

Survival Under Anarchic System: Realism, Liberalism and China—US Relations

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ABSTRACT

The controversy between the Chinese government and the US government has intensified recently then this article aims to expound such conflict. The methodology used is realism and liberalism which are two most important interpretive method of international relations through which it comes to the conclusion that the nature of such conflict is security competition. The continuous security competition originates from the essence of anarchy in the international environment, only by understanding such essence can we understand the international community.

Keywords: China—US relations, anarchic system, security competition

1. INTRODUCTION

The 20th century was turbulent with two world wars in the first half and the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union in the second half. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the bipolar pattern, the international pattern has gradually developed towards multipolarity so that the research of such new international relations has gradually moved towards the 21st century. The US believed that the menace of communism had gone so that American elites continued to pursue the construction of a liberal world order and hoped to realize “perpetual peace” [1] by exporting the ideology of freedom and democracy to all countries in the world which had succeeded in western society but difficult to implement in other regions of the world such as the Middle East and China while a anti-democratic crisis also happened inside western society in recent years. Observe East Asia, China's national power is growing over the past 30 years which has gained significant benefits from world-oriented economic system and became an important big power but the Communist Party of China refused to accept American ideology and CPC leaders hope to enhance China's global impact while promotes the ideology of nationalism within China at the same time to against US. U.S. economic dominance around the world was impacted by China during the process of Globalization so that the U.S.

President Trump launched a trade war against China after which President Biden has intensified ideological competition with China and confrontation to the Communist Party on human rights [2]. Such competition determines the international situation which means comprehending the essence of China US relations is of great significance for us to comprehend the world politics today.

The target of this article is to interpret China US relations with two theories: realism and liberalism. Realism deems that between different countries are destined to be full of competition and conflict but liberalism believes cooperation and peace can be achieved. Both ideas have a long history in which they always contend with each other and form a dialectical relationship. The important thinkers who influenced realism were Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Hans Morgenthau and so on. For instance, Thucydides recorded the war between Athens and Sparta and then explained it from the perspective of power struggle [3]. Images presented by realism are full of fierce competition and war from Ancient Greece in the Thucydidean era to now. Important thinkers who influenced liberalism include John Locke, Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Kant and so on. For example, Adam Smith believes that economic interdependence can promote cooperation between countries [4], Kant believes that perpetual peace between countries can be realization based on many strict

elements. Liberalism makes great efforts to draw a blueprint for cooperation and peace but the real situation of the international environment always runs counter to it. Next, we will first introduce the contemporary version of realism - structural realism and its two branches, offensive realism and defensive realism. Then we will introduce liberalism and its three branches—democratic peace theory, economic interdependence theory and liberal institutionalism. The last part will discuss the conclusion of this paper and briefly discuss the enlightenment of this conclusion to us.

2. REALISM

Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes' theory of international relations is called classical realism, after World War II, human nature realism represented by Hans Morgenthau was prevalent for a time. Structural realism inherits and develops the previous theories then dominates the contemporary so this part discusses how structural realism explains China US relations. Structural realism emerged in the late 1970s and was mainly contributed by Kenneth Waltz whose theories had a fundamental impact on contemporary international relations study. Structural realism regards the international system as a structure in which the relative growth and decline of the power of each country will affect this structure [5], Next, we will discuss two branches of structural realism: offensive realism and defensive realism.

2.1 Offensive realism

Offensive realism believes that the international relations system is an anarchic system in the past, present and future, there is no higher authority to resolve international dispute because the United Nations for example is controlled by great powers and cannot play the role of the world government. Powerful countries can evaluate the external environment through rational analysis and calculation which have strong armaments and the ability to invade other countries but each country can never understand the intentions of other countries so they fear each other. Survival is the main goal of big powers so that they can only pursue as much power as possible to obtain security because only a powerful country can guarantee not to be invaded which means the security competition among big powers is always constant and war may break out at any time. The representative of offensive realism is John Mearsheimer who believes that international politics has always been a ruthless and dangerous business, and it is likely to remain that way [6].

Under the paradigm of offensive realism, power, survival, security and uncertainty have become dominant discourses to explain China US relations. China has gradually pursued the national policy of reform and

opening up to enhance its national economic strength and finally transformed its growing economic power into military power that has triggered fears of US after which we can see that the arms competition between them has become increasingly tense in recent years. China tries to take the same path as the US in dominating America and then dominate East Asia because controlling the surrounding areas is the best way to survive under anarchic system but the US doesn't want to see that so it has intervened in China in Taiwan and the South China Sea which also courted China's neighbors to suppress China so as to curb its expansion. Finally, the security competition and power conflict between China and the US is endless that even go to war which entered Mearsheimer's theoretical expectation [7].

2.2 Defensive realism

If a country takes measures to ensure its own security then it will inevitably reduce the sense of security of other countries which resulting in more insecurity of the country itself, this is the security dilemma, an important concept to understand state behavior under the anarchic system [8]. Therefore, defensive realism suggests states pursue appropriate power to obtain security under the anarchic system [9]. The below will expound China US relations by defensive realism.

Defensive realism believes that China and the US can avert war as long as they pursue moderate power and do not exaggerate each other's threats then compromise with each other on some issues such as Taiwan issue so that conflicts can be avoided [10]. Under the security dilemma, moderate motivation is not easy to antagonise which is more conducive to security but this is a theoretical inference. Although the motives of the two countries are relatively transparent, they are still uncertain about the intentions for each other's arms expansion which is not fundamentally different from the European countries during the two world wars, the security dilemma is equivocal and lacks sufficient evidence to support so that defensive realism has limited explanatory effect in today's fierce competitive environment of mutual distrust.

3. LIBERALISM

John Stuart Mill believed that the struggle between Liberty and Authority is the most conspicuous feature in the portions of history [11]. With the modernization of Western civilization, the bourgeoisie fought against the old world and constantly pursued personal liberation after which liberalism ideology eventually dominates the western world that is of great significance to explain China US relations. Liberalism believes that cooperation and peace between countries can be achieved based on some practical conditions so that it has become the ideological discourse for western countries to construct

the international order, but it also has the opposite that is if these conditions are not available then the international system must be full of competition and conflict. Although there are some terminology changes, liberalism has three branches since Immanuel Kant's age – democratic peace theory, economic interdependence theory and liberal institutionalism [12].

3.1 Democratic Peace Theory

Democratic peace theory believes that democratic countries can have confidence in each other due to the similar domestic political environment and then achieve peace and collaborate [13]. The logic of democratic peace theory is that leaders of democratic countries must cater to the will of the public in order to win votes, ordinary people are generally afraid of war so it is difficult for the rulers of democratic countries to launch aggressive wars because they are constrained by the will of the masses, then democratic countries would be less likely to start a war and they can trust each other. On the contrary, authoritarian countries are more likely to wage wars of aggression because their leaders do not need to worry about losing popular support. Therefore, the US hopes to export democracy to China to promote mutual understanding but the Communist Party of China refuses to accept. Recently US President Biden strengthened the export of American ideology and listed China as the enemy of the democratic world then the contradiction between the two sides is intensifying which is evident in Hong Kong and Taiwan that have become battlegrounds for ideological struggle. Recently, the US is facing various intractable contradictions at home and abroad which has weakened its ability to export democratic ideology to China then the realization of democratic peace is far away. Why did democratic peace theory fail? Perhaps because China lacks a democratic environment, but democratic peace theory itself is also controversial, for example, the realist Sebastian Rosato criticized its logical flaws [14].

3.2 Economic Interdependence Theory

Since Adam Smith founded the capitalist free market theory, the economy has always been one of the pillars of human society whether it is to promote personal prosperity or national prosperity. Economic interdependence theory believes that peace can be achieved between countries with high economic mutual benefit because if war breaks down economic intercourses then it will be a catastrophe to both sides. The US needs China as a vast marketplace and China needs to import American science and technology for economic development so two countries are highly interdependent economically [15]. However, the trade war broke out which had a far-reaching impact on economic trends that has had a significant impact on the economies of both sides, resulting in a series of crises

such as personnel unemployment, enterprise bankruptcy, national economic stagnation and so on. The two countries began to move towards self-interest then there has been a trend of economic nationalism and anti globalization in the world. The mutually beneficial trend has changed due to the uneven distribution of economic benefits in the progress of globalization then both China and the US began to raise tariffs and hope to be in a advantageous position in this competition. The theoretical expectation indicates that there will be more new trade frictions so the economic interdependence in promoting cooperation will decline [16].

3.3 Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal institutionalism believes that international law and international organizations can promote peace [17]. International law can restrict the behavior of each country in pursuing its own interests while international institutions can punish rule breakers so as to safeguard the benefits of all countries, however, if the relative gains of countries are unbalanced then they may violate the rules after which the function of laws and institutions will decline. After the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the US, China joined a series of international organizations such as the IMF and the WTO, these international organizations provide a platform for both sides to exchange information so as to make their policy decisions more transparent and reduce uncertainty. However, China's continuous economic expansion makes the US awake to the decline of its benefits then it sanctions against China. Recently, the controversial issues intensified and the two sides began to break the rules due to various negotiation failures so that the role of international law and international organizations in promoting peace and collaborate is instability in today's international environment. Various international organizations such as the United Nations has also been criticized because they are always dominated by the purpose of great powers, at least today, liberal institutionalism cannot change the essence of anarchy in the international pattern.

4. CONCLUSION

The operation of China US relations is undoubtedly most in line with the paradigm of offensive realism which means the security competition between nation states will never stop as long as the anarchic system cannot be changed. Liberalism is weak not because its theories cannot help promote peace but because of the lack of necessary conditions that provided by liberalism world order which is now facing various crisis in recent years. The conclusion of offensive realism is very dangerous since World War I, World War II and the Cold War all conform to its interpretation framework so we should be extremely vigilant about today's China US relations. The fierce security competition has aroused the dread of all

countries in the world so people in all places are discussing how to avert a new cold war or a new world war especially by those who want to change human predicament.

Whether in terms of conceptual framework or in terms of sticking up for peace, selecting offensive realism perspective as reductionism to elaborate China US relations as security competition certainly cannot satisfy everyone especially scholars and people in other fields. Inside international politics field, liberalists also try to defeat offensive realism but the effect is not good, after all, liberalism is just a western ideology which is difficult to implement in the non-western world. International political research is an independent field heavily fortified and its theories tend to focus on rational analysis of relations of great powers and their conducts then these theories can teach politicians how to formulate policies and this is why this dissertation provides such verdict. It means scholars and people in other domains can also examine China US relations from other perspectives and standpoints, this dissertation is just one perspective.

The existing circumstance of international relations research is that structural realism and criticism or discussion around it had led the academic mainstream in the past 30 years which means the tendency of anarchy in the international circumstances cannot be changed easily and human still cannot be divorced from the melody of power competition [18]. The efforts of liberalism to eliminate the anarchic system was failed but we must either proceed to implement the unfinished liberal international order or find solutions to supersede it so as to face potential perils such as nuclear war. John Mearsheimer believed that the liberal international order is "bound to fail" [19] who directed a parlous future and told us it's hard to avert, China US hegemonic competition has deviated from the possible direction of the decline of hegemony mechanism proposed by Keohane but globalization is still intensifying [20], human beings must seriously confront the possible further deterioration of international circumstances and think over countermeasures.

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