REALISM, LIBERALISM, AND THE RISE OF CHINA

November 3, 2025

READING NOTES

Paradigms are analytical lenses that help scholars organize theories about international relations. For the November 6th session, we review the two most prominent international relations paradigms: Realism and Liberalism. You will hear John Mearsheimer and Andrew Moravcsik representing Realism and Liberalism, respectively. The assigned readings serve two purposes. First, they communicate the diversity within each paradigm—Realism and Liberalism are both big tents with many internal fissures and debates. Second, the readings illustrate the connections between theory and policy on a matter of immediate importance: the rise of China.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

STRUCTURAL REALISM

Kenneth Waltz is the founder of structural realism, often termed neorealism. Structural realism departs from classical realism because it asserts that the cause of war is not the evil nature of humanity but rather the structural conditions of the international system, mainly anarchy. In *Man, the State, and War*, Waltz divides analysis into three “images”: the individual level, the national level, and the systemic level. He dismisses theories based on the first two levels. Since international relations between states—cycling between war and peace—have remained relatively constant throughout history, any explanation of international relations must be similarly unchanging despite new leaders and new types of governments. Therefore, Structural Realism is sometimes likened to a “billiard ball” model: states may come in different colors and stripes, but they fundamentally act the same.

Structural realists begin from the central premise that the international system is anarchic: there is no central authority to enforce rules among the individual states. Without a central authority, states are the chief actors in the international system, and the primary motivation of states must be survival. Put in other words, states that don’t value survival don’t survive. This illustrates the two ways structure exerts influence on international relations: first, through a process of socialization that limits and molds behavior; and second, through competition between states, which creates an evolutionary pressure.

The most important attribute of the international system to structural realists is the distribution of capabilities, otherwise known as the “balance of power.” In an anarchic world, states pursue survival by balancing against other states. While self-help is always preferable, weaker states form alliances to balance against stronger states in the system.

A critical wrinkle in Realism emerges in the question of *perception* in international relations. All Realist scholars identify uncertainty regarding other states’ intentions as an important determinant of state behavior and international relations outcomes. Because states cannot be sure that other states do not intend them harm, they must act to protect their own security. In *Perception and Misperception in*

International Politics, **Robert Jervis argues** that international relations hinges on the perceptions and decisions of individual leaders. This is a departure from Waltz's emphasis on pure structure.

Jervis looks at the problem of perception in outlining two models for how the world works: the spiral model—also known as the security dilemma model—and the deterrence model. In the spiral model, the world is populated by security-seeking, status quo states. However, the security dilemma can still lead to a war despite a lack of aggressive intentions. In the security dilemma, efforts that one state takes to increase its security, like increasing its defense budgets, can provoke similar reactions from its neighbors which find themselves threatened by the first state's effort. This produces a spiral of arms racing and counterreactions which can lead to a war which no state wanted. The way to avert war in a spiral model world is for states to reassure each other of their peaceful intentions and not overreact to other states' measures to increase their own security. World War I is given as an example of a spiral model war.

In contrast, the deterrence model assumes that the world is populated by a mix of security-seeking, status quo stakes and power-seeking, revisionist states. War, rather than being an accident, results from the purposeful decisions of the revisionist states. Unless the revisionists states are deterred by a coalition of stronger status quo states, they will continue to attack their neighbors. Therefore, the way for status quo states to avert war is to strongly react to transgressions from their neighbors in order to avoid appeasing power-seeking states. World War II is cited as a quintessential deterrence model war.

The spiral and deterrence models yield opposite prescriptions. To avoid war by deterrence model, states should wield sticks to make sure they do not embolden adversaries. To avoid war by spiral model, states should offer carrots to make sure they do not antagonize adversaries into aggression. A critical task for policymakers, Jervis argues, is to identify the conditions under which the threat of spiral is more acute than the threat of deterrence failure, and vice versa. The full book reviews a multitude of theories, borrowing heavily from psychology, to explain how leaders perceive and misperceive each other.

Structural Realism can be broadly sub-divided into two camps—Defensive Realism and Offensive Realism. Defensive Realists, like **Stephen Walt**, generally offer a more sanguine perspective on international relations. Yes, anarchy means states have to fend for themselves in an anarchic world, and security dilemmas threaten to bring about conflicts that no one wants. However, states are generally *security* maximizers, not *power* maximizers, and the steps that states take to pursue security, such as forming alliances to guard against domination by stronger states, can actually ameliorate security dilemma dynamics and reduce the risk of conflict. In his assessment of alliance formation, Walt offers a corrective to Waltz. States do not form alliances to balance against *power;* they form alliances to balance against *threat*. Power (a state's actual or potential military capabilities) is just one of three factors that determine threat, the other two being the geographic proximity of the state and the perceived intentions of the state. Therefore, Walt argues, Great Britain in 1939 saw Nazi Germany as very threatening while regarding the United States as a potential ally against aggression.

In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, **John Mearsheimer** makes the case for Offensive Realism, claiming that states must maximize their own power to ensure survival. Mearsheimer begins with five assumptions. First, the structural condition of anarchy means that states have no higher authority upon which they can rely for protection. Second, all great powers possess offensive military capabilities. In other words, it is impossible to have only defensive capabilities—as Mearsheimer writes, "After all, for every neck, there are two hands to choke it." Third, states can never truly know the intentions of other states. States might wish to believe that their neighbors are benign, but they cannot be 100% certain of benevolent intentions. Fourth, all states seek to survive. Fifth, states are rational actors. They understand the nature of the international system and act strategically.

These assumptions lead to the “Tragedy,” that all states must act as power-maximizers to ensure their own survival. Security dilemmas are inescapable, and conflict is an unfortunate inevitability. Mearsheimer writes, “Apprehensive about the ultimate intentions of other states. and aware that they operate in a self-help system, states quickly understand that the best way to ensure their survival is to be the most powerful state in the system. The stronger a state is relative to its potential rivals, the less likely it is that any of those rivals will attack it and threaten its survival.” Mearsheimer notes that states care about relative power, not absolute power. Power is a zero-sum game, useful only as a measuring stick between states.

Mearsheimer acknowledges that there are practical limits to a state’s capacity to maximize its power. States are content with the power distribution—they become status quo powers—when they become regional hegemons. Regional hegemons face no peer competitors within their geographic regions. The author argues that power projection is considerably more difficult across large bodies of water. Therefore, global hegemony is so unlikely as to be practically impossible, making regional hegemony the principal goal of states. Once established, regional hegemons focus on preventing the emergence of hegemons in other regions. Mearsheimer writes, “In sum, the ideal situation for any great power is to be the only regional hegemon in the world. That state would be a status quo power, and it would go to considerable lengths to preserve the existing distribution of power.”

The concept of power is central to Mearsheimer’s argument. He distinguishes between potential power, which depends on a state’s population and wealth, and actual power, which is a function of its present military might. Over time, the distribution of power in the international system varies. Mearsheimer argues that war is most likely in the case of an unbalanced multipolar system, a system in which there are multiple great powers but that features a potential hegemon. In contrast, bipolarity reduces the likelihood of war because the two great powers are evenly matched and have little to gain from war.

Mearsheimer presents a hierarchy of state goals in order of desirability: 1) seek regional hegemony and prevent the emergence of other regional hegemons; 2) maximize control over the world’s wealth; 3) build up dominant land power capacity; and 4) seek nuclear superiority. The author further identifies four strategies for gaining power and achieving those goals. First is war. Here, Mearsheimer takes pains to rebut arguments that war never pays. Instead, he argues that war often increases the power of aggressive states and serves their interests. Second is blackmail, wherein a state uses threats of force to gain concessions. Mearsheimer argues that this strategy seldom works since great powers are unlikely to make significant concessions to their rivals. Third is what the author terms “bait and bleed,” a strategy of pitting two potential enemies against each other. Mearsheimer also argues that this strategy is unlikely to work because “the states being baited are likely to recognize the danger of engaging each other in a protracted war while the baiter sits untouched on the sidelines.” Fourth and finally is bloodletting, in which a state interferes in the wars of its rivals to make them more costly. Mearsheimer views this as much more promising than baiting and bleeding.

Mearsheimer argues that states generally have only two options for opposing aggressors: balancing and buck-passing. Balancing occurs when a state directly confronts an aggressor, shouldering the burden of fighting it. Buck-passing is when a state attempts to get another great power to take on the burden of balancing. Mearsheimer acknowledges that other authors have identified two other potential strategies: bandwagoning and appeasement. In both strategies, however, states allow aggressors to gain in strength, so Mearsheimer argues that great powers will not utilize them. As always, Mearsheimer’s argument is driven by the logic that states are selfish actors who strive to survive above all other goals.

In “War in International Politics,” **John Mearsheimer** argues that war is fundamental to the nature of international politics. The American foreign policy community today has grown accustomed to the last thirty years of unipolarity, dominated by liberal ideas about the progress of humankind and the end of major power war. However, with the return of multipolarity, major power war will once again be a prominent risk in international affairs.

Three claims support the idea that war is a fundamental part of international politics. 1) Politics is competitive with the potential to become violent due to the stakes. 2) In the international system, the lack of any supranational authority increases the risk of mass political violence. 3) Moral and legal barriers aimed at limiting or reducing the occurrence of war will not restrain states who view war as a means to improve their security situation. He adds, tangentially, that limited wars often expand in scope.

Although politics is competitive, there are some caveats. First, sates may still cooperate for mutual benefit in areas of international affairs where survival is not at stake, such as in international trade and economics. Second, states are often reluctant to fight because the costs and risks of war in the ages of nationalism and industrialization are so high. Third, leaders who formulate policy are the most focused on state survival, not members of the public. Fourth, survival is not just continuation as a functioning state, but as a state with the ability to determine its own fate in the international system. In other words, great powers compete fiercely to protect their territory and autonomy, not just avoid total military conquest.

Moral and legal institutions of the postwar order forbid preventive wars and wars of opportunity; however, these wars are recurring features of the international system. No matter a state's domestic political values or government, it will ignore norms and international law to protect its vital interests. This does not mean states never act in ways to uphold international laws and norms, but they will only do so when it does not harm their vital interests. However, states rarely fight to eliminate their enemies entirely, not out of moral consideration, but due to the prohibitive costs and lack of strategic reason to do so.

Wars tend to escalate due to nationalism, military organizational interests, and the dynamics of war. Nationalism, the belief that the nation is the highest-level social group and that nations need a state, or government to represent their interests. During war, differences between nations are highlighted and mutual enmity and distrust grows making de-escalation more difficult and escalation more enticing. Military organizations tend to seek military victory without considering political ramifications and so will seek to reduce limits on war in place for political reasons to achieve battlefield victory. Finally, there are four dynamics of war that create escalation pressure. 1) Limited war success will create incentives to press the advantage. 2) If it fails, escalation may appear to be a means of succeeding where limited war failed. 3) Military leaders will be incentivized to target civilians (though Mearsheimer does not offer a reason why). 4) There is a risk of inadvertent escalation in which a state unintentionally strikes a target that triggers retaliatory escalation.

LIBERALISM

Andrew Moravcsik provides an overview of Liberalism. All variants of Liberal theory, he argues, focus not on what states *can* compete to get, as Realists do, but on what they *want* to get. The paradigm rests on one basic idea: variation in state preferences, influenced by globalization and social pressures, drives state behavior in world politics. States are not "billiard balls" but have differing goals and values. Liberals do not believe that power doesn't matter, but they do argue that it's not the *only* thing that matters.

Moravcsik outlines three core assumptions of all Liberal theories. First, individuals and private groups are the unit of analysis. Second, state preferences represent a subset of domestic societal interest. For example, this 'selectorate' (the group of individuals who nominally or in practice select public officeholders) may be the entire body politic, or a narrow elite. Their demands and interests define what states want. Third, the interdependent of states' interests determines their behavior. Opposing state preferences make conflict more likely, while more convergent ones generate peace and cooperation.

Drawing on these three assumptions, Liberals do not claim that wars should never happen, only that they do not result from the factors—or at the times and places—Realists identify. Liberals believe war occurs not when there are imbalances of power, as do Realists, but when aggressor states arise with revisionist preferences so extreme that other states are unwilling to submit. Moravcsik delineates three variants of Liberal theory, each of which explains how a different source of conflicting state preferences can trigger war.

First, Ideational Liberal theories link state behavior to domestic social identity as expressed by national identity, the domestic political system, and socio-economic ideas. War results from situations of intense ideological conflict, for example, when a political system feels threatened by the existence of an opposing ideology.

Second, Commercial Liberal theories stress economic interdependence. The pattern of economic winners and losers created by a state's economic policies shapes the preferences of different groups within society. In this case, armed conflict becomes more likely in circumstances in which resources are scarce but readily captured and in which economic control easily monopolized. Politics, including war, is a means by which domestic actors attempt to increase their own wealth.

Third, Republican Liberal theories stress the role of domestic representative institutions; elite and leadership dynamics; and executive-legislative relations. These theories attempt to explain whose preferences dominate policymaking. In these cases, war can break out when state preferences are dominated by groups who favor war for their owns reasons, like military juntas in search of legitimacy or imperial cliques with a narrow economic interest in expansion.

All three versions of Liberal theory predict significant variation in the substantive content of foreign policy across issues, regions, or hegemonic orders. While Moravcsik is far from a blanket optimist, he does predict that over long periods of time there can be major changes in the nature of world politics that override the pattern of great power conflict that Realists emphasize. In general, Liberal variables such as democracy, economic interdependence, and ideological conflict have been moving in a normatively positive direction for the past 75 years. Armed conflict in the world has generally been in decline, and has essentially disappeared from Western Europe, the Americas and parts of East Asia. Conflict, such as it still is, coexists with ever more intensive international cooperation in many issue areas. Moreover, many countries pursue strategies that are manifestly not based on Realist power balancing, but on economic, social, and political cooperation—even among otherwise competitive great powers, such as the US and China. The best way to explain this, Moravcsik argues, is to accept the Liberal premise that what states want both determines what states do and can change substantially over time.

Finally, Moravcsik asserts that a great advantage of Liberal theory is that it is not exclusive. It meshes well with other paradigms and theories. Neither academics nor practitioners find monocausal theories particularly convincing. Liberals argue that the first thing one needs to know about a situation in world politics is what the underlying stakes are—i.e., what states want, and how badly they want it. This means Liberalism comes first in any multi-causal explanation of outcomes in international politics. In a subset of cases, Liberal theory will tell us that state preferences are highly conflictual and important enough that ruling elites in society will be willing to contemplate the use of military force. In such cases, Realist theory may tell us a lot about who ultimately prevails and how.

In his 2020 article, Moravcsik argues that the European Union has continually defied skeptics by capably managing a series of successive crises, from Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea through the Covid-19 pandemic. Moravcsik contends that European success can be explained by the boring, pragmatic, technocratic, and ultimately effective methods of governance in Brussels.

THEORY APPLIED – ENTER CHINA

We begin our assessment of the relative explanatory power of Realist and Liberal perspectives on the rise of China with several recent essays from *Foreign Affairs*. Each essay offers a different perspective on the sources of rising U.S.-China tensions and, in turn, the optimal U.S. strategy for managing China's rise. Taken together, they provide a reasonable portrait of the current "state of the debate" on the matter.

Elbridge Colby and Robert D. Kaplan leverage ideas from structural Realism to caution against viewing China's behavior and U.S.-China competition in ideological terms. Consistent with Offensive Realism, they characterize China's pursuit of "hegemony" in East Asia as a "natural" outgrowth of its security needs and interests as a rising great power. In turn, they argue that the United States, as the world's sole regional hegemon, "simply cannot afford" to allow China to become one as well and must therefore work to "ensure that China cannot dominate" Asia. But even this fairly hawkish take (akin to what Aaron Friedberg calls realist pessimism—see below), they suggest, allows room for moderation in U.S.-China relations as long as both sides refrain from viewing competition as a contest between democracy and authoritarianism. Inserting ideology into the mix, they warn, will only make an already dangerous situation worse by turning every new development into a "test of which political system is superior" and by limiting the U.S. ability to cooperate with non-democracies in competition with China.

Hal Brands and Zack Cooper counter that ideology is and should be integral to how the U.S. approaches competition with China. Just as a basic commitment to liberal democracy and the liberal international order animated U.S. efforts to contain Soviet Communism, so a sensitivity to the moral failings of China's authoritarian ruling regime underpins U.S. concern over rising Chinese power. Far from a liability, they argue, this sensitivity and the commitments it reflects are assets the U.S. should leverage to mobilize domestic and international support liberalism at home and abroad. Simplistically pitting power against principle misses the important role principle can play in mobilizing the United States' resource both domestic and vis-a-vis our allies.

Though they offer different views of the nature of the challenge China's rise poses, both pairs of authors agree that China does, in fact, pose a fundamental challenge to U.S. interests in Asia – one that the U.S. must energetically confront. Arguing from essentially defensive realist premises, **Charles Glaser** offers a radically different conclusion. The U.S., he suggests, should not be lured by an outdated self-conception (and obsolete assessments of its relative power) into mounting a frontal challenge to China's rise. Instead, it should recognize its limitations and ruthlessly assess which of its interests in Asia are essential and which should be dispensed with in the interest of limiting the risk of war with China. He concludes that U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea should be maintained and strengthened, but that Washington should abandon its ambiguous commitments to defend Taiwan and to counter China in the South China Sea.

Writing in early 2020, **Fareed Zakaria** questions the bipartisan consensus that "U.S. policy towards China has failed," and that "Washington needs a new, much tougher strategy to contain it." Zakaria identifies three assumptions underlying this consensus. First, that the unofficial U.S. strategy of "engagement" has failed to transform China into a responsible stakeholder in the U.S.-led, rules-based international order. Second, that China today is the most significant threat to that U.S.-led liberal order. Third, that a policy of "active confrontation" with China will better address the threat it poses than a more accommodative approach. In response to the first assumption, Zakaria argues that, in fact, "today's China is a remarkably responsible nation on the geopolitical and military front," noting its extremely restrained use of force in recent decades (compared with most other major powers) and significant contributions to the United Nations peacekeeping program. On the second assumption, Zakaria challenges the very notion that there is, or ever was, something like a cohesive and meaningfully "liberal" international order. At any rate, he argues, while the rise of a one-party authoritarian regime (and certain of China's actions, including domestic human rights abuses) certainly pose challenges to the "imperfect order" that does exist, China is far less interested in undermining that order than, say, Russia. Regarding the final assumption, Zakaria warns that a tougher response to China may benefit the military-industrial complex. But it will leave American and international society less safe and less well-off. More troubling, a more assertive U.S. posture towards China today risks further empowering hawks within China's political and military elite tomorrow.

In a 2023 article in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, **John Mearsheimer** pushes back against what he perceives as a Western dislike of Realism, rooted in a privileged pacifism which disdains war as an instrument of policy. During the "unipolar moment" of unquestioned American power from 1991-2017, Mearsheimer contends that policymakers had the power needed to disregard the dictates of Realism. However, he argues that Liberalism's policy dominance led to "near-total failure" which "played a major role in creating the troubled world of 2023." From wasting lives and resources in the Middle East to strengthening China to threatening Russia, Liberalism has created a more dangerous world.

The U.S.-China rivalry is based on the fundamental tension between China's push to become a regional hegemon and the U.S.'s deep and abiding interest in preventing that rise. While the rivalry was inevitable, Mearsheimer argues that the U.S.'s present dilemma is a result of the "colossal strategic blunder" of the Liberal policy of engagement with China, which allowed China to become the wealthy, powerful antagonist that is today. A Realist policy of confrontation, if adopted earlier, would have limited China's rise.

Mearsheimer similarly argues that the current U.S.-Russia conflict is a direct result of previous U.S. policymakers eschewing Realist principles. However, he goes further by placing blame for the present war squarely on American shoulders, arguing that the war "was provoked by the US and its European allies when they decided to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia's borders." The Liberal policy of NATO expansion at all costs led to a "straightforward case of balancing against a dangerous threat" on the part of Russia.

In "Where have all the China experts gone?" **Rory Truex** argues that the United States is running low on China expertise at a time when its most needed. The United States has a relative deficit of experts in with experience and language fluency compared to its main power rival. College Mandarin course enrollment declined by 20% between 2016 and 2020. Just 382 American college students studied abroad in China in 2020-2021 compared to 14,887 in 2011-12. This shift has been driven by China's draconian zero covid laws, but American decoupling is reinforcing this trend that is severing the pipeline of China expertise. Funding for foreign languages was cut by from $110.3 million to $68.3 million in FY 2011 and remained at just $71.9 million in 2022, of which 15% is for East Asian languages. Today, as a consequence, most competent applicants to PhD programs for Chinese politics, are Chinese, not American.

Rory Truex and Michael Cerny present new survey data showing how the US foreign policy community views China. In the wake of Fareed Zakaria's congressional testimony warning of groupthink on China, their survey explores the persistence of groupthink in US foreign policy. In a survey of 495 foreign policy professional supported by 55 semi-structured interviews, they find that there is consensus about China as a "competitor" state, but not consensus about how to compete. They also find however, that those with more dovish views feel pressure to conceal them and feel doing so is important to future career success. Despite pluralistic views, the apparent perception of a consensus appears to be reducing rigorous debate on US foreign policy towards China.

Writing in 2014, **Adam Liff and John Ikenberry** investigate the concept of the security dilemma in the context of evolving U.S.-China relations. They ask two main questions: First, what evidence is there that the U.S. and China are participating in a security dilemma death spiral? Second, is there anything the main players can do to reduce security dilemma tensions, engage in strategic restraint, peacefully address conflicts of interests, and manage nascent rivalries amid China's rise?

The authors reach several conclusions. First, they argue, a security dilemma is indeed shaping dimensions of the U.S.-China relations. Second, real conflicts of interest (factors *outside* of the security dilemma) drive the U.S.-China relationship as much if not more than security dilemma factors. Third, even when Chinese intentions or U.S. intentions are status quo, the other side may not perceive them as such. Fourth, arms racing is not the only type of state behavior that is caused by and fuels the U.S.-China security dilemma. Fifth and finally, perception matters a great deal. The authors stress that "states' military policy responses to others are shaped not just by the other side's objectively identifiable capabilities, but also by international politics: the degree of mutual strategic (mis)trust, which in turn powerfully shapes how attempts at reassurance are perceived." Government rhetoric and other kinds of actions can exacerbate spirals as well. Fourth and finally, they conclude that U.S. and Chinese leaders have agency. If U.S. policymakers step into Chinese shoes and vice versa, they can anticipate how their rhetoric and action will be received on the other side and take more effective steps towards the reassurance that breaks the spiral model.

Richard Fontaine and Mira Rapp-Hooper step back and ask—what is the supposed "liberal international order" and why must the United States make sure China respects it? They identify three propositions that support America's approach: First, there exists one more-or-less-unified liberal international order, and that this order is both based on rules and open to any nation that seeks to join it. Second, if China is brought into this liberal order, the underlying rules and institutions will shape Beijing more than they will be shaped by it. Third, it is the task of the United States and its partners to bring China into the existing order, and that if the attempt proves unsuccessful, the rules-based global order is headed for the dustbin of history.

Fontaine and Rapp-Hooper "lift the hood" on these three propositions, so to speak, to reveal that each is "woefully incomplete." They caution that effective U.S. global leadership requires policymakers to move beyond these simplistic and misleading propositions and accept a more complex reality.

Jessica Chen Weiss argues that there is room for debate about how America competes with China. Instead of economic decoupling and military confrontation, Weiss argues that the two countries can benefit from mutual economic and technological interdependence and that this should not be lost in the competition. On both sides, there's increasingly zero-sum rhetoric that increases the risk of conflict. The U.S. should set clear limits on de-risking so that degree of mutual interdependence is maintained without compromising on confronting military aggression.