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**Embedded Impasse in US perspectives on China:  
Intellectual Incapacity of Neoliberalism and Neorealism to  
See Beyond the China Threat**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper analyzes the dominant international relations (IR) discourses of neorealism and neoliberalism in the US on China's rise from a poststructural perspective. Besides, it also discusses what, in relationship to these US discourses, Chinese IR discourses can do in order to be critical and reimagine rather than reproduce the current hegemonic IR system.

This work argues that both neorealism and neoliberalism perceive China as a threat because they assume that China seeks to reconstruct the US-constructed IR system. In other words, they believe that China wants to either overthrow the US and become the new hegemon as a fulfillment of the deterministic Thucydides Trap (neorealism) or replace US-established institutions that act in the US interest by Chinese ones that act in Chinese interests (neoliberalism). These discourses are so ingrained in the worldview of mainstream China observers and policy makers in the US that it has created an intellectual incapacity to see beyond the China threat.

Through adopting a poststructural perspective, this paper deconstructs the theories of neorealism and neoliberalism and, through doing so, creates the discursive space that might enable one to see alternatives beyond the China threat. However, it also points out that since discourses essentially determine what is legitimate to say about the world, it is very difficult to step out of a certain discursive framework. Chinese IR can only be critical if it does go beyond the mainstream discourses, and, rather than reproduces western hegemonic IR, reimagines it.

**Key Words: China Threat, Poststructuralism, US Foreign Policy**

## **1 Introduction**

China's seemingly unwavering rise after Deng Xiaoping initiated economic reforms in 1978 has caused observers all over the globe to question what the exact implications of this will be for the world, in general, and China's neighbors, in

particular. The field of International Relations (IR) is no exception. This essay is part of a larger project analyzing the question, “is China reimagining or reproducing IR?” from both US and Chinese perspectives. This particular article examines the consequences of using mainstream IR theories to assess China’s rise.

This issue is important because US foreign policy mainly draws from the two dominant IR theories, neorealism and neoliberalism (Kissinger 1994). Neorealist theorists perceive China as a “threat” because they believe in the deterministic destiny of the Thucydides trap, which argues that a rising power will always challenge a ruling power and that this will eventually escalate toward war (Roy 1996; Allison 2017). Therefore, neorealists seek to contain or balance China and its influence in the world (Mearsheimer 2001, 2010; Kaplan 2011; Walt 2017).

Neoliberals, on the other hand, hope to draw in and convert China into the neoliberal worldview (Nye 2002; Diamond 1998; Nathan 1998). They seek to do so by constraining or influencing China’s behavior through institutionalizing China into neoliberal organizations such as the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank. The hope of this approach is that China in the end will democratize and become neoliberal, which would be in the US interest.

This essay adopts a poststructural approach because of its critical stance, the tools it provides to ‘denaturalize’ the assumptions used by neorealism and neoliberalism, and the discursive space this will provide to go beyond these two theories. In the words of Michel Foucault (1988: 155), “[p]racticizing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult”.

In the field of IR, the legitimacy and universal applicability of neorealism and neoliberalism and the notions they advocate are often taken for granted. What is frequently forgotten though, is that the discipline of IR is a distinctively American Social Science (Hoffman 1977). The result is that mainstream IR theories are predominantly based on assumptions originating from the American context. Hence, assessing China’s rise by means of theories premised upon such context-specific assumptions is problematic.

The paper is built up as follows. The first section introduces the paper’s poststructural methodology and explains how this will be used to deconstruct US dominant discourses. Section two not only explains the mainstream IR theories neorealism and neoliberalism, it also seeks to criticize them and ‘denaturalize’ their assumptions. The third section discusses critically the implications of using

neorealism and neoliberalism and considers how Chinese IR could learn from these theories. Finally, the last section provides the conclusion.

## **2 Poststructuralism as a Critical Attitude of Everything**

### *Poststructuralism and IR*

The discipline of IR portrays the world in a certain way. The dominant way of understanding the world has been established by the IR theories neorealism and neoliberalism. Although the study of IR “is thought to require the suspension of values, interests and power relations in the pursuit of *objective knowledge*,” (Devetak 2009: 184; emphasis by author) poststructuralism argues that this is an ideal far from reality. Hence, with Foucault in the lead and heeding Kant’s (1970: 115) warning that “the possession of power inevitably corrupts the free judgment of reason,” they problematize this view of IR (Devetak 2009).

### *Representation and discourses*

According to poststructuralism no “objective” reality exists, neither in the natural nor social sciences, because all understandings of reality by definition are mere *representations* of reality. As such, when attempting to define a perceived object “objectively,” a person is always inhibited by the limitations his or her reality imposes upon them. Not only language is a representation, but also for example signs, symbols, pictures, and movies. These representations “frame” (material) things or events in a certain way that reflects the observer’s perception of reality. Hence, “reality” differs from person to person, making generalizations often problematic. An example of this is poststructuralism’s views on the human subject and human nature, which it perceives as neither good nor evil. Instead, “the nature of individuals, their humanity, is produced by certain power structures” (Campbell 2007: 233)

Discourses, then, are constituted of sets of representations and cover all forms of communication. Discourses represent normative ideas of how the world (or for example the South China Sea, or China, or the US) ought to be or what it should look like (Hansen 2006). They do so through communicating certain statements. These, in turn are based on assumptions, beliefs, background knowledge (context), and common sense (Schneider 2013). Discourses/objects simultaneously constitute and

are constituted by subjects, hence they shape both subjects and objects (Campbell 2007).

Although from a poststructuralist perspective they merely present “a” certain reality, discourses try to market themselves as propagating “the” sole objective truth/reality (Devetak 2013). The more powerful an advocate of a certain truth, the more likely it is that people will take this knowledge for granted (Foucault 1991).

### *Foucault’s critical ontology of ourselves*

The goal of poststructural theory is to expose the power structures behind the discourses, first, and foremost, through being critical of everything. In this light, Foucault argues that poststructuralism takes further the idea of criticizing everything originating from the European Enlightenment. Hence, Poststructuralism does not faithfully sticks to certain doctrinal elements, but instead permanently reactivates a certain attitude, namely “a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our era” (Foucault 1984: 42). Campbell (2007: 227), points out why Foucault is actually closer to Enlightenment thought than for example neoliberalism (see section three) by stating, “[a]lthough the Enlightenment conception of knowledge was intended to free humanity from religious dogma, it was eventually transformed into a dogma itself”.

Regarding this critical attitude Foucault (1984: 50) himself writes,

*The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them*

Foucault’s words grasp the core of poststructural analysis. First, through criticizing “what we are” we need to analyze the “limits that are imposed on us”. Limits are imposed on us by our identity, which “is always constituted in relationship to difference” (Campbell 2007: 238). In his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish*, regarding the prison system, Foucault explains the concept of ‘disciplinary power’. He argues that we define “who we are” (the people outside the prison) primarily

through defining “who we are not” (the people inside the prison). Hence, according to poststructuralism, “particular events, problems, and actors that are recognized in history are thereby understood as constituted by an order always dependent upon the marginalization of other identities and histories” (Campbell 2007: 234)

Therefore, the goal of poststructural analysis is not eradicate exclusion (because that is what shapes identity/meaning). Rather, poststructuralism seeks to “understand the various forms of exclusion that constitute the world as we find it, understand how they come to be and how they continue to operate, and make possible interventions that can articulate alternatives” (Campbell 2007: 234)

### *Conducting a “history of the present”*

Hence, Foucault proposes to conduct a “history of the present”. Contrary to critics of this approach who argue that poststructuralism denies material reality (Keohane in Campbell 2007), this is certainly not the case. Poststructural theory acknowledges the existence of things, for example people constructing things on a piece of rock protruding out of the sea. However, what Foucault means with the “history of the present” is that poststructural theory does not use any particular value system to judge this occurrence. A poststructural analysis of this occurrence will analyze which actors are involved (e.g. China, Vietnam, the US), how these actors were discursively constructed over time (e.g. ‘assertive’ or ‘bullying’ China, ‘victimized’ Vietnam, the US as the protector of the ‘freedom of navigation’), and how these constructions have led to the particular occurrence in question. In this process, poststructuralism seeks to achieve the greatest objectivity mainly through not providing any normative judgment of the world.

When conducting a history of the present poststructuralism concerns itself with tracing the genealogy from representations/discourses in the present. Although always multiple representations of things or actions exist (see for example the diverse ways in which different languages describe the same things), it is usually the case that a certain representation has achieved dominance over time. What this does not mean, though, is that alternative representations no longer exist. In fact, alternative representations often exist simultaneously but are marginalized or silenced by the dominant representation. What poststructuralism seeks to do is to deconstruct the dominant representations through exposing the power relations behind them, and, through doing so, create discursive space to exhibit the alternatives (Foucault 1977:

Ashley 1987). Hence, “The overall purpose of a poststructural analysis is ethical and political. Its emphasis on how things have been produced over time seeks to denaturalize conventional representations so as to argue that they could have been different” (Campbell 2007: 241)

### **3 The Origins of US Foreign Policy and the Implications for US China Policy**

#### *3.1 The Origin of the Persistent Struggle within US Foreign Policy*

Kissinger (1994) points out that since World War I American foreign policy has been haunted by a struggle between European realism, which focuses on the balance of power, and idealism, emphasizing universality. Through this assessment Kissinger draws upon the existing discourses, frames them in a certain way, and continues the flow of a certain discourse through reproducing it.

Kissinger argues that whereas US President (from 1901-1909) Theodore Roosevelt was the most famous proponent of (neo)realism, President (from 1913-1921) Woodrow Wilson came to represent (neo)liberalism. On the eve of the US entrance into WWI, Roosevelt was in favor of US intervention on the basis of a realist viewpoint. He argued that if Germany would win the war in Europe, the balance of power (or the power equilibrium in Europe) would be broken, and Germany would become a direct threat to American security. Wilson, on the contrary, was of the opinion that America had “faith in values higher than the balance of power” (Kissinger 1994: 45), and should therefore maintain a neutral position and merely act as a mediator. Roosevelt criticized this as an attempt to continue America’s isolationism, however, this was exactly the contrary of what Wilson had in mind. Rather than “America’s withdrawal from the world,” Wilson proclaimed the “universal applicability of its values and, in time, America’s commitment to spreading them” (Kissinger 1994: 45).

From a poststructural perspective, the juxtaposition of only realist and idealist arguments in the above paragraph gives the reader the feeling of choice, and thus of alternatives. However, outside of realist and idealist discourses, no other alternatives are mentioned. As a consequence, the realist and idealist and idealist discourses are consolidated.

Kissinger continues to argue that Wilson came to such a conclusion because he saw America's leading position in the world as an "unselfish" one, which it had gained by "divine favor." Wilson argued as follows: (in Kissinger 1994: 46)

*"It was as if in the Providence of God a continent had been kept unused and waiting for a peaceful people who loved liberty and the rights of men more than they loved anything else, to come and set up an unselfish commonwealth"*

By representing the continent upon which America was later built as "unused and waiting" Wilson entirely neglected (or silenced/marginalized) the existence of pre-colonial "American" (they obviously were not) native populations on the continent. Wilson then, "put forward the unprecedented doctrine that the security of America was inseparable from the security of *all* the rest of mankind". Hence, it became "America's duty to oppose aggression *everywhere*" (Kissinger 1994: 47) As a result, Wilson envisioned America's duty in the world as that of a "beneficent global policeman" (Kissinger 1994: 47) that had an almost crusading ideology to fight evil all over the globe.

This crusading ideology consisted of the following four points: 1) "America's special mission transcends day-to-day diplomacy and obliges it to serve as a beacon of liberty for the rest of mankind". 2) "The foreign policies of democracies are morally superior because the people are inherently peace-loving", 3) "Foreign policy should reflect the same moral standards as personal ethics", and 4) "The state has no right to claim a separate morality for itself." (Kissinger 1994: 46)

Kissinger points out that from a European perspective, Wilson's proclamations of universality at the time were unimaginable. In Europe no nation had ever been able to unify the entire continent and universalize its values. America, on the contrary, had no strong neighbors that could constrain its ambitions. Hence, America essentially knew no limitations. This allowed it to proclaim, "if not the end of history, then surely its irrelevance, as it moved to transform values heretofore considered unique to America into universal principles applicable to all". (Kissinger 1994: 48) The above logic became the core reason that the U.S. in the end decided to enter WWI. "National interests were irrelevant [...] [and] the balance of power had nothing to do with it. Rather, the war had a moral foundation, whose primary objective was a new and more just international order" (Kissinger 1994: 48).



As a realist, Kissinger's contempt for Wilsonian idealist policies becomes apparent when reading between the lines of the above quotations. Yet, the struggle between realism and idealism in American foreign policy he describes is still very much alive. Both views coexist within, or take turns dominating, contemporary American foreign policy in the shape of (neo)realism and (neo)liberalism. The following two sections describe each in more detail.

### *3.2 Classical Realism and Defensive Neorealism (1945-1992)*

Classical realists introduced the pessimistic view of human nature contemporary neorealism, or structural realism, still adheres to. Classical realism was established in the post-World War II era and sought to explain international politics as a result of human nature. It perceived international politics to operate in a Hobbesian state of nature, in which a state's capabilities define its successes. In other words, in the realist view international politics constitute a "war of all against all" (Leviathan 1651) in which selfish (egoistic) actors operate in anarchy (absence of government). Since capabilities define the strength of an actor, realism is primarily a theory in the interest of great powers, which is reflected in Thucydides words, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (1910: 5.89.1). In order to survive within this structure, states need to adhere to Machiavellian logic, meaning that they must act as if 'all men [states] are wicked and that they will always give vent to the malignity that is in their minds when opportunity offers' (Machiavelli 1970: Book 1, Chapter 3). In other words, no other state can ever be trusted. The implication is that cooperation becomes impossible, since you never know when a state (leader) might turn against you in the future. This is also the reason for realism's focus on 'relative gains'. Realists pursue only gains that strengthen the self if they simultaneously weaken the adversary.

Classical realism is certainly a product of its time. The theory cherry picked from certain philosophical European traditions (in the process marginalizing other traditions) to explain the current world, which constituted a chaotic situation of constant war between all nations (Two World Wars) in which you never knew who could be trusted (e.g. from a Jewish perspective, how could you distinguish between collaborators and those who truly wanted to help you?).

Structural realism, or neorealism, was introduced by Waltz in his 1979 book *The Theory of International Politics*. The main difference with classical realism is that

Waltz argues that, rather than world leaders, it is the *structure* of international politics that decides the behavior of actors (states) within the international system. As such, neorealism is also called an “outside-in” theory. Rationality is the only way to explain the workings of this structure, making consequences of neorealism structure-defined rather than actor defined. To name an example, according to structural realism the Cold War was a result of the bipolarity of the system, not because of decisions made by individual leaders in either the US or the Soviet Union (Donnelly 2009). In a similar fashion, the current China threat is also caused by the structural reasons, which are taken for granted by realism, making their predictions “scientific”, or inevitable. Disagreement with such logic makes one seem irrational.

Similar to classical realism, structural realism is also a construct of its time. Waltz, writing in 1979, had witnessed relative stability in the Cold War situation between the US and the Soviet Union that had continued for quite a long time –i.e. no direct war between the two great powers for about 34 years from 1945-1979. Hence, Waltz sought a continuation of this situation through proposing an arms race (internal balancing) in order to keep intact the balance of power, which had proven to provide stability in the international system. Besides, Waltz also argued that the most stable situation in international society was one in which there are only two great powers.

After the sudden end of the Cold War (no IR theory had predicted this), Waltz’s structural realist theory of bipolar stability suddenly became obsolete. One the one hand this explanation gap was filled by the “hegemonic stability theory,” a term first coined by Robert Keohane in 1980. The theory argued, “international economic openness and stability is most likely when there is a single dominant state” (Webb and Krasner 1989: 183). However, the downfall of the Soviet Union led simultaneously to a strongly decreased influence of neorealist thought in American foreign policy.

### *3.3 Neoliberalism (1992-...)*

The true victor of the defeat of the Soviet Union was (neo)liberalism. Liberalism is considered “the most enduring and influential philosophical tradition to have emerged from the European Enlightenment” (Burchill 2009: 57). In many respects, liberalism advocates exactly the opposite values of realism. For instance, liberalism has a positive view on human nature, advocates an “inside-out” approach with regard to international politics, believes that cooperation between states (in the shape of

institution building) is not only possible, but also vital, and finally promotes absolute gains –i.e. gains independent of the gains or losses of other countries.

Liberalism receives inspiration from its positive view on human nature from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant argued in 1795 already that perpetual peace was possible if all nations became constitutional republics. In 1983, Michael Doyle applied this theory to liberal democracies, and scholars such as Levy (1989) developed his groundwork later into the Democratic Peace Theory (DPT). Owen (1994) and Dafoe et al (2013) provided empirical backing to the theory by showing that liberal states hardly, if ever go to war with each other. Such empirical “evidence” shows liberalism’s advocacy of scientific rationality, which undergirds liberalism with an aura of irrefutability.

Democratic Peace Theory promotes the democratization of nations all over the globe with the goal of establishing a Kantian perpetual peace. The theory adopts an inside-out approach with regard to international politics in the sense that it takes a certain domestic model (liberal democracy, free market capitalism) and seeks to extend this across the globe. DPT became especially influential after the Cold War when the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama declared the “end of history” (1992). Fukuyama argued that history had reached a point in time in which certain liberal democracies (i.e. those emphasizing individual and universal human rights, constitutionalism, and limited government) longer needed to progress. The only countries that needed to develop were the nations that had not reached this stage of history yet, and therefore needed to be converted into entities just like the advanced liberal democracies.

Liberalism is also closely connected to the idea of globalization, especially through its focus on free market capitalism. Because in the liberal view “market capitalism best promotes the welfare of all by most efficiently allocating resources within society,” (Burchill 2009: 57) and liberalism promotes an inside-out approach, it also does so on a global scale. In order to advance this goal institutions like the IMF and World Bank provide loans to countries in order to become just like liberal democracies. The IMF and World Bank provide loans on the basis of ‘conditionality,’ meaning that they only provide loans on the condition of cooperation with neoliberal values. These are the so-called ‘structural adjustment policies’ (SAPs). The implication is that if a country is not willing to take a loan from any of these

institutions, such as is now the case with China, this country immediately becomes a threat to the neoliberal view.

Consequently, just like classical and structural realism discussed above, neoliberalism also was a construct of its time (i.e. the circumstances both constituted and were constituted by the discourses describing them). As Madsen (1995) describes, the “opening up” of China by Kissinger and Nixon in the 1970s gave American’s the feeling that the Chinese “wanted to be like us”. Whereas the end of the Cold War reinforced this, the Tiananmen Protests of 1989 shattered this image and made Americans feel disillusioned regarding China’s rise.

### *3.4 Implications for US Foreign Policy Toward China*

Assumptions of neorealism and neoliberalism are ingrained in American foreign policy. The result is that the dominant reference cadre for American foreign policy makers is constituted by these two theories, and hence their assumptions. The problem with this is that it becomes impossible to see alternatives outside of the discursive realm of the above two theories. As the above has shown, neorealism and neoliberalism coexist and take turns in dominating US foreign policy. Whereas during the Cold War neorealism was the predominant explanatory theory, Russia’s perestroika and China’s “reform and opening up reforms” constituted the American perception that the rest of the world wanted to be “like us”.

Hence, over the past almost four decades (1978-2017) neoliberalism has been the dominant theory in US foreign policy toward China. Neoliberalism has sought to convert China into an entity resembling the US (democratic, free market economy, low government intervention in the economy, (internationally) institutionalized, adhering to “universal” human rights, etcetera). However, first the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests and then the “failure” of China to democratize over time culminating in Xi Jinping’s more ‘assertive’ foreign policy and focus on a distinctively “Chinese” system starting from 2012, have undermined this “idealist” prospect from a neoliberal perspective. The result is that neoliberal observers now perceive Chinese institution

building as rivaling US institutions –e.g. the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a replacement for the World Bank<sup>1</sup>.

Hence, neorealism has slowly “reemerged” over the last ten years or so, again seeking domination of the American foreign policy discourse. For example, Stephen Walt (2017) argued in an article in *Foreign Policy* titled, ‘Obama was a Foreign Policy Failure,’ that although the “crisis of 2008-2009 was the ideal moment to abandon the failed strategy of liberal hegemony that the United States had been pursuing since the end of the Cold War, [...] Obama never broke with that familiar but failed approach.” He even goes so far as to argue that this is the reason that “helped propel Donald Trump into the White House.”

From this perspective John Mearsheimer’s 2010 article “The Gathering Storm: China’s Challenge to US Power in Asia,” which is based upon his 2001 book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, becomes almost a logical/rational result of the development or flow of US foreign policy discourses. Due to neoliberalism’s failure in the post-Cold War era to convert the rest of the world (and especially the great powers China and Russia) into the neoliberal worldview, Waltz 1979 theory of bipolar stability was right after all. Mearsheimer is an offensive realist. He first of all continues in the realist tradition that great powers are the most important actors in international relations. Second, great powers always seek to achieve regional hegemony. Third, although global hegemony is impossible, regional hegemons should make sure that no other great power in a different region achieves regional hegemony, because this would allow this regional hegemon with “freedom to roam” in the vicinity of the self. Hence, since according to Mearsheimer’s structural realism China is seeking regional hegemony just like the US does, the US and China are destined for war.

Another influential neorealist prediction comes from Graham Allison, who introduced the concept of a “Thucydides Trap” to explain US-China relations (2015). Allison “reminds us of the attendant dangers when a rising power rivals a ruling power—as Athens challenged Sparta in ancient Greece, or as Germany did Britain a century ago” (2015). Allison analyzed sixteen cases in which this was the case, and argues that in twelve out of sixteen cases the result was war, underscoring the

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<sup>1</sup> See for example newspaper headlines such as “All of the countries joining China’s alternative to the World Bank” (Kuo in *QZ: 2015*) or “China Creates a World Bank of its Own, and the U.S. balks” (Perlez in the *New York Times: 2015*)

“scientific rationality” and thus plausibility of his prediction. Hence, “The defining question about global order for this generation is whether China and the United States can escape Thucydides’s Trap” (2015).

## **4 The Neorealism/Neoliberalism ‘Trap’ and How Not to Fall in It**

### *4.1 The Dangers of Adopting Neorealism and Neoliberalism: reconstructing and reproducing*

The above has shown that both neorealist and neoliberal discourses perceive China’s goal to be to *reconstruct* the US-established system. To “reconstruct” here means either a) “to establish or assemble again,” b) “to subject (an organ or part) to surgery to re-form its structure or correct a defect,” or c) “to build up mentally: recreate ◦ reconstructing a lost civilization” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). In other words, reconstruction refers to the practical transformation of existing structures and rules through abiding by a new discourse or ideology. The notion of in the process “correcting a defect” implies that in this sense China perceives to be improving upon the current US-led system.

The problem is that reconstructing according to neorealism and liberalism is not really reconstructing, because US discourses discursively *reproduce* the same ontology of major power politics (neorealism) and the same epistemology of maximizing national interests (neoliberalism) as the US has implemented, but then for China. Mearsheimer’s offensive realism and Allison’s Thucydides trap perceive China to seek to replace the US’s hegemony. Neoliberalism also assume that Chinese institutions such as the AIIB seek to rival and replace the World Bank, which would mean that they would operate in the Chinese self-interest. In other words, they perceive China’s strategy of *reproducing* IR as meant to make China become (like) the US. Therefore, the US charge of China “reconstructing” IR is mostly about a reconfiguration of power and interest. Hence, this reflects a blind spot in the US worldview that is informed by statically sticking to the neorealism/neoliberalism. Insistence upon the ‘scientific validity’ of these theories due to their adherence to positivist principles further legitimizes these discourses. Moreover, it silences alternatives, which, in the Chinese case (e.g. China’s peaceful rise, a new type of

great power relations), are usually discarded on the basis of constituting mere ‘propaganda’ or not conforming to neorealist or neoliberal assumptions.

According to poststructuralism, this is not very surprising. Existing discourses both constitute the reality of foreign policy observers as well as they (re-)constitute and in the process entrench these discourses. In other words, discursive structures essentially determine what is legitimate to say about the world. This is underscored by Anaïs Nin’s famous quote, ‘[w]e do not see things as they are, we see them as we are’. Since people’s perceptions of reality are constructed this might suggest that the more Chinese students are educated in the United States in neorealist and neoliberal thought, the more likely it is that they will internalize such perceptions on foreign policy and, hence, reproduce western mainstream IR in China after their return. However, the opposite could also be true. Chinese students could also encounter feelings of alienation toward the usage of neorealist and neoliberal theories when explaining Chinese foreign policy behavior, leading to a situation in which they seek to resist these discourses and/or go beyond them.

In this sense, the development of Chinese IR discourses could take (at least) two roads. On the one hand they could *reproduce* the ontology/epistemology of a unipolar or self-interested state with a new method. On the other hand they could *reimagine* IR through discursively describing a structure of IR that fundamentally differs from the current hegemonic IR. Whereas the former is rather dangerous (because it will most likely lead to (cold) war), the latter provides an opportunity to reimagine IR (see section 4.2 below). The former is the case in for example Callahan’s (2008) reading of Zhao Tingyang’s ‘Tianxia’ (all-under-heaven) system. Whereas Zhao (2006; 2009) seeks to offer a model of world governance that is post-hegemonic – i.e. that seeks to reimagine IR and make the world a ‘better’ place – Callahan perceives him to merely replace the former hegemon (the US) with a new one (China). This would mean that China’s IR would fulfill the expectations of neorealism and neoliberalism, which would form the primary danger. Such a discourse would, for example, simply substitute the AIIB for the World Bank, bilateral settlement for international arbitration, and non-interventionism for the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). If such a discourse becomes dominant in China, ontological/epistemological collusion between the US and China will occur, since both essentially subscribe to the same methods, albeit under a different name. Under such circumstances although reconciliation could ultimately be possible, it would be

very difficult. Reconciliation would be a matter of China versus the US, and the result would depend on who the stronger party is, as is currently the norm in IR. In other words, the result would be confrontational, greatly heightening the risk of a (cold) war.

Hence, the primary dangers of using neorealism and neoliberalism to explain China's rise are twofold. First, the dominant usage of the two theories silences alternatives (such as China's peaceful rise, a new type of great power relations). The two theories are so ingrained in US foreign policy, the US educational field of international relations, and the US media, that they are no longer seen as mere theories that can be used as "tools" to make sense of a few "big, important, and enduring patterns" (Waltz 1979: 70). Instead, they have come to represent the sole truth, making it impossible to think outside of their discursive realities. Second, neorealism and neoliberalism are the dominant theories in the field of IR all over the globe, including China. Moreover, since increasing amounts of Chinese students gain their degrees from American institutions, the risk is highly increased that Chinese IR discourses reproduce American hegemonic IR, rather than come up with alternatives. Consequently, the risk of the predictions of either of the two theories becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy is large.

#### 4.2 'Reimagining' IR as the only option to go beyond neorealism/neoliberalism

However, as pointed out above, Chinese discourses could also *reimagine* IR through discursively describing a structure of IR that fundamentally differs from the current hegemonic IR. Several signs exist that could suggest China seeks to *reimagine* IR. One, China's "peaceful rise/development" (Zheng 2003) *within* the current world order. Two, Xi Jinping's 2014 proposal of establishing a "New Type of Great Power Relations" (Li and Xu 2014). And three, the current endeavors of Chinese scholars to back up China's peaceful rise with theoretical proof based on Chinese cultural history (Zhao 2006, 2009; Qin 2009, 2012; Yan 2011), which have led to discussions of establishing a Chinese School of IR (Zhang and Chang 2016).

The most famous example of the latter is probably Zhao Tingyang's 'All-under-Heaven' or 'Tianxia' concept, most known in the Anglophone world through his articles 'Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All-under-heaven' (Tian-xia, 天下)' (2006) and 'A Political World Philosophy in terms of All-under Heaven (Tian-



xia)' (2009). Zhao puts forward a 'world theory' of IR that goes beyond the narrowly defined interests of the nation state, which is a product of western modernity, and 'promote[s] universal wellbeing, and not just the interests of some dominating nations (Zhao 2009: 6). Whereas Zhao's proposition has given rise to fears in the 'West' that China would constitute the hegemonic leader of this reimagined world, Zhao (2009: 11) quotes the Lüshi Chunqiu in an attempt to take away this fear: 'all-under-heaven is meant to be of all and for all, and never of and for anybody in particular'.

Qin Yaqing (2012), who is president and professor at China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU), 'believes that Chinese and Western theories are philosophically, thus fundamentally different and strives for a distinctive Chinese IR theory by analyzing and utilizing Western theories' (Zhang and Chang 2016: 54). Particularly inspired by Wendt's constructivism in combination with Chinese traditional thought, Qin (2009) puts forward the concepts of 'Relationality' (*guanxixing*) and 'Processual Construction'.

Building upon Qin's relationality, Shih (2016) and Shih and Huang (2016) propose the Balance of Relationship (BoR) theory, is essentially constituted by a web of mutually beneficial bilateral relationships between nations all over the globe. The BoR theory advocates bilateral reciprocity, rather than unilateral strategic calculus or multilateral rule making, as a basis for IR.

How all of these efforts are elaborated upon and implemented has a lot to do with Chinese decision making. In order for Chinese IR to *reimagine* IR, it is vital that Chinese IR remains critical at all times, not only of American foreign policy, but also of Chinese. As the current essay has shown, poststructuralism as a meta-theory (a theory criticizing theory) could provide a helpful tool. However, to what extent Chinese authorities will be able to tolerate critical attitudes remains to be seen.

## **5 Conclusion**

This paper has analyzed the dominant international relations (IR) discourses of neorealism and neoliberalism in the US on China's rise from a poststructural

perspective. Besides, it has also discussed what, in relationship to these US discourses, Chinese IR discourses can do in order to be critical and reimagine rather than reproduce the current hegemonic IR system.

This paper has argued that both neorealism and neoliberalism perceive China as a threat because they assume that China seeks to reconstruct the US-constructed IR system. In other words, they believe that China wants to either overthrow the US and become the new hegemon as a fulfillment of the deterministic Thucydides Trap (neorealism) or replace US-established institutions that act in the US interest by Chinese ones that act in Chinese interests (neoliberalism). These discourses are so ingrained in the worldview of mainstream China observers and policy makers in the US that it has created an intellectual incapacity to see beyond the China threat.

Through adopting a poststructural perspective, this paper has deconstructed the theories of neorealism and neoliberalism and, through doing so, created the discursive space that might enable one to see alternatives beyond the China threat. However, it has also pointed out that since discourses essentially determine what is legitimate to say about the world, it is very difficult to step out of a certain discursive framework. Therefore, Chinese IR can only be critical if it does go beyond the mainstream discourses, and, rather than reproduce western hegemonic IR, reimagines it. Attempts of doing so are currently underway, however, how much leverage these will be able to gain over more mainstream attempts remains to be seen.

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