

# China's Rise: Offensive or Defensive Realism

Ghazala Yasmin Jalil\*

## Abstract

*China's rise has been the greatest development of the 21st century. It has emerged as the second largest economy in the world, a country with a modern army and nuclear weapons. China's rise has come to be seen as a major threat by the West and especially the US. Most scholarly debates predict that it will lead to a conflict between China and the US. Set in this context, this paper takes John Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, which predicts intense competition and conflict between China and the US and examines China's behaviour as a rising power against it. The paper finds that far from being an aggressive, hegemonic and a revisionist state, China is a status quo power that aims to preserve its position in the international system rather than upset it. The paper argues that China's behaviour displays elements of defensive rather than offensive realism.*

**Keywords:** China's Rise, Great Power, Offensive Realism, Defensive Realism, Power Maximising Behaviour, Status Quo Power.

## Introduction

In the last few decades, China's rise as a great power is increasingly seen as a major security threat by most of the Western powers, especially the US. Both the policymaking as well as the academic circles have debated the rise of China as a major security threat of the future. John Mearsheimer is also among those who perceive China's rise as the most immediate threat to the US supremacy. Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism predicts intense security competition between China and its rivals and the threat of war among these competing powers.<sup>1</sup> He foresees China and the US becoming adversaries as China's power increases. It is important to assess these claims and in turn, what it means for regional and global security.

---

\*The author is Research Fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.

<sup>1</sup> John J Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W W Norton & Company, 2001).

This paper looks at Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism<sup>2</sup> and tries to determine whether it explains China's behaviour as a rising power. The test of the offensive realism theory would be to determine whether China displays revisionist tendencies, acts aggressively towards its neighbours and shows power maximising behaviour. In sum, it would entail determining whether China displays revisionist tendencies or acts like a status quo power.

If China's foreign policy behaviour is not explained by Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, then is there an alternate theory that may explain China's behaviour. China's behaviour may be explicable somewhat through defensive realism, which does not see a conflict between great powers as inevitable. The paper would argue that China seeks to maintain the balance of power rather than upset it.

The paper has three main sections. The first section looks at the basic tenets of Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism. The second assesses whether China's behaviour as a rising power displays elements of offensive realism. The third discusses what theory, if any, does explain China's behaviour. This section argues that China shows more of elements of defensive rather than offensive realism.

The literature on the rise of great powers in general and China's rise, in particular, is widely divided into power transition theory, the realist camp (offensive realism and defensive realism) and the liberal school of thought. The scholars who use power transition theory or offensive realism to examine China's rise, predict a future where a major conflict and even war is inevitable. Power transition theory foresees conflict as a result of a rising power confronting a dominant power where the former is willing to reshape the rules of the system and institution by force, if necessary, in order to change the status quo.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Graham Allison talks of the impending conflict when a rising power challenges an established great power, calling it the 'Thucydides's Trap.' He argues that in the last five centuries, there

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) and A F K Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

have been 16 such instances and 12 resulted in war. He sees the US and China heading for the trap unless imaginative statesmanship is exercised.<sup>4</sup>

Others, like Kenneth Waltz, argue that war is made unlikely by the advent of nuclear weapons. His argument is that while the international system is still characterised by intense security competition and anarchy, it will not culminate into war.<sup>5</sup> Charles Glaser argues that due to interdependence and vested interest for both the US and China, any security competition would be limited in nature.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, John Ikenberry argues that China's rise would not necessarily result in war or overturning of the existing system. He postulates that Western-oriented liberal world order has a certain appeal and is thereby easy to join. He essentially argues that a rising China would be accommodated in the existing system. The Western order would thereby live on.<sup>7</sup>

Then there are scholars like Mearsheimer who, through their theory of offensive realism, predict that China's rise would be marked by hegemonic, aggressive and expansionist behaviour and that would inevitably lead to a major conflict between China and the US.<sup>8</sup> The present paper takes Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism and applies it to contemporary China to determine whether it indeed is manifesting the kind of behaviour that Mearsheimer predicts. Moreover, since China's rise is being seen and interpreted as a threatening one in the West, especially the US, one that needs to be contained and countered. It is, thus, appropriate to examine China's behaviour against this theory.

---

<sup>4</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Waltz and Scot D Sagan, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: W W Norton & Co., 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Glaser, "Will China's Rise Lead to War? Why Realism Does not Mean Pessimism," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2011), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2011-03-01/will-chinas-rise-lead-war>

<sup>7</sup> John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?" *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2008), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2008-01-01/rise-china-and-future-west>

<sup>8</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy*.

## Mearsheimer's Theory of Offensive Realism

Mearsheimer presents a theory of offensive realism,<sup>9</sup> which is essentially a systems level theory that borrows elements from Hans Morgenthau's classical realism<sup>10</sup> and Waltz's defensive realism.<sup>11</sup> Mearsheimer takes Morgenthau's assumption that states seek to accumulate maximum power for themselves. However, the reason why they do so is because of the anarchical characteristics of the international system as Waltz assumes and not because of the human lust for power. One important element Mearsheimer brings in is the factor of geography to explain the behaviour of great powers. He uses his theory to explain the behaviour of great powers from the wars of the French Revolution through the 1990s. He also uses it to explain the US grand strategy. He also uses his theory to predict the future of great power politics in the 21st century. One particular emphasis is the pessimistic scenario which is emerging with the rise of China and the probability of an inevitable clash between the US and China.<sup>12</sup>

Mearsheimer argues that the anarchical system forces great powers to engage in power competitions and act aggressively. The thrust of his thesis is that great powers are afraid of each other and are perpetually competing for power. Great powers' primary aim is to maximise their power and be the greatest power in the system.<sup>13</sup> This behaviour among great powers is motivated by the instinct of survival not by any human lust for power.

Mearsheimer's theory is based on five basic assumptions. These include:

- i. The international system is characterised by anarchy;
- ii. The great powers possess the capability to destroy each other;
- iii. Great powers are uncertain about the intentions of others;
- iv. Survival of a state is the supreme goal of a state;
- v. And Great powers are essentially rational.

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Hans J Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1948).

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth N Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Addison Wesley Publishing Co., 1979).

<sup>12</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy*, 373-377.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 2.

The combination of these five assumptions results in great powers acting aggressively towards each other.<sup>14</sup> The assumptions translate into fear, self-help and power maximisation. The offensive capabilities of other states coupled with the uncertainty about the intentions of other states produce fears about survival. In an anarchical international system where there are high stakes involved in the war, the states follow their own interests. Power maximisation means that, for great powers, survival is a means to become the most dominant power in the system. Moreover, states care more about relative power rather than absolute power. This behaviour typically results in security dilemmas.<sup>15</sup>

Mearsheimer also presents an auxiliary theory that considers the power of water and its insulating effects. He argues that large swathes of water or sea limit the power projection capabilities of great powers. In making the argument, he divides the states into insular and continental powers.<sup>16</sup> The UK, Japan and the US are examples of insular states and France, Germany, China and Russia are continental states. For Mearsheimer, this means that territorial conquest is not possible while coercion is possible.

Mearsheimer, taking his geography argument further, asserts that stopping the power of water is precisely why no state can be a global hegemon. They can only be regional hegemons.<sup>17</sup> This is why he considers the US a regional hegemon, not a global one.

Mearsheimer does use his theory to predict the future of great power politics in the 21st century. For Mearsheimer, the basic structure of the international system, characterised by fear and anarchy, has not changed with the end of the Cold War as many scholars have predicted.<sup>18</sup> Talking explicitly about Europe and Northeast Asia, he predicts that the regions may see a lot more security competition than it did in the 1990s. He characterises the present security configuration in Europe as bipolar (Russia and the US) and Northeast Asia as multipolar (with Russia, China and the US as balancers). However, he predicts that these power configurations will

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 114-119.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>18</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

change over the next two decades, which will result in intense security competition and war.<sup>19</sup>

He also argues that China is the biggest threat to the US in the 21st century: “China, the principal great power rival of the United States in Northeast Asia.”<sup>20</sup> He asserts that China’s worldview is guided by realism, citing instances of war with China’s neighbours. Mearsheimer sees China’s military modernisation programme with great concern and considers Taiwan a great flashpoint where China and the US could clash. He also fears China’s economic growth and predicts that, at the present growth rate, it would overtake Japan in wealth over the next two decades. He asserts that “A wealthy China would not be a status quo power but an aggressive state determined to achieve regional hegemony.”<sup>21</sup> However, what is notable with Mearsheimer’s concern with China is that it would become a hegemon rivalling the US. This contradicts Mearsheimer’s own argument where he says that it is possible only to be a regional hegemon and not a global one. If that is the case and the US is a regional hegemon, it should not be concerned with what is happening in another region of the world.

In sum, the theory of offensive realism amounts to great power behaviour that is aimed at power maximisation with the aim to be the most dominant power in the system. A great power behaviour would be a revisionist one where it would not be satisfied with the status quo and would always be striving to readdress that power balance to its advantage until it becomes the most dominant power in the system. Moreover, Mearsheimer’s theory sees continental powers as more dangerous than the insular one. According to this logic, a rising China would be a revisionist force with the aim to be the ultimate hegemon in the region. It is important to see whether China’s behaviour fits Mearsheimer’s theory.

## **China’s Rise: Offensive or Defensive Realism**

### *China’s Rise*

China has grown tremendously in economic terms in the last 30 years. At the same time, it has also gained enormous political, military and economic

---

<sup>19</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy*, 362.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

clout. The engine behind China's rise has been its enormous economic growth. It has a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of nearly 10 per cent per annum, which is one of the major sustained expansions in the history of world economies. As a result, it has been able to lift more than 800 million people out of poverty.<sup>22</sup> In just 30 years, China has risen as the second-largest economy in the world. It has a world economic output of 14.8 per cent and an economy worth US\$11 trillion.<sup>23</sup>

China has also been playing an increasingly vital role in the issues affecting international security like North Korea, Iran, Sudan to HIV/AIDS and energy security. Moreover, China is among the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and has a right to veto. It has a nuclear arsenal and is pursuing a military modernisation programme.

China's growing economy has also meant that it has an increasingly large and diverse defence force. It has a large army and an increasingly large naval force. China's defence spending is an indicator of China's growing defence force. While it had only a defence budget of US\$58.8 billion in 2008, it has a US\$215 billion budget in 2016. Its defence budget has increased nearly four times in just eight years. In comparison, the US had military spending of US\$611 billion in 2016, which is almost thrice that of the Chinese military spending,<sup>24</sup> it is significant that the latter has become the country with second highest military spending. China is estimated to have a nuclear arsenal of 260 weapons, the fourth largest in the world after Russia, US and France.<sup>25</sup> It has an impressive array of ballistic missiles with ranges from 600 km to 11000 km. It has nearly 150 land-based ballistic

---

<sup>22</sup> "The World Bank in China," World Bank, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>

<sup>23</sup> Alex Gray, "The World's 10 Biggest Economies in 2017," World Economic Forum, March 9, 2017, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/03/worlds-biggest-economies-in-2017/>

<sup>24</sup> "World Military Spending," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), <http://visuals.sipri.org/>

<sup>25</sup> "Nuclear Weapons: Who has What at A Glance," Arms Control Association, Factsheet, updated January 2017, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat>

missiles, 48 sea-based ballistic missiles and bombers.<sup>26</sup> China also has a nuclear-powered submarine fleet of JIN (Type 094) that provides it with an assured second strike capability. China's military strength is ranked third largest after the US and Russia.<sup>27</sup>

All these factors definitely provide the making of a great power. Also, in light of Mearsheimer's theory, China has both latent power and military power. China's latent power is its national wealth and the size of the population, both of which are very strong. This qualified China as a great power according to Mearsheimer's theory. China is definitely a rising power, possibly a great power. What remains to be seen is what it means for China and the region.

### *Offensive or Defensive Realism*

The test of the offensive realism theory would be to determine whether China displays the revisionist tendencies, acts aggressively towards its neighbours and shows power maximising behaviour. In sum, it would entail determining whether China displays revisionist tendencies or acts like a status quo power.

Under Mao (1949-1976), China had the policy of overturning all the imperialist regimes in Asia and the world. During this period, China actively supported revolutions in many developing countries that it considered imperialist or saw them as imperialist proxies. This threatened China's neighbouring states especially the US allies.<sup>28</sup> China essentially wanted to export its socialist ideology to other states. During this time, China's policy can be described as operating under the principles of offensive realism. At the same time, during this era, China was operating with limited capabilities in an international environment characterised by bipolarity. It was operating within an environment where global politics was

---

<sup>26</sup> Hans M Kristensen and Robert S Norris, "Chinese Nuclear Forces, 2016," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 72, no. 4, (2016): 205-211, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00963402.2016.1194054>

<sup>27</sup> "Countries Ranked by Military Strength (2017)," Global Fire Power, <http://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.asp>

<sup>28</sup> Shiping Tang, "From Offensive Realism to Defensive Realism: a Social Evolutionary Interpretation of China's Security Strategy," in *China's Ascent: Power Security and the Future of International Politics*, ed., Robert S Ross and Zhu Feng (London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 141-162.



driven by the intense Cold War rivalry of the two great powers — the US and the former Soviet Union.<sup>29</sup>

However, since the 1970s China's policies have shown less revisionist tendencies. The country has increasingly become a state that is embracing defensive realism. One thread of this evidence is that China has toned-down its revolutionary rhetoric. It is also not supporting insurgencies in other countries. The second thread of evidence is that since the late 1970s China has increasingly pursued a cooperative security approach in its relations with regional neighbours and in the international arena. By and large, China has tried to forge friendly relations with its neighbours. It includes ameliorating relations with states like India which is traditionally a rival. Their relations did become strained in 2017 when there was a standoff between the Indian and the Chinese forces on the Doklam plateau. Dhoklam is a territory claimed both by Bhutan (aligned with India) and China.

However, Indo-China relations improved as the two countries held an informal summit in China in April 2018.<sup>30</sup> The two countries even held a joint military exercise in December 2018, called Hand-in-Hand.<sup>31</sup> Over the years, China has also managed to resolve border issues with so many neighbouring states. It has settled border disputes with countries like Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan initially and recently with Russia, bordering the Central Asian States and Vietnam.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, China has territorial disputes with India and Japan but it has never made these disputes a hurdle in forging friendly ties with these two countries. Avery Goldstein dubs it a neo-Bismarckian grand strategy of China whereby it is pursuing its interests by reassuring those who may feel threatened and may form anti-China

---

<sup>29</sup> Avery Goldstein, "An Emerging China's Emerging Grand Strategy: A Neo-Bismarckian Turn?," in *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific*, eds., John Ikenberry and Michel Mastanduno (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 64.

<sup>30</sup> "India China Informal Summit at Wuhan," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, April 28, 2018, [https://mea.gov.in/pressreleases.htm?dtl/29853/IndiaChina\\_Informal\\_Summit\\_at\\_Wuhan](https://mea.gov.in/pressreleases.htm?dtl/29853/IndiaChina_Informal_Summit_at_Wuhan)

<sup>31</sup> Ankit Panda, "India, China Resume Annual 'Hand-in-Hand' Military Exercise After One-Year Gap," *Diplomat*, December 11, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/india-china-resume-annual-hand-in-hand-military-exercise-after-one-year-gap/>

<sup>32</sup> Shiping Tang, "The Rise of China as a Security Lynchpin," *Asia Times*, June 21, 2003.

alliances.<sup>33</sup> This, in his opinion, has resulted in a security environment that is conducive for China as well as for the region as a whole.

Another indication that China does not show aggressive behaviour in its policies is that China has increasingly engaged and integrated with the international community. Over the past 30 years, China has amply demonstrated this by its increasing membership of international organisations and institutions as well as membership of treaties since the 1980s.

China has increasingly participated in the regional multilateral institutions over the years. In the last few decades, East Asia has seen a number of regional institutions being formed. Topmost among those are the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC); the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF); ASEAN plus 3 and the East Asia Summit. China is part of most of these multilateral institutions as well as an active member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). China was also a key player in the six-party-talks in getting North Korea to halt and roll back its nuclear and missile programmes.

On the global front, China sought participation in global institutions like the World Trade Organisation (WTO). China is also playing a very active role in the UN. According to one figure, China's membership of international governmental organisations doubled (from 21 to 52) during the years 1977-1997. In the same time period, its membership of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) increased from mere 71 to an impressive 1,163.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, according to another account, China signed less than 30 per cent of the arms control accords it was eligible to join in the 1970s compared to 80 per cent by mid-1990s.<sup>35</sup> China has actively taken part in the treaties of the nuclear non-proliferation regime as well as those of aimed at non-proliferation of biological and chemical weapons. It has also become a part of the voluntary non-proliferation groups like the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in 2004 and exercises strict export control policies.

---

<sup>33</sup> Goldstein, "An Emerging China's Emerging Grand Strategy," 73-75.

<sup>34</sup> Aaron L Friedberg, "The Future of US-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?," *International Security* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 14.

<sup>35</sup> Alan Ian Johnston, "China's International Relations: the Political and Security Dimensions," in ed., Samuel Kim, *The International Relations of Northeast Asia* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 67.

Since 2004, China has also shown interest in joining the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR).

This is an indicator of China's willingness to participate in international institutes and regimes, increasing comfort towards norms of interdependent behaviour among states. It has also exhibited the desire to somewhat shape the rules of the game for regional cooperation. This is definitely an indication of its tendency towards the status quo. It also advances China's national interests and helps dispel concerns about its increasing economic and military power.<sup>36</sup> This is also an indicator that China is willing to work in the existing Western-dominated systems of international institution and regimes rather than challenge the system or seek to break it up.

Moreover, China consciously pursued a good neighbour policy. The pursuit of good relations with its neighbour is the foundation of its strategy for economic development. It has the dual benefit of attracting foreign trade and investment while, at the same time, it reassures its neighbours that it does not present a threat for them. Deng Xiaoping laid two paths for China's foreign policy in 1990 — anti-hegemonism and establishment of a new multi-polar international order of politics and economics. This meant that China adopted a policy of active defence of China's interest — of minding its own business and be neither a leader nor a challenger but a participant or co-builder of the westerns international order.<sup>37</sup> This remains the foundation of China's foreign policy today.

Many analysts, however, argue that participation in the international institutions is not an adequate indicator but compliance with the norms, rules and goals of these institutions is a better indicator of whether a country is a status quo state or not. Along these lines, Alastair Johnston considers China's compliance with five global normative regimes: these include sovereignty, free trade, non-proliferation and arms control, national self-determination and human rights.<sup>38</sup> As far as sovereignty is concerned he

---

<sup>36</sup> Chien-peng Chung, *China's Multilateral Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific: Institutionalising Beijing's "Good Neighbour Policy"* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 4.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>38</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?," *International Security* 27, no. 4 (Spring 2003), 14.

writes: “Today China is one of the strongest defenders of a more traditional absolutist concept (of sovereignty).”<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, free trade is another international norm that is seen as an indicator of status quo behaviour. China has moved to support the norms of global free trade. China’s membership of WTO in 2001 is a testament to its support for free trade. China’s tariff rates have declined from over 40 per cent in 1992 to less than 20 per cent in 1997.<sup>40</sup> In 2015, the tariff rate was 3.4 per cent.<sup>41</sup> China has gradually embraced global capitalist institutions and system. In the Belt and Road Forum that China held in May 2017, hosting 30 world leaders, it released a communiqué, which was signed by all 30 world leaders present on the occasion that emphasised the need to “build an open economy, ensure free and inclusive trade (and) oppose all forms of protectionism.”<sup>42</sup> However, the ongoing trade war with the US has forced China to increase its tariffs. Since 2017, the US had imposed three rounds of tariff on the Chinese products worth US\$250 billion. China has retaliated by imposing US\$110 billion on the US goods. Beijing has accused the US of starting the “largest trade war in economic history.”<sup>43</sup> This damages the global free trade regime.

China has gone even a step further and initiated projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is envisaged as a journey towards economic regionalisation. The CPEC is a framework of regional connectivity which is expected to be beneficial for China and Pakistan as well as the regional states like India, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Its primary aim is to promote geographical linkages and improve infrastructure connectivity. It would also result in a higher flow of trade and businesses in the region.<sup>44</sup> Its ultimate aim is to have a well-connected region, promote harmony and accelerate economic development. This is also a clear

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>41</sup> “Tariff Rate, Applied, Weighted Mean, All Products ( %),” World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/TM.TAX.MRCH.WM.AR.ZS>

<sup>42</sup> James Griffiths, “China’s Xi Positions Himself as Free-Trade and Climate Champion,” *CNN*, May 15, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> “A Quick Guide to US-China Trade War,” *BBC*, January 7, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-45899310>

<sup>44</sup> “Introduction of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC),” Planning Commission of Pakistan, <http://cpec.gov.pk/introduction/1>

indication that China is focused on economic development and regionalisation instead of displaying aggressive hegemonic behaviour.

As far as China's non-proliferation record is concerned, it has a fair record, with no blatant violations of international nuclear non-proliferation norms. The prevailing concerns mostly centred on the transfer of missile technology and components to Pakistan in the 1980s and early 1990s. However, China has not signed the 1987 MTCR, so it does not amount to any violations of China's treaty obligations. On the positive side, in 1996, China signed the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which a major nuclear non-proliferation proponent like the US has not done till date.<sup>45</sup> It has been cooperating with the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organisation (CTBTO) and has installed four new International Monitoring System (IMS) stations, bringing the total number of certified stations in China, to five.

Furthermore, it is also a part of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) since the time that it was signed. Moreover, along with Russia, China has long been trying to get a treaty negotiated to ban the stationing of offensive weapons in outer-space. For nearly two decades, now there have been the Chinese and Russian efforts to negotiate a treaty for Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS). Many proposals have been put forward including the two Chinese working papers and a joint China-Russia working paper in the Conference on Disarmament (CD). However, PAROS remains blocked due to the US refusal to negotiate any such treaty because it goes against its missile defence and space plans.<sup>46</sup>

China has also played a stabilising role in the North Korean nuclear issue. It acted as a lynchpin in hosting and conducting the six-party talks, which were meant to solve the North Korean nuclear issue. Even after the breakdown of the six-party talks in 2009 and the recent high tensions on the Korean Peninsula in 2017 with the US, China played the role of a stabiliser, urging both sides to show restraint and emphasising that war was not an

---

<sup>45</sup> "Remarkable Progress: China and CTBT," Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organisation (CTBTO) Preparatory Commission, <https://www.ctbto.org/press-centre/highlights/2018/remarkable-progress-china-and-the-ctbt/>

<sup>46</sup> Hui Zhang, "FMCT and PAROS: A Chinese Perspective," Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs, August 2002, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/fmct-and-paros-chinese-perspective>

option for any country. China has, thus, helped strengthen the international nuclear non-proliferation norms.

Also, China's growing soft power<sup>47</sup> or its "charm offensive" in Southeast Asia and elsewhere is another indicator that it is not an aggressive, power maximising state. Its economic progress has been accompanied by its increasing cultural and diplomatic influence around the globe. Its growing soft power is not only evident in Southeast Asia but also in Beijing's economic partnerships in Latin America and Africa.<sup>48</sup> The fact that China is able to attract and appeal the states in the region through its soft power is an indicator that its neighbours are increasingly viewing China as less of a threat.

However, this has stirred the concerns of waning the US influence in the region. In many parts of Asia, Africa and the Latin America, the "Beijing Consensus" which advocates a mix of authoritarian government and market economy, is overtaking the "Washington Consensus" of market economics and democratic government which was popular in the past.<sup>49</sup> With signs that the US is placing emphasis on hard power under President Donald Trump, China seems to be positioning itself as a champion of globalisation and economic integration. It seems to be placing an emphasis on soft power.

Taiwan issue is one instance where China's policies are viewed by the West as a non-status quo. However, the issue can be seen in terms of a security dilemma between the US and China. In the last few decades, America continued selling advanced weapons to Taiwan,<sup>50</sup> mainland China

---

<sup>47</sup> The concept was coined by Joseph Nye which describes the ability to attract and co-opt rather than by coercion. Soft power is the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction. Soft power comes from a combination of a country's culture, political values and foreign policies. See Joseph S Nye Jr, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

<sup>48</sup> Hongyi Lai and Yiyilu, eds., *China's Soft Power and International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2012) and Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> Joseph S Nye Jr, "The Rise of China's Soft Power," *Wall Street Journal*, December 29, 2005, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB11358086724233272>

<sup>50</sup> From President Jimmy Carter to George Bush, the US has made over US\$24 billion in arms trades. During President Barak Obama's term, the US made US\$14 billion in arms available to Taiwan for purchase. Again President Trump is making available over a billion worth of arms to Taiwan. This amounts to nearly US\$30 billion in the last four

considers these developments to encourage Taiwan's independence and a threat to its interests. According to Yiwei Wang, "on the Taiwan issue, America's logic is that peace comes from "balance of power." China has time and again protested the matter of arms sales to Taiwan with the US but to no avail. China sees these moves as an effort to change the distribution of power in the region. In turn, China has threatened Taiwan against moves for independence and deployed missiles on the mainland as well. Consequently, this makes the US suspicious of China's revisionist intentions towards Taiwan – locking the two powers in a security dilemma.

Another area where China has been accused of displaying revisionist tendencies is in the South China Sea. The dispute centres on territorial claims over two island chains the Paracels and the Spratlys and surrounding oceans. The area provides valuable trade passage and fishing ground, as well as holds hydrocarbon resources ranging from 25,000 Mboe to 260,000 Mboe.<sup>51</sup> China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei all have competing claims. The dispute has existed for centuries but things got tense in the last few years. China has been island-building since 2014 and has also increased naval patrols.

It can be argued that China's actions are defensive in nature. The US has had increased interference in the area. Under the garb of "freedom of navigation" operations, the US sent planes and ships in the disputed area to keep access to key shipping and air routes.<sup>52</sup> In February 2017, the US deployed the aircraft carrier, Carl Vinson, strike force to the South China Sea under the garb of "freedom of navigation."<sup>53</sup> In December 2018, there was a trilateral anti-submarine warfare exercise by the US, Britain and Japanese forces. Another week-long US and British Naval exercise took place in January 2019.<sup>54</sup> These are meant to send a signal to China to rescind claims over the disputed area. These exercises have angered China.

---

decades. See Phillic Wegmann, "Before Trump, US Sold Taiwan More than US\$30 Billion in Weapons," *Washington Examiner*, December 5, 2016.

<sup>51</sup> N A Owen and C H Schofield, "Disputed South China Sea Hydrocarbons in Perspective," *Marine Policy* 36, no.3 (2012): 818.

<sup>52</sup> "Why is the China Sea Contentious?" *BBC*, July 12, 2016.

<sup>53</sup> "US Carrier Group Patrols in Tense South China Sea," *Reuters*, February 18, 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Jesse Johnson, "US and British Navies Conduct First Joint Military Exercises in Disputed South China Sea," *Japan Times*, January 16, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/01/16/asia-pacific/u-s-british-navies-conduct-first-joint-military-exercises-disputed-south-china-sea/#.XEAAhP4qWUk>

The US has also been sending hundreds of Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) missions to the South China Sea every year that have caused friction between the US and China and, which the latter sees as a threat to its security. This clearly amounts to the US interference in China's area of influence. This has heightened China's threat perceptions and it is bound to act more assertively to defend its interests in the region. As a result, the area is becoming a flashpoint, with growing tension between China and the US over control of the disputed waterway.

China does not have expansionist or hegemonic designs in the South China Sea. It claims over the two island chains are not something new. Beijing has adjusted its strategy to safeguard its interests, as it becomes increasingly powerful. However, a military conflict over the dispute is not an option. Moreover, the US influence over other claimants of the territory complicates matters for China. This has resulted in China acting more assertively in the South China Sea in order to defend its interests. In fact, the US would act more aggressively if any country was to interfere in matters close to its borders.

Overall, from the above analysis, it can be summarised that China has so far behaved more as a status quo power rather than as an aggressive revisionist power. This is apparent in China's engagement with its neighbours, its participation in the regional and international institutions, it is in compliance with most of the international norms as well as its emphasis on projecting its soft power.

### **Alternate Theory of China's Rise – Defensive Realism**

The claims of Mearsheimer's offensive realism are in contrast with Waltz's defensive realism on several points. While Mearsheimer claims that great powers act aggressively and aim to gain so much power that they are the ultimate hegemon in the system, Waltz's defensive realism sees the states as acting defensively to maintain rather than upset the balance of power. For Waltz, the states are primarily concerned with maintaining "their position in the system."<sup>55</sup> Defensive realists argue that offence-defence balance favours

---

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 1979), 126.



the defence.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, a robust defence and careful balancing should deter any aggressive impulses from great powers. Defensive realism argues that great powers are concerned with maintaining the status quo rather than maximising their power because often the cost of expansion outweighs the benefits. Defensive realism sees security dilemmas as a problem where an increase in the power of one state increases the insecurity of the other causing the latter to increase its power. Under the conditions of defensive realism, great powers would try to alleviate any security dilemmas rather than exacerbate it.

China's current policy seems to be firmly rooted in defensive realism. Its policy seems to be aimed at maintaining the balance of power rather than upsetting it. As the earlier section has argued, China is not a revisionist power but a status quo one. The analysts like Shiping Tang are convinced that China's security strategy flows out of its realisation of the security dilemma whereby the Chinese leaders have understood that an aggressive expansionist strategy would just lead to counterbalancing alliances. "This recognition has led China to adopt a defensive realism-rooted security strategy emphasising moderation, self-restraint and security cooperation."<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, China's military modernisation, its Taiwan policy and its increased policies in the South China Sea also make more sense if seen through the lens of defensive realism. China's Taiwan policy may be more geared towards preventing redistribution of power in the region. Since the US is providing arms assistance to Taiwan, China may be averse to the US aiding Taiwan's independence — the latter issue is one where China has made clear that independence is not acceptable to China.

Similarly, there is good evidence that China's military modernisation programmes and training exercises since the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996 are aimed partially at dealing with the issue of the Taiwanese separation.<sup>58</sup> On the question of whether China is balancing against the US, Johnston

---

<sup>56</sup> Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 167-214 and Stephen Van Evera, "Offence-Defence and the Causes of War" *International Security* 22, no. 4 (Spring 1998): 5- 43.

<sup>57</sup> Tang, "The Rise of China."

<sup>58</sup> Thomas J Christensen, "China" in *Strategic Asia: Power and Purpose 2001-2002* eds., Richard Ellings and Aaron Friedberg (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2001), 39-47 and David M Finkelstein, *China's National Military Strategy* (Alexandria, Va.: CNA Corporation, 2000), 5-6.

says, “There seems to be little doubt that China’s military modernisation programme since the mid-1990s has been aimed in large measure at developing capabilities to deter or slow the application of the US military power in the region.”<sup>59</sup> It would then seem that China is not concerned with gaining power or projecting its powers but with balancing against a predominance of the US power in the region.

China has not shown any signs of hegemonic behaviour as a lot of Western analysts feared. Instead of guided by offensive realism, China’s policies seem to be guided by defensive realism where it is concerned with survival and with maintaining its position in the system. Just as the US fears China’s hegemonic rise, China also fears the increase of the US influence in the region and its talk of containing China. China’s policy may change in the future to display hegemonic tendencies. However, at present, there is not much evidence to support the theory of offensive realism.

## **Conclusion**

Far from being a revisionist power maximising state, China’s behaviour seems to be more of a status quo power. Instead of being a threat and a source of instability, China can be a source of stability in the region. China’s foreign policy seems to be driven by defensive realism rather than principles of offensive realism as Mearsheimer argues. The conflict between China as a rising power and the US as a status quo power is not inevitable. It is possible to avoid the Thucydides’s Trap. China’s rise is not as much of a threat as the Western debates make it out to be. In many ways, it may provide opportunities rather than challenges. However, theories and analyses presented by scholars such as Mearsheimer would certainly lead to conflict if followed by the US policymakers. If Washington continues to believe and act on the assumption that increase in the Chinese power poses a threat to the US military and diplomatic presence and economic interests in the region and opts for a containment and encirclement policy towards China — it would amount to a self-fulfilling prophesy where the conflict would materialise between the two powers. Engagement rather than containment is the policy that would lead to a more stable and secure regional and global environment.

---

<sup>59</sup> Johnston, 38.