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Chinese Realism: Why Were the Liberal Internationalists Wrong on China?

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Introduction

During the post-Cold War era, in which the United States of America enjoyed its “unipolar moment,” relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) were characterized by U.S. cooperative engagement with China. This was part of a larger grand strategy, called liberal internationalism, according to which the interstate system can be transformed from one based on self-help and realist balance of power relations to a system based on rules and norms populated by peaceful, liberal democratic states.¹ Liberal internationalist proponents made confident predictions that engagement would encourage the PRC’s economic prosperity, cause domestic liberalization, and make China a responsible stakeholder in the liberal world order.²

Recently, the Biden Administration’s top official on the National Security Council for foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific, Kurt Campbell, declared that the period of engagement with China has come to an end, stating, “The dominant paradigm is going to be competition.” Cooperative engagement has not changed Beijing’s realist, self-interested pursuit of its national security interests. The PRC backed down during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995-96 because it



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faced overwhelmingly superior U.S. military power, not because it feared damaging relations with the United States, and China has aggressively asserted its territorial claims in the South China Sea contrary to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.³ China's peaceful rise has given way to "wolf warrior" diplomacy. Predictions that the PRC would liberalize politically have also proven fruitless; the Chinese Communist Party's iron grip over China has only grown stronger as it leverages China's wealth and technological prowess to build a sophisticated, repressive surveillance state.⁴ Why were the liberal internationalists wrong and what does Beijing's hard realism mean for U.S. strategy in the Pacific? Examining the respective strategic cultures of the United States and China may help answer these questions.

Key Discussion Terms

Before diving into a detailed discussion, it would be helpful to define the three key concepts upon which the argument is founded: *realism*, *liberal internationalism*, and *strategic culture*.

Realism - According to realists, a fundamental cause of war is the anarchic structure of the interstate system; states rely on self-help to ensure their security from other states because (a.) cooperation is inhibited by mutual distrust and (b.) there is no higher authority to arbitrate disputes. Realists do not deny that cooperation is possible on points of shared interest; however, states ultimately depend upon themselves to achieve their interests.⁵ So long as mutual mistrust exists and states are reluctant to sacrifice their sovereignty, changing the interstate system is unlikely to happen. By contrast, *idealists* believe the interstate system can change, that mutual distrust can be overcome making possible the establishment of a powerful, international body or set of institutions capable of resolving interstate disputes if states realize that changing the system is within their "enlightened self-interest."⁶

Liberal internationalism - Academic G. John Ikenberry describes liberal internationalism as a "liberal grand strategy" for promoting democracy worldwide, pursuing greater economic freedom and interdependence, and supporting rules and norms backed by international institutions. Efforts to build a liberal world order include transforming illiberal societies into liberal ones which, according to democratic peace theory, will lead to a more stable international system; the pursuit of free trade and economic openness which promotes economic prosperity, which is argued to cause illiberal societies to become more liberal, and reduces the likelihood of war through economic interdependence; and the promotion of international institutions, and international rules and norms, which "socialize" illiberal states into the liberal world order.⁷ Liberal internationalists share the optimistic aspirations of idealists for changing the international system and believe the states themselves must change to transform the interstate system. As liberal states are more likely to be peaceful and promote the rule of law, they are best suited for supporting international institutions and observing cooperative rules and norms.⁸



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Strategic culture – Academic Ken Booth defines “strategic culture” as “a nation’s traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behavior, habits, symbols, achievements, and particular ways of adapting to the environment and solving problems with respect to the use of force.”⁹ Strategic culture is how the elements of a state’s national experience influence the way it uses means to meet national security goals, or how its culture influences its strategy. Strategic culture is important for strategists to avoid mirror imaging their own beliefs and perceptions upon their interlocutor, risking “deadly consequences.”¹⁰

American Liberal Internationalism

Liberal internationalism found fertile soil in American strategic culture of which two elements are of particular importance: the primacy of reason and universal human rights on one hand and a proselytizing, evangelical zeal on the other. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger traces the latter to John Winthrop’s famous exhortation for the New England colony to be a “city upon a hill,” setting an example of good, Christian governance. This sentiment was echoed by Alexander Hamilton who claimed the viability of liberal governance depended on the American republic’s success. Furthermore, the U.S. expansion into the frontier lands was viewed as a project for spreading American values, not an imperialist campaign for land and resources.¹¹

Academic John Mearsheimer identifies the beginnings of liberal international relations theory in the Enlightenment belief that reason can make the world more peaceful.¹² Enlightenment ideals are optimistic in outlook; reason is believed to imbue humanity with the capacity for understanding how the world functions and how to improve it. Individuals have universal, inalienable rights (including commerce and property rights) that the state is obligated to protect, necessitating a constitution establishing impartial rule of law and limits on government power.¹³ Citing social initiatives such as Prohibition and the New Deal, Mearsheimer further argues that liberalism in the United States is interventionist and “progressive” – in addition to protecting citizens’ rights, governments must also ensure they can have a good life.¹⁴ Because universal human rights transcend national borders, the liberal view of interstate politics conflicts with the Westphalian emphasis on sovereignty and state interests. Americans view peace as the norm and conflict as an aberration. President Woodrow Wilson regarded endless, apolitical balance of power competition as immoral, hoping to use the Allied victory in the First World War to transform the interstate system into a more cooperative one based on rule of law and self-determination.¹⁵ In Wilson’s view, he was completing the work of Jesus Christ.¹⁶

The foundations of liberal internationalism are apparent. Proselytizing democratic virtues abroad is facilitated by an idealistic zeal for building a better society. Open, international markets where nations can trade freely accords with the belief in individual property rights and the pursuit of happiness. Finally, establishing international and economic institutions



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expresses the liberal belief that the world can be managed through reason and that the rule of law is necessary to prevent arbitrary and tyrannical exercise of power.

However, it would be a mistake to assume American national security policy does not have a pragmatic side. Ikenberry regards containment strategies, such as that employed by the United States during the Cold War, to be a realist rival to the liberal grand strategy. George Kennan warned against “excessive moralism and legalism” in U.S. foreign policy.¹⁷ Regarding American participation in international institutions, championed by liberal internationalists, realists in Congress have pushed back against the United States joining institutions out of concerns for undermining U.S. sovereignty, as in the case of the International Criminal Court.¹⁸ Indeed, Founding Father James Madison’s sardonic statement that no external or internal government controls would be necessary were men “angels” reflects a realist, Hobbesian view of human nature.¹⁹

Chinese Realism

China’s strategic culture contrasts sharply with its American counterpart. The Chinese historical narrative is cyclical rather than linear, many brutal wars have been fought in the Chinese homeland, and China has experienced periods of domination and subjugation within its region. Fierce power competition and frequent conflicts have caused China to have a realist strategic outlook, which emphasized the paramount importance of a strong, centralized state.

China’s realist strategic philosophy is rooted in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period between the 8th and 3rd centuries B.C.; this stretch in ancient Chinese history is characterized by the collapse of the Zhou dynasty’s feudal order, resulting in the emergence of “interstate anarchy” whereby China’s feudal states vied against each other in hegemonic struggle.²⁰ Sun Tzu, who shunned the ethics of Zhou-era warfare, taught that states must be strong to avoid falling prey to more powerful states.²¹ In 221 B.C., the warring states were unified under the Qin dynasty, which discarded the old feudal order in favor of a highly centralized bureaucracy; academic Steven Mosher describes the political evolution of China to be the opposite of the gradual liberalization found in English-speaking political history.²²

China’s imperial era was characterized by a historic pattern of unity and division called the “dynastic cycle” lasting until the 20th century. Possessing the “mandate of Heaven” determined a ruling dynasty’s legitimacy; proof of its possession depended on the dynasty’s aptitude for perpetuating its power. Failure to address natural disasters, protect the frontiers from external threats, inhibit bureaucratic corruption, or quash internal unrest was interpreted as the loss of heaven’s favor, inviting political challengers.²³ In practice, the dynastic cycle was driven by realist logic necessitating that rulers ruthlessly defeat challenges to their power. Academic Alastair Iain Johnston describes a “realpolitik-dynastic cycle model” that predicts strong, resource-rich dynasties will “adopt increasingly expansionist, coercive strategies.”²⁴



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To the Chinese, the present can never be decoupled from the past.²⁵ The “century of humiliation,” during which foreign powers used superior force to coerce the Qing dynasty and the weak Republic of China fell prey to Japanese aggression, serves as the ultimate lesson in the necessity of military strength.²⁶ The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is painfully aware of the need for a strong, centralized government for sustaining its power over China. This pragmatic, realist view of China’s strategic dilemma has led to establishing friendly relations with the United States, an ideological foe the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had previously fought a war against, to balance against the growing threat of the Soviet Union.²⁷ The PRC also lent assistance to Pakistan’s nuclear weapons development to “restore the strategic balance” against India’s growing nuclear capabilities.²⁸

Post-Cold War U.S.-China Engagement

Despite the sudden, peaceful end of the Cold War, realism remains a powerful force in China’s strategic culture. As for the United States, relieved of the strategic constraints of the Cold War, the Wilsonian aspiration for building a more liberal democratic world order reasserted itself. Liberal hegemony, claims Mearsheimer, is most likely to be pursued in a unipolar world where a liberal superpower need not fear peer competitors.²⁹

The Soviet collapse and China’s Dengist economic reforms appeared to confirm Francis Fukuyama’s prediction of an emerging liberal world order. Encouraged by the PRC’s growing prosperity and friendly relations with the United States, policymakers determined continued engagement with China would encourage liberal political reforms and China’s socialization as a responsible stakeholder in the “new world order.” President George H. W. Bush firmly believed engagement would change the PRC, even after the Tiananmen massacre appeared to dash hopes for China’s liberalization. The 1991 *National Security Strategy* declared political change within China to be “inevitable,” justifying continued U.S.-China engagement.³⁰ Months following the massacre, President Bush waived export bans on U.S. satellites to China.³¹ Meanwhile, with the Soviet threat gone, Beijing reassessed its national security dilemma along realist lines. Threat perceptions shifted to the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, where China reckoned external threats to its growing prosperity and power would materialize.³²

President Bill Clinton was critical of President Bush’s Chinese engagement policy, accusing the President of “coddling tyrants.” However, over President Clinton’s terms in office, he too pursued cooperative engagement with the PRC. Initially intending to link U.S.-China engagement with human rights issues, by 1998 the Clinton administration reversed its position, placing engagement before human rights. The 1998 *National Security Strategy* states, “China’s integration into the international system of rules and norms will influence its own political and economic development” and failure to engage with China would “hinder the cause of democracy and human rights.”³³ Engagement remained on President Clinton’s agenda after



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the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995-96; during a 1998 state visit to Shanghai, the President claimed, “we don't support independence for Taiwan, or two Chinas, or one Taiwan-one China. And we don't believe that Taiwan should be a member in any organization for which statehood is a requirement,” seemingly aligning U.S. policy closer to Beijing’s “One China, Two Systems” concept.³⁴ Commerce with China took precedence over national security concerns as the Clinton administration relaxed export controls on militarily sensitive technology transfers to the PRC.³⁵ While agreeing with the 1999 Cox Commission report’s finding that theft of sensitive U.S. technologies improved China’s ballistic missile arsenal, President Clinton vowed to prevent such reports from derailing U.S.-China engagement.³⁶

President George W. Bush initially viewed the PRC as a strategic competitor, but relations improved when Washington and Beijing found common cause in the global War on Terror.³⁷ The 2002 *National Security Strategy* heralded the PRC’s admission to the World Trade Organization (WTO) as an important step for China’s liberalization, stating the “power of market principles and the WTO’s requirements for transparency and accountability will advance openness and the rule of law in China to help establish basic protections for commerce and for citizens.” However, concerns were also expressed regarding China’s leaders having “not yet made the next series of fundamental choices about the character of their state.”³⁸ China facilitated the North Korean denuclearization negotiations process by hosting the Six-Party Talks and the PRC eventually voted in favor of imposing UN sanctions on North Korea, which Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice praised.³⁹ However, an agreement for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program was not forthcoming. Despite China’s apparent support for North Korean denuclearization, Beijing’s lack of sanctions enforcement undermined the strategy of pressuring North Korea into submission.⁴⁰ This will be a recurring problem for subsequent U.S. administrations.

The Shift to Great Power Competition

The cracks in liberal internationalist hopes widened during President Barack Obama’s terms in office as the reality of China’s unchanging nature set in. President Obama took office believing the United States could cooperate with China on issues in which the President believed both nations had a shared global responsibility, such as the 2008-09 economic crisis, global warming, and nuclear proliferation. However, China posed immediate challenges, including increased aggression in the South China Sea and opposition to U.S.-South Korean military exercises.⁴¹ Exasperated at the lack of progress with North Korean denuclearization, President Obama warned Beijing that he “would have to take steps to shield the United States from the threat of a nuclear missile attack from the North.”⁴² In 2011, the Obama administration proposed its “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific away from the Middle East.⁴³ Nonetheless, U.S.-China engagement was preserved along more pragmatic lines by avoiding linking issues together, dealing with points of contention behind the scenes while publicly trumpeting successes, such as cooperation on climate change.⁴⁴



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The Trump administration declared China to be a strategic competitor in the 2017 *National Security Strategy*, stating, “after being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition returned. China and Russia began to reassert their influence regionally and globally” and that “China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor.”⁴⁵ The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“the Quad”) among the United States, Australia, Japan, and India was revived and joint military training exercises among Quad members are increasingly part of its agenda. Predictably, Beijing’s Cold War-era fear of American “encirclement” resurfaced.⁴⁶ President Donald Trump also bolstered U.S. support for Taiwan, including increasing defensive arms sales and lifting restrictions on U.S. diplomats meeting Taiwanese government officials.⁴⁷ The Biden administration is expected to continue the trend towards competition with China. The *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* states, “We must also contend with the reality that the distribution of power across the world is changing, creating new threats. China, in particular, has rapidly become more assertive. It is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system” and stresses the U.S. commitment to the Quad alliance.⁴⁸ Recently, the Biden administration approved its first arms sales to Taiwan.⁴⁹

Implications for U.S. Security Policy

Understanding China’s realist worldview is key to crafting a strategy that is consistent with the U.S. interest in sustaining a stable western Pacific. Engagement will prove difficult in areas where U.S. and Chinese strategic interests clash. Taiwan is the “lens” through which Beijing views other security issues, such as North Korean denuclearization. Indeed, according to academic Andrew Scobell, it was the Taiwan Strait crises of the 1950s that influenced the PRC’s decision to develop nuclear weapons, despite having been previously dismissive of them.⁵⁰ Because of its geostrategic importance, a hostile, independent Taiwan is perceived as a dagger aimed at the PRC’s heart, and Beijing has never ruled out using force to bring Taiwan under its power.⁵¹ A stable western Pacific depends on a stable Taiwan Strait. Three broad policy approaches, each with their own dangers, are:

- Accommodating Beijing’s national security aims by abandoning Taiwan, which would allow the PRC to annex Taiwan, likely through coercive means. After securing Taiwan, an emboldened China will be better positioned to aggressively assert illegal territorial claims in the South and East China Seas, leading to greater instability in the Pacific.⁵² Furthermore, appeasing Beijing risks undermining the credibility of U.S. defense commitments in the face of Chinese aggression.
- Backing Taiwan in a bid for *de jure* independence, which risks war with a China that feels it has no other recourse on the Taiwan issue.



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- Sustaining the status quo whereby Taiwan is independent in all but name, preventing Taiwan from falling under PRC control by deterring aggression while avoiding provoking Beijing.

The risks inherent in the first two approaches make them unpalatable. The third approach is the most viable and has been sustainable since the passage of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) in 1979, requiring the United States to supply defensive articles to Taiwan necessary for self-defense and, although the TRA is not a formal defense commitment, requiring the United States to sustain its own capabilities for defending Taiwan from aggressive coercion.⁵³ However, since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, Beijing has undertaken to develop anti-access/area denial capabilities that make U.S. intervention far riskier than it was 25 years ago. Such capabilities include anti-ship ballistic missiles (AShBM) such as the DF-21D and DF-26, as well as new capabilities such as the DF-ZF hypersonic glide vehicle (HSGV).⁵⁴ The greater the risk to U.S. forces, the less credible U.S. intentions for intervening on Taiwan's behalf will appear to Beijing.

Therefore, to sustain the status quo, the United States will have to make China's use of force costlier than tolerating a *de facto*-independent Taiwan. It should be clear to Beijing that its only hope for Taiwan reunification is through peaceful, noncoercive means whereby *Taiwan itself chooses* to unify with the mainland. A formal commitment to Taiwan's security that leaves no doubt in the minds of China's leaders will be necessary. Steps to credibly deter Chinese aggression in the Taiwan Strait include:

- Reducing the vulnerability of U.S. forces in the Pacific, particularly U.S. warships, to missile attack via bolstering theatre missile defenses.
- Raising the cost of aggression against Taiwan intolerably high by extending the U.S. nuclear umbrella to Taiwan.
- Reinforcing the credibility of U.S. defense commitments to Taiwan by making the National Missile Defense system capable of defending the U.S. homeland from near-peer missile strikes.
- Investing in the development of new missile defense technologies, such as directed energy weapons and space-based interceptors, to counter new missile threats (e.g., the DF-ZF HSGV).

The final two steps will require law and policymakers to have the political will for protecting U.S. interests in the Taiwan Strait. Critics may object that these two steps risk starting a so-called "action-reaction cycle" but, even with the currently limited U.S. missile defense capabilities, the Chinese have developed operational advanced missile systems, much as the Soviet ballistic missile stockpile continued to grow despite inhibitions regarding U.S. missile defense development during the Cold War.⁵⁵ Artificially preserving the vulnerability of the United States and its forces to missile attacks will not convince Beijing to forgo valuable "assassin's maces" such as anti-ship ballistic missiles (AShBMs) and HSGVs. The PRC is



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determined that the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis will not be a repeat of the Third. Additionally, defending the homeland from near-peer missile threats has become all the more relevant with the recent public revelations regarding the construction of multiple new Chinese missile silo sites, reportedly intended to house DF-41 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) equipped with multiple, independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs), which United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) head Admiral Charles Richard has called a Chinese “strategic breakout.”⁵⁶

Conclusion

U.S. cooperative engagement with the PRC has not made the interests of the United States more secure – indeed, the American “holiday from realism” (as Mearsheimer puts it) has made the Pacific more dangerous. Rather than vainly hoping China will politically change in ways that suit the United States, Washington should assert its self-interest in the Pacific. A strong, clear, and credible defense commitment to Taiwan's security will promote a stable Pacific region. Furthermore, it will boost the confidence of U.S. allies, such as Japan – who, recognizing Taiwan's pivotal role in regional stability, has recently become more outspoken in defense of Taiwan's security.⁵⁷ Finally, a strong defense commitment to Taiwan, a peaceful and prosperous democracy, is also an area where realist self-interest happily coincides with American values.

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