

# Is China Threat Theory a Construction? A Critical Review

<sup>1</sup>Nakari L. Mwanamvka, <sup>2</sup>Chloe Adem, <sup>3</sup>Doris A. Onyango, <sup>4</sup>Weldon Ng'eno

School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Department Of International Relations

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**Abstract:** China is rising. The United States of America remains a global hegemon although China is likely to overtake it. Some realists and liberalists are predicting that this rise of China may lead to a conflict with the United States of America. This is called China threat theory. Paul Ribeiro thinks this is a constructed fear which is emanating from the West looking at China from their own lens. He however says China may be feeding into this fear by giving wrong signals. China is not emphasizing on advantages that her rise brings to the world at large.

This paper attempts to look at this fear in the context of China's relationship with Africa. Africa could be the battle ground for influence for the two superpowers. The reviewers think that Africa has no reason to fear. Africa can contribute to the reconstruction of a mutual relationship in which China, the United States of America, and Africa can build mutual trust among the three actors.

**Keywords:** global hegemon, United States of America, China.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Paulo Ribeiro has discussed a very important subject of the China threat theory. China is rising and is expected that soon it may surpass the United States of America as the world hegemon. While this may present opportunities, analysts and academicians are debating on the possible threats China's rise may pose. This is not just about economic and technological competition. It is "a threat in the military and security arena" (Ribeiro, 2015). The discussion has dwelt on the image of China which is dependent on its history; current military modernization and increasing expenditures for the same; territorial disputes with neighboring states; the inflexible position of China on Taiwan; and also the Chinese nationalism which manifests itself in anti-Japanese and anti-American rhetoric among the Chinese people.

Specifically, the article has looked at the signals of Chinese intentions and the symmetrical reactions of the United States of America as a hegemon; and the reactions of the countries in the region which seem to indicate that with power China may become a regional bully. Focus is put on the Spratly and Paracels Islands in which China is disputing with Vietnam and Philippines over ownership (BBC NEWS, 2016). There is the dispute over Senkaku also called Diaoyu Islands with Japan (Murata, 2013) and China not accepting the independence of Taiwan. These issues enforce the threat theory when taken together with what is considered as Chinese superiority complex which is based on the consciousness of its long history of civilization and the resentment of having been under Japanese and Western domination (Zarrow, 2005).

On the other hand, China threat theory may be looked at from the way the United States of America is reacting to the rise of China, regardless of China's intentions and behavior. The United States of America is seen as making attempts to contain China as it engages in the South China Sea, as the US strengthens its alliance with Japan since 1995 and other countries in the region (like South Korea) which is seen as an effort to contain China. The label of China threat is itself seen by China as an effort by the US to undermine it. The US is also worried that with the rise China may start regulating the international arena. Now with China espousing different values and worldview, this in itself poses a serious challenge

to the US. This “damages the US development initiatives and diminish its role in the region” (Schneidman, *The Commercial Relationship between United States, China, and African Countries: Areas of Trilateral Cooperation*, 2013)

There is therefore a dissonance between the rising power and the hegemon which enforces the threat theory. But it must be emphasized that the author underscores that there is no outright conflict between China and any state or actor. It is a hypothetical construct.

The reviewers are in this article looking at the China threat theory using the constructivist theory as the author has used it. Then the reviewers will look at the lessons the China threat theory offers African countries as they relate with China.

## 2. CHINA THREAT THEORY

China threat theory is an attempt to explain the implications of the rise of China to the world order. The theory combines assumptions of what is likely to happen when hegemonic stability is challenged; predicts China’s likely trajectory of actions from China’s history including traces of superiority complex, and the disparity of norms and values between the rising power China and the hegemon the United States of America (Mearshmeimer, 2006).

Three theories have been used to understand and predict China’s (the rising power) likely character; and the United States of America’s (hegemonic power) likely reaction that may affect international order. The theories are realism, democratic peace theory (liberalism) and constructivism. It should be said right away that democratic peace theory has been so debated that it seems inconclusive in its ability to lead policy (Mello, 2016). It will not be discussed in this review. Suffice to say that recent history seems to be disproving it. Kingsley Ofoe Doe in his Ph.D. thesis has critiqued the basic assumption of this theory, namely, that democracies do not fight. Russia and Georgia were democracies when they went to war in 2008 (Doe, 2015).

Mearshmeimer observes that within structural realism, there are two schools: one saying that the dominant and preponderant power at the pinnacle may cause war to protect hegemony. The other espouses the unlikely scenario of the rising power causing war (Mearshmeimer, 2006). Other authors take this unlikely possibility in the context of China’s history: discussions in China acknowledge the fear in the world that China may be manifesting resurgence of “Middle Kingdom” which has strong connotations of a superiority complex on the part of China (Mondejar, 2015). This is compounded by the following historical facts: China became nuclear power in 1960. China was key actor in the Cold War. There have been military engagements with India and Vietnam. And there have been repeated wars, and the ongoing fears of a conflict with Japan (Breslin, 2007). There are others who also think that because China espouses different norms and value systems, the communist or Socialist alternative to capitalism, the cultural and economic dominance may in themselves be sources of conflict with the region and the West, in particular the US. Offensive realists think that China will make efforts to weaken all regional competitors like Japan, Russia, India and even South Korea. But defensive realists think China will seek growth within the context of co-existence. Its neighbors have nuclear arsenal and Japan could develop nuclear if threatened. Indeed military “expansion in the age of nationalism are outweighed by the costs” (Mearshmeimer, 2006). In fact, Injoo Sohn finds that China has actually chosen the root of co-operation with its regional neighbors (Sohn, 2008). The whole concept of ‘China’s reform and opening up’ is to advocate for a peaceful rise (Baijia, 2014). It is soft power and not realpolitik. It is the reviewers’ view that military expansion that China is engaged in could as well be in pursuance of smart power. It is important to take into account that after Mao Zedong who took China into struggle and revolution, China changed its trajectory as they went back to the philosophies of Confucius and Tao. This has led China to pursue its national interest with a positive-sum or win-win situation (China’s Rise) (Baijia, 2014)

## 3. ONTOLOGY AND WORLDVIEW

Realism is a western (specifically drawn from European historical view of state) worldview. No wonder Mearshmeimer explains structural realism with examples from actors like Bismarck, Kaiser Wilhelm or Adolf Hitler. Is it possible to explain and predict China’s actions from its own ontology and worldview? According to Injoo Sohn, China is seen to have migrated from relative gain inclination to absolute gain (win-win also called positive-sum) position. China now espouses the “utility of regional multilateralism to deal with their security dilemma” with notions of “common security...co-operative security [also called] comprehensive security” (Sohn, 2008).

Yiwei Wang discussing the Chinese worldview observes that, for the Chinese, power comes from morality and morality draws from nature. It is on this basis that Confucius taught that morality inside brings power outside; and therefore he advised: “do not impose upon others what you do not desire yourself” (Wang, 2008). This is not just about internal public policy and internal politics. In the Chinese concept of *Tianxia* “All under heaven” the distinction between internal and international politics does not exist (Wang, 2008). Instead of dominating and changing the world, Chinese epistemology is that of learning from the world (or nature). Actually, it is evident that the fast development of the Chinese economy has been a result learning from the world. After many challenges experienced from the ‘cultural revolution’ under Mao Zedong in the four decades after the Second World War; especially in the period of Deng Xiaoping “there was a rush to engage in study tours overseas. The Chinese government sent a number of delegations abroad to study other countries’ experiences...” This has been the basis for Chinese Reform and Opening up philosophy” (Baijia, 2014). It is really like the Chinese worldview agrees with the saying that “We live in ‘a world of our making’ not a world whose contours are predetermined in advance by non-human forces” (Brown & Ainley, 2005).

#### 4. CHINA AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

The rise of China in the International System has been explained through several theories. From a constructive perspective, the identity that China has formed for itself has led to incorporation with the world economy that has had a direct benefit to China (Goldingay, 2014). Theoretically, Constructivism is seen as the identity of a state drawn from its history and development of values that shapes its behavior in the international system (Behraves, 2011). In the 1970’s, China’s focus was more on internal matters whose effect was it separated itself from the rest of the world. China pursued revolution and struggle. It is only from the 1980’s that China changed its attitude as that was necessary for the advancement of its economic growth (Blyth, 2013)

Established in the late 1980’s by scholars such as Nicholas Onuf, Alexander Wendt and the likes, Constructivism is a social theory that emphasizes on the social construction of world affairs as opposed to post-positivist theories such as realism that states that the international political system was shaped by actors who choose to pursue their interests while making calculations to maximize the benefits and minimize loses (Blyth, 2013)

##### **Constructivism theory and its implications:**

Constructivism as a theory of International Relations, is one of the oldest theory which bases itself on assumptions that revolve around concepts that are governed by values, identity, socialization and norms. (Hurd, 2008). When talking of constructivism, explains that how various states behave in the international system, is based on the nature of the construction that can either be relational or social in their formation. Such kind of constructions, are normally used to define the nature of politics of power, the genre of cooperation whether in areas of trade, military or scientific and, give an insight on all potential conflicts and more, other phenomenon that may result due to states interactions. As a central principle of constructivism, (Wendt, 1992) in his book *Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics*, points out that actions of people towards various actors within the system and objects that they relate to, is defined by the perception they have towards such actors or objects depending on their perceived connotations.

China as a continuous rapid growing economy, has continued to manifest its social and relational constructivist approach, in its interaction within other players in the global system. This has been in efforts to pursue most of the country’s interest and also, maintenance of its global image. Some of this approaches have been perceived positively while others, have been looked upon as negatively leading to strained interactions with other actors in the system.

Constructivism as a theory has provided China with the lens necessary to enable it as a state, pursue its identity within the international system, thus allowing China’s economic development to advance and progress to the position it presently commands recognition (Goldingay, 2014). According to (Behraves, 2011) the major thesis of constructivism is that the international system is socially constructed, that is, it’s the ways in which human beings think and interact with one another. The core concepts in constructivism are norms, values, identity and socialization which are used frequently in discussions on issues of international concern.

**Issue of Taiwan's Sovereignty:**

The relational construction between China and Taiwan has been one of the most challenging ever since 1949. Despite the Island of Taiwan having an administrative autonomy from this great Asian country, the country of China, continues to practice a principle dubbed *One China Principle* which, has been socially constructed by the Chinese and used to exert influence to the democratic Taipei. The People's Republic of China (PRC) under this principle, affirms the existence of only one state of China and does not acknowledge that Taiwan exist as an independent state (Albert, 2016). The belief in the principle over years, has led China to adopt more stringent approaches as a means of safeguarding its sovereignty attached to Taiwan. One such move has been the adoption of the Anti-Secession Law of 2005 in which, despite being perceived as a foster move towards a diplomatic and non-violent unification of the two countries, it stated that in case those advocating for secession choose to do so forcefully, the PRC would respond to such move by use of non-diplomatic means to safeguard its domestic sovereignty.

**China's national interest:**

Constructivism theory can be used to explain China's national interest construct and especially, its pursuit towards its energy security in Africa that has seen this country, instigating series of relational interaction with the countries in Africa (Hurd, 2008) championed by their foreign policy that promotes such engagements. One of the approaches adopted by Chinese for safeguarding its energy demands has been through the use of oil diplomacy, whose main goals has been to securing abundant supplies to meet the growing demands of its population and also, in the long term ensure China becomes an international voice in the oil business (Taylor, 2006). The social construction enshrined within China's policies such as non-interference in countries national policies, has made it have dealings with countries that tend not to uphold human rights and government accountabilities. This has been witnessed in early 1990's in Sudan whereby, after the National Islamic Front assumed command of the country leadership in 1989 and was accused of supporting terrorism by the West hence cutting ties with Sudan, China went ahead pursuing its interest by developing the oil infrastructure in that country (Caroline Francis, 2012).

**China and increasing global networks:**

The rate at which China is reaching to both regional and global networks, has made it to be perceived both as a competitor to powerful economies such as the United States and, a fast emerging economic giant. These constructs have come along due to the fact that China influence in the world today, is being felt in its efforts to reach out to most and especially through its programs of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) (Morrison, 2017). Through governmental support, the relational construct between China and other global and countries has seen an increase in technological advancements which, has impacted positively on domestic productions, boosted both the manufacturing and service industry and, increased the presence of Chinese enterprises global wide. The FDI that are backed by China, have also increased the angle of risk diversification, allowing formation of companies in regions that can accommodate cheaper production, expand markets and open up for new opportunities. China nowadays has constructed an image whereby, many third world countries seeking rapid development, have turned towards it to realize their goals.

**China Threat theory and Africa:**

Ribeiro acknowledges that China's development model is appealing to many developing countries (Ribeiro, 2015). Africa is among those countries that are looking up to China both for lessons and support. Lemayan and others have said that African leaders "are now able to access an alternative path to investment, loans and economic development (Lemayan, et al., 2016). The question would rightly be asked whether Africa should be concerned with the China threat theory as it engages with China. David Shinn has discussed the military and security relations between China and Africa (Shinn, 2008). This discussion observes that China's security interest in Africa is "only in terms of China's effort to secure the energy, mineral, and timber resources used to fuel its economy". Thus far the security interest of China is in the following countries: Angola, Sudan, Congo-Brazzavile, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Zambia, South Africa, Ghana, Namibia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, with possibility of others joining the list as they discover resources like Kenya and Malawi. China supports the political status quo in these countries. China is also involved in peace keeping operations in Africa. Of course, as in many other areas, information (therefore transparency and accountability) is not readily available on China's military engagement with African governments (Shinn, 2008)

On the other hand, the United States of America has historical and security interests in the continent of Africa. The push for democracy and multiparty politics. The resources like oil are vital for America. Since 9/11 Africa has become a strategic partner in America's fight against terrorism (Wyk, 2005). But one American Ambassador to Ethiopia has been quoted as saying "Africa is an ideal location for the US and China to reduce mutual suspicion and benefit African Countries at the same time" (Schneidman, *The Commercial Relationship between United States, China, and African Countries: Areas of Trilateral Cooperation*, 2013).

There is however some competition between China and America in Africa. China pursues non-interference in sovereign affairs. The West has accused China for not being a responsible stakeholder which may be interpreted as protecting despots. But it is observed that these accusations may also be brought on the feet of the US in Africa. What is important to note is that the competition between China and the United States of America does not have to grow into a conflict. In that case it is possible to have a healthy completion. It does not have to be a zero-sum game. It offers opportunity to the United States and the West to relook at its engagement with Africa. As Bergsten and others have observed the West has opportunity to work with African leaders as partners and not the master servant relationship that has been so far been the case (Bergsten, Freeman, Lardy, & Mitchell, 2008).

#### **Benefits of the China Threat Theory:**

For Chinese nationals, this theory simply means that China as a nation is simply regaining its position as a hegemon in the world centuries after the decline of the Chinese empire. China had an impeccably strong national identity for approximately 3000 years (as opposed to America which is a nation that is only 300 years old)

Maintaining the world order: The rise of China as a great power is drastically reducing the influence of America in the world. For some states, the influence that America has had over other states was akin to a dictatorship. This rise of power by China is bringing back a balance of power to the world. With China being a member of the United Nations Security Council, it is seen as a supporter of international law. China has previously warned against the use of military power where there are other peaceful methods of diplomacy. This can be noted in the Chinese reactions to military interventions that America was carrying out during the Cold war Era where China was a vocal critic of superpower conduct in world affairs (Delios 2005).

#### **Disadvantages of the China Threat Theory:**

To other countries, China is seen to be the world's most likable super power. Through the guidance of President Xi, China is seen to be liberal, responsible globalist power. However, the reality is that China is not a liberal, authoritarian nation, run by the Communist Party for the last 68 years. China will eventually seek to expand their philosophies to countries where they have sufficient influence.

Beijing is providing frameworks for all these nations to plug into a Chinese world order. The most prominent is "One Belt, One Road," Chinese President Xi Jinping's signature trade initiative, which seeks to recreate the old Silk Road trading routes, with China once again at the center of the world's economy (Fish 2017). This perspective will however land China into the same predicament that America is facing now. States that will seek help from China will find that they will often have to create internal policies that are in line with Chinese policies.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The discussion on the China threat theory is very helpful. By constructivism it has been possible to show that China may not be a threat as has been portrayed by realists. China has gone back to its roots in the teaching of Confucius and Tao to diffuse its negative history during Maoist. China does not have to be defined strictly on the basis of a brief history of three decades after the Second World War. Recent initiatives of attempts to resolve the Senkaku also called Diaoyu Islands gives credence to this theory (Murata, 2013). This discussion further assists African policy makers to see that the competition between the United States and China in and for Africa gives space for African leaders to take advantage and leverage the opportunities to the benefit of Africa. Constructivism allows African policy makers to look at Africa's history, norms and values in the context of the opportunities available.

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