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# PROCEEDINGS OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON TRANSFORMATIVE IDEAS IN A CHANGING WORLD

## THE GLOBAL SOLIDARITY CRISIS


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# Can Transitions Be Peaceful? International Relations Theory and Thoughts on China's Foreign Policy

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*[This is a text based on the transcript of the actual presentation and the question-and-answer forum which has been modified for smoother reading.]*

## *Can the Resolution of International Problems be Peaceful?*

The first thing that I really want to say is that international society has seen both periods of conflict and peace. If you look beyond World War I and World War II, and in between, there is a big possibility for peace. In fact, you'd see the Cold War—which is not really a war—, but you know there were threats of conflict. In between conflicts, there is the possibility of cooperation. However, many scholars of international relations predict that power transitions such as what we're experiencing today, and global shifts, tend to be violent, therefore decreasing the chances for global solidarity on important issues.

We know that the biggest threat to humankind right now is the COVID-19 pandemic, and we need to be able to cooperate in those aspects more than ever. Global public health is such an important topic. Vaccines, the provision of vaccines for more vulnerable people, that's definitely some of the things that we have to solve today. We're not even talking about the environment. We also have to talk about international trade and essentially cultural understanding, ethnic understanding and religious understanding among countries. We know that different countries have different priorities and interests.

So, the question is: despite those competing interests and competing visions for the world, is it possible to establish peace and solidarity? In the field of international relations, there's a big group of scholars who say that it's not possible. For them, transitions will always be very conflictual. One of those theories that deny the possibility for peace is realism. Realism in international relations theory, in contemporary parlance or in the basic parlance or in popular parlance, you could call it Machiavellian. But really, there are a lot of theoretical assumptions to realism in IR (international relations). In fact, they made it "scientific" by looking for enduring facts in international relations, and, according to them, the enduring fact in international relations—in fact, the most important fact—is what you call "anarchy". For some, anarchy definitely leads to conflict, and it is akin to conflict. But, for some theorists, anarchy is simply the absence of the need for a world government. By that we mean that the international system is quite different from the domestic system, where in the latter you have the courts, you have the

police and you have the army to look to if there's any conflict between parties or among parties. In the international realm, you do not have that, despite having the United Nations. And so that brings fear and insecurity among countries.

### *The "Traditional" Stance of International Theory is Based on Conflict*

The argument is that, because of this fear and insecurity, because you have no one to turn to, declining<sup>1</sup> powers will resort to conflict, and then rising<sup>2</sup> powers will challenge them using their own alliances, or using their own power, their material power. The argument further says that the international system and the fundamental characteristic of States, not just the system, but the States themselves, are always conflictual. And, as I said, the assumption here is that anarchy inherently pushes States towards conflictual relations, instead of cooperation and solidarity.

But, obviously, many theories disagree with this, and I'm going to discuss here the philosophical basis for why they disagree with the realist vision of conflict in international transitions. What I want to say is that this prediction, even among policymakers and among people observing China, and observing the US and how it will act, observing Russia, observing countries that are getting more power through economic growth, and all of these things: these predictions are based on a sort of theoretical orthodoxy in international relations theory, which also mirror the way social science theory has developed over time. So, the bid for IR theory to be scientific pushes IR theory closer to physics, closer to economics, meaning that a good theory will mean that you find eternal laws in society, and IR theory found—at least have argued over the last few decades—that the eternal laws are conflictual. The laws that you find in international society is conflictual.

### *An Alternative View*

We're going to present an alternative view by looking at several sets of assumptions. By that we mean that we will engage the philosophy of the social sciences at the level of ontology. The argument is that these predictions are overstated, conflict is overstated. If you look at a bigger stretch of history, even in East Asia, in fact, there's a big research group that suggests that China does not conform to western standards of conflict.

During the earlier centuries, China has actually cooperated, even at the time that it was the most powerful country in East Asia. Conventional wisdom really challenges this evidence.

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<sup>1</sup> Transcriber's Note: "Declining powers" are countries whose worldwide influence—whether in terms of brute force or economic force—is waning.

<sup>2</sup> Transcriber's Note: "Rising powers" are countries whose worldwide military and/or economic influence are on the rise.

Later, I'm going to present some evidence as well. So, what we're saying is that the orthodoxy is based on several social forces or social assumptions of what the dominant social forces are. The first assumption is *individualism*: that all states are individualists, that relationships don't matter, that communities don't matter, and that states will always think about themselves in a very egotistical way. The second ontological assumption is *materialism*: that countries are simply motivated by the pursuit of material gains and the pursuit of material gains usually comes in the form of money and economic growth. That's why it's such a big issue that China is getting more economic benefits in the international system. That's a big issue because the assumption is, as they get more, as countries get more, they will be more conflictual and the world will be more conflictual. That's why there's a lot of news, even in Bloomberg, and there's a whole industry about this whole prediction, that China will become violent. The third assumption is a worldview, a paradigm in the world, where *conflict* of interests cannot be resolved, that conflict is inherent in social relations.

My argument is that society is much more complex than these three assumptions: the assumption of individualism, the assumption of materialism and the assumption of a conflictual world. But International Relations theory and Social Science theory rarely engage with the philosophy of the social sciences at the level of ontology. And because of that, what you have is institutionalized orthodoxy in the academia. It discriminates against other types of philosophies and largely favors these three ideas, especially in IR theory.

The dominant theory in IR theory is *realism*. As we saw earlier, it's about anarchy in conflict, and that the decentralized nature of power lead countries to be individualistic. By that we mean again that there's no bigger government in the world and that, because of this different structure, you can find in the world, compared with the domestic sphere, that things are automatically going to be conflictual. Rationality and individualism are defined materially—later, I will discuss the difference between absolute and relative gains—, and power is defined materially. Therefore, definitions of power such as prestige and status in the world really don't matter. It's really about the pursuit of guns. It's really the pursuit of more land and geography and more money, and States themselves act like human nature. The assumption is that humans are inherently conflictual (which they're not). Are States inherently aggressive? What do states really want? What are their interests? What are the sources of these interests? The assumption of realism is, more often than not, that it's conflictual because of all of the above reasons.

### *Case in Point: The Rise of China*

Before we engage this topic at the level of philosophy, we first have to note that we know that China's rise presents one of the most important global shifts in the world. For some, it represents the increase of power of Asians and that China is leading the way. But, at the same time, some really just view China's rise as a challenge to US dominance or Western dominance.

Consequently, here are many scholars who focus on US-China relations, and there's a big debate about whether China is what you may call a *status quo* or *revisionist* power. It's a question of whether China will work with the current norms and with the current institutions or whether China want to remake the world. Therefore, if there's a global shift, will it challenge the norms of democracy, the norms of sovereignty, and the norms of respect for human rights and trade? You then know that there might be some issues because the US will not be willing to give up those norms.

A lot of the people focusing on China are what are called *offensive realists*. There are many types of realisms but the dominant type is offensive realism among many of those looking at China's international relations. You're talking about scholars such as John Mearsheimer and many other scholars who focus on conflict. China's rise was nurtured by great power competition. There's always competition between the US and the Soviet Union, both of whom were seeking hegemony in their financial system. The question is: do countries always want to get hegemony? Hegemony means dominance in the world. Because Europe and the US have always had that goal, especially in the 19th century and 18th century, they're assuming that China will be the same. A lot of international relations theories are also based on western history and not really based on the history that really happened in China. There are a lot of scholars who are saying that, if you really look at the history of East Asian international relations, you would see quite different dynamics, something that you will not find in the Western world.

### *Turning to the Philosophy of Social Science and Ontology*

Why should we engage the philosophy of social science and ontology in this issue? It's because society is much more complex than the simplistic assumptions of conflict, individualism and materialism, and we need to be able to acknowledge and synthesize all these social forces and to discuss all these social forces to be able to create or have a more informed theorizing as we talk about the world, as we talk about conflict. The more we talk about conflict the more that conflict will happen. Is there an alternative to conflict? Is an alternative possible? The answer is yes, but also, when we think about the philosophy and social science at the level of ontology, it also allows for a fundamental understanding of social reality.

There are many types of ontologies –actually just 11 ontologies— in the social sciences, but I would say that there are just a couple that define the different fault lines among theories. I'd like to focus on are just a few here, specifically four sets of ontological debates across which International Relations can be better understood. The first one involves the two extremes in the spectrum of *interests*: what type of gains do countries really want? Do they want Relative or Absolute gains (and I will explain that later)? The second set revolves around Materialism and Ideationism: Is the world power propped up by Materialism or Ideationism? The third pair involves paradigms: Is there a preference for a Conflict Paradigm or is it possible for a Harmony

Paradigm to exist? The fourth pair considers the nature of the world, that is: Is the world Static or Evolutionary? I'd want to focus on this as well because, if we initially assume and concede that the world is somehow conflictual, we would like to know if it can change towards something more peaceful. If you assume that the world is static, then it cannot change: we cannot do anything about it. But there's another perspective, which is an evolutionary perspective, which says that, even if you can see that there's conflict, it's quite possible to have peace in the future, as long as individuals, universities, and policymakers work towards that. This, therefore, creates less pessimism as we practice solidarity and work on all these possibilities in the world.

### *Interests: Relative and Absolute Gains*

In terms of interests, specifically, in terms of relative gains, are countries only concerned about gaining more than other states or are states concerned about gaining something from another state? The difference is crucial because, if a state always wants relative gains, the state will always want to get more and, therefore cooperation is very, very impossible: there's a lesser possibility for deeper cooperation and peace. But, if we describe states to just want to have something, not necessarily greater than another state, then it's possible to cooperate in many areas, such as trade. So, even if the gain is lopsided towards another country, but the other is just willing to get something, that's what you call "absolute gains", it's possible to get peace, peaceful relations and cooperation. However, a lot of scholars think that China wants relative gains.

It is said that a lot of countries who emerge in the world will want relative gains. In fact, the reason why they want to emerge in the world in the first place is because of the pursuit for relative gains. But the alternative view is that, actually, that claim is not really accurate, and countries want absolute gains: they just want to get something because it will benefit from them regardless of whether they will get more or less from a specific deal. Just think about trade relations. In fact, one of the biggest issues for creating the Mega-Trade deal called the RCEP or the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership is because some countries get more, such as in some industries, than other countries, and that's why they wanted to negotiate for better deals. But, actually, not all countries wanted more from the certain deal. They just want to be included in that deal. What we're saying is the alternative view is that absolute gains is what countries want and, if we assume this, it's possible for countries to cooperate and possible for countries to have peaceful relations.

## *Materialism versus Ideationism*

The second set of ontological assumptions about the world is Materialism and Ideationism. The argument of the Materialists is that State behavior is determined primarily by material motivations. That means that if a certain country invades another country, it's really about the pursuit of more growth, more guns, and more material benefits. But the other view is Ideational; that means that State behavior is determined primarily by norms, by beliefs, by ideas, by culture. If countries are motivated not just by materialism but also by ideationism, it's quite possible for a country to pursue a norm of peace rather than always just getting material things. Just look at the situation after World War II. We know that Japan deinstitutionalized war in their constitution. What they did was to promise the world that they're not going to attack another country and you know that, if it's going to pursue this, it's going to be the last resort. If we assume that ideationalism is also a motivation of states, and not just materialism, then there's a possibility for peace.

If certain ideas such as non-interference or ideas such as nuclear non-proliferation exist in the world in existent countries, then there's a possibility for peace. Then it's not just all a pursuit of material dreams. It is quite crucial as well if we admit that peaceful ideas can be a motivation for countries because then solidarity won't be a problem. Solidarity would then be a possibility.

## *The Harmony Paradigm versus the Conflict Paradigm*

One of the most important ontologies revolve around the harmony paradigm and the conflict paradigm. A lot of economists actually gravitate towards the harmony paradigm. But some theorists, such as the Marxist theory, the Realist theory and many other theories assume that the conflict paradigm is the dominant paradigm in the world. Let's that break that down one by one. The conflict paradigm assumes that agents often have conflicts of interest because of the pursuit of relative gains, and agents often resort to actual conflict. They don't want to resolve it through dialogue. They resort to actual conflict because of the conflict of interest. It is presumed that most social outcomes are determined by agents' conflictual behavior. There are other theories that assume this, like *offensive realism*, that assumes that the world is really a product of conflict. Marxism, for example, proposes that the world will be a product of conflict among classes.

At the same time, you have the Harmony Paradigm, where there's generally more common interests and, if there's a conflict of interest, it's possible to resolve this conflict of interest cooperatively. This paradigm presumes that most positive social outcomes are produced by cooperative behavior instead of conflict. You would then see that in some economic theories



where relationships are really based on economic transactions. There's really less room for basing these transactions on conflict. Another branch of realism is *defensive realism*, and that's the way we will want to describe China. As a defensive realist, China believes that, even if there's a conflict of interest, it does not necessarily lead to conflictual relations, and therefore there's a possibility for solidarity.

### *Static versus Evolutionary Nature of the World*

Finally, the last set of ontological assumptions is that that of the Static versus the Evolutionary perspective. As I said earlier, it is important because, if we describe the world to be static, and if we describe it to be conflictual and static at the same time, then there's no room for change and international systems will always be like that. Therefore, States will act accordingly if the world is conflictual. The States will react with fear and uncertainty and, therefore, they won't change. But if we admit the possibility of evolution, i.e., that international systems and countries evolve from being belligerent to being peaceful or, actually, from peaceful to belligerence, then there will always be a possibility for peace and cooperation, if we take the evolutionary view of the world.

All these sets of ontological assumptions are rarely discussed in the open at the level of theory, because a lot of social scientists are not very comfortable with philosophical discussion. But the goal should always be that we should engage the philosophy of social scientists, look at the orthodoxies, look at the ontological assumptions and theories that we make, because it's very, very important. Proper theorizing will always only be borne out if we look at the philosophy of social sciences. We will be able to understand theories better if we look at the philosophy of the social sciences.

### *Back to the Case of China*

There are a lot of scholars just zeroing in on China, because China is a good example or case study to analyze using these ontological assumptions. There are a lot of scholars saying that China is a *satisfied country*<sup>3</sup>. But, at the same time, there are also a lot of scholars saying that China is a *dissatisfied country*<sup>4</sup> and, therefore, will want to revise the world order and will want to pursue relative gains rather than absolute gains. According to the latter, China will want

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<sup>3</sup> Transcriber's Note: If China is a *satisfied country*, then it will pursue absolute gains. The authors who think that this is the case, as listed in Dr. Garcia's slide, are: Johnston (2003), Shambaugh (2005), Glaser and Wang (2008), Goldstein (2005), Zhang and Tang (2005), and Medeiros (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Transcriber's Note: If China is a *dissatisfied country*, then it will pursue relative gains and will resort to conflict to achieve it. The authors who think that this is the case, as listed in Dr. Garcia's slide, are: Kagan (2006), Friedman (2008), Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Small (2008).

to pursue conflictual relations very rather than cooperation. We don't blame these theorists because there are a lot of theories that really do not unpack the issue at the level of philosophy.

On the other hand, what we're saying is that China is a realist state. But it's a *defensive realist* state. By that we mean those states that do not intentionally reduce the security of other states: its actions are based not on offensive intentions but defensive intentions. It really just wants to defend itself. In such a scenario, conflicts can be resolved and overcome by cooperation. Conflicts therefore are not necessarily a part of international politics. It's not an enduring part of international politics, and there's a lot of Chinese philosophy that actually predicts that China would be more peaceful than what people actually think.

We also see the evolution of Chinese foreign policy over time. China has moved from an offensive realist state, i.e., from Mao Zedong wanting to overthrow the international system to inject its own vision of the world, to a defensive realist state, and even the liberal state, under Deng Xiaoping. The assumption is that, under Deng Xiaoping, it wanted to cooperate with the ASEAN countries it wanted to be part of the world. Obviously, we know the great opening up of China under Deng Xiaoping towards a liberal and capitalistic system. Even, obviously, when he opened China up to liberal ideologies as alternative worldviews rather than just promoting Chinese worldviews, these worldviews were also learned by China and its policy makers.

One sees this evolutionary process commence, in fact, since 1949. The year 1949 is a watershed moment for China because it was the time that the Communist Party of China took over from the Chinese Republic and State. So, China has participated in 23 unique territorial disputes with neighbors on land and at sea. But the striking empirical evidence is that China has pursued compromise and offered concessions in 17 of these conflicts. Out of 23 land and sea conflicts, China has conceded 17. That's almost 70 to 80 percent of all territorial disputes over the last few years. What explains that? If everything is about conflict, if the West believes that everything's about conflict, that they will be motivated by conflictual relations, what explains this empirical evidence? In the face of this empirical evidence, we really have to extend our worldview towards other ontologies, other theoretical traditions that admit the role of the pursuit of peace in the world.

This is a rundown of all the disputes that China has gone through over the last few years<sup>5</sup>. There are issues with Burma, with Myanmar, with North Vietnam, with Nepal, and with India across the Chinese border; even North Korea shares a border with China. There are also issues with Mongolia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, Laos, and Bhutan. So, there are a lot of settlements with these countries. We also see issues with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and the former USSR countries. There's some violence, but at the end point of such issues were concessions. In fact, increased trade relations, increased diplomatic actions, cooperative actions with these countries, and a lot of compromises and concessions have been made by China. So,

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<sup>5</sup> Transcriber's Note: At this point Dr. Garcia presents a table entitled the *Summary of Findings for China's Compromises in Territorial Disputes (19149-2005)*.

why is it that, even if you look back in history, at the time that the East Asian countries had a tributary system, China had actually been very cooperative, and did not subjugate and colonize other countries? China has never colonized any country in the world at the time when Europe was in a colonization spree. China did not do that even if it was really powerful. So, there's a different worldview that China has. In fact, it could be argued that China was even more powerful than Europe at the time that Europe was colonizing. If the orthodoxy is that powerful countries will always seek to subjugate weaker countries, why is it that China did not do that?

### *Offensive Realism Under Mao Zedong*

It's quite fascinating evidence really. And we're not really speaking about defending China and its actions. It's really about the evidence, and perhaps admitting that there might be a different worldview and a better future for the whole world. What happened was that under Mao Zedong, the offensive realist theory of the Mao Zedong state expounded an ideology of overthrowing and fearless regimes in Asia and the world by supporting insurgencies and threatening imperialist supporters and threatening the people sympathetic to the West. Mao also believed that conflicts were inevitable, and a necessary part to transform the world into Socialism. Cooperation was negligible. Mao also believed that the intentions of other states are evil: that the world will always be conflict-prone.

That's under Mao Zedong. But China has evolved to a defensive realist state under Deng Xiaoping. China expunged its revolutionary actions and rhetoric, it opened up to the world, it welcomed foreign investments and ideas that are different from its own, and Deng Xiaoping realized that how other States react to them is a product of their own actions towards States. So that means that China has to be careful with how it deals with other states. China has also practiced self-restraint by being a member of international institutions. It's been a supporter of the ASEAN, the ASEAN regional forum where the South China Sea/West Philippine Sea disputes are being discussed. In 2001 it became part of the World Trade Organization, the leading trade organization in the world that really discusses or regulates and encourages the free market in the world. That's such a big thing because it means that China is willing to subject itself to rules that have been created by other countries before it.

As we have seen, China has also resolved many of its territorial conflicts amicably. It has pursued cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to reassure other countries as well that it seeks to cooperate with them. China has also cooperated with many other institutions such as the AIIB, the ASEAN+3. It has become a champion of economic globalization. Xi Jinping has in fact spoken about economic globalization, and it's willing to pursue talks and cooperate instead of just shunning talks and shunning cooperative opportunities with other countries.

## *Conclusions*

To sum it all up, if you look at Social Science theory and International Relations Theory from a different ontological perspective, we may find that there's more possibility for cooperation in peace, contrary to what has dominantly been argued by a lot of the media and a lot of scholars as well, who have an offensive realist vision. But we're saying that those visions are based on really just three sets of ontological assumptions that may be limiting and may not be enough to really accurately describe the world and predict what's going to happen in the future. The case of China, the most dominant emerging country in the world, tells us that it's possible to evolve, the international system can evolve, countries can evolve, and there's a huge potential for cooperative relationships in the current world order. To end, I would say there is a big possibility for solidarity. There's a big possibility for peace and cooperation. Countries, organizations, universities and professors can work towards that, as long as we admit that the world is not always conflictual, the people and countries are not always materialistic and individualistic.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you today. I hope for a fruitful discussion afterwards.