiveness', recognizing all societies and cultures as coexistent and equal stakeholders in the global order.

As Shaun Breslin writes, the message stemming from these principles is that China values a “democratic” international order - the so called “democratization” of international relations - rather than the uni-polar hegemony of the pax americana. Moreover, China has the utmost respect for state sovereignty and does not seek to impose values and policies on other countries: “by forcefully reiterating that China does not have

\[71\] Ibid.

\[72\] Ibid.
a normative agenda when it comes to dealing with other countries - in stark contrast to the US and the West more generally - this 'anti-normative' stance actually becomes a normative position itself.”

These guiding principles in terms of policy have been elaborated and expanded from a theoretical point of view on the basis of the ideational elements which contribute to shape China’s national identity. As Zhang Tiejun has written, “the idea of China’s ‘peaceful rise’ (heping jueqi) portraying China as a responsible, peaceful, and non-threatening global power was introduced by Zheng Bijian, vice president of the Central Party College of the Chinese Communist Party. On November 3, 2003, Zheng addressing a plenary session of the Bo’ao Forum for Asia in Hainan – introduced in his speech, (titled *A New Path for China’s Peaceful Rise and the Future of Asia*), a new concept for China’s foreign strategy, which he termed China’s peaceful rise.”

According to Zheng Bijian’s theoretical analysis, the three following elements would characterize China’s peaceful rise:

…firstly, China will be rising peacefully introducing and applying “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, while actively participating in and contributing to economic globalization. Secondly, while China needs a peaceful international environment to continue accomplishing its goal of lifting its enormous population out of a condition of underdevelopment and poverty, it would rise to great power status without destabilizing the international order or oppressing its neighbors. Thirdly, as regards to China’s role and position in Asia,

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73 Ibid.

74 Zhang, “China’s East Asia Policy,” 18-19.

75 Ibid.
…China’s peaceful rise will be part of an overall historically important and significant peaceful rise of Asia.\textsuperscript{76}

The “peaceful rise” theory was later changed to “peaceful development” by the Chinese president Hu Jintao’s in 2004 in order “to reassure the nations of East Asia and the United States that China’s economic and military rise will not become a threat to peace and stability, and that other nations will benefit from China’s rise.”\textsuperscript{77} In this sense China’s peaceful development was presented by the Chinese leadership as a vision of international relations which, rejecting a zero-sum game logic, offered above all an approach aiming at reinforcing economic cooperation and political dialogue. The Chinese discourse on China’s “peaceful development” was also a response, as Zhang notes, to the recurring “China threat” and “China collapse” debates which circulated in the West and amongst Chinese neighbours. In the framework of the alternative between “Asia’s China” or “China’s Asia” discourse, this doctrine wanted to emphasize China’s rise as part of East Asia’s rise, restating that the PRC was “not seeking regional hegemony and dominance”, but rather it wanted to promote regional integration.\textsuperscript{78}

As Evan Medeiros writes, the further step of the Chinese strategic vision of international relations was Hu Jintao’s calling in 2005 for the building of “a harmonious world” (hexie shijie) as an “external manifestation of his domestic policy of building a

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
‘harmonious society’ (*hexie shehui*).” The harmonious worldview suggested that China’s leaders were “moving away from their traditionally reactive and combative view of foreign affairs as a ‘struggle’ (*douzheng*) against any number of external forces (e.g., hegemony and power politics).” It is interesting to take note in this respect of the following aspects:

Hu Jintao’s work report to the 17th Party Congress, for the first time, did not call for establishing a “new international political and economic order,” a phrase that Deng started using in these reports as far back as 1988, and it had achieved near-canonical status in China’s foreign affairs lexicon. Instead Hu’s 2007 report used a phrase that was less evocative of a challenge to the current international system: China will “work to make the international order fairer and more equitable.” In addition, Chinese media reports now seldom use the phrase “opposing hegemonism and maintaining world peace” as a “task” (*renwu*) in foreign affairs work; rather, the new formulation is “maintaining world peace and advancing common development.”

Even though in Chinese governmental and CCP policy documents the rise of China is still officially reduced to the objective of becoming “a medium developed country in the mid 21st century,” the trends of economic growth confirmed also in the wake of the world recession, its geo-political weight, its impressive military modernization, its increasing soft power projection are all factors which make China a rising power and a potential shaper of an evolving international system.

80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid. Zhongqi Pan notes that “the principal index of China’s rise is its rapid and robust decade-long economic growth. China ranks with other great powers in the areas of GDP, trade, investment, finance, etc., being the second largest economy next to only the US, the third largest trading nation after only the US and Germany, the first among developing countries in attracting foreign direct investment, and
These more ambitious goals have been stated – as Evan Medeiros notes\(^{83}\) – in official documents such as the 2008 National Defense white paper which underscored that China was playing “an active and constructive role in multilateral affairs, thus notably elevating its international position and influence” and by prominent scholars such as Huang Renwei who think that China “as a major driver of the current transformation of the international system…is playing an increasingly important and influential role…[being] a main participant in and builder of the international system in transformation.”\(^{84}\) As Medeiros rightly points out, Chinese analysts and policymakers “now regularly discuss using China’s new global position to shape the rules and norms of major international organizations in ways consistent with Chinese interests”\(^ {85}\). This attitude is echoed in the following considerations made by Ambassador Shen Guofang in a 2007 speech:

…China’s rapidly growing economy, its gradually increasing political and diplomatic influence, and the striking rise in its international status are all influencing the international structure in far-reaching ways. . . . China’s own unique strengths and influence demand that it play an important role in international affairs. . . . China should enhance its ability to determine the agenda and its ability to make use of the rules by playing a substantive role in all kinds of consultations and the writing of international rules. It should show even more initiative in holding foreign exchange reserves”. It is useful to remember in this respect that, even if other regional countries will rise and develop simultaneously with China, the PRC will still be – as Zheng argued in the early 2000s – “disproportionately stronger than other states in the region.” Zhang, “China’s East Asia Policy,” 19.

\(^{83}\) Medeiros, *China’s International Behavior*, 42.

\(^{84}\) Ibid.

\(^{85}\) Ibid.
participating in international affairs and in building the multilateral system.\textsuperscript{86}

**Ideational elements of the rise of China**

In this perspective the regime theories that we have examined so far seem to underline that the possible factors of change and friction at the international level linked to the peculiarity of the Chinese system are characterized by a mix of status quo and revisionist aspects which are not conducive, though, either to a new form of “security dilemma” or necessarily to confrontational attitudes in terms of economic competition. The core interest of the CCP regime survival requires, as we have seen, internal and external stability and shapes in this direction the PRC’s international behavior and its theorizing about the significance of China’s “peaceful development.” In the same time we should take into account, as Lieberthal and Wang Jiesi underline, that there are the following “fundamental sources of strategic distrust between the United States and China:”

…different political traditions, value systems and cultures; insufficient comprehension and appreciation of each others’ policymaking processes and relations between the government and other entities; and a perception of a narrowing gap in power between the United States and China.\textsuperscript{87}

In this context “strategic distrust appears to be more the accepted wisdom in Beijing than in Washington, possibly reflecting China’s memories of the “100 years of humiliation” and the recognition of its disadvantageous power position vis-à-vis the

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{87} Lieberthal and Wang, “Addressing US-China Strategic Distrust,” xi.
United States. Against this background which tends to underscore some ideational forces influencing the rise of China, we cannot underestimate - amongst the more revisionist and possibly destabilizing aspects of the PRC’s internal dynamics - the role played on the political scene by “a deep-seated nationalism taking root among a more attentive, aware, and outspoken Chinese public.” The manifestations of this new nationalism have included a widespread pride in China’s outstanding economic progress and in its rise on the world’s scene, often coupled with feelings of popular resentment at past and present mistreatment by foreigners. This nationalistic public sentiment has been nurtured not just by the official accounts of the country’s “century of humiliation” but also by an active debate on possible policies of containment vis-à-vis a rising China.

For these reasons also “democratic transition” theorists have suggested that revived or new forms of nationalism can provide the country’s leaders “with a collection of hot button issues that might have consequences for China’s international behavior.”

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88 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid. As Goldstein observes, in this perspective, the adoption of a more assertive foreign policy could be motivated – as it has been the case in Putin’s Russia - also by the need of rallying nationalist support behind a regime whose legitimacy is perceived more tenuous (having lost its former ideological appeal and still lacking a well-institutionalized basis for its exercise of authority). According to Mansfield and Snyder’s theory, the adoption of nationalistic attitudes might result from the pressures of competition within the CCP as contenders seek to outshine their rivals by tapping volatile popular sentiments. As we will see, the new forms of Chinese nationalism seem to be a complex mix of “top-down” and “bottom-up” dynamics.
Though, in contrast to some basic assumptions of this theoretical approach, the vicious circle related to the interaction between domestically motivated foreign policy initiatives and the expectations of a nationalistic public opinion has not led to major crises also in the case of disputes touching on highly sensitive issues, such as the Taiwan and the Tibet problems and more recently with regard to the South China Sea disputes.92

As we have seen, the focus of “transition theories” has been therefore partly shifted in the more recent years from the political and security sector to the implications of economic interdependence. At the domestic level, the overall good performance of the Chinese economy during the world recession and the greater economic role that the PRC has gained during this difficult phase, has circumscribed the conventional wisdom scenario which assumes that low growth could erode the party's political legitimacy and

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92 Francesco Sisci, “Assessing China’s Rise,” Asian Times, 15 October 2011. Lieberthal and Wang, “Addressing US-China Strategic Distrust,” xi. As Sisci notes in this regard, it is important “to grasp the complexities of the dispute in the South China Sea that flared up in 2010”. The US intervention in the dispute, arguing that as part of the main international sea lanes the South China Sea was of international interest, and Secretary Clinton’s offer of mediation were enough, according to this analyst “to create immense trouble for China - internationally, and thus internally” potentially turning the issue “in some kind of second Taiwan”. “The offer of mediation by itself was a declaration that the Chinese offer made a decade before by Zhu Rongji had been shattered. It affirmed that China was not able to deal with its immediate neighbors by itself, and it needed the United States to get involved its businesses. It further cast a powerful doubt on the possession of the islands, as the US mediation, while warmly welcomed by other neighbors, implicitly meant China had to give up some of its claims on the sea. The possibility of renouncing the claim is particularly sensitive for China. The map with the dotted line was handed down to the People's Republic government by the fleeing Nationalist forces in 1947. For many years, Beijing had no capability to enforce the claim, which then simply reinforced that of the Taiwan-based Nationalist government. This present tension is different and extremely irksome for Beijing. It's not just the obvious interest in the oil and gas below the South China Sea and the interest in stretching its hands into sea lanes vital for transportation to Japan or Korea.” On the US side – as Lieberthal notes - this situation “requires that America prepare to defend its interests against potential Chinese efforts to undermine them as China grows stronger. PLA aspirations for dominance in the near seas (jinhai) potentially challenge American freedom of access and action in international waters where such freedom is deemed vital to meet American commitments to friends and allies. The context for this is that, as China’s strength in Asia grows, it is more important for America to maintain the credibility of its commitments to friends and allies in the region.”
fuel social unrest. As Minxin Pei has underlined, such a scenario overlooks two critical forces which continue to prevent, as we have seen, political change in China: the regime's capacity for political and social control and the unity among the elite. For this reason even though economic slow-down and social unrest “may make it tougher for the CCP to govern,” they do not seem able to “loose the party's hold on power” in the near future.\(^\text{93}\) In Minxin Pei’s opinion this is indeed not going to happen for the following reasons:

…the CCP has already demonstrated its remarkable ability to contain and suppress chronic social protest and small-scale dissident movements. Since the Tiananmen crackdown, the Chinese government has greatly refined its repressive capabilities. Responding to tens of thousands of riots each year has made Chinese law enforcement the most experienced in the world at crowd control and dispersion. Chinese state security services have applied the tactic of “political decapitation” to great effect, quickly arresting protest leaders and leaving their followers disorganized, demoralized, and impotent.\(^\text{94}\)

In this context, unity among the country's elite continues to be a crucial factor in periods either of crisis or transition: as Pei notes, China's "authoritarian resilience" can be considered one of the most significant achievements of the CCP, which in recent decades has fostered technocratic dominance, a lack of ideological disputes, standardized

\(^{93}\) Ibid. As Minxin Pei notes, strong economic performance has been the single most important source of legitimacy for the CCP, so a slowing-down of economic growth “carries the danger of disenchanting a growing middle class that was lulled into political apathy by the prosperity of the post-Tiananmen years. And economic policies that favor the rich have already alienated industrial workers and rural peasants, formerly the social base of the party. Even in recent boom years, grass-roots unrest has been high, with close to 90,000 riots, strikes, demonstrations, and collective protests reported annually. Such frustrations would only intensify in hard times. It might seem reasonable to expect that challenges from the disaffected urban middle class, frustrated college graduates, and unemployed migrants could constitute a threat to the party's rule. If those groups were in fact to band together in a powerful coalition, then the world's longest-ruling party would indeed be in deep trouble.”

\(^{94}\) Ibid.
procedures for the promotion and retirement of high officials and a smooth leadership succession from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao and now to Xi Jinping.95

By concluding this analysis we can say that - although the present regime perspectives do not seem necessarily heading toward a “trapped transition”, two aspects which link the “home and abroad” dimensions of China’s evolution are confirmed in this scenario: first, the complexity of the economic interdependence which influences not only the internal situation and trends of the country (also from a political point of view) but which has clear international implications because of the weight of the Asian giant in the world’s economy. Kenneth Liberthal writes in this respect as follows:

…given the U.S. view that Asia is the most important region in the world for future American interests, American leaders are especially sensitive to Chinese actions that suggest the PRC may be assuming a more hegemonic approach to the region. Washington saw evidence of such actions in 2010-2012. On the economic and trade side, America is especially sensitive to Chinese policies that impose direct costs on the U.S. economy. These include intellectual property theft, keeping the value of the RMB below market levels, serious constraints on market access in China, and China’s 2010-2011 restrictions on exports of rare earth metals, which appeared to be strategically designed to acquire sensitive foreign technologies—especially in clean energy.96

A second aspect which emerges - also from a regime type perspective - as a significant factor in the interaction between China’s domestic politics and its international projection is the abovementioned role played by ideational factors such as a

95 Ibid. Nevertheless it is interesting to note that also Minxin Pei’s analysis focuses on a possible transition dynamic characterized by attempts of political entrepreneurs who could “use populist appeals to weaken their rivals and, in the process, open up divisions within the party's seemingly unified upper ranks”. In this respect he notes that “the current Chinese leadership is a delicately balanced coalition of regional, factional, and institutional interests, which makes it vulnerable to dissension. No single individual towers above the others in terms of demonstrated leadership, vision, or performance, which means that no one is beyond challenge, and the stage is set for jockeying for preeminence.”

multifaceted nationalistic discourse which signals the search of a delicate balance between the definition of a national identity less ideologically linked to the principles of the communist party-state and the recognition of the Chinese rising influence in contemporary international relations.

National identity, new forms of nationalism and China’s search of status

The continuum between the domestic and international dimensions of the rise of China is characterized by “transversal” elements - such as national interests and national identity – which cannot be analyzed simply by means of an epistemology which sees “the state as a unitary actor, whose behavior is dictated by the international structure;” Deng Yong describes these aspects as follows:

…the PRC state is porous to global forces and much of its foreign policy is driven by the interaction between domestic and international politics. For realist theories of varied persuasions, the state’s motivation is a given, whether is to maximize power or to be secure. But Chinese foreign policy has proven to be dynamic and responsive to domestic evolution and changes on the world stage.97

As we have seen, the Chinese leaders, in determining their country’s international course have had to face - as Deng Yong underscores - two essential questions: “first, what they can do to create an international environment conducive to their domestic agenda for sustaining the state-directed growth and gradualist reforms; secondly, how can China pave the path to great-power status” under an international hierarchy which is still partly Western-centered.98 In addressing these two issues the

97 Deng Yong, China’s Struggle for Status, 2.
98 Ibid.
Chinese leadership has also to handle new nationalistic tensions - fueled by problems affecting the Chinese national identity (the relationship with the USA and Japan, the question of Taiwan etc.) - that can damage not only the country’s internal development but also its peaceful rise to the status of world power. Even though we do not share his pessimistic view, it is worth noting the “structural” role that Zbigniew Brezinski attributes to Chinese nationalism in the following recent analysis of contemporary international relations:

At some stage, however, a more assertive Chinese nationalism could arise and damage China's international interests. A swaggering, nationalistic Beijing would unintentionally mobilize a powerful regional coalition against itself. None of China’s key neighbors - India, Japan, and Russia - is ready to acknowledge China's entitlement to America's place on the global totem pole. They might even seek support from a waning America to offset an overly assertive China. The resulting regional scramble could become intense, especially given the similar nationalistic tendencies among China's neighbors. A phase of acute international tension in Asia could ensue.99

In analyzing the link between these two important ideational elements characterizing the rise of China - nationalism and search of status - we prefer to use a constructivist approach because, as Alexander Wendt has written, “states are actors whose behavior is motivated by a variety of interests rooted in corporate type role and collective identities. Since most of these identities vary culturally and historically it is important to say much about the content of states interest in the abstract.”100


100 Alexander Wendt, Social Theory of International Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
this background, to better set in context the role of nationalism and search of status in the multidimensional framework of China’s rise, it may be useful to examine theoretically how we could rationalize the core national interests of the emerging Asian superpower that we have mentioned in our previous analysis.\textsuperscript{101} Alexander Wendt agrees with the identification of three fundamental national interests - physical survival, autonomy and economic well-being - which George and Keohane described informally as “life, liberty and property.”\textsuperscript{102} Wendt adds a fourth essential interest to this list: “collective self esteem,”\textsuperscript{103} which is a very useful criterion to assess the evolving international identity of China and the role played in this process by new forms of nationalism. How can we apply George and Keohane’s three categories to China’s core interests? If we consider the first one – physical survival – we need firstly to underline, as Wendt does, that the consideration of this element differs with the basic assumption of neo-realist thinkers who consider that survival is the only interest of states.

In terms of regime perspectives we have already seen how this core interest is specified at the “unit level,” by essentially referring to the notion of CCP party-state survival. Moreover, if we consider the case of China at the “system level,” we have seen that this element is important not in terms of a possible global threat to the country’s

\textsuperscript{101} Massimo Ambrosetti, “The Rise of China: New Nationalisms and Search of Status” (master’s thesis, University of Cambridge, 2009), 38-54. This analysis reproduces the arguments developed in my master’s thesis in this respect.


\textsuperscript{103} Wendt, \textit{Social Theory of International Politics}, 233-238.
survival in a security dilemma scenario but for its relevance for some “existential“ national identity problems such as Taiwan and the Tibet question. In fact, these are, with all their diversified backgrounds, very sensitive issues not because a crisis related to them could threaten the survival of the Chinese state, (also in the most conflicting secessionist hypothesis) but for the crucial challenge they represent for a certain idea of the Chinese national identity and sovereignty. As we have seen, this is a delicate area for the interaction of a rising China and other great powers: Taiwan has been in the past the only real factor of a possible security crisis in East Asia between Beijing and other regional significant players such as Japan and the United States. The more recent trends in the “straits relations” have witnessed a scaling-down of the “ideological” tension, confirming that a rising China in the region would regard the Taiwanese issue more as a problem of national identity than as a trigger of a regional conflict with other great powers. As we have already stated, this theoretical approach - based on a fundamental problem of national identity - seems therefore more adherent to the real Chinese priorities and drivers vis-à-vis Taiwan than the old structural realist explanations centered on “security dilemma” assumptions. The second criterion, autonomy, is explained by Wendt stressing that “in order to reproduce its identity, it is not enough for a ‘state-society complex’ to merely survive, it must also retain its liberty.”\textsuperscript{104} Here again there is an idea which is functional to better understand the present reality of the Chinese state, the leadership of which is certainly very sensitive to strengthen – in a period of rapid changes – the ability of the “state-society complex” to find new elements of legitimacy, to exercise control

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
over its allocation of resources and to streamline the governance dimension. Also a thorough consideration of the possible implications for a globalizing China of the third fundamental national interest - economic well-being - can offer interesting insights: in this theoretical framework, a national interest for economic well-being is indeed still associated - as we have argued - to the “growth imperative” and the implications of international interdependence. The international consequences of China’s rise are thus intertwined, especially in a period of world recession, with the challenges China’s economy has traditionally had to face. The constraints linked to huge infrastructure problems, a lack of natural and energy resources, a tremendous demographic pressure, a necessary path of further development not merely export-led will have to be reconciled with the fundamental objectives of a sustained rate of growth in a framework of economic complex interdependence. These needs tend to underline, one hand, the importance for China of a cooperative international context, on the other hand, the possibility of some revisionist tensions in the system stemming from the Chinese expectations of a growing recognition of the PRC’s status as the second largest economy in the world. This evolving balance of economic power and influence has recently led - as we have stressed - to a more assertive international posture. Suisheng Zhao writes in this respect as follows:

For more than one decade after the end of the Cold War, conditioned by its circumscribed power position and geopolitical isolation, China had to “learn to live with the hegemon” (i.e. the US), adjusting and implementing policies taking the reality of US dominance of the international system into account. Beijing thereby followed the so-called taoguang yanghui (“low profile”) policy doctrine introduced by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1990s, suggesting that China must “hide its capabilities, focus on its national strength-building, and bide its time”.

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The time to change China’s approach towards international politics seemed to have arrived when the financial meltdown started in the US and swept across the globe in 2008. Seeing a troubled US attempting to restrain China’s global influence and power, Chinese leaders became less willing to accept US-led international politics and were more prepared to define and defend China’s global interests. It is not difficult to find enough evidence to demonstrate that China has indeed been more forceful in formulating its “core interests” since the global economic and financial crisis started.105

This search of status can be better interpreted if we consider Wendt's addition of a fourth typically constructivist core interest - collective self-esteem - which can be used also to set in context the factor represented by the new forms of Chinese nationalism. This analytical perspective seems to usefully complement and enrich the theoretical analysis centered on the material elements of China’s rise. To understand China in its new international dimension, ideas matter, history matters, culture matters. Collective self-esteem in this perspective should be viewed as a crucial element for the representation of China not simply as a state increasingly more influential on the international scene but also as a civilization reaffirming its historical role. More than hegemonic designs, what matters is that a rising China is profoundly aware of its past, of

105 Zhao, “China’s New Foreign Policy ‘Assertiveness’,” 5. Suisheng Zhao quotes as examples of this attitude the fact that “after French President Sarkozy met with the Dalai Lama in his capacity as rotating president of the EU Council, Beijing abruptly canceled the scheduled summit with the European Union in December 2008 to show that, even amid the global crisis, it was ready to confront the leaders of its biggest trading partner. China’s response to the Obama administration’s announcement to sell arms to Taiwan and President Obama’s meeting with the Dalai Lama in early 2010 was also unusually tough. Instead of talking about Deng’s low profile dictum – in a warning to the US – China cited Deng’s statement that «no one should expect China to swallow the bitter fruit that hurts its interest». For the first time the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman threatened to impose sanctions on American companies involved in arms sales to Taiwan. In effect, as openly stated by PLA Rear-Admiral Yang Yi, China was to reverse its position from previously being a target of US sanctions to become a country that imposes sanctions against the US in order to “reshape the policy choices of the US.”
its historical and cultural identity, of its right to “have back” its status as a world power. These can be clearly powerful drivers of change on the international scene.

All this is blended, though, with a very pragmatic and realistic policy-making which has been a guiding principle for the Chinese leadership in pursuing its priorities. Such a scenario is thus characterized by partly opposing forces: on one hand, the more reassuring core interests represented by the status quo and cooperative features of China’s rise that we have delineated. On the other hand, the potentially revisionist elements stemming from the promotion of a distinct Chinese model that Pan Wei has defined in four sub-systems: “a unique way of social organization; a unique way of developing its economy; a unique way of government; and a unique outlook on the world.”

The last sub-system rightly points out the specificity of the relationship of this tremendously auto-centric country and the rest of the world. Wendt makes the following warning in this respect:

> These…interests are needs that must be met if state-society complexes are to be secure, and as much as they set objective limits on what states can do in their foreign policies. They may, on occasion, have contradictory implications that require prioritization, but in the long run all four must be satisfied.

China’s rise seems therefore to be a challenge not only for the international community, but for China itself: even though this challenge does not stem from the abstract Huntington’s “clash of civilizations,” it has to take into account a new phase of

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106 Pan Wei, “The Chinese Model of Development” (lecture at the Foreign Policy Center, Beijing, 11 October 2007).

107 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 237.
international relations characterized by important and unprecedented aspects of complexity and novelty, also in a “civilizational” perspective.

The rise of China in this sense is significantly promoting a “new ideational position” which is supported not only by “harder sources of power” but also by soft power and influence. As Joshua Kurlantzick argues, “as China has built a global strategy, it has also developed more sophisticated tools of influence, which it deploys across the world.”108 The instruments of China’s soft power “are tools of culture and diplomacy, tools related to Chinese culture and arts and language and ethnicity”109 which are deployed and supported also by means of China’s growing economic might. This soft power projection encompasses ideational forces such as new forms of nationalism which can have an impact on the whole process of the rise of China.

If the analysis of Chinese nationalism is inscribed in a post-structural perspective we can consider this multi-faceted phenomenon also as a “civilizational” factor which cannot be analyzed, as David Campbell has noted, simply through a “logic of explanation,” trying to identify self-evident realities and material causes by means of a “narrativizing historiography.”110 China’s new nationalism is thus related to the constitution of a partially new Chinese identity - functional to its revived great power status - in the framework of historical representations which tend to construct identity

108 Kulanztick, Charm Offensive, 62.

109 Ibid.

through a series of inclusions and exclusions of other identities and histories. A “logic of interpretation” applied to Chinese nationalism can thus draw some conclusions focusing on the manifest political consequences of adopting one mode of representation of a national identity over another in the context of China’s rise.

As we have anticipated, the complex background of China’s historical identity, the “weight of the past”, seems to be an inescapable starting point to approach the new dimension of Chinese nationalism. This perspective allows a better understanding of a phenomenon which has been usually analyzed from a Western point of view in order to justify foreign policy options vis-à-vis the rise of China. As Peter Gries argues, “the crucial national narrative of the “Century of Humiliation” (bainian guochi) from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century is central to Chinese nationalism today. This thesis is shared, as we have seen, also by authors such as Jenner who in his *The Tyranny of History*, thinks that, in terms of identity, “China is caught in a … prison

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111 Ibid.

112 Peter Hays Gries, *China’s New Nationalism: Pride Politics and Diplomacy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 45. Tu Weiming, “Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center,” *Daedalus* (Spring 1991). In Chinese history earlier victorious invaders (such as the Mongols and the Manchus) had become Chinese while barbarian populations outside the borders of the Empire paid tribute to “civilization” (wenming), in a vision of the world that assumed the Middle Kingdom as the universal and superior civilization (early encounters with western merchants, missionaries and intellectuals from Marco Polo to Matteo Ricci did not change this view). The violent encounter with the “West” in the 19th century therefore was not only a military and political ominous defeat but first and foremost a confrontation with a civilization technologically more advanced and with strong universalist pretensions of its own which - as writes Tu Weiming - “fundamentally dislodged Chinese intellectuals from their Confucian haven ... [creating a] sense of impotence, frustration, and humiliation.” Understanding that this traumatic confrontation between East and West fundamentally destabilized Chinese views of the world and their place within it, makes easier to contextualize the meaning of the Century of Humiliation for the Chinese national psyche.
of history.”  

If the weight of the past - in a civilization still shaped by the Confucian heritage - seems to be a rather inevitable element of context to understand China, several scholars of nationalism, such as Hobsbawm, have addressed this problem from an opposite perspective, arguing that historians writing in the present determine the past, inventing “histories and traditions to serve contemporary ends.”  

Geremie Barmé expresses even a more radical opinion asserting that “every policy shift in recent Chinese history has involved the rehabilitation, re-evaluation and revision of history and historical figures.”  

This is not an easy process because, as Gries points out, “national narratives can help us better understand the role of the past in nationalist politics today.” In this respect he writes as follows:

Narratives are the stories we tell about our pasts. These stories, psychologists have argued, infuse our identities with unity, meaning, and purpose. We cannot, therefore, radically change them at will. Far from being simple tools of our invention, the stories we tell about the past both constrain and are constrained by what we do in the present. Simply put, the storied nature of social life provides our identities with meaning.

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114 Eric J. Hobsbawm and T.O. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 213. This approach has been followed by historians such as Paul Cohen who, referring to the “ideological” commemoration of the 90th anniversary of the Boxer Rebellion in the wake of the Tiananmen massacre, has focused on how Chinese historians “draw on [the past] to serve the political, ideological, rhetorical, and/or emotional needs of the present.”


In this perspective if we consider, as Stuart Hall does, that “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past,” we see the importance and relevance of Gries’ following argument on Chinese nationalism and its influence on foreign policy-making:

National identity is both dependent upon interactions with other nations, and constituted in part by the stories we tell about our national pasts. Like all forms of identity, national identity does not arise in isolation, but develops and changes in encounters with other groups. Thus, Chinese nationalism cannot be comprehended in isolation; instead, it must be understood as constantly evolving as Chinese interact with other nationalities.117

As we have seen, this nationalistic dimension is relevant for some crucial aspects of China international posture, in particular for its relations with countries such as the United States and Japan but, more recently, also with other rising powers and possible regional peer-competitors such as India and Russia. Moreover, this dimension is relevant in light of the complex web of expectations which characterizes the Chinese public discourse focused on the further socio-economic growth of the RPC, its expanding economic role and the recognition of its status at the international level. In the framework of these nationalistic trends we cannot underestimate the degree of “friction” - both domestic and international - possibly stemming from the perception either that foreign actors are opposing the “legitimate” rise of China or that the present PRC leadership is not able to pursue effectively these crucial national objectives. Ideational elements such as nationalism can be therefore drivers of change because the abovementioned narratives provide meaning and coherence to an evolving national identity in the framework of the

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117 Gries, China’s New Nationalism, 135.
rise of China. This process is also related to the growing consciousness in the Chinese leadership of the burden that nationalistic pressure can put on state behavior in terms of decision and policy making (an area that “present-day nationalist entrepreneurs” try to affect with their initiatives).118 In this sense the Chinese leadership increasingly recognizes that these forms of nationalism are also “bottom-up processes” - based on the population’s deeply rooted feelings, perceptions and representations – which cannot be entirely controlled or manipulated by means of a “top-down” political propaganda (as the CCP-state has tended to do in the past) in a consensus-building logic of legitimization of the domestic and international objectives of the regime.

In particular, as Gries rightly points out, the “debates about the Chinese past have direct impact on Chinese nationalists today also through the continuous production and reproductions of narratives about the “century of humiliation.”119

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118 Ibid.

119 Ibid. This period, which witnessed the collapse of China’s politico-institutional and socio-economic structures, encompasses little more than a century, beginning with China’s defeat in the First Opium War in the mid-nineteenth century (with the British acquisition of Hong Kong in 1842) and ending with China’s victory over Japan at the end of World War II. During these turbulent years the domestic and international weakness of the Middle Kingdom reached a point which made China – as Hedley Bull has interestingly argued – a member of the international system (being formally a sovereign state still recognized by other sovereign states) but not a member of the “international society”, because of its de facto unequal status vis-à-vis the major world powers. This historical background is important also to understand a topic that is closely linked to the new Chinese nationalism, that is what Yong Deng calls “China’s struggle for status”. If the contemporary Chinese nationalism has also a “civilizational” dimension, it is useful to evaluate how the opium wars and the subsequent events represented an unprecedented and disruptive turning point for the national identity of China. The catalogue of Chinese national humiliations in that period is still consulted and regularly enriched, including historically symbolic events such as the two Opium Wars of 1839–1842 and 1856–1860, the Sino-Japanese “Jiawu” War of 1894–1895 (with the “unequal treaties” signed with the British at Nanjing in 1842 and the Japanese at Shimoneseki in 1895) the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, the neglect of China’s aspirations and requests at the peace Conference in Versailles. As Gries argues, it is not an exaggeration to say that the telling and retelling of narratives about the “Century of Humiliation” have “framed and still partly frame the views and interaction of the Chinese with their Western and Japanese counterparts. Representations and perceptions of this past still resonate in today’s Chinese national identity: the humiliating loss of sovereignty linked to the unequal treaties, (with all a panoply of unilateral concessions such as
His argument in this respect is the following:

The “Century of Humiliation” is neither an objective past that works insidiously in the present nor a mere “invention” of present-day nationalist entrepreneurs. Instead, the “Century” is a continuously reworked narrative about the national past central to the contested and evolving meaning of being “Chinese” today. Furthermore, the “Century” is a traumatic and foundational moment because it fundamentally challenged Chinese views of the world.120

These evolving and contested narratives both reflect and shape China’s relations with the West on the basis either of a “victimization” or a “victor” syndrome, coexisting in China’s nationalism.121 In this context, Chinese new nationalism partly escapes, though, from its traditional role as “instrumentum principis” in a logic of control and manipulation of the popular consensus. The dangers of the political use of nationalism stem from the fact that – as Gries argues – such a complex phenomenon implicates our identities and emotions and for this reason it is difficult to reduce it to a tool used to maintain political legitimacy for the following reasons:

Awareness of the ways Chinese nationalism engages with other nations and the ways it narrates the past reveals how it is shaped by the passions of the Chinese people. Thus, awareness of these factors forces

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indemnities, extraterritoriality, foreign settlements in the treaty ports) is associated to other symbols of the foreign aggression: the ruins of the Old Summer Palace, looted and burned by Anglo-French troops in 1860, are regarded as a symbol of the material and cultural ‘rape’ of China while Lin Zexu, the famous Chinese official who tried to resist opium and British invasion, is depicted as a symbolic figure of national courage and virtue.”

120 Ibid.

121 Ibid. As Gries writes, this ambivalence of Chinese visions of the “century” is linked nowadays to the struggle to come to terms with this period and is reflected in the emergence of new narratives about the “Century.” The maoist “victor” national narrative seeking to mobilize popular support for the Communist revolution and later to strengthen the nation-building of the People’s Republic blamed pre-“Liberation” sufferings on the feudalism of the Qing Dynasty and Western imperialism. More recently we have witnessed a coming back of a new and popular “victimization narrative” that blames “the West,” including Japan, for China’s humiliations, renewing in this way the focus on victimization in pre-Mao Republican era writings.
a revision of the mainstream view that Chinese nationalism is a tool of the elite: that, with the slow death of communist ideology, the Communist Party foments nationalism to legitimize its rule.

This process could indeed risk of becoming an element of complication for the recognition of China’s “peaceful rise.” The reactions to episodes such as the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the 2001 spy plane collision and, more recently, the South China Sea frictions - perceived by many Chinese as American assaults on national dignity in the framework of a new victimization narrative - underline the possibly influential role that popular nationalists can play in regime legitimization.\(^\text{122}\)

In this sense the communist party has witnessed a partial erosion of its hegemony over Chinese nationalist discourse and for this reason popular nationalists can exert more pressure on those who decide the PRC’s foreign policy, the legitimacy of the current regime being dependent also upon its ability to respond effectively to nationalist demands. This is a trend that the Chinese party-state is interested in minimizing for its domestic and international implications.

In this perspective a foreign policy aimed at achieving the recognition of great power status seems to be an instrument also to respond to those growing demands and aspirations, in terms of national identity. At the same time this strategy centered on the quest for international influence and status, rather than a mere power-politics approach, seems much more functional - as we have stressed - to a policy of “threat reduction” which is an essential component of the peaceful rise of China as a great power aimed at avoiding the risks of an “ideational security dilemma” stemming from conflicting

\(^{\text{122}}\) Ibid.
national identities fueled by nationalistic attitudes. Once more, a realist paradigm focused on “the state’s single-minded pursuit of power” seems therefore insufficient to better understand how the Chinese leadership intends to respond to these problems.123

**Between a “civilizational nationalism” and an international system “with Chinese characteristics”**

The possible emergence of a new “civilizational nationalism” infused with neo-Confucian values (a recipe for stability and hierarchical control for the CCP-state) could encompass, though, the “bottom-up” and “top-down” dimensions of the contemporary Chinese nationalistic discourse. The rise of China could thus offer an exit from “the prison of history” which so significantly still influences the Chinese national identity. The international recognition of a “peaceful” great power status can be therefore seen as a historical opportunity for China to overcome the demons of its past, avoiding the risks of a new ideational security dilemma driven by nationalistic policies, perceptions and misperceptions.124 This evolving national identity could make easier for China to play in the international system – as scholars such as Zhongqi Pan have argued – the role “of a responsible and constructive reformist.”125

123 Deng Yong, *China’s Struggle for Status*, 231.


125 Zhongqi Pan, “Defining China’s Role in the International System,” 6. The basic assumption of this analytical approach is that China’s ascendancy on the world’s stage will be a peaceful rise because the “Chinese, policy-makers and scholars alike, have increasingly realized that it is impossible for China to benefit from challenging the international system and violating the existing norms. China can gain only by continuously embracing the international system and internalizing, accommodating and complying with the international norms.”
Also in this perspective, however, “China’s central question” is not only – as Qin Yaqing argues - “how to peacefully integrate into international society” but also “how and to what extent China will develop and spread its ideas and norms - both those with ‘Chinese characteristics’ and the universally accepted ones - to facilitate and deepen the outside world’s acceptance of and adaptation to China’s peaceful rise.”\(^{126}\) As we have seen, this paradigm of gradual change influenced by a “peaceful rise” of China can be questioned, though, in light of the ideational elements – including the implications of a peculiar regime-type and of a multifaceted nationalistic discourse – which shape the Chinese vision of the evolution of the international system.

This vision of international relations “with Chinese characteristics” is clearly at the heart of the on-going and multifaceted strategic reflection of the Chinese leadership in this context. A meaningful example of such debate is offered by the following considerations, made “off-the-record”, by Qian Qichen:

> It can be said that the 21st century cannot be the “American century.” It is not that the Americans do not want it but that it is not possible…. The United States wants to engage in unilateralism but it cannot dominate the world. . . . Speaking about international relations in the new century, one has to talk about China. China is the most vibrant force in the world today. The rapid growth of our country has led to widespread attention in the international community.\(^{127}\)

This confident and assertive view of China’s role in contemporary international relations underlines, once more, the PRC’s aspiration of being - as scholar Huang Renwei put it - “a major driver of the current transformation of the international system” on the basis of a mix – as we have seen in this chapter – of hard and soft power, of

\(^{126}\) Ibid.

\(^{127}\) Medeiros, *China’s International Behavior*, 43.
material and ideational elements. However, the nature of this possible new international order – more multi-polar and multicultural - influenced by the rise of China is to some extent still immanent.

If in the present transitional period the rise of China can be a factor of change of the structure of the system itself, the evolution of this very structure - with the ascendancy of other global actors - is, in turn, an element which sets the significance of China rising as a global actor in a broader context, as we will see in the next chapter; a context characterized by a gradual redistribution of “the comprehensive structure of international power and influence.”
CHAPTER 4

A POST-WESTERN ORDER OR A MESSY CONCERT OF POWERS?

A gradual redistribution of the international hierarchy of power and influence

In the previous chapters we have seen that in the first decade of the new century the theoretical reflection on the rise of China has been characterized by the widespread acknowledgement that Beijing has been successful in gradually translating economic clout into global political leverage and influence. The debate on the implications of this process in the United States and elsewhere (and in China itself) is substantially open and evolving. Experts and policymakers still ponder whether the rising Asian power could, in the mid-term, become a challenger – along with other emerging protagonists - of U.S. and European political and economic global primacy or a major (and assertive) “stakeholder” in an international system partially redefined on the basis of its own interests and principles.1

In this sense the focus of the debate has been, more recently, increasingly centered on whether the rise of China and “of the rest” will be able to ultimately establish a post-Western international order. As we have seen, this is one of the main conundrums stemming from Chinese international behavior: “the extent to which China is a status quo power, or offers an alternative to existing models and norms.”2

1 Rudolf, “The United States and the Rise of China,” 7. As we have seen, managing the military and economic rise of the People’s Republic of China has been regarded by Peter Rudolf and many other analysts as “the big challenge facing American foreign policy in the coming decades. The formulation of a China strategy is taking place under conditions of great uncertainty. China’s capabilities and their further development need to be estimated, and its intentions need to be interpreted and assessed. How will its intentions change with growing capabilities. Will China become a revisionist power as it rises?”

In trying to draw some final conclusions from the analysis we have so far delineated we need to refocus on the main question of our research, that is whether and how China is transforming the structure of the international system.

In this respect we have argued that some ideational elements of China’s rise – its national and civilizational identity, its search of status, its hybrid regime’s success in advancing a form of “authoritarian capitalism,” a nationalistic discourse influencing its policy-making – can be the most genuinely revisionist forces possibly conducive to change in the framework of an evolving global order. In parallel, the growth of China’s “comprehensive power” has already become a fundamental factor of novelty influencing the landscape of international relations in the 21st century.

At the same time, we have argued that the elements related to the rise of China which can potentially contribute to changing the structure of the international system are constrained by a set of counterbalancing factors. Firstly, the priority for China of continuing to rise under conditions of internal and external stability to safeguard the regime’s survival: hence the Chinese threat reduction and partly status quo approach aimed at that “peaceful development” which is regarded in Beijing as an essential instrument in order to advance the PRC’s vision and role on the world’s scene. In this perspective the PRC’s leadership continues to express an overarching and consistent assessment of China’s security external environment which assumes “a low probability
of war among major powers, which would distract China from national development.”

In this respect Medeiros describes the Chinese position as follows:

…the Chinese government’s current position is that, on balance, China faces a favorable external security environment for continued growth and development….Chinese leaders believe that the current environment, for a variety of reasons, offers a strategic window of opportunity that should last about 20 years and should allow China to continue to grow its comprehensive national power and to build a “moderately well-off society.” Chinese policymakers seek to maximize this window and, if feasible, to extend it for as long as possible.

As we have seen in previous chapters, the neo-realist paradigm centered on a power-politics dynamic of confrontation between a rising China and a still US-led Western international system cannot capture the complexity of the present transitional phase. By deconstructing the neo-realist theoretical assumptions which posit that contemporary international relations will continue to be driven by a logic of “hegemonic transition,” we have tried to demonstrate that the potential of change related to the rise of China cannot be only the product of a shift of the balance of power in material terms.

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4 Ibid.

5 Medeiros, *China’s International Behavior*, 22-23. As Medeiros points out, the strategic focus on a process driven by “peace and development” in its initial incarnation “was articulated by Deng Xiaoping in the mid-1980s and was in direct opposition to Mao’s assessment of the likelihood of ‘early war, major war and nuclear war’ (zao da, da da, he zhanzheng 早打, 大打, 核战争). Deng’s conclusion, in overturning Mao’s pessimism, established the theoretical foundation for his pursuit of a more internationalist foreign policy and one that would assist economic development. Deng’s seminal conclusion subsequently allowed the leadership’s articulation in 1985 of the phrase ‘peace and development are the main trends of the times’ (heping yu fazhan shi dangjin shidai de zhuti 和平与发展是当今时代的主体). This core conclusion and Deng’s repeated references to it in the 1980s and 1990s set the foundation for China’s reform-era foreign policy; and this phrase persists today in China’s foreign policy discourse.”
After the brief uni-polar interlude following the end of the Cold War, the neo-realist vision of the international system seems indeed to be contradicted by the lack of any true “strategy of preponderance,” despite the ambitions of the various ascending powers and the US determination to continue to play the role – to use Madeleine Albright’s definition - of “indispensable nation.” In this context, we agree with Simon Serfaty’s following argument:

Attempting to reassert U.S. preponderance and Western dominance may not be desirable, even if it were feasible, but the ability of any other power to achieve preponderance over the United States and the West will not be feasible either, even if it were deemed desirable. A return to unipolar conditions is thus unlikely, but so is a return to bipolar conditions, notwithstanding repeated forecasts of China as America’s principal rival. Finally, absent a major discontinuity such as the use of nuclear weapons in a regional conflict, a “concert” remotely comparable to what emerged in Europe after 1815 is also improbable, as neither the goals nor the members of any such concert would be readily identifiable, even if limited to democratic states.⁶

If we consider the broader concept of influence vis-à-vis that of “comprehensive power,” another important counterbalancing force that we have to take into consideration is related to the fact that “some of the international ideational space in which China has been able to move with relative ease during the Bush years has become somewhat squeezed.”⁷ The decline of the US and of the West in terms of its “ideational capital” - expressed by soft power and global influence - does not seem to be a “manifest destiny,” as thinkers such as Kishore Mahbubani had predicted just some years ago.


⁷ Ibid.
The fact that we are undoubtedly witnessing a shift in the global balance of power – and China has a significant role in it – does not mean that we are necessarily moving into a “post-Western world” in terms of value-systems, international norms and regimes and institutional architecture of the international system. The response to the ongoing world’s economic crisis seems to confirm this trend: in terms of global economic governance the leading role attributed to the G-20 (largely replacing the former role of the G 8) is a significant signal of relative shift in the economic balance of power. Even though this process has not structurally changed so far the primacy of “Western-centered” institutions such as the Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank, we need to assess the rise of China also in light of the “rise of the rest.” Pereira and de Castro Neves underscore in this respect the following aspects:

There are several reasons why emerging powers today are perceived to be much more than supporting actors in the international arena. First, they exert an increasing influence on global economic issues, such as trade and investments. Initially regarded as an acronym to refer to dynamic markets, the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) have become integral players in the process of economic recovery after the global financial crisis in 2008 and 2009. With 40 percent of the world’s population and nearly 25 percent of global GDP, these countries not only proved more resistant to the crisis, but also lead the efforts to global economic recovery when compared to the developed economies. Moreover, of the top 20 companies in the 2010 Forbes Global 2,000 list, five are from the BRICs (3 Chinese, 1 Russian, and 1 Brazilian).  

If we look at systemic change we can therefore say that the rise of China is a necessary but not sufficient force for a possible transformative process which could lead

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ultimately to a structural redistribution of the international hierarchy of power and influence.

If it is not surprising that the recent uni-polar moment of US preponderant power ended not only in the sands of Iraq and Afghanistan but also because of the global economic crisis (confirming, as Simon Serfaty observes, that uni-polarity is historically more the exception than the rule in international relations), one could question, though, the emerging consensus “about an inevitable and irreversible shift of power away from the United States and the West”\textsuperscript{9}, driven by the rise of emerging powers such as China. In this perspective, Serfaty describes the challenge to move out “of this consensual bandwagon” as follows:

The challenge…is to think about the surprises and discontinuities ahead. In the 20th century, the post-Europe world was not about the rise of U.S. power, but about the collapse of everyone else. In the 21st century, the post-Western world, should it be confirmed, need not be about the decline of Western powers, including the United States, but about the ascendancy of everyone else.\textsuperscript{10}

A paradigm of cooperation-competition: China as a “partner-opponent”

In the framework of these general trends, it appears that in the shorter run China could remain - in an evolving framework of “cooperation-competition” - a “partner opponent,” strengthened by two decades of changes in the balance of power. Jeffrey Bader and Richard Bush III describe this situation as follows:

China’s rise may pose the most important foreign policy challenge to the United States in the 21st century – if China surmounts massive

\textsuperscript{9} Serfaty, “Moving Into a Post-Western World,” 7.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
internal challenges and becomes a superpower. Although the Communist Party does not enjoy high legitimacy, its mix of promoting economic growth, selective repression, appeals to nationalism, and management of rapid social change has been successful enough internally to allow it to remain in power and has led the nation to greater international respect. Each leadership cohort has been more capable than the previous one. Economically, we already share an uneasy codependence. Militarily, the projection of Chinese military power eastward will bump up against existing American deployments. Politically, China’s authoritarian system remains at odds with American liberal democratic values. American suspicion that China’s rise challenges U.S. leadership in East Asia combines with Chinese concern about U.S. intentions to create a climate of uncertainty.\textsuperscript{11}

In this context the paradigm shift from an improbable “security dilemma scenario” to a situation of friction arising from the “complex interdependence” has been accelerated – as we have already underscored - by the recent global economic crisis, which further increased China’s international power in relation to America and Europe.

The United States has been committed, especially as a result of the economic crisis, to continued engagement with China as a major "stakeholder" (without compromising, though, on issues such as Tibet, Taiwan or the situation of human rights). The Obama Administration has so far emphasized the importance of a new dimension of “trans-Pacific” relations in which the relationship with Beijing is obviously bound to play an essential role. This position continues to some extent a policy developed by the second Bush Administration, which often emphasized Beijing’s cooperation on many strategic issues, rather than its failings. In the words of Robert Zoellick, U.S.-China relations in the past were “defined by what we were both against. Now we have the

opportunity to define our relationship by what are both for.” On the Chinese front, also
the present leadership seems focused on the following priorities:

China’s success in accomplishing national revitalization depends on
close and continuing interaction with global and regional powers,
markets, and institutions. In the words of China’s 2008 national defense
white paper, “the future and destiny of China have been increasingly
closely connected with the international community. China cannot
develop in isolation from the rest of the world, nor can the world enjoy
prosperity and stability without China.” Even in the wake of the global
financial crisis in fall 2008 and the resulting rapid declines in Chinese
growth, Hu Jintao affirmed during the December 2008 Central
Economic Work Conference that the direction of global economic
integration for China was correct and should continue.

In the same time the Obama administration’s “China policy” has been more
sensitive to the complexity and the long-run implications of “the most important bilateral
relationship of the 21st century.” Against this scenario of cooperation-competition the rise
of China has undoubtedly been recently shaping the US policy-making in a direction
which recognizes the multi-polar challenge which is posed by this process in its
interaction with the other emerging actors at the global level. A response to this trend is
represented - vis-à-vis the rise of China – also by the recent Obama administration’s
“pivot to Asia” policy which is, as Michael Green notes:

…a strategic recognition that Asia deserves more attention….because
the center of international political and economic dynamism is shifting
to Asia; power is diffusing, and it is shifting to Asia, especially with the

12 Robert B. Zoellick, “Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?” (speech of the
Deputy Secretary of State before the National Committee on U.S-China Relations, September 21, 2005).

13 Medeiros, China’s International Behavior, 20.
rise of China and India. It makes sense for the US to play the leading role in this process.\textsuperscript{14}

As we have seen, the “pivot to Asia” policy seems to be bound to reinforce in East Asia a renewed “pax-americana” which can rely on the traditional system of “hub and spokes” - in terms of security alliances - and Washington’s role as a honest broker for regional affairs.\textsuperscript{15} This role of “honest broker” cannot be easily played by the PRC for the following reasons underlined by Francesco Sisci:

China at the moment cannot do the same. It does not have similar experience. China, in fact, has no recent or ancient experience in equal alliances - despite US-underscored leadership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Washington has great experience in taking on a very measured, transparent, and respectful attitude toward its allies - and China's tradition is only in feudal, unequal ties, where minor countries bow to China's superior power.\textsuperscript{16}

The recognition of the pivotal role of Asia and the rethinking of US foreign policy in that direction can be seen as one of the significant factors of change – also related to the rise of China - in the framework of a region emerging as a global pole of development in the economic sphere.

\textsuperscript{14} Michael Green, “The Asia pivot is both political, and good policy,” Dispatch Japan (March 20 2012), \url{http://www.dispatchjapan.com/blog/2012/02/mike-green-the-asia-pivot-is-both-political-and-good-policy.html#tp} (accessed 22 March 2012).

\textsuperscript{15} Jeffrey A. Bader, Obama and China’s Rise (Washington: the Brookings Institution, 2012). In his recent book the former Senior Director for Chinese Affairs at the NSC underlines that Obama's intent has been “extend U.S. influence and presence in East Asia, which he felt had been neglected because of American preoccupation with the ‘war on terror,’ the Middle East, and especially Iraq. China's rise, particularly its military buildup, was causing sleepless nights for its neighbors. The Obama administration's efforts have been aimed at developing stable relations with China while building stronger relationships with troubled allies and partners in the face of Beijing's rising assertiveness. In his opinion, the future US presidents “will need to find the right balance in China policy, maintaining U.S. strength and watchfulness but not falling into the classical security dilemma trap, where each side interprets growing capabilities as reflecting hostile intent and responds by producing that reality. I believe that President Obama struck that balance.”

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
In this respect we have to consider, though, a possible transformation of the international system not simply by examining the possibility of a hegemonic transition from the realist theoretical standpoint of polarity but from the point of view of a broader process of “redistribution of power and influence” at the international level.

This multifaceted concept – elaborated by Alessandro Colombo – encompasses the notion of change with regard to the hierarchy of international actors and of regional and global dynamics.\(^\text{17}\) This hierarchy would be constructed not around the concept of a global order structured on polarity but around new “regional orders” which are influenced by the role of pivotal states which act as centers of gravitation for these “regional constellations.” In this context, as we have argued, China risks of being a rather isolated emerging great power with a reduced potential of becoming a “regional pole.”

**The rise of China in light of the rise of other emerging powers**

As Chris Brown has written, “from a foreign-policy perspective, states attempt to change their environment in accordance with aims and objectives they have set for themselves. From a structural perspective, states attempt to adapt to their environment, making the best of the cards the system has dealt them.”\(^\text{18}\)

In this sense the rise of China is constrained by the “structural cards” the system has dealt it. As we have seen, in East Asia the Chinese ambitions of being the “pivotal state” for the region have to take into account a strategic scenario influenced by the necessity not only to reckon with the comprehensive power of the United States – which

\(^{17}\) Alessandro Colombo, “L’Ordine Globale e l’Ascesa delle Grandi Potenze Regionali,” 2.

is the traditional point of reference for evaluating the rise of China - but also with other peer competitors like Japan and, in a larger context, India and Russia.

In this framework the relationship between Beijing and Tokyo can offer an interesting confirmation of our main argument, because it is not only characterized by power politics but also by profound national identities and historical backgrounds. Against this background, it cannot be underestimated the potential of renewed competition, not only in geopolitical terms, and of possible friction between the two great powers in East Asia, in a framework of redefined national identities and new nationalisms which tend to be also bottom-up processes involving value systems, cultural perceptions and representations. As we have seen, this nationalistic and “civilizational” dimension is an important background for the rise of China, in terms of foreign policy options of the main actors involved in the process. Even in the highly unrealistic perspective of a dramatic decline of the United States power in East Asia, leaders in Beijing should recognize, as Hugh White writes, the following situation:

> Japan has no such option, and there is virtually no chance that Tokyo will accept Chinese primacy as long as Japan’s economy is comparable to China’s, as it will be for many decades at least. In the face of Japan’s power, China’s best option is to help establish a new order patterned on the European concert of power, in which Chinese influence can be maximized, and the costs and risks of strategic competition with Japan minimized. But that has two unwelcome implications for China. The first is that it must relinquish hopes of even a soft ‘Monroe-style’

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19 Ibid. Even though both of them share some common Asian values, China wants to rise “on its own terms” while Japan, keeping a strong national and cultural identity, after WWII has been part of the Western Alliance and its society has been fully integrated in an international system based on Western values. In this sense, China after a long historical experience of confrontation with a modernization based on externally imposed values and principles, has been developing a peculiar model which could be defined “modernity with Chinese characteristics” (socialist market economy; partly de-politicized communism; traditional neo-Confucian culture and Western-style consumerism).
hegemony in the Western Pacific, and accept strong continued US strategic engagement. The second is that it must accept Japan as a legitimate major power on a par with China. This will be hard for Chinese leaders to accept, and even harder for them to sell to their people. But if they do not, it is hard to see how Japan can find a durable and sustainable place in Asia’s new order, without which it is hard to see how that order can be stable and peaceful.20

If, as White argues, Japan is “in many ways the crux of the problem of Asia’s future order,”21 it is easy to see how the historical US policy of “double reassurance” vis-à-vis China and Japan is challenged by China’s rise also in terms of perceptions and nationalistic reactions. Tokyo could find itself in an increasingly difficult position because its security depends on good relations between its two major trading partners but, at the same time, a strategic US-China “special relationship” would pose problems to Japan’s national identity and role as a regional power. In a scenario of “quest for primacy” the perspectives to construct a “concert-like order in Asia” seem therefore heavily influenced not only by the diverging strategic objectives of the major players but – especially in the case of China and Japan – by a nationalistic discourse which often fuels a process of reciprocal “otherization” which reproduces negative representations and perceptions on the basis of the conflicting bilateral relations which have characterized the history of China and Japan in the 19th and 20th centuries.22


21 Ibid.

22 Ibid. This background makes difficult for to accept Japan’s legitimacy as a major power in Asia because it would limit its own aspirations to primacy. In the same time for Japan would be an immensely difficult step to play an autonomous role outside the present position of “strategic client” of the united States. As White notes, “after two decades of economic stagnation and political drift, it is hard to see where the leadership will be found to take Japan in this new direction. The risk is that those in Japan
If we look at the other prominent member of the contemporary “Asian troika”- India - we can see that the potential for a “common revisionist agenda” with China is not easily identifiable. As Dujit Dutta notes “India’s relations with China are uneasy in the best of times, but over the past few years the spectrum of differences between the world’s two largest countries has steadily widened, with the relationship becoming more complex as a result.”

Even though “there has indeed been some cooperation in economic ties and in areas of global significance such as climate change,” Dutta underscores the negative side of the relationship in the following way:

…the list of issues pending resolution which bedevil the relationship has been growing. The constructive partnership envisaged in 2005, when the two countries announced the India—China Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity, remains unfulfilled and has proven difficult to attain. Over the past two decades of engaging China, the general tenor of India’s diplomacy has been to avoid confrontation over security issues, sustain diplomatic talks, and adjust where possible in the hope that it will bring about a more accommodating Chinese approach sensitive to India’s concerns.

If no “Chindia” is in sight, also the relationship between China and Russia tends to underscore the lack of a potential truly strategic revisionist approach among emerging

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24 Ibid. As he notes “India is worried by Chinese territorial claims on vastly-populated regions of India, its alliance-building and active nuclear, missile, and military collaboration with Pakistan, and the absence of any agreement between China and the large Tibetan community in exile in India since 1959. There is no active constituency in India for a conflict with China. Yet, the opinion within the political class is significantly less positive about China and the prospects for resolution of some of the crucial issues than it was in 2005. In 2010, the Pew Global Attitudes Project found a steady decline between 2005 and 2010 in the percentage of Indian respondents who viewed China favorably, as Chinese assertiveness steadily grew.”
great powers not only because of the competing geo-political and geo-economic interests of these countries at the regional level but also because of their diversified national identities and objectives. Fabio Indeo describes this situation of geopolitical competition as follows:

...although the Sino-Russian strategic cooperation partnership has recently evolved – boosting bilateral trade and economic cooperation and enhancing cooperation in the oil and gas sectors – geopolitical competition between Russia and China to influence Central Asia is destined to continue in the coming years, considering the importance of their strategic goals in the region. Moscow aims to preserve its traditional influence in the “near abroad” as well as to control Central Asian energy exports, while Beijing aims to become the leader of a greater economic area as well as to strengthen its energy cooperation ...in order to enhance Chinese energy security and diversification of supplies.25

After achieving their shared goal of consolidating their reciprocal spheres of influence in Central Asia by means of the marginalization of the US influence in the area, “the different strategic aims of Russia and China towards Central Asia have emerged in the regional scenario, drawing up several elements of tension and rising geopolitical competition between them in the security, energy and economic fields.”26 In addition to these material elements we have to consider the ideational dimension which influences the national identity of Russia which – even though is not “a European country like any other,” – defines itself primarily through its consciousness and ambition of being an “European great power”. For these reasons – as Serfaty rightly points out – Russia “rather than the assertive and domineering power it is sometimes portrayed to be, relative


26 Ibid.
to Europe and the rest of the West, is a demandeur state, and what it demands most is a willing and capable partner for the power it lacks and cannot regain without Western help.”

This priority linked to Russia’s national and historical identity – in addition to the abovementioned factors of regional competition - reduces the potential of a strategic cooperation (and of a common revisionist agenda) between Moscow and Beijing.

In search of an enlarged leadership for the contemporary international system

The paramount focus on the US and China relationship - which has been reflected also in our analysis - could raise, as Sisci has written, the typical prospect of a “Three Kingdoms strategy,” the one exemplified in the famous strategic novel The Romance of the Three Kingdoms: as the US and China are engaged in their strategic competition and complex interdependence other emerging competitors are ready to play the “cards the system is dealing them.” In this context change cannot be, though, simply the outcome of these emerging powers’ “mildly revisionist belief that they should play a more prominent role in global affairs.”

To better assess whether this process is “a harbinger of a new world order yet to be unveiled” we should - as Pereira suggests - to move away from a perspective only centered on the surviving idea of the hegemonic power of the United States, and look more closely at the complex web of relations among these countries. From this analysis we tend to draw the conclusion that - even though some emerging or re-emerging great powers like China have the ambition of moving into


28 Ibid.

29 Carlos Pereira and Joao Augusto de Castro Neves, “Brazil and China: South-South Partnership or North-South Competition?,” 5.
a post-Western global order - a common agenda for this challenging goal is not in sight because their rising trajectories, as Colombo argues, are driven more by national and regional dynamics than global ones.\textsuperscript{30} This situation could lead to a protracted transitional phase characterized – as Serfaty argues – by a “messy concert of powers” which reflects significant elements of globalization and fragmentation of contemporary international relations.

The reflection upon the structural limits of this “messy concert of powers” for China’s role as a global power is meaningfully reflected by the thesis of Chinese analysts such as Yan Xuetong who have recently argued in favor of a new version of a bipolar order, based on a sort of “pax sino-americana” realistically taking into account the cooperation-competition paradigm which has emerged more recently. In this regard Yan Xuetong has asserted that “China’s rise will alter both the relative distribution of power among nations and the norms and responsibilities underlying the international order.”\textsuperscript{31} Despite Chinese official rhetoric to the contrary, Yan has expressed the view the United States and China could form a “de facto” bipolar world order in the coming decades which could minimize the risk of a “messy concert of powers.”\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid. According to Carlos Pereira and Joao Augusto de Castro Neves, a “counter-hegemonic coalition” stemming from the interaction among emerging powers is not for the moment a likely alternative to the U.S.-led order because this process – in terms of potential of change of the international system – cannot been simply defined along the lines of North-South dynamics. As they argue by referring to the “pattern of growing imbalances and asymmetries” between Brazil and China, “Brazil and China are bound to be competitors, but it is not clear how bilateral imbalances may affect multilateral cooperation between the two countries.”

\textsuperscript{31} Yan Xuetong, “China’s Rise and International Order,” (lecture, the Brookings Institution, Washington DC, November 7, 2011).

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
Even though as late as 2004, “the Chinese government prohibited official media from mentioning the ‘rise of China’, afraid of alarming other major powers and overstating China’s capabilities, and Chinese officials still couch their statements in terms of China’s rejuvenation” it is interesting to take note of these more candid discussions - within the Chinese scholarly community - of China’s growing role in world affairs and its connected potential of systemic transformation. The rationale offered by Yan for his thesis is that within 15 to 20 years, the economic gap separating China and the United States from the rest of the world will expand considerably. Although other rapidly growing countries such as India will enjoy greater influence, only China has any realistic chance of matching the United States in economic power. In the realm of strategic relationships, however, the United States will remain unchallenged, because it maintains over 70 major alliances, while China has none.\(^\text{33}\) Without minimizing the intensified economic, political, cultural, and possibly even military competition, Yan contends that such competition, however, can ultimately be managed and even channelled to positive ends.\(^\text{34}\) This approach seems to implicitly underline a growing perception also from a Chinese standpoint that the systemic synergies with other emerging powers to redefine the international order have still to be proven.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.

\(^{34}\) Ibid.
If China’s “strategic intimacy”35 with the US can look unlikely under the present circumstances, it is also true - as we have argued - that there is neither a “Chindia” in sight nor an embrace between the Russian bear and the Chinese dragon.

If the post-Cold War uni-polarity has been a rapid transitional phase because the US was lacking “a strategy of preponderance,”36 in the present more fragmented scenario the role of China is still an evolving factor which is contributing, though, to a redistribution of power and influence in parallel to other emerging actors.

This makes the international system of the 21st century partly “under construction.” In this context the expectations of China’s continued growth – in addition to its existing comprehensive power – forms a sort of “imagined power” in the minds of other actors which make, in this sense, greater the Chinese influence. The anticipation of structural change could become – to some extent – a self-fulfilling prophecy. What is lacking - as Colombo has written37 - is certainly a working redefined model of enlarged leadership for the contemporary international system.

In this still uncertain framework the potential of change linked to the material and ideational dimension of the PRC emerging as a global player should hopefully contribute to shape contemporary international relations in a cooperative direction which could make the rise of China evolve in line with past models of peaceful “civilizational” prominence.

35 Ibid.


37 Ibid.
In this perspective we can hope that - as Michael Hunt has perceptively written - “to the extent that China’s long and rich imperial past defines the future for which Chinese strive, it is not in the crude sense some would have it – as a system of middle-kingdom arrogance to be revived – but rather as a standard (or perhaps more accurately a national myth) of cultural achievement and international power and influence to live up to.”

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