

The Problem of the Capability-Threat Nexus: The Role of Threat Perceptions in International Relations and the Case of US-China Relations (1979 – 2010)

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Abstract

This thesis is written against the backdrop of China's rise and subsequent changes in China's foreign security policy since it formalised relations with the United States (and the world). Using Stephen Walt's notion of "threat" (to simplify, aggregate power plus threatening intentions), the article explores why it was theoretically possible for the United States (US) and China to continue a policy of engagement despite China showing signs of gaining latent power and declarations of such great power potential, arguably satisfying the capability-threat nexus in the 1990s, conducive to triggering a balancing response by the established great power, the United States. This thesis hypothesises that China did not qualify to be constituted as a threat using Walt's criteria because the US did not perceive China as a threat nor was it securitised, gauging intentions through a discourse approach stressing the higher importance of social factors (intentions) over aggregate power in threat assessments. Then, I qualify the material effects of this by examining how the US handled China's rise using a core interest framework devised by Björn Jerdén and Linus Hagström based on eight indicators crucial to China's grand strategy, where I find that to a significant degree the US has accommodated the rise of China rather than balanced against it as expected. Overall, this thesis serves to demonstrate that capabilities and threats do not coincide, arguing the role of perceptions are crucial in shaping threat assessments.

Chapter 1

The Problem of the Capability-Threat Nexus: The Role of Threat Perceptions in International Relations and The Case of US-China Relations (1979 – 2010)

Introduction

One morning while I was drinking my coffee and scrolling Apple News+ on my iPhone for news to consume, I came across an interesting article by Fareed Zakaria, a distinguished American journalist and international relations theorist. In his Washington Post op-ed, Zakaria discusses the framing of the China “threat” (Zakaria, 2021). He asks why China is viewed as a threat recently when there are capability “chasms” between the United States (US) and China (Zakaria, 2021). Zakaria essentially problematizes what the China threat is and more specifically asks what is exactly the basis of this threat? China’s steady rise in terms of their growing economy and military capabilities over the past decades which should have triggered a threat perception was not seen as such when it could have been construed to satisfy the capability-threat nexus much earlier in China’s rise. In Zakaria’s stride, I ask why China, despite its growing capabilities, was not perceived as a threat like realism would have predicted from the start of its rise in the 1990s if it holds that when a state grows materially it should be seen as a threat? Furthermore, in terms of behaviour, much of China’s foreign policy which could have been construed as threatening, i.e. the third Taiwan strait crisis in 1995-96, was not depicted as such (Jerdén, 2014a, 2014b; A. I. Johnston, 2013). How can we explain this lack of a threat perception when material conditions were perhaps satisfied? In this thesis, I set out to investigate the role of discourses and perceptions on threat assessments or lack thereof.

Statement of Problem and Main Research Questions

A.F.K. Organski, author of power transition theory (PTT), predicted the potential rise of China and its impact on the international order (Kim & Gates, 2015; Organski, 1968). He went as far to say that “the Western powers will find that the most serious threat to their supremacy comes from China” as early as 1958, before China materially became a rising power (Organski, 1968, p. 361). Even when they shared previous antagonistic relations such as during the Korean War in 1950-1953 and when China successfully conducted its first nuclear test in 1964, the US

and China in 1972 managed to establish diplomatic ties and formally normalise diplomatic relations in 1979 (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, 1978; Office of the Historian, 1972). Since then, China's opening up and reform policy has enabled economic growth and development at an unprecedented rate never before seen in history, becoming the second largest economy in 2010. This is consequential for world politics as the PTT and balance of power realist dictums both agree that growing economic power translates into greater military ambitions (Organski, 1968; Waltz, 1979, 1993).

However, China's rise has occurred relatively uninterrupted (Schweller, 2004). This is despite Kenneth Waltz arguing that China was a contender for great power status in 1993 and Christopher Layne arguing that "new powers will rise" when speculating the new international order after the Cold War (Layne, 1993; Waltz, 1993). Therefore, in this thesis I firstly ask why did the US not view China as a "threat" earlier on in its rise? Why didn't China's steady growing economic and complementary military growth since not automatically trigger a balancing response by the US? In terms of its behaviour, had China not acted aggressively in the past such as during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis by carrying out missile tests in 1995-96? Why was this not viewed as a "threatening" act back then? It is not entirely clear why the "threat" of China has begun to be perceived as such only relatively recently, as late as 2010 according to the 2010 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) issued by the Obama administration, even when the capability-threat nexus could have been construed as "satisfied" far earlier. As a result, this thesis is centred around these key questions. I hypothesise that social factors trump material ones in international relations (IR) where China did not qualify as a threat according to Stephen Walt's notion of "threat", defined herein as aggregate power and harbouring aggressive intentions (Walt, 1987, pp. 22–25). In other words, the US primarily did not *perceive* China as a threat or attribute it to harbouring aggressive intentions, as expressed in its discursive representations of China in its official security documents, even with burgeoning capabilities.

This is despite, as mentioned, early in the 1990s and 2000s, China's rise producing a sizeable body of international relations literature, forewarning of the high likelihood of strategic competition, even confrontation between China and the US. Based on the premise that China principally being located in East Asia will desire to pursue hegemony in the region, where

America's hub and spokes system of alliances is also located, precipitates a proverbial "clash of the Titans," later coined as the "Thucydides Trap" by Harvard University political scientist Graham Allison (Betts, 1993; Christensen, 1999; Friedberg, 1993; Mearsheimer, 2001, 2006; Roy, 1994). As we can see, the realist literature maintains by default that great powers balance the strength of rising powers because of changing material capabilities and rising powers challenge the status quo (Waltz, 1979). Do they? Looking back now, with the benefit of hindsight, we can definitively say that by that logic the US appears to present an interesting puzzle in international relations because it viewed China's rise positively and acted contrary to realist predictions (Chan, 2010; Kang, 2003).

Therefore, I qualify this understanding of the US response to China's rise between (1979 – 2010), by investigating the structuring effects of discourses on perceptions and threat assessments. This will form the second research objective. More specifically, I ask how the US dealt with China's long-term core strategic interests? Again, the lack of a threat perception, means that China was an "unanswered threat" to borrow Randall Schweller's words and enabled a different set of possible power relations between a rising power and an established great power (Schweller, 1999, 2004). Thus, using the core interest framework devised by Björn Jerdén and Linus Hagström, I demonstrate that these positive discourses on China facilitated a seemingly contrary foreign policy by the US when compared to realist expectations until the China "assertiveness" discourse sedimented in 2010, hence the selection of the period of inquiry until 2010 (A. I. Johnston, 2013; Schweller, 2004). While ups and downs, of course, existed between 1979 and 2010, and could be construed as congruent with "strategic competition" (Shambaugh, 2000, 2013), my main finding is that the lack of a threat perception enabled a different range of great-power relations, namely an accommodating policy (Holland, 2013).

This could explain why China's growing capabilities and foreign policy behaviour, i.e. China's steady military build-up and the third Taiwan Strait Crisis, which could have been construed as threatening, were not perceived so, even when there was perhaps good reason to view it that way (Jerdén, 2014a, 2014b). To reiterate, this is because of a lack of threat perception, as defined by Walt, or lack of a securitising move as defined by Barry Buzan et al (Buzan et al., 1998; Holland, 2013; Walt, 1987, pp. 22–25). Again, I place special importance of

social factors over material ones in threat perceptions as well as in the *securitisation* process as crucial to understanding threat assessments (Buzan et al., 1998).

Methodology

First, this thesis is developed by using Stephen Walt's notion of "threat" from his "balance of threat" theory (Walt, 1985, 1987). According to Walt, the criteria for whether a country can constitute a threat is firmly located in a largely materialist basis. His theory argues that four key factors determine the threat perception of states: (1) "aggregate power," defined as the total resources that a state under its command, including "population, industrial and military capability, and technological prowess"; (2) "geographical proximity," referring simply to the physical distance makes other countries' capabilities seem more or less threatening; (3) "offensive power," i.e. a state's ability "to threaten the sovereignty or territorial integrity of another state at an acceptable cost"; and (4) "aggressive intentions" (Walt, 1985, pp. 8–12, 1987, pp. 22–25). He argues states do not balance against power itself and admits that "power is one of the factors that affect the propensity to balance, although it is not the only one nor always the most important" (Walt, 2002, p. 134). Rather, intentions, if aggressively expressed are more likely to provoke balancing behaviour, Walt states (1987). Though this thesis does not necessarily employ Walt's notion of threat for theorising the US's *balancing* behaviour vis-à-vis China, it is used to demonstrate that power often attributed to capabilities and threat perceptions do not necessarily coincide with each other. As Gideon Rose notes, there is "no immediate or perfect transmission belt linking material capabilities to foreign policy behaviour," which can be extended to include reactions and threat assessments (Rose, 1998, pp. 146–147). Hence, this thesis just uses the aforementioned three materialist factors and one social factor from Walt's notion of "threat" relevant in the period of inquiry to problematise the capability-threat nexus and apply it to US-China relations between 1979 and 2010.

To explore how capabilities and threats do not coincide, I proffer that securitisation theory is instead better suited to explain this conundrum. Securitisation theory views security as a process conducted by agents rather than assume it is a structural phenomenon (Buzan et al., 1998; Waltz, 1979). In other words, changes in threats are not necessarily found in objective or material fact like (neo)realists such as Stephen Walt suggests, but are found in perceptions or

social factors and require collective acceptance of the threat (Ruggie, 1998). Actors with positions of authority may justify certain actions as a *securitising* move and thereby change the respective relations between the securitising agent and the securitised object (Buzan et al., 1998). The issue at hand, be it terrorism or an environmental disaster, will then be placed outside of the bounds of normal politics and call for emergency procedures to deal with the securitised object beyond normal political procedure (Ibid). Doing so has a structuring effect that narrows the range of policy options, especially negative ones (Holland, 2013). For the purpose of this thesis, I assume that “government elites maintain a dominant position when it comes to framing threats” by tracing the discursive representations in the US *National Security Strategy* and *China’s National Defense* publications focused on in securitisation theory (Buzan et al., 1998; Eriksson, 2001, p. 15; Wæver, 1999). These actors decide or choose security threats, be it another state actor or other amorphous concepts like terrorism and attribute threatening characteristics to it.

Applying these theories, the first section confirms that neither side in its discursive representations expressed in official security publications harboured aggressive intentions or perceptions, despite China perhaps fitting objectively “threatening” criteria in its growing economy and capabilities. In essence, China desired to “rise peacefully” and the US was consistently cautiously optimistic about China’s rise. Assuming these discursive representations have a structuring effect on politics and on policy range, the second section proposes that this enabled a wider range of possible responses between rising powers and established powers – an accommodating one (Holland, 2013; Schweller, 1999; Wæver, 1999). As a result, I qualify this by examining how the US handled China’s rise. To operationalise this, I use a “core interest” framework to gauge how much the US acted in accordance with China’s national interests as devised by Björn Jerdén and Linus Hagström (Jerden & Hagström, 2012). Contrary to the realist narrative, this section finds that to a significant degree the US has accommodated the rise of China. It has done so by facilitating or at least respecting China’s grand strategy despite some incidents within this period having the potential to be depicted as “threatening” and reorienting bilateral relations akin to realism.

Significance and Limitations of Research

It is expected that the social basis of threats as theorised in securitisation theory will be more successful than Walt's materialist notion of a threat. Hence, social factors are hypothesised to override material ones in threat assessments in US-China relations, which explains why, in terms of timing, the need to "monitor" China's rise only arises in 2010 when President Obama published his first NSS document. Research by Linus Hagström and Christian Turesson show this in the Japanese context how North Korea was depicted as a threat when it possessed a stagnant military whereas China was regarded as a "concern" at most when its military capability burgeoned (Hagström & Turesson, 2009). This is important because threats do not conform to material reality though it does have material consequences, especially negative ones. Securitising moves already appear to be creating an environment "racing towards a security dilemma" in the Asia-Pacific region (Liff & Ikenberry, 2014). While a materialist account forewarns war is more likely than not (Allison, 2017), assuming there is relative agency in threat assessments, it must hold that certain phenomenon prone to securitisation and actors can also be de-securitised. Structures are able to be manipulated changing the course of policies and therefore relations (Wendt, 1992, 1999). Hence, this thesis will contribute to pertinent literature on how threat assessments should rather be viewed as a process conducted by agents than the force of an amorphous anarchical structure that causes war (Waltz, 1979, 2001; Wendt, 1999). From this, we can open up avenues to see how it's possible to de-securitise. Within the confines of the thesis, however, a theory of a de-securitisation process cannot be explored, an admitted limitation of the thesis. Only how actors are not securitised when material conditions were fertile can be explored. Another limitation of the thesis is that it does not purport to explore China accommodating the US and not securitising it in its official discourses, as the focus is on the US's accommodation of China. These omissions are a suggestion for further research in the future.

Outline of the Thesis

In order to address the research questions presented above, this thesis problematises Stephen Walt's notion of "threat" in US-China relations. Despite China being declared as a potential great power with a steadily growing economy and militarily, it was not perceived as a threat. This thesis begins in this chapter where I discussed the issue of the materialist concept of threat in international relations. Rather, I propose security should be seen as a discursive process conducted by actors, where there is relative agency in delineating threats. Hence, I hypothesise

that social factors are more important than material factors in threat assessments. Following that, chapter two provides a theoretical framework for the thesis and operationalises Walt's notion of "threat" to find that the capability-threat nexus does not answer when states view other states as threats. Rather, securitisation theory can answer how objectively threatening actors are not considered as such by focusing on the ideational factors, discourses and perceptions, in threat assessments. Then, in chapter three, how the lack of a threat perception created an accommodating environment despite those materially threatening or objective factors perhaps being satisfied and allowing China to rise will be explored by employing Jerdén and Hagström's grand strategy framework. This makes up the totality of the thesis. As a result, this thesis will make conclusionary remarks in chapter four with a brief discussion on the implications of this research.

Chapter 2

Background of Threat Perceptions and Offensive Power in US-China Relations

Introduction

The first chapter briefly covered the issues of how threats are constituted in international relations, specifically in US-China relations. Drawing from Stephen Walt's materialist notion of threat, this chapter seeks to problematise the realist concept of a "threat," defined as aggregate power and aggressive intentions. This section will not necessarily test his balancing theory, it will use its component parts that he argues comprise a threat, namely material capabilities and social elements (i.e. intentions), as a framework to assess military trends and intentions in US-China relations to gauge whether the US viewed China as a "threat" or not. To operationalise this, intentions will be gauged through discourse analysis finding there were no securitising moves expressed in the US or China's discursive representations of each power in their official security publications. This is despite a changing international order after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and incidents between the US and China during this period. Hence, this chapter serves as a preliminary background that demonstrates how social factors facilitated a policy of engagement with a rising power, in spite of material conditions which could have been construed as warranting a balancing response.

Stephen Walt's Materialist Concept of Threat: Early US-China Relations (1972 – 1989)

Stephen Walt's concept of threat was originally formulated in his publication "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power" and developed into his developed "The Origin of Alliances" thesis (Walt, 1985, 1987). His aim was to refine balance of power theory, an enduring principle that has uni-causally explained war for much of history, where changing aggregates of power alone explain war (Dinneen, 2018; Walt, 1985, 1987). Contrary to this, Walt explores alliance formations by states that may not conform to regular alliance formation patterns adding other factors to explain war. Though he still retains that "aggregate power," defined as the total resources that a state under its command, including "population, industrial and military capability, and technological prowess" plays a large role, he also insists that other factors such as "geographical proximity," referring simply to the physical distance makes other countries'

capabilities seem more or less threatening and “offensive power,” i.e. a state’s ability “to threaten the sovereignty or territorial integrity of another state at an acceptable cost” are also important material bases to define threats. Most importantly, however, he adds that “aggressive intentions” as part of threat assessment criteria (Walt, 1985, pp. 8–12, 1987, pp. 22–25). He argues states do not balance against power itself and admits that “power is one of the factors that affect the propensity to balance, although it is not the only one nor always the most important” (Walt, 2002, p. 134). For example, it would be expected that weaker states form coalitions with weaker states against strong states in regular balance of power theory. However, as Walt observed, states do not always necessarily conform to this expectation such as during the Cold War. As he observed:

At first glance, this result would seem to contradict the assertion that states choose alliance partners in order to balance against the strongest. Focusing solely on aggregate power would lead us to expect more states to ally with the Soviet Union, in order to prevent the United States from using its superior overall resources in harmful ways. Judging from the preponderance of aggregate power favouring the West, many states appear to have ‘bandwagoned’ rather than balanced by aligning with the United States (Walt, 1985, p. 35).

A similar observation can be made in the US-China context that displays this similar anomaly in balance of power theory Walt observed. For example, we witnessed a dramatic turn in world politics between the Soviet Union and China in 1958 after the “Sino-Soviet Split.” Although the Soviet Union and China were ideologically “communist,” they began to diverge ideologically and strategically. From disagreements on communism in the early 1960s to border disputes in Xinjiang, China perceived the Soviet Union as their main strategic enemy (Shen, 2005). Border negotiations did occur in 1964 but remained unresolved and escalated into military tensions progressing into bloody border clashes in 1969. As a result, the Soviet Union gradually replaced the United States as the main security threat to China, despite the US having military supremacy over the Soviet Union by most quantitative metrics (Schaller, 2002; Walt, 1985). This led to a rapprochement between China and the United States and Henry Kissinger’s secret trip to Beijing in 1971 and President Nixon signing the Shanghai Communique, sowing the seeds for strategic (and economic) cooperation. The presidents who followed after Nixon’s resignation

honoured the agreements seeing out that relations be normalised. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan furthermore provided a strategic rationale for China and the US to cooperate militarily making cooperation all the more sensible as the second Cold War rekindled. This did not change as President Ronald Reagan was elected in 1981 signing a new Joint Communiqué and selling arms to the Chinese to balance against the Soviet Union. This was brought about by their shared perception of the Soviet Union as the threat, something perceptions as a variable can explain (Jervis, 1976; Walt, 1987). As such, Walt includes the role of perceptions in threat assessments in addition to aggregate power (Walt, 1987).

Yet, after the dissolution of the Cold War, the US and China persisted with its cooperation, albeit more so in the economic realm than the military one, hence the selection to explore this from 1991 in particular. According to realism, one would expect both powers to find there is a lack in incentive to cooperate any further given that their strategic enemy, the Soviet Union, dissipated, and the US was now the sole superpower of the world (Keohane & Axelrod, 1985; Krauthammer, 1991). With the benefit of hindsight, no (serious) counter-coalition emerged or was provoked to balance the US's overwhelmingly dominant position in the world (Ikenberry, 2002; Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005; Schweller, 2004; Walt, 2002). Rather, cooperation deepened between the US and China after the Cold War, albeit more in the economic realm than the security realm. Again, only perceptions, a way to index and understand intentions, can have facilitated this where materialist accounts fall short (Holland, 2013; Jervis, 1976).

Securitisation Theory and Threat Perceptions

How can we explain this conundrum? Why did cooperation deepen at a time when there was little incentive to do so after the Cold War, according to realism? Securitisation theory can gauge Walt's isolated aspect of intentions which facilitated this cooperation. Contrary to Walt's theory, securitisation theory sees security as a process socially constructed through discourses or speech acts (Buzan et al., 1998). As Roxanne Lynn Doty (1993, p. 316) explains, often we find that "the attributes attached to the subjects of this discourse are not reflections of 'reality' but rather illustrations of the inextricable linkages between the discursive production of 'knowledge' and the power inherent in that production." In other words, structural or material factors do not necessarily have any objective meaning, only ones attributed meaning through ideational factors.

A classic example to highlight this is that North Korea's 10-40 nuclear weapons are viewed as a security threat by the US (Kristensen & Korda, 2021; Wendt, 1995).¹ On the other hand, for the US, China successfully testing its first nuclear bomb was not a deal breaker to form security and economic relations to stave off Soviet expansion during the Cold War in 1971. The same logic applies through that counter-example. Threats are not solely materially determined but are socially constructed intersubjectively among security actors, often by nation-states in international relations. The difference is that sometimes they do not conform to materially objective criteria and social factors can override material ones, as we see in the US-China case. But, the danger is that threats can be attributed ideationally, perhaps dubiously. In saying that, that must mean there is relative agency in threat assessments.

Research Strategy to Gauge US-China Intentions: Discourse Analysis

Buzan et al (1998) specify four features in the securitisation process. It depends on: the rules of the act, the position of the security actor, the attributes attached to the issue, and the scale of the referent object.

First, the rules of the act, the entity constructs an object as a “threat,” which requires “emergency measures” that justifies “actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure” epitomises a securitising move (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 23–24, 33). Second, the position of authority of the securitising actor in the process of securitisation is important (Ibid). For example, the president has more of an authoritative position to securitise than an average person. Third, securitisation is more likely if a phenomenon has traits attributed to it as threatening, as juxtaposed with the securitising actor (Buzan et al., 1998; Doty, 1993). This could come in the form of its regime type, i.e. autocratic, assertive, or other attributes of the referent object. Fourth and final, the scale of referent object, that which is presented as being threatened (Buzan et al., 1998). This ranges from the micro-level – individuals, small groups, etc – to the system level – e.g. regime type or national survival. In the case of IR, states are securitised and are the most

¹ Different studies estimate different numbers of nuclear weapons but expert sources state North Korea has around 10-40 in total. See H. M. Kristensen & M. Korda, (2021), *Nuclear Notebook: How many nuclear weapons does North Korea have in 2021?* Bulletin of Atomic Scientists.

successful at being securitised, often juxtaposed with the securitising state given states have been historically tasked with security as a legitimate role of government (Buzan et al., 1998).

All of this is done at the discursive level, and thus will form the research strategy to gauge intentions and/or perception of threats. This method looks at discourse as a series of statements, by which “unity and coherence of a discourse is simply the regularities exhibited by the relations between different statements” (Wæver, 1999). The task for discourse analysis is to “establish how representations are constituted and spread, and what set of different representations at specific points in time determines and constitutes a discourse” (Neumann, 2003, p. 34). If there is consistency, then we can say that a discourse is sedimented “from which much of a national discourse can be generated” (Neumann, 2003). As explained above, this method views “government elites maintain[ing] a dominant position when it comes to framing threats,” and will use the United States’ NSS and China’s National Defense publications to gauge aggregate intentions of each power since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 until 2010 when a discursive turn occurred labelling China as “assertive” (A. I. Johnston, 2013)

Background of Offensive Power and Threat Perceptions in US-China Relations (1991 — 2010)

This section aims to assess the relative strength of Chinese and US offensive power until 2010. The next two sections will examine China’s military power, grounded in realist understandings of power as a “property” concept, and intentions (Morgenthau, 1993, pp. 29–30, 35–36, 124–165; Waltz, 1979, p. 131). As such, offensive power is operationalised as an aggregate of various military capabilities such as: military personnel; nuclear weapons and their means of delivery, such as intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and intermediate-range ballistic missiles; submarines, diesel or nuclear powered; combat ships, such as destroyers and frigates; bomber and fighter aircraft; and finally, rates of modernisation (Ibid). The final two subsections will compare China and the US’s expressed intentions, and trace the official discourses, assessing to what extent these intentions could be interpreted as “aggressive” or not.

Chinese Offensive Power (1991 – 2010)

Between 1991 and 2001, China's gross domestic product (GDP) more than tripled in nominal terms (from US\$383.37 billion to US\$1.34 trillion), and it grew nearly six times larger between 2001 and 2010 (to US\$6.09 trillion) (World Bank, 2022a). According to World Bank data, the Chinese defence budget of 2010 (US\$105.52 billion) grew around five times larger than that of 2001 figures (US\$26.56 billion) (World Bank, 2022b). Though Chinese numbers are not transparent, some estimates are somewhat lower or significantly higher (Shambaugh, 2005). Nevertheless, there has been significant economic growth and spending on the military since its rise.

Deng Xiaoping's intention was to match China's capabilities with its gradual transition to the status of a major power by overhauling the military, which involved downsizing personnel, modernising technical capabilities, and capacity build-up (Deng, 2008; Fisher, 2008; Shambaugh, 2004; Waltz, 1993). In line with the gradual transition toward a quality military, the number of personnel decreased by about 30 percent since 1991 (from 3,030,000 to 2,285,000 people) (International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 1991, 1999, 2007, 2010). Correspondingly, the number of tanks available to the army had been phased out (from 15,000 to 6,500), coupled with an introduction of newer models to gradually replace the old Type 59 battle tanks (Ibid).

Naval forces, too, underwent substantial rapid modernisation as part of creating a quality, modern military. Particularly noteworthy is the growth in the number of destroyers and frigates added to the Chinese fleet from 18 to 28 and 52, respectively, between 1999 and 2010 (Ibid). In addition, by 2010, China had acquired four modern Sovremenny II Class destroyers to add to its fleet (Ibid). The submarine fleet has also increased to 65 submarines with three ballistic missile nuclear-powered submarines, two of them constructed domestically, with an addition of eight new Russian Kilo Class diesel powered attack submarines to join part of their fleet (Ibid).

One of the most dramatic developments is found in the air force. In 1991, China only possessed a modest number of third-generation aircraft. By 1999, the air force had increased its number of J-7s and J-8s, but had significantly increased its capabilities acquiring 50 Russian Su-27 fourth-generation fighters (International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 1991, 1999).

Following that, China rapidly improved the number of J-11s (from 2 in 1999 to 116 in 2007), based on the Soviet designed Sukhoi Su-27 air superior fighter in a short period of time (International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 2007). Furthermore, Russian Su-30 attack planes had started to replace the Q-5s, too (Ibid).

Finally, the most pertinent increase in Chinese military power has come in its increase in conventional and nuclear arsenals. A quite dramatic expansion occurred between 1999 and 2010; the number of ICBMs more than quadrupled (from 15-20 to 66), while the number of short-range ballistic missiles nearly quintupled (from 150 to 204), all of which China is likely to continue expanding its nuclear capabilities (International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 2010; Norris & Kristensen, 2016).

Overall, Chinese military development since 1991 to 2010 must be seen as significant across the board. The defense budget has substantially increased in tandem with GDP, and while China decreased personnel numbers and phased out-dated equipment, according to the 2010 publication of *The Military Balance*, rates of modernisation of technical capability, too, has steadily increased to add to the quality and quantity of its military in all aspects (International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 2010, pp. 377–379). Furthermore, China’s steady development could have been cause for worry especially its growing force projection from expanding its ballistic missile defence arsenal. As we can see, China has relatively modernised its capabilities and built up its capacity, particularly since 1999, which could be construed as fulfilling the material conditions of a threat. Yet, to signpost, China did not harbour aggressive intentions, posturing a peaceful image of itself, which does not satisfy the necessary social factors in the constitution of a threat.

Chinese Intentions

“China is committed to peaceful development... China’s development will not affect or threaten any country... It does not seek hegemony... It will never seek hegemony even when it is developed.” So spoke the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao in an interview with the Japanese press in 2007 – largely in continuation of the three Joint Communiques signed between the US and China which states “China will never be a superpower and it opposes hegemony and power

politics of any kind” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2007; Watson Institute for International Studies, n.d.). This has been quite a consistent message in all editions of China’s National Defense publication from 1998, 2000, 2006 and 2008 and again affirmed in the 2010 edition (Government of the PRC, 1998, 2000, 2006, 2008, 2010). China also stated its defence policy is “defensive in nature” (Government of the PRC, 1998, 2000), which the 2006 and 2008 versions states is “purely” defensive (Government of the PRC, 2006, 2008). This section will analyse China’s security intentions between 1991 and 2010.

To start off with, a remark in the 1998 publication of China’s National Defense stated that the enlargement of military blocs and the strengthening of military alliances were counterproductive to fostering a peaceful post-Cold War order, should be interpreted as a careful criticism of NATO enlargement and the Japan-US Joint Declaration on Security in April 1996 (Government of the PRC, 1998). The 2000 edition of China’s National Defense, though it remained unnamed, criticised “certain big powers” for “hegemonism and power politics,” which China views it undermines world peace and security (Government of the PRC, 2000). It also criticised regional moves by the US for strengthening its military efforts and bilateral military alliances in the region, with specific reference to the development of the theatre missile defence (TMD) system, no doubt aimed at Japan (Ibid). The publication showed particular concern for the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act which may incorporate Taiwan into the US TMD system as, according to the publication, fails “to exclude Taiwan from scope of ‘the areas surrounding Japan’ (Ibid). Such actions have fuelled Taiwanese “arrogance” and “imperilled the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region,” according to China (Ibid).

While these views above exhibit concerns, perhaps bombastically, in contrast, China’s National Defense 2006 was restrained in its descriptions of the United States and allies in the region. It duly notes that the US is “accelerating its realignment of military deployment to enhance its military capability in the Asia-Pacific region,” and their continuing relationship with Taiwan (Government of the PRC, 2006). The publication also stated “a number of countries have stirred up a racket about a ‘China threat,’ and intensified their preventive strategy against China,” though it is hard to say who this is precisely aimed at (Ibid). The 2008 publication of China’s

National Defense repeats similar points about the US increasing its strategic attention in the region and relations with Taiwan (Government of the PRC, 2008).

The 2010 edition of China's National Defense was even more restrained and hardly mentioned the similar points in each previous publication of the white paper, except for noting the US's arms sales to Taiwan (Government of the PRC, 2010). Rather, the 2010 publication took a turn mentioning several areas both powers have cooperated on, such as space, non-proliferation, counter-terrorism and bilateral military and security exchanges (Ibid).

In summary, this brief overview can conclude that official Chinese security sources, while it expressed concerns, did not express any aggressive intentions vis-à-vis the US, either between the 1998-2000 nor between the 2006-2010 publications of its National Defense documents. China has not threatened the US or implied it will take military action against it. Thus, we cannot say its harbours aggressive intentions. If anything, China has been relatively consistent in its "peaceful" discourse over each publication consistently mentioning its "peaceful development," and been perceived as such by the US for the most part, which is to be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

China perceived as a "threat" by the US?

This section aims to analyse whether and how China has been framed in terms of a "threat" in US government documents and statements, examining the 1991, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2006, 2010 publications of *The National Security Strategy* issued by Presidents George H. W. Bush, William Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, respectively.

Cautiously Optimistic to "Monitoring" China

The White Houses' 1991 *National Security Strategy* document, which covers the first half of the year, referred to China in restrained terms. It noted China's "struggle to achieve stability" likely in reference to the Tiananmen Square Incident. It also noted the US remained stern in its engagement where "contact with China... [is] a central feature of our policy," stating "change is inevitable in China" (The White House, 1991, p. 9).

In line with President George H. W. Bush's publication, the 1994 edition of the *National Security Strategy* published under President Clinton noted the US and China's continued desire to engage with China in the economic and strategic realms (The White House, 1994, p. 24). A notable feature of this is how the US delinked China's Most Favoured Nation status from its human rights record to further this cause (Ibid). The NSS also notes its importance in integrating it into the global economy and participation in regional security mechanisms, as well as the importance of cooperating on non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (Ibid). The 1995 edition of the *National Security Strategy* repeated the same cooperative sentiments as in the 1994 NNS, but especially noted the importance of the signed agreements to control the exports of missile technology (The White House, 1995). The 1996 *National Security Strategy* went further by adopting a policy of comprehensive engagement to socialise China as a responsible member of the international community, stating the importance of China to stability and economic development in the region, promoting a positive image of it (The White House, 1996, p. 40). The 1997 edition of the *National Security Strategy* is particularly noteworthy for championing China's future economic role in its support for China to join the World Trade Organisation (The White House, 1997). The 1998 and 1999 editions continued to promote a positive view of China in its hopes for it to become a responsible member of the international community, especially in security terms (The White House, 1998, p. 46, 1999, p. 36). The 2000 edition of the *National Security Strategy* noted positive China's strategic and economic relations, especially with the establishment of Permanent Normal Trade Relations with China, echoing previous publications' sentiments of cautious optimism of China's rise (The White House, 2000).

However, when George W. Bush campaigned for the Republican presidential candidacy, he wanted to demote China from its status as a strategic partner as it was denoted during the Clinton presidency to a strategic competitor (Wang, 2003). After 9/11, China quickly became an important and active partner in the War on Terror as an area of bilateral cooperation (He, 2019; Matsuda, 2016; Park, 2017; Wang, 2003). This was also mentioned in the US's 2002 edition of the *National Security Strategy* published under President Bush. There were some concerns raised regarding China's pursuit of advanced military capabilities in the US's NSS in 2002 (The White House, 2002, pp. 27–28). However, the publication leaned toward the optimistic side about

China's rise with the US calling to bolster security and economic ties (The White House, 2002). The 2006 NSS published, in addition, also made some mention of China as not being transparent about its military expansion, yet it still leaned towards an optimistic view on China's "peaceful development," even "welcoming the emergence" of China in this way (The White House, 2006, p. 41). Nonetheless, we can observe the US did not view it as a threat nor did it securitise it in its official discourses.

Even after a rather large hike in military spending in 2007 by China (Reuters, 2007), the 2010 *National Security Strategy* published under the Obama administration only mentions the US will "monitor" their military modernisation program (The White House, 2010, p. 43). This is hardly an elevation of the status of China as a threat. The tendency has rather been to refrain labelling it as a threat from as we can see over the course of 20 years' worth of *National Security Strategy* publications. To reiterate, we can observe the US did not view it as a threat nor did it securitise it in its official discourses.

Therefore, it is safe to say that China was largely successful in employing its benign image as it was not seen as a threat by the US based on official *National Security Strategy* publications (Walt, 1987). As we can observe, military modernisation does not automatically trigger threat perceptions in this context. This is despite the fact the capability-threat conditions could have been construed as "satisfied" after reviewing China's steady military build-up, according to Walt's "threat" criteria. Instead, the US was reluctant to securitise China in its official discourses, perhaps as influenced by China's discursive power (Gustafsson, 2014). The tendency has been to be stick with its cautious optimism about China's rise, though there were some concerns voiced the *National Security Strategy* documents over the regime's domestic behaviour and military transparency. Nonetheless, we cannot say this meant the US viewed China as a "threat," it just framed China's military growth has to be "monitored." As a result, this structured the US's China policy and facilitated an accommodating stance towards it until 2010, which its material effects will be explored in chapter three.

Conclusion

This chapter served as a background on the problems with the capability-threat nexus in the case of US-China relations between 1991 and 2010. It explained how role of discourses on

perceptions are crucial to gauge whether the US saw China as a threat or not, even when there was perhaps an incentive to view it as a threat from its burgeoning capabilities and actions from the 1990s onwards. Rather, both powers continued to engage with one another and cooperate economically and strategically on a broad range of issues, from terrorism to supporting China to join the World Trade Organisation. This was evidenced by the “unity and coherence of a discourse... exhibited by the relations between different statements” (Wæver, 1999). As such, they were theoretically able to engage with each other strategically and economically because those discourses and perceptions set the possible parameters of great-power relations in this instance, which will be explored in chapter three. The most important finding is that threats do not necessarily have a materialist basis, but are delineated based on social factors instead if a state actor chooses to put it through the securitisation process, even though no threats were detected between 1991 and 2010. This chapter confirms that capabilities and threats do not coincide like realists believe, meaning there is agency in delineating threats.

Chapter 3

The United States' Facilitation of China's Rise (1979 – 2010): Bjorn Jerdén and Linus Hagström's Core Interest Framework

Introduction

The second chapter confirms that neither side in their official discursive representations in their national security documents harboured aggressive intentions or perceptions, despite China perhaps fitting objectively “threatening” criteria in its growing capabilities. In essence, China desired to “rise peacefully” and the US was cautiously optimistic about China’s rise. Assuming these discursive representations have a structuring effect on politics and on policy range, this chapter proposes that these discursive representations enabled a wider range of possible relations between rising powers and established powers (Holland, 2013; Schweller, 1999; Wæver, 1999). As a result, I qualify this by examining how the US handled China’s rise. To operationalise this, I use a “core interest” framework to gauge how much the US acted in accordance with China’s national interests as devised by Björn Jerdén and Linus Hagström (Jerden & Hagström, 2012).

The Diversity of Rising Power Discourse: Pessimistic and Optimistic Views of China's Rise

Scholars have been divided on how to understand China’s rise and its implications on global politics. They have treated a regional power shift as imminent since the 1990s with many diverging theoretical explanations discussing its implications from several points of view. Not everyone agrees on the most likely outcome, but all scholars agree that a shift in power is occurring (Betts, 1993; Friedberg, 1993; Roy, 1994).

Two common positions revolve around the common assumption that the US in its decline could withdraw some of its military presence from East Asia (Betts, 1993; Roy, 1994; White, 2012). If so, one overall position is pessimistic that this would destabilise the region as stability rides on US presence in the region to curb latent threats China’s rise may have (Ikenberry, 2004; Shambaugh, 2004). As a result, Japan may remilitarise and US retrenchment could produce arms races and security dilemmas (Berger, 2000; Christensen, 2006; Friedberg, 1993; Goh, 2008; Roy,

1994). However, even if the US stays in East Asia, this could also proffer a bleak outlook for the region. China may become discontent with the US-led order and might challenge the US-centric order and establish regional hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2006). Conversely, the US with its hub and spokes alliance system may seek to contain China. This view is on the severely pessimistic side of the spectrum in that the risk of violent conflict is predicted as likely, mirroring offensive realism and power transition theories claims (Chan, 2005; Layne, 2012; Mearsheimer, 2001; Tammen & Kugler, 2006). A less severe view in the pessimistic realm states that considering the complexities of the economic and security relations shared, the US and regional countries aligned with it might only be able “hedge” against it. That is, they can have cordial economic relations but militarily balance against China. Another view is that China, meanwhile, may attempt to softly reform the US order in its favour through less direct means (Acharya, 2014; Breslin, 2013; Chan, 2012; Pempel, 2010; Schweller & Pu, 2011). In this way, a more stable balance of power could be reached without precipitating extreme conflict but could upset the current order as we know it (R. S. Ross, 1999; Waltz, 2000; Zhao, 2007). All views, however, share a pessimistic outlook.

The more “positive” side argues that there would be a more peaceful transition where most countries in the region may bandwagon with the rising hegemon because of economic opportunities presented by China’s rise (Kang, 2007). Another positive position is that the US, may commit further to entrench its political, bilateral and multilateral relationships already established in the region. The US could continue to integrate China into the liberal order, locking each other interdependently where win-win cooperation may help alleviate the dangers often associated with changing distributions of power (Berger, 2000; Gurtov, 2013; Ikenberry, 2004; Tammen & Kugler, 2006). In this scenario, interdependence is seen to make the cost of conflict too high to risk conflict, even war, thereby limiting the likelihood of it. This precipitates a more optimistic view of emerging US-China relations.

As we can see, these discourses concerning China’s rise were relatively open in the academic literature. On the one hand, we can see a pessimistic outlook that predicts that China’s rise precipitates a negative outcome, although to varying degrees. Some severe views range from intense competition to likely conflict, even war. On the other hand, more relatively optimistic

views predicted that greater entrenchment politically and economically could stave off the potential for conflict and facilitate favourable relations, or at least keep competition bounded. As Jack Holland (2013) argues, this sets the confines of the possible range of great-power relations and overall grand strategy, which will be discussed in the next section.

Discourses Structuring Effects on Policy Range: Possible Actions vis-à-vis a Rising Power

As such, if discourses are mainly negative, then this sets the direction for bilateral relations. Conversely, if discourses are positive, then this sets a different trajectory for bilateral relations. As a result, Randall Schweller outlines six possible actions possible to deal with rising powers which are determined by the dominant discourses that structure social relations. From his study, he managed to deduce feasible great-power relations. They are balancing, preventive war, bandwagoning, binding, distancing/buck-passing, all grounded in vary strands of realism, and engagement which falls in both realist/liberal paradigms (Schweller, 1999, pp. 7–18). As mentioned, these discursive representations structure the possible policy range at the US's disposal to deal with China's rise (Holland, 2013). As we observed in chapter two, we confirmed that neither side harboured aggressive intentions toward each other confirming the US's more optimistic views of China's rise, thereby making it possible to engage it which, for the most part, accommodated China's rise.

Hence, this chapter's main aim is to qualify how this dominant engagement discourse structured the US's perceptions and actual policy to accommodate or act according to China's core interests. To gauge this, I use Bjorn Jerdén and Linus Hagström's core interest framework (Jerdén & Hagström, 2012). Eight indicators are used to operationalise China's grand strategy, which will be sketched out in the next section. For each indicator, the US's degree of accommodation are classified depending on the level of correspondence with China's interests. Policy of consistent conformity is classified as strong, and, conversely a "weak" mark if it runs counter to China's interests. Where results are ambiguous, a "moderate" classification seems most suitable to apply.

Background on the Origins of China's Grand Strategy: The Restoration of China as a Great Power

In the post-war period, China's historical memory has guided its foreign policy since it endured the "century of humiliation" from foreign powers. Since the end of World War II and establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China's core aim is to restore its historical status as a great power that stems back from its dynastic eras. In IR parlance, this core aim does not differ to great power status (Xuetong, 2006). This has remained a central tenet since the Communists won the civil war in 1949, though the means to achieve this have evolved. Previously, lying in its communist philosophy, the Chinese Communist Party valued self-reliance and shut itself off from the outside world as part of its core strategy (Cai, 2022). Post-Mao, China changed tact by normalising relations with the West when relations with the Soviet Union soured to their lowest point from border disputes (Cai, 2022). As a result, China sided with the West to gain access to Western capital, technology and leadership in Western-led international institutions needed to integrate into the liberal order, in order to achieve internal development and modernisation goals, and ultimately security (Cai, 2022), putting it on a path to securing modern day great-power status (Waltz, 1993).

In saying that, China's grand strategy has not been static. Certain elements, especially since the 1990s onward, have been modified over time, but the crux of China's grand strategy has remained since the normalisation of formal ties in 1979 (Cai, 2022). Nor has the US's actual policy been totally uniform to China's core interests. In saying that, China's rise has proceeded relatively uninterrupted without provoking any major conflicts after rapprochement with the West, even after declarations of great power potential (RAND Corporation, 2014).

So, what was China's grand strategy? As Jerdén and Hagström (2012) devised, first, China sought to secure the unity of China under Communist Party rule. Second, China aspired to develop its economy through integration in the global economic system, a necessary component to achieve military ambitions (Ibid). Third, China looked for acceptance of its status as a peacefully rising power, in line with its aspiration to consolidate its desire to be a leading regional power (Jerden & Hagström, 2012; Mearsheimer, 2001). Thus, this grand strategy can be divided into three overarching goals, each of which reflect different aspects of China's core interests (Jerden & Hagström, 2012):

1. Secure the unity of China under Communist Party rule.
2. Develop the economy through integration in the global economic system.
3. Rise “peacefully” to regional power status.

For the sake of analytical clarity, these three aspects span social, economic and military realms. The first and second indicator contain three sub-indicators and the third indicator contains two sub-indicators. These indicators are presented in Table 1 below to be discussed in the following sub-sections. Then, the US's degree of accommodation will be evaluated to the degree of its conformity with China's core interest iterated in the previous section ranging from “weak” for low conformity, “moderate” for some conformity or “strong” that is congruent to China's core interests. These indicators in the next section structure the crux of this analysis.

Table 1. Indicators and Subgoals of China's Grand Strategy

<p><i>1. Secure the unity of China under Communist Party rule:</i></p> <p>Territorial integrity</p> <p>National sovereignty</p> <p>Regime legitimacy</p>
<p><i>2. Develop the economy through integration in the global economic system:</i></p> <p>Trade</p> <p>Foreign direct investment</p> <p>Foreign aid</p>
<p><i>3. Rise “peacefully” to regional power status:</i></p> <p>Military modernisation and build-up</p> <p>Regional security cooperation</p>

China's Core Strategy and the United States' Responses

Secure the Unity of China under Communist Party Rule

This subgoal of securing the unity of China is the first prong of China's grand strategy. It overlaps to a large extent with security interests as defined in the realist purview as its contents

include territorial integrity, national sovereign and regime legitimacy. To facilitate these core tenets, China insists that outside powers should not interfere in its domestic affairs and respect its national sovereignty. Moreover, it has done so in the face of harsh criticism by the West when some of China's actions are in contravention to what the West sees as universal human rights, as enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Hence, these non-negotiables provide a gateway to gauge China interests, and act as a litmus test for China to get established powers to act in accordance with this indicator (Chen, 1996).

Operationalising this subgoal, this section will look at Beijing's demands for: (1) respect of its territorial claims, mostly with respect to its "One China" policy regarding the status of Taiwan; (2) the isolation of anti-China forces, notably the Dalai Lama, leader of the India-based Tibetan government in exile and its leader, Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama; and (3) support for one-party rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Jerden & Hagström, 2012). The third one has manifested itself in demands for non-interference even in the face of harsh condemnation by the West, such as the Tiananmen Square massacre against political protesters in 1989, as a means to ensure its monopoly of internal political power over China (Ibid). These demands are all grounded in its territorial interests, hence why they will serve as the case studies for this indicator.

Territorial Integrity

China affirming its territorial claims over offshore islands from the outset of the reform and opening period is the first sub-indicator of China's grand strategy to secure internal political unity. However, apart from a few episodes of military escalation that were eventually de-escalated, China has generally shelved these issues with interested parties in order to maintain regional stability (Fravel, 2008). In addition, China has also grappled with internal territorial affairs, namely the status of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan (Ibid). The most crucial of these issues is the ongoing dispute over Taiwan, stemming as far back as the Chinese Civil War (1927-1949).

As a result, Taiwan has been a key driver of Chinese foreign policy since the CCP took power in 1949. China's official position is that the "renegade province" needs to be reunified with the mainland. The status of Taiwan, thus, has been described as "the most important issue

for China's foreign and security policy" (Tsang, 2008, p. 52). China in its negotiations over its normalisation of diplomatic ties with the world demanded that Taiwan be recognised as part of "One-China." Overall, in this regard, China has preferred other governments to: (1) accept the "One-China" policy; (2) have no (formal or de facto) diplomatic relations with Taiwan; (3) refrain from granting visas to incumbent Taiwanese political leaders; (4) prevent Taiwan from joining international organisations where state-hood is deemed a prerequisite for joining them; (5) and abstain from selling weapons to Taiwan (Cai, 2022).

The United States' Taiwan policy carries particular significance for China. The US has clearly complied with China's basic framework regarding the Taiwan issue. In the Joint Communiqué that was signed when Sino-American relations were normalised in 1972, the US recognised Taiwan as "part of China" (*U.S.-China Joint Communiqués: 1972, 1979, 1982*). Moreover, in the 1979 Joint Communiqué, the US recognised the government of the PRC as the "sole legal government of China" and affirmed there is but "One-China" which Taiwan is part of. In the third Joint Communiqué signed in 1982, the US reaffirmed its respect for China's "sovereignty and territorial integrity and non-interference in each other's internal affairs" as the "fundamental guiding principles guiding" bi-lateral relations (Ibid). Here we can see the US strongly corresponds with China's territorial interests.

Admittedly, while the U.S. maintains no formal diplomatic ties, it does have "unofficial relations" with Taiwan, as recognised in the Joint Communiqué and Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 (Carter, 1979). As per this relationship, the US maintains defence and other relations through selling arms and has done so to Taiwan since the normalisation of relations in 1979 since President Jimmy Carter signed the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 (Kan, 2014). However, the US pledged that the US "does not seek to carry out a long-term policy of arms sales to Taiwan, that its arms sales to Taiwan will not exceed, either in qualitative or in quantitative terms, the level of those supplied in recent years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China, and that it intends to reduce gradually its sales of arms to Taiwan" (Watson Institute for International Studies, n.d.). In saying that, arm sales rates have been fairly consistent without an end date to these sales the US pledged (Ibid). Nevertheless, the US has no formal diplomatic ties and still recognises the One-China policy, thereby respecting the PRC's position in relation to Taiwan and ultimately the One-China policy (Kimball, 2012).

From Beijing's perspective, however, some parts of the US's Taiwan policy still remain unsatisfactory. First, the two joint declarations between Japan and the US in 1996 and 2005 have conflicted with China's perception of cross-strait affairs as a solely domestic affair (Gill, 2007). Second, the US has supported Taiwan's accession to international organisations (IOs), such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), which rests on its territorial and legal status in international law. Nevertheless, the US has compromised and respected China's One-China policy in that Taiwan could not fully join IOs because it does not have any legal claims to statehood and instead fought for it to be granted "observer status" in 2009 to attend the World Health Assembly summit (WHA) (Herington & Lee, 2014). Third, incumbent leaders of Taiwan have also been granted visas to visit the United States such as Lee Teng-hui when he visited his former alma mater in 1995, Cornell University, though it was in the capacity of private citizen as opposed to as a Taiwanese leader, still, much to China's dismay. Nonetheless, we can see compromises in the US's dealings with an array of China's territorial interests.

In sum, the US's record in dealing with China's territorial integrity must be classified as moderate, because of the maintenance of unofficial ties, arms sales to Taiwan, supporting Taiwan's observer status to IOs in contravention to China's wishes, and allowing Taiwanese leaders to visit the US, albeit in a private capacity. In saying that, from China's perspective, while the US has violated issues intertwined with its perceived territorial integrity, it has maintained the One-China policy where it counts most and compromised where necessary in alignment with China's territorial and associated interests, as mentioned supporting Taiwan's efforts to join IOs and allowing Taiwanese leaders to visit the US only in a private capacity.

National Sovereignty

Secondly, China's national sovereignty is the second sub-indicator, part of its core strategy of securing unity. China is a multi-ethnic state harbouring numerous ethnic minorities. How to suppress attempts to achieve independence or greater autonomy for those regions China presides over but inhabited by such minorities remains a sore point for them.

This is especially pertinent in the case of Tibet. The way in which foreign countries deal with the Tibetan spiritual leader and head of the "Tibetan government in exile," the Dalai Lama, will serve as this section's case study making it an important illustration of the national

sovereignty indicator. To be clear, they are not the only ethnic minority who seek greater autonomy from China's claims to national sovereignty over the Tibetan region, but they are arguably the most vocal out of the others. The Tibetan uprising in 1959, for example, is still the most serious attempt at independence from China's claim to national sovereignty to date (Fravel, 2008). As a result, in China's international relations, the Dalai Lama has assumed a symbolic meaning of secession from the mainland unmatched by any other issue intertwined with sovereignty issues.

Since the Chinese government considers the Dalai Lama's meetings with foreign leaders as part of separatist activities, it views meeting with the Tibetan leader as interference in its national sovereignty claims or internal affairs (Carlson, 2004). China has often reiterated this position and stated that meeting him can have serious repercussions for respective relations with China (Fuchs & Klann, 2010). Thus, countries refraining from meeting him could be seen as a tacit acknowledgement of China's national sovereignty claims.

Although, the United States has gone against Beijing's interests on this too. It has hosted the Dalai Lama and granted him many visas and meetings with US leaders. Furthermore, in 2002, the US passed the "Tibetan Policy Act of 2002" which is intended to "support the aspirations of the Tibetan people to safeguard their distinct identity," including by supporting "projects designed ... to raise the standard of living for the Tibetan people and assist Tibetans to become self-sufficient" (Nair & Sharma, 2017; United States Congress, 2001). While the United States has maintained relations with Tibet, like Taiwan, it has supported the Chinese nor disputed the position that Tibet is under Chinese sovereignty (Nair & Sharma, 2017).

Therefore, the US's actions correspondence with Beijing's interests has to be classified as moderate.

Regime Legitimacy

Thirdly, the legitimacy of CCP rule is the third sub-indicator paramount to securing unity internally. The CCP often stifles dissent as necessary to maintain regime stability internally. Their means of doing this is often considered atrocious by official standards espoused by the West. The event that challenged the West's resolve on human rights and respecting the CCP's

regime legitimacy was when the CCP cracked down on peaceful pro-democratic protesters at Beijing's Tiananmen Square in June 1989 through violent means resulting in many deaths and horrific scenes broadcast across international media stations. Here, the US deviated from China's grand strategy.

Until 1989, the West justified its engagement policy with China on the assumption that economic liberalisation would eventually lead to political liberalisation towards a liberal democratic society. In response to such violence, the West sanctioned China diplomatically and economically, acting against China's interests. As a result, foreign investment and trade in China declined sharply. However, by 1991, many of the 1989 sanctions imposed on the CCP by President George H. W. Bush's administration ended relatively quickly since being enacted (Mann, 1991). After that, economic relations quickly picked up again and the regime was not called into question too harshly, valuing the relationship perhaps over human rights.

In sum, the US's correspondence on this core interest is arguably moderate, though it was relatively quick to lift the sanctions in 1991 in favour of better relations. China's handling of the Tiananmen Square massacre and the US response is illustrative of this. Nevertheless, while the US was hopeful for political liberalisation in China, it has always recognised the CCP as the sole legitimate government and never called for the overthrow of the regime or anything drastic like that. In turn, we can say the US respects the CCP's rule. It does, however, voice concerns and tries to shape the CCP on human rights matters where necessary through economic instruments which could be viewed as undermining regime legitimacy, hence the moderate classification.

Develop the Economy through Integration in the Global Economic System

China developing its economy by integrating itself into the global economic system is the second prong of achieving its national goals. Up until Deng Xiaoping opened China's economy, its foreign economic relations had been very modest (Hart, 2008; M. Ross, 1994). According to Legro (2005), the shock of the "Cultural Revolution" (1966-1976) and the death of Mao led to the collapse of the Mao consensus and his vision of modernisation, which was replaced by a new vision, namely the reform and opening strategy.

In this section, I look at crucial factors of Deng Xiaoping's vision of economic development. China needed access to Western capital, technology and markets as well as access to international institutions to reap the benefits of the Western led economic order, most notably by becoming part of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). It has also attracted FDI and foreign aid to develop its infrastructure and industrial base, key to modernising the domestic economy.

Trade

Firstly, trade is the first sub-indicator, and so to become part of the global economy, China in the late 1970s broke with its previous Mao consensus opening itself to trade, specifically expanding exports to gain foreign capital. Initially, trade liberalisation in the late 1970s and early 1980s failed to bring the desired trade volumes China wished to see. In the 1990s, however, volumes of foreign trade increased exponentially and continued along this trajectory in the 2000s as China replicated the export-led growth strategy headed first by Japan and other East Asian economies in the region in earlier decades (Goldstein, 2005; Johnson, 1982; Pearson, 2001).

In 1986, China began its campaign to gain full membership in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and it continued in its efforts to gain access to the WTO which replaced the GATT (Pearson, 2001). A deal between China and the US was finally struck in 1999 paving way for China to join the WTO in 2001. China's accession to the WTO was symbolic and signified "China's coming of age as a participant in the global economic community," especially when it had US backing (Naughton, 2007, p. 377). Since then, China's trade volumes have grown significantly. Between 2000 and 2008, exports increased by 574 percent and imports by 503 percent, although reducing in 2009 due to the global financial crisis (International Monetary Fund, 2007). As a result, China has now become the US's major trading partner, just after Canada, and vice versa (US Census Bureau Foreign Trade Division, 2011)

In sum, China has become one the US's top trading partners. As part of this, the US supported China's bid to join the trading system through direct trading with them at the outset of normalisation, eventually to be integrated into trade-based institutions like the WTO (World Trade Organisation, 2021). Thus, there is solid evidence that the US's efforts correspond strongly with China's interest in joining the global trading system.

Foreign Direct Investment

Second, foreign direct investment is the second sub-indicator. It was important for China to develop and become part of the global economy. Although during Mao Zedong's leadership, foreign investment was commonly viewed as a tool for exposing China to foreign influence, after the introduction of the reform and opening policy reform in 1979, China opened up its economy to FDI as it was important in the initial stages of economic modernisation (M. Ross, 1994). The goal behind this reform to open the economy to FDI was two-fold: (1) to increase foreign currency earnings from the establishment of export oriented industries (Johnson, 1982); and (2) to introduce much needed advanced technology into the country. As a result, we saw FDI begin to pour into China, albeit in quite small amounts. After the crackdown of dissent after the Tiananmen Square massacre, FDI decreased in response to human rights violations. However, the volume of FDI started to increase after Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in 1992, which is said to have saved the reform period according to his daughter (South China Morning Post, 2014; Xiaoping, 1994). As a consequence, FDI volumes grew steadily from the early 1990s until 1995 all to pick up and wane again in the early 2000s, then to smoothly pick up again. All up, this has culminated into a cumulative amount of FDI approximately totaling 10 billion in 2010, placing the US as a major source of China's FDI (Rhodium Group, 2016; Statista, 2021).

In sum, US FDI has been an important source of foreign investment in China since the reform and opening up period to achieve its internal development goals and becoming part of the global economic system. Thus, we can conclude that this coincides with Beijing's interests to a strong extent.

Foreign Aid

Thirdly, foreign aid is the third sub-indicator for China to achieve its internal development goals and modernising its economy. In 1979, China opened up to foreign aid after the reform and opening up period. Just as with the economic liberalisation and the acceptance of FDI, the decision to accept aid also became part of China's national development goals (M. Ross, 1994). By and large, however, China has received a small amount of aid when compared to China's total GDP (Jin, 2007). Nonetheless, it has been a large recipient of foreign aid to build much needed infrastructure, with the US being a fairly important source of Official Development Assistance (ODA) provider with other providers like Japan, Germany and France (Deng, 1997;

Lum, 2014; Shang-Jin Wei, 1996). Between 2001 and 2010, the US allocated approximately \$315 million for the Department of State's foreign operations or aid programs in China (Lum, 2014, p. 13). At the same time, most of the aid the US government has provided to China has generally been tied to the promotion of human rights, democracy and rule of law, or to strategic interests in regard to Tibet (Lum, 2014). Private entities over the years 1988 to 2010 have also contributed to aiding China, although in line with the similar goals of the US government (Lum, 2014). After 2012, much of these programs were phased out (Lum, 2014)

Thus, the US's degree of correspondence with China's development goals as a provider of foreign aid can be classified as strong. The intentions may be in contravention to Beijing's core interests but it has been an important provider of foreign aid through its aid programs, such as environmental protection and health promotion to fight diseases, overall totalling \$390 million between 2001 and 2014, conducive to China's development goals (Lum, 2014). In comparison to trade and FDI, foreign aid from the US has played a smaller role in China's integration into the global economy, but at the same time, it has contributed significantly to China achieving its internal development goals.

Nonetheless, the US has conformed strongly with facilitating this aspect of China's grand strategy to becoming a major economy, which is part and parcel of China achieving regional power status militarily. This will be discussed in the next section.

Rise "Peacefully" to Regional Power Status

China rising peacefully is the third prong of its overall grand strategy. During the initial three decades of its existence, China has relied on a strategy of deterrence. It has fought wars in South Korea in 1950-1953, against India in 1962, the Soviet Union in 1969 and Vietnam in 1979 resorting to a relatively high degree of violence in all of these conflicts (Deng, 2006; A. Johnston, 2004). It moreover has interfered in many Southeast Asian states' internal affairs through arming insurgent groups aligned with its interests or ideology (Shambaugh, 2004)

Considering that, China's neighbours could have regarded it as a rising threat as opposed to a relatively benign rising power. To alleviate these fears in the region, Deng Xiaoping emphasised a policy of not seeking international leadership or regional hegemony from the

outset of opening up to the world (Watson Institute for International Studies, n.d.; Xiaoping, 1994). As the “China threat” theory discourse gained traction, China engaged proactively to counter these fears (Deng, 2006). Operationalising this subgoal, China has sought to alleviate potential anxieties of its steadily growing military budget to consolidate its desire to rise peacefully as a regional power, as it is considered that growing economic might translates into greater military ambitions (Layne, 1993; Waltz, 1993, 2000). An advisor to CCP leadership, Zheng Bijian, thus, coined the phrase “peaceful rise” to promote an image of China as a benign and responsible great power with no intention to upset the international distribution of power (Zheng, 2005). Over time, this official parlance modified into “peaceful development” and eventually a “harmonious world” in continuation of this supposed benign view, all of which has been echoed in US NSS documents, structuring the US’s views on the contents of China’s rise (Fan, 2006; The State Council - The People’s Republic of China, 2011). In saying that, China as part of its “peaceful rise” does not necessarily connote an embrace of pacifism or anything like that because China has not excluded using force to defend their core interests (Brown et al., 2018; Hu, 2005). The record, however, shows China seldom resorts to escalatory measures since the Vietnam border dispute in 1979 (RAND Corporation, 2014). For the most part, China has been cautious to not get embroiled in conflict.

Thus, China has been relatively successful employing this benign image as the US has accepted China’s self-portrayal not viewing it as a threat, as found in chapter two, despite what is generally connoted with rising power status – greater military ambitions. Thus, we can say that the US has acted according to China’s interests to a strong degree by accepting and perceiving its peacefully rising power image. This is despite China’s military modernisation efforts and its increase in its capabilities, which could be construed as “threatening,” which is discussed in the next indicator.

Military Modernisation and Build-Up

While it portrayed itself as peacefully rising, China has indeed expanded its military capabilities and aimed to quell fears concerning it, which is the first sub-indicator of its peaceful rise. As was examined in detail in chapter two, while in power, Deng Xiaoping overhauled the military, which involved increased incremental spending as a proportion of GDP and technical modernisation at least until 2007 when spending increased exponentially (Fisher, 2008). The

driving force behind this, David Shambaugh claims, is for China to develop its military capabilities “commensurate with its status as a major power” (Shambaugh, 2004, p. 85).

Of course, China’s figures are not as transparent as they could be but it is clear they have steadily risen since Deng Xiaoping’s drive to modernise the military. Despite this, the US has not particularly reacted how one might expect a state to against a rising power – by balancing, or constraining the rising power, nor viewed its military modernisation and increasing military expenditure as especially threatening. This is evident by the US expressing its cautious optimism about China’s rise in NSS documents, as discussed in detail in chapter two. In terms of its aggregate behaviours in response to China’s military escalations, while the US did dispatch two carriers to the Taiwan Strait during the missile tests between 1995 and 1996, tensions were de-escalated and favourable relations continued thereon. When George W. Bush campaigned for the Republican presidential candidacy, though he wanted to demote China from its status as a strategic partner to a strategic competitor (Wang, 2003), after 9/11, China quickly became an important and active partner in the War on Terror as an area of cooperation for the US (He, 2019; Matsuda, 2016; Park, 2017; Wang, 2003). This was also evident in the US’s official publications calling to bolster security and economic ties (The White House, 2002). The 2006 NSS published, in addition, also made some mention of China as not being transparent about its military expansion, yet it still leaned towards an optimistic view on China’s “peaceful development,” even “welcoming the emergence” of China in this way (The White House, 2006, p. 41). Nonetheless, it was not viewed as a threat nor was it securitised in the official security discourses.

Even after a rather large hike in military spending in 2007 by China (Reuters, 2007), the 2010 NSS published under the Obama administration only mentions that the US will “monitor” their military modernisation program, which is hardly an elevation of threat status (The White House, 2010, p. 43). Therefore, it is safe to say that China was largely successful in employing its benign image as it was not seen as a threat by the US based on official NSS publications (Walt, 1987).

Altogether, while the US, too, steadily increased its spending and capabilities since the end of the Cold War, we can see the US has in aggregate not responded how it would be

expected to according to balance of power theory (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1993). Rather, it has focused on the War on Terror as its main security threat during the 2000s all the while when China is growing steadily. Hence, its correspondence with China's interests has been strong, in the sense it has not reacted as expected toward a rising power – by balancing or constraining China, nor viewing it as a security threat.

Regional Security Cooperation

China has also participated in regional security architecture, playing a greater role in regional and global security and stability, which is the second sub-indicator of its peaceful rise. During the second half of the 1990s, China shifted from a critical to a more supportive view of institutionalised regional security cooperation in the Asian region. In 1994, China joined the security dialogue ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and in 2001 it co-founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (ASEAN, 1993; United Nations, 2001). In addition, Beijing started to engage actively in official military exchanges and bilateral security dialogues (Gill, 2007; Shambaugh, 2004; Wu, 2009). While the focus of the SCO has been to facilitate security cooperation with Russia and Central Asian states, spanning China's shared land mass, the Six-Party Talks (SPT) on North Korea's nuclear program are a prime example China's participation in regional and global security and conflict alleviation in Northeast Asia (Davenport, 2022; Wu, 2009), will serve as the prime example in this section to illustrate the accommodation of China in Western security based institutions.

Besides the Taiwan Strait, the nuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula also serves as an acute security issue in China's backyard. Other powers in the region, the United States, Russia, South Korea and Japan all desire denuclearisation (Zhao, 2006). To maintain a beneficial regional environment beneficial to its economic development, China, too, has an inherent interest to stabilise regional security (Ibid). As a result, Beijing joined the SPT, formed in 2003, with other powers to work towards this goal and create a favourable regional environment conducive to its strategic goals. As part of the SPT, Beijing has chaired the forum since joining (Davenport, 2022), allowing it to act as a responsible great power, imparting this status as an important actor in global affairs (Zoellick, 2005).

In sum, the US's interest in denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula converged with China's interest to work cooperatively to reduce the threat of North Korea's nuclear program to regional stability. On this pressing issue, we can say that the US's degree of correspondence with Beijing's interests has been strong.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that on the whole there is a relatively consistent pattern of the US acting according to its discursive representations of China traced in chapter two. In other words, the US has respected China's core interests and acted accordingly through the period of inquiry, which the results are summed up in table two below. Perfect correspondence would have suggested a bandwagoning strategy, but in securing unity of China under CCP rule, the US in each indicator has moderately acted in China's interests. Regarding the other indicators, developing the economy and rising peacefully to regional power status, the US has complied strongly with China's core interests. As a result, it tentatively follows that the US has facilitated the implementation of China's grand strategy which brought about the rise of China, at least on this set of specific issues explored. More aspects as part of this grand strategy and the US's degree of correspondence on more exhaustive issues would have to be explored to definitively state this. Nonetheless, in the meanwhile, we can say that US has not pursued a policy of balancing or containment of China but rather one of engagement leading to accommodation.

Table 2 – United States' Level of Conformity with China's Core Interests/Grand Strategy

Indicators of China's Grand Strategy	The United States' Degree of Conformity
<i>Secure the unity of China under Communist Party rule:</i> Territorial integrity National sovereignty Regime legitimacy	Moderate Moderate Moderate
<i>Develop the economy through integration in the global economic system:</i> Trade	

Foreign direct investment	Strong
Foreign aid	Strong
	Strong
<i>Rise “peacefully” to regional power status:</i>	
Military modernisation and build-up	Strong
Regional security cooperation	Strong

A realist would perhaps rebut that all that matters is how the United States handles the high politics of security and that the moderate results in response to China’s internal unity, the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis and Korean Peninsula are portrayed as sufficient evidence of US containment of China, or diverging from China’s core interests. Furthermore, while realists portray security narrowly in military terms expressed above, realists are also concerned about the security of economics. As advanced in realist theory that the fundamental goal of states in any relationship is to prevent others from achieving advances in their relative capabilities. This is based in the realist assumption that states care about relative gains, gains for one actor more than the other, over absolute ones, or gains for everybody. As Kenneth Waltz writes, “even the prospect of large absolute gains for both parties does not elicit their cooperation so long as each fears how the other uses its increased capabilities” (Waltz, 1979, p. 105).

While these claims may have merit, if states are assumed to translate economic capability into military might, to argue that the US contained while engaging China economically contradicts core assumptions of realism. In contrast, this chapter has confirmed the US’s enthusiasm to integrate China into the international economic system and positive views on its rising status, two key indicators of China’s grand strategy which were in strong correspondence with China’s core strategic interests. If anything, the US continued in its positive outlook on relations with China, even when it had ample reason to view its increasing capabilities and actions like in the Taiwan Strait Crisis as threatening as early as the 1990s (Jerdén, 2014a, 2014b). While this chapter found the US only moderately corresponded with all three sub-indicators of internal unity, the US has most importantly respected the One-China policy. On the whole, I find that the US has strongly accommodated China to a significant degree, or at least allowed it to rise economically and military, contrary to what one would expect the established great power to do when there is a prospective rising power. Thus, the results suggest that

perceptions are crucial to gauge foreign policy behaviour in this case. It also suggests China was quite effective in employing these peaceful discourses to influence the US (Gustafsson, 2014), though how it did this in practice this has to be explored further.

This chapter's finding is especially important as it suggests that the structuring effects of discourses are extremely important in defining great-power relations, especially threat perceptions and assessments, and the feasible policy range available to established great powers and rising ones, and likely behaviours from them (Holland, 2013). Hence, the US was predisposed to engage with China thereby accommodating its core interests because it did not perceive China as a threat during the period of inquiry in this study.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

This thesis started in chapter one by problematising the capability-threat nexus that is often espoused as the basis of threats in international relations. So I set out to explore this in US-China relations between 1979 and 2010, as it displays an interesting research puzzle in international relations. This is because though China could have been construed to have satisfied the capability-threat nexus from its steady economic growth and commensurate military spending, the US did not perceive China as a threat. This inspired the two research questions that underlie that crux of this thesis:

1. Why wasn't China viewed as a threat when it fulfilled great-power potential?
2. How this was theoretically possible to engage with China, a rising power which often precludes war at one extreme to strategic competition at the less severe pole? More specifically, I ask how the US acted in accordance with its grand strategy?

In chapter two, I gave a background on the role of perceptions and how a shared perception of the Soviet Union as the common enemy between China and the US made sense to form a security coalition based on the aggressive intentions they perceived. However, once the Soviet Union dissolved and the Cold War was declared over in 1991, at least officially, cooperation persisted between the United States and China. Hence, using Walt's notion of a threat, that is, aggregate power and aggressive intentions, I place specific focus on the isolated aspect of aggressive intentions, or lack thereof, in Walt's theory to explain the US's continued engagement policy with China in the post-Cold War period until 2010, the end of the period of inquiry. This framework found that despite China's aggregate power growing, no aggressive intentions were aimed at the US, nor did the US perceive China's growing capabilities as threatening. Not only that, securitisation theory, seeing security as a discursive process by relevant agents, found there were no securitising moves that would warrant emergency procedures outside of the confines of normal political procedure in the US official *National Security Strategy* documents, and vice versa in *China's National Defense* publications. In other

words, China consistently expressed its aspiration to rise peacefully and the US was optimistic about China's rise until 2010 after Obama declaring China was in need of "monitoring."

Considering this was the dominant discourse, it formed the parameter of the possible great-power relations between the US and China, and propensity for action otherwise not possible had China been depicted as threatening (Holland, 2013). This was the aim of chapter three, to show the material effects of these discourses on threat perceptions or lack thereof which facilitated an engagement policy with China. Hence, I ask and qualified this by exploring how the US acted in accordance to China's grand strategy, based on a core interest framework devised by three broad indicators, (1) securing the unity of the Communist Party, (2) economic development, and (3) rising peacefully, with two sets of three sub-indicators and one set of two sub-indicators respectively to gauge this. The results summarised in chapter 3 found that the US acted moderately in accordance with China's internal unity and strongly in accordance with economic development and China's peaceful rise, mostly accommodating China's rise, contrary to realist expectations. This may seem anomalous from a realist perspective, but these findings suggest that threats are assessed based on social factors, or perceptions and intentions, and constructed through a discursive process, which can be a blessing and a curse. But it demonstrates that there is some agency in threat delineation and is a process conducted by agents, not necessarily some amorphous structure that precludes war (Jervis, 1976; Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979; Wendt, 1992, 1999). It is possible to have different sets of great-power relations even when material conditions may suggest the propensity for conflict, an important implication for the possibility of de-securitisation.

Though this is outside the scope of the thesis, current US-China relations are becoming more narrowly defined in terms of threat (Liff & Ikenberry, 2014), so studying how to de-securitise it is crucial to limit the extremities of the strategic competition currently emerging. This thesis is just the springboard for further research in contemporary US-China relations post-2010. Exploring the role of narratives concerning US-China relations and how to moderate the zero-sum views could be a starting point towards moving back to de-securitisation so as to avoid negative depictions and ultimately conflict (Gries & Jing, 2019; Liff & Ikenberry, 2014). If conflict or even the "thinkability" of it can be avoided when material conditions were perhaps

fertile for conflict as early as the 1990s until 2010, perhaps it is possible to define and redefine great-power relations and work towards an avoidable war. Great academic capital to develop a theory of de-securitisation will be necessary to successfully achieve this great feat, however, for it is worth a try.

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