

Heartland, Contender and Periphery: A Critical Analysis of Chinese Foreign Policy

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Abstract

This study makes a critical analysis of Chinese foreign policy from 1989 to 2017 to evaluate China's changing position in the world order from a historical perspective. Following Gramscian Critical Theory, it examines China's relations with the United States, Russia and the Central Asian members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to figure out if China is challenging the US-led world order. Here, it is argued that while China has an intention of reforming the existing world order, it does not have the intention of replacing it with a completely new order since it has been among the countries that benefited from the existing one the most.

Keywords

China, the United States, Russia, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Hegemony, Chinese foreign policy

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Merkez Bölge, Hasım ve Çevre : Çin Dış Politikası'nın Eleştirel Bir Analizi

Özet

Bu çalışma, Çin'in dünya düzenindeki değişen konumunu tarihsel bir perspektiften değerlendirmek için 1989 ila 2017 yılları arasındaki Çin dış politikasının eleştirel bir analizini yapmaktadır. Gramscici Eleştirel Teori'yi temel alan çalışma, Çin'in ABD liderliğindeki dünya düzenine meydan okuyup okumadığını anlamak amacıyla ülkenin ABD, Rusya ve Şangay İşbirliği Örgütü'nün Orta Asya üyeleriyle ilişkilerini incelemektedir. Çalışmada Çin'in mevcut dünya düzeninden en fazla fayda sağlayan ülkeler arasında yer alması dolayısıyla her ne kadar mevcut dünya düzenini yeniden düzenlemek gibi bir niyete sahip olsa da bu düzeni tamamıyla yeni bir düzen ile değiştirmek niyetinde olmadığı ileri sürülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Çin, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, Rusya, Şanghay İşbirliği Örgütü, Hegemonya, Çin dış politikası

Introduction

Since its entrance to the discipline in the 1970s as a part of the debate on the decline of the United States' (US) power, hegemony has been a contested concept in International Relations (IR). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, many different theories, with realism being at the forefront, suggested explanations that the US was in decline and a new, post-US international system was emerging. However, at the end of the 1980s it became clear that this was not the case and in fact, throughout the 1990s the US was quite successful in increasing its strength relative to others and securing its central place in the world order. As it seemed obvious that mainstream theoretical approaches were insufficient in explaining the ongoing change in the world order, new approaches were introduced into the discipline with alternative hegemony conceptualizations. One of those approaches, neo-Gramscian Critical Theory (CT), aims to overcome the weaknesses of mainstream approaches by analyzing change from a historical perspective with the overall goal of transcending the prevailing order by revealing potential alternatives.

Since the end of the 1990s, as China has received all of the following titles one by one, biggest trading nation, biggest exporter of goods, largest holder of foreign exchange reserves and largest lender state and became the candidate for others by becoming the second largest economy and military spender in the world, the hegemony debate, this time putting China at its center, was again brought up to the agenda. As in the 1980s, this current debate is still dominated

by mainstream theories, especially by neorealism, which aims to maintain the prevailing world order with its existing power relations. This study, by contrast, aims to offer an alternative analysis of China's re-rising status by focusing on its relations with the US and Russia, and with Central Asian states through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the post-1989 period. The US is the leader of the heartland while Russia has been, including the USSR experience, one of the main contender states of the 20th and 21st centuries. Central Asia, on the other hand, provides an important case to evaluate China's regional policies because unlike East Asian countries, it is almost out of reach of the US sphere of influence and also an important region to test Sino-Russian relations due to the importance of the region for Russian interests. In short, each of these cases occupies an important place in China's foreign policy as well as occupies a place in the division of labor in the world order: core, contender and periphery respectively. The year 1989, on the other hand, represents an important break in Chinese domestic and foreign policy and shows how national and international/transnational social forces are related to each other. This is why 1989 is selected as the starting year. The study ends in 2017 because in that year India and Pakistan were accepted to the SCO as full members. Since this study aims to make an analysis on China's relations with the Central Asian members through the SCO, post-2017 era is not included.

This study seeks to reveal if China's foreign policy behavior enables the creation of an alternative world order by delegitimizing the prevailing post-hegemonic world order and by offering a counter-hegemonic coalition, at least in its neighborhood. Here, it is argued that as the main contender state in the global political economy, while China has an intention of reforming the existing world order, it does not yet have the capacity to establish a counterhegemonic coalition to alter the US-led world order with a completely new one. Thus, China, at the moment, tries to increase its voice in world affairs, limit the excesses of the US and cooperate with states outside of the Western core to transform the existing order into a multilateral one. Its proposals for a multilateral order and its selective balancing/challenging behavior against the US contribute, albeit slowly, to the de-legitimization of the existing order and especially its US- and Western-centric character.

In this direction, to provide a theoretical background, in the first part, neo-Gramscian Critical Theory's approach to the concept of hegemony is analyzed. In the second part, with the aim of examining transformations in Chinese foreign policy, a brief historical background is provided. In the following three parts, China's post-1989 relations with the US, Russia and Central Asia is examined. Finally, in the conclusion, an assessment of China's post-1989 foreign policy and its potential challenge to the existing world order is made.

Conceptualizing Hegemony

Vast majority of the literature on the hegemony debate, especially realist studies focusing on the relationship between a rising China as a challenger and the US as the hegemon, base their studies on a thin conceptualization of hegemony, which considers only material but ignores non-material aspects of hegemony building.¹ Thus, hegemonic transition is just a matter of leadership change among economically and militarily dominant powers. Accordingly, the main discussion is reduced to how this transition will be realized: a peaceful or a conflictual one.² However, such conceptualizations of hegemony building are not sufficient to grasp the true nature of change in historical hegemonies. This study, thereof, follows neo-Gramscian Critical Theory that has a thick, one that considers both material and ideational aspects, understanding of hegemony.

Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony: Gramscian Concepts

CT, which was introduced by Robert W. Cox, bases its conception of hegemony on the works of Antonio Gramsci. While Gramsci formulated this concept mainly at the national level, he was well aware of its links with the international level and in his writings related these two levels. Cox, following Gramsci's conceptualization, reformulated his thoughts at the international/transnational level.

Gramsci based his description of hegemony on two sources: the debates within the Third International on how the hegemony of the working class should be established and the writings of Niccolo Machiavelli. Following the first debate, in order to create a pathway for a socialist transformation in Western Europe, Gramsci applied the concept of hegemony to the ruling bourgeoisie class. In this way, he distinguished two important factors that created the conditions for the hegemony of the bourgeoisie: capitalism and civil society. In countries where capitalism was established and civil society was strong enough to cope with the state, capitalist class could establish its hegemonic position. Furthermore, by including the civil society into the picture, Gramsci enlarged the definition of state. Secondly, following Machiavelli's "image of power as a centaur: half man, half beast" Gramsci combined consent and coercion as the mutually

¹ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.

² Bentley B. Allan, Srdjan Vucetic, and Ted Hopf, "The Distribution of Identity and the Future of International Order: China's Hegemonic Prospects", *International Organization*, Vol. 72, No. 4, 2018, pp. 839–841.

complementary elements of hegemony. According to him, the more consent becomes prominent, the more an order becomes hegemonic.³

In his studies, Gramsci realized that conditions between Tsarist Russia and post-World War I Western Europe differed considerably. The main difference was relative strengths of the state and civil society and the relation between them. Changes in this relationship affected which types of strategies to be used for a socialist transformation. Since, in Tsarist Russia, civil society was undeveloped, and the state apparatus was strong but vulnerable, a vanguard party could overthrow the previous order in a “war of movement” without an active resistance from the civil society. However, in Western Europe, where a strong civil society coexisted with elements of government, such a strategy could not be used. Instead, an alternative strategy, a “war of position” had to be implemented. This strategy involved the creation of alternative institutions and intellectual resources that could bridge other subordinate groups with the working class. In other words, through a war of position, the working class had to gain the support of other constituents of the civil society, namely elites and masses, by creating counter-hegemony.⁴

Following his enlarged definition of the state as a state-society complex, Gramsci refused to favor structure (material conditions) over superstructure (ideas). According to him, the relationship between material forces, institutions and ideologies were reciprocal and their historical congruence formed a “historical bloc”. An important aspect of a historical bloc is the existence of a historical social class. In the process, intellectuals have an important role. As organically connected to a social class, to create cohesiveness among group members, intellectuals take part in producing and developing ideas, technologies and organizations.⁵

Hegemony and World Orders

To make a historical analysis of how the world operates, instead of following the mainstream thin meaning of hegemony as the material dominance of one state over other states, CT applies Gramscian, or thick, notion of hegemony to

³ Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935*, New York: New York University Press, 2000, pp. 422-424; Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1983, pp. 163-164.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 222-230; Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony”, pp. 164-165; Kees van der Pijl, “Gramsci and Left Managerialism”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2005, p. 506.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 301-307; Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony”, pp. 167-168; Stephen Gill, *Power and Resistance in the New World Order*, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 301-307.

the international/global level. For CT, the thin conceptualization does not reflect a hegemonic order, but a non-hegemonic order that can be named as “dominance”. Dominance of a powerful state may be a necessary condition but is not sufficient for building hegemony. Consent of other state-society complexes needs to be secured to transcend dominance and create hegemony.⁶ Thus, a state’s dominance in economic, military and political realms needs to be supported by an ideology that can be embraced by other societies and states.

Historically, hegemonies have first established at the national level and then expanded to the global level. Put differently, in order for a state to establish hegemony at the global level it first needs to experience a national economic and social revolution. After a social class establishes its hegemony at the national level, with its institutions, culture and technology this national hegemony is expanded to the transnational level with the consent of other states and societies. While core state-society complexes adapt themselves to the new order smoothly, emulation of hegemony in peripheral countries takes the form of a passive revolution and is therefore not as intense and consistent as in core countries. Therefore, hegemony represents something more than just an order among states at the international level. It is an order with a dominant mode of production that penetrates into states and bounds subordinate modes of production. This way, hegemony becomes a combination of international social relations that links social classes in different states.⁷

Throughout history, all hegemonic orders have generated and faced challenges from counter-hegemonic forces that tried to delegitimize the established order by creating a new counter-society based on norms and principles contradicting and challenging those of the hegemonic order. In other words, to challenge and overcome the existing hegemonic structure, counter-hegemonic forces must establish a new historical bloc through a war of position.⁸

International organizations that are created and supported by the hegemonic state play an important role in maintaining the world hegemony by expressing the universal norms, which are regarded as the general principles that states and forces of civil society have to comply with. International organizations incorporate rules of the hegemonic world order and play an important part in

⁶ Bentley B. Allan, Srdjan Vucetic, and Ted Hopf, “The Distribution of Identity”, p. 840; Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1981, pp. 139-140; Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations,” pp. 170-171.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54; Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders,” pp. 139-140; Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations,” pp. 171-174.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37; Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations,” pp. 173-174; Robert W. Cox and Michael. G. Schechter, *The Political Economy of a Plural World*, New York, Routledge, 2002, pp. xv-xvi.

legitimizing that order by creating guidelines for states to follow. Furthermore, following the method of *transformismo*, these organizations co-opt elites from peripheral countries and decrease the likelihood of resistance and counter-hegemony building processes. In other words, *transformismo* enables international organizations to absorb and assimilate counter-hegemonic ideas.⁹ Hereby, Cox claims that international organizations are not suitable for a struggle against the hegemonic order. However, following Kees van der Pijl, this study suggests that an ideological struggle can be fought both within and between international organizations. Furthermore, through them support can be given to local and international civil society and non-governmental organizations as part of a war of positions.¹⁰

Sino-US Relations: Accommodating or Challenging?

In the post-1989 period, Sino-American relations have been an undulated relationship. After Tiananmen, the US-led Western heartland tried to isolate China by placing economic, financial and military sanctions.¹¹ The US, furthermore, ceased bilateral summits between the leaders of two countries until October 1997.¹² However, being aware of the importance of China on both economic and political issues, in time, the George H. W. Bush administration also took some steps to improve bilateral relations like lifting some aspects of the embargo and maintaining cross-state relations through official and unofficial visits. Deng was also aware of the need to improve relations with the US both to continue economic modernization and to re-establish his power in the decision-making process. As a result, economic ties recovered quickly.¹³ In 1994, by pegging its currency to the USD China showed its willingness to improve bilateral ties and be a part of the existing order.¹⁴ In September 1997, Japan and the US adopted the new US-Japan Defense Guidelines that expanded the role of Japan's military in maintaining the security in the region.¹⁵ Furthermore, the following

⁹ Robert W. Cox, "Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations," pp. 172-173.

¹⁰ Kees van der Pijl, "Two Faces of the Transnational Cadre Under Neo-liberalism", *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2004, p. 201.

¹¹ Gregory J. Moore, "Less Beautiful, Still Somewhat Imperialist: Beijing Eyes Sino-US Relations" in Shaun Breslin, ed., *Handbook of China's International Relations*, London, Routledge, p 130.

¹² Yan Xuetong, "The Instability of China-US Relations", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2010, p. 267.

¹³ Chi-kwan Mark, *China and the World Since 1945: An International History*, New York, Routledge, 2012, pp. 111-112.

¹⁴ Kees van der Pijl, *Global Rivalries from the Cold War to Iraq*, London, Pluto Press, 2006, p. 302.

¹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Joint Statement U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee Completion of the Review of the Guidelines", 23 September 1997, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/defense.html>, (access date: 1 July 2020).

year, Japan and the US announced the initiation of a joint research program on establishing a theatre missile defense (TMD) system.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, China interpreted these moves as signs of containment and reacted against the enhanced role of the Japanese military.

To overcome this confrontational relationship, China and the US agreed to improve bilateral ties and defined their relationship as “neither-friend-nor-enemy”. As a result of both sides’ efforts to improve their relationship, on 29 October 1997, Jiang and President Bill Clinton held a summit and issued a joint statement in Washington, which declared that a stable Sino-US relationship “is important to fulfilling their common responsibility to work for peace and prosperity in the 21st century”.¹⁷ In return, in June/July 1998, Clinton made a state visit to China where he, for the first time, announced the “three nos” in US-Taiwan relations.¹⁸

When everything seemed to be going in a positive direction, US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on May 8, 1999, despite claimed to have been accidental by the US, reversed the upward trend in bilateral relations, a development that could only be improved upon after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US. After the bombing crisis, Chinese analysts started viewing Sino-American relations in negative terms.¹⁹ Still, during this period, China avoided introducing a confrontation policy against the US that would be counterproductive and costly. Nevertheless, as soon as George W. Bush took office in 2001, Sino-American relations deteriorated rapidly. On April 1, 2001, a US EP-3 aircraft collided with a Chinese navy fighter. Washington blamed Beijing for the incident and interpreted it as China’s intention of challenging the US primacy in the Pacific Ocean. However, the incident happened in Chinese airspace and at the end, Washington had to send a letter to express their “regrets”. China-US relations, since Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit to Beijing, were at an all-time low (Gries 2005, p. 402; Pollack 2003, p. 617).²⁰

¹⁶ Lindsay Maizland and Benia Xu, “The U.S.-Japan Security Alliance,” Council on Foreign Relations, 22 August 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/us-japan-security-alliance>, (access date: 1 July 2020).

¹⁷ Embassy of the PRC in the USA, “China-US Joint Statement”, 29 October 1997, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zmgx/zywj/t36259.htm>, (access date: 1 July 2020).

¹⁸ Chi-kwan Mark, *China and the World*, pp. 117-118; Yan Xuetong, “The Instability of China-US Relations”, pp. 267-268.

¹⁹ Deng Yong, “Hegemon on the Offensive: Chinese Perspectives on U.S. Global Strategy,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 116, No. 3, 2011, pp. 343-365.

²⁰ Peter H. Gries, “China Eyes the Hegemon”, *Orbis*, Vol. 49, No. 3, Summer 2005, p. 402; Jonathan D. Pollack, “China and the United States Post-9/11,” *Orbis*, Vol. 47, No. 4, Autumn 2003, p. 617.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks changed the course of Sino-US relations and improvement in bilateral relations was again in favor of both sides. The US needed China's support in its "war on terror" and did not want to be distracted by it. China, on the other hand, could continue its economic modernization and "rejuvenation" without being disturbed by the US. Furthermore, they have also increasingly become interdependent economically. While China needed the US market for its goods and the FDI coming from the US, the US needed Chinese foreign currency reserves for financing its debts. Thus, as China supported the war in Afghanistan and shared intelligence with the US, Sino-American military relationship re-established. In return, Washington supported Beijing in its fight against "terrorism" in Xinjiang.²¹ Furthermore, after a long and painful negotiation process, as China accepted to make important concessions to the US, in December 2001, it could become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). China's concessions can be defined as a policy of "throwing a sprat to catch a mackerel". While the WTO was vital for China's economic modernization and integration to the global political economy, membership was also seen as a step in becoming a playmaker and reforming the global economic governance.²² According to a Chinese foreign policy scholar, China's opening up has been more opening up to the US than to the world. That's why, relations with the US has always been China's top priority.²³ This can be seen from its trade relations, as well. China's entrance to the WTO improved its place both in world trade and in Sino-US bilateral trade, which makes more than 15% of its total trade. Following fifteen years, China's total merchandise trade increased more than six-fold from \$620.8 billion to \$3685.6 billion and China's share in world trade increased from around 4% to more than 13%.²⁴ Sino-US trade, during the same period, increased almost five-fold from \$121.3 billion to \$578.1 billion.²⁵ By supporting China's transformation into one of the biggest trading economies in the world, the US, on the other hand, could benefit from a China that is eager to integrate into and comply with the rules of the world order.

Positive momentum in relations was disturbed by the unilateral US decision to wage war against Iraq in 2003. Still, this did not create high tensions between the two powers and good relations continued in the post-2003 period, as well.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 402-403; Jonathan D. Pollack, "China and the United States", p. 620.

²² Chi-kwan Mark, *China and the World*, p. 123; Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2010, p. 54.

²³ Anonymous informant #3, personal communication, 13 April 2018.

²⁴ World Trade Organization, "World Trade Statistical Review 2017", https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statis_e/wts2017_e/WTO_Chapter_09_tables_e.pdf, (access date: 30 June 2020).

²⁵ United States Census Bureau, "Trade in Goods with China", <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html#2001>, (access date: 28 June 2020).

Hence, while China was critical about the invasion, it let other states like Germany and France to take the lead and never challenged the US directly. This was also the case in other grounds such as criticizing the US during the WTO Doha negotiations.²⁶ In the following five to six years, China responded positively to calls from the US to become a “responsible stakeholder”²⁷ in the global order and cooperated with it on issues such as the North Korean nuclear program.²⁸ In short, China had no intention of at least openly challenging the hegemonic power and complied with the order and rules set by the Western heartland since the end of the Cold War.

The positive momentum in Sino-US relations was lost again in the aftermath of the 2008/9 Global Financial Crisis by reciprocal moves from both sides. In 2009 and 2010, China left its cooperative policy on the North Korean nuclear program aside and provided support to the Pyongyang regime, did not participate to sanctions against Iran, and in 2010, the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands problem re-emerged following China’s harsh reaction to the detainment of a Chinese fishing boat by Japanese authorities.²⁹ Furthermore, starting from October 2011, China cooperated with its strategic partner, Russia, to stop US attempts to realize a regime change in Syria by vetoing six UN resolutions related to Syria.³⁰ On the other hand, US moves contributed to worsening relations, as well. Soon after Obama and Hu, in November 2009, issued a joint declaration on respecting the core interests of each other, in early 2010, Washington agreed to sell weapons to Taiwan and Obama met with the Dalai Lama. These two moves were clearly against China’s core interests, which meant crossing the red lines for Beijing.³¹ Therefore, China reacted to these moves with unusually harsh measures.³²

Some of China’s post-2008 moves such as announcing the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone in November 2013, looking from Beijing’s side,

²⁶ Rosemary Foot, “Chinese Strategies in a US-Hegemonic Global Order: Accommodating and Hedging”, *International Affairs*, No. 82, Vol. 1, 2006, p. 87.

²⁷ Robert B. Zoellick, “Remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations”, National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, 21 September 2005, https://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/Zoellick_remarks_notes06_winter_spring.pdf, (access date: 2 July 2020).

²⁸ Thomas J. Christensen, “The Advantages of an Assertive China: Responding Beijing’s Abrasive Diplomacy”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 2, March/April 2011, pp. 55-57.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58; Alastair I. Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?”, *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4, Spring 2003, pp. 21-23.

³⁰ He Kai and Feng Huiyun, “Debating China’s Assertiveness: Taking China’s Power and Interests Seriously”, *International Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 5, 2012, p. 634; United Nations, “Security Council Veto List”, <http://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick>, (access date: 2 July 2020).

³¹ Yan Xuetong, “The Instability of China-US Relations”, p. 280.

³² Zhao Suisheng, “American Reflections on the Engagement with China and Responses to President Xi’s New Model of Major Power Relations”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 26, No. 106, 2017, p. 491.

can be regarded as defensive moves, response to US actions in China's neighborhood, rather than challenging the US. Indeed, Obama administration's policies towards Taiwan and the Dalai Lama and support for the remilitarization efforts of Japan as a part of deepening Japan-US alliance and the US Pivot to Asia were seen by Beijing as efforts to contain its "peaceful development".³³ Furthermore, statements such as "America's Pacific Century", "American leadership well into this century"³⁴ and "The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay"³⁵ by top US officials, strengthening of US military presence in the region and defining China as a potential threat in 2012 Defensive Strategic Guidance³⁶ have only exacerbated China's fears.

To overcome the problematic relationship of the last few years and propose a guideline for future relations, during his visit to the US in February 2012, Xi Jinping, then the Vice President of China, proposed establishing "a new model of major country relations" with the US that offered a relationship of "no conflict or confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation". The main reason for Xi's offer was his intention of focusing on China's long-term goal of economic development by furthering reforms and stable environment needed for that goal. The Obama administration, on the other hand, responded, at least initially, positively to Xi's proposal, so that it could continue its own post-crisis economic recovery at home and make the most of good relations with China while being distracted by developments in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.³⁷ This formulation of Sino-American relations also included Beijing's demand for being recognized as an equal by Washington, not as a junior power.³⁸

³³ David A. Beitelman, "America's Pacific Pivot," *International Journal*, Vol. 67, No. 4, December 2012; Kerry Brown, "China's Foreign Policy since 2012: A Question of Communication and Clarity", *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2017); Robert S. Ross, "The Problem With the Pivot", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 6 November/December 2012; Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Leadership and the Elite Responses to the U.S. Pacific Pivot", *China Leadership Monitor*, 38 (2012), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Swaine_CLM_38_Final_Draft_pdf.pdf, (access date: 2 July 2020).

³⁴ Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century", *Foreign Policy*, (11 October 2011). <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>, (access date: 2 July 2020).

³⁵ Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament", White House, 17 November 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>, (access date: 2 July 2020).

³⁶ United States Department of Defense, "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for the 21st Century Defense", 3 January 2012, https://archive.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf, (access date: 2 July 2020).

³⁷ Wang Yi, "Toward a New Model of Major-Country Relations Between China and the United States", Brookings Institute, 20 September 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/wang-yi-toward-a-new-model-of-major-country-relations-between-china-and-the-united-states/>, (access date: 28 June 2020).

³⁸ Kerry Brown, "China's Foreign Policy since 2012", p. 330.

In late 2011, the Obama administration, to safeguard its dominance in the region, announced the Pivot to Asia policy of re-balancing US global focus from the Middle East to the Pacific. This was a multi-dimensional policy that included political economic and security aspects. With the Pivot, to contain China and counter its rise, the US enlarged its regional focus from Northeast to Southeast and South Asia by strengthening decades old security relations with its regional allies and partners like Japan and Australia and by building new ties with other regional actors like Vietnam and Malaysia.³⁹ As a result, since 2012, the US increased its military presence in the region both by installing new military bases and raising the number of US forces and by conducting joint military drills with allies and partners and challenging China's assertiveness in the South China Sea under the rhetoric of "defending the Freedom of Navigation".⁴⁰

The Pivot also had an important geo-economic dimension. With the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which represents the interests of the globally minded transnationalist capitalist class, the Obama administration had undertaken the duty of rewriting the rules of global trade and thus, not letting Beijing do it instead, with the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. In short, the aim of this strategy was to reinstate the US's weakened hegemonic position in the global political economy.⁴¹

China's response to the US Pivot has been Xi's signature project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is a set of political-economic projects that aims to overcome the problems China faces in political, economic and security fields. It is, on the one hand, an attempt to escape the US encirclement by widening China's attention from the maritime Asia Pacific to territorial Eurasian states like Russia and Central Asia. It is, on the other hand, an attempt of overcoming China's industrial overcapacity problem by putting itself at the center of Asian connectivity and economic cooperation. The BRI, in this regard, is an initiative to promote the interests of the Chinese state class and the capitalist class that is related with the former. On the other hand, it is a move of transforming the Chinese Dream into Eurasia's dream and in this way, increasing its clout in the region.⁴²

³⁹ Martin Indyk, et al., "Scoring Obama's Foreign Policy: A Progressive Pragmatist Tries to Bend History", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 3, May/June 2012.

⁴⁰ Seung-Ook Lee, Joel Wainwright, and Jim Glassman, "Geopolitical Economy and the Production of Territory: The Case of US-China Geopolitical-Economic Competition in Asia", *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, Vol. 50, No. 2, March 2018, p. 429; Zhao Suisheng, "American Reflections", p. 497.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 428-429.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 426-428; Emre Demir, "Fragmented or Integrated Asia: Competing Regional Visions of the US and China", *Rising Powers Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 2, August 2018, pp. 52-54.

In sum, in the last three decades, bilateral relations between China and the US, at least until Trump's presidency, have been a fluctuated but progressively deepening one. Notwithstanding important crises such as the embassy bombing in Belgrade and rising tensions due to issues concerning Taiwan and the South China Sea, until Trump, both sides showed willingness to deepen their political economic relations. The Chinese side needed the US capitalist class and markets for its economic modernization and security provision for a stable order, whereas the US side needed the Chinese market, labor and savings and also the CPC's active contribution in stabilizing the world order as a "responsible stakeholder". However, as China gained strength in an era of transition to a post-hegemonic order, especially after the 2008 crisis, the respective ruling classes of China and the US began to compete for influence, particularly in the Asian region. This rivalry carries the potential to transform the US-led world order into a multilateral one with a number of competing power clusters. In this regard, China's relations with Russia and other SCO members have critical importance.

Demanding a Multilateral Order

China-Russia relations have been one of the most salient topics of international politics since the mid-1990s. Some regard improving relations between these two countries as an "authoritarian axis"⁴³, whereas others as an "axis of energy"⁴⁴ challenging the Western liberal order. Even though both states prefer a more "democratic world order" in which they have more voice and cooperate on important issues from energy to security, it is not possible to claim that a Sino-Russian "axis" is forming. According to a Chinese Russia expert, China and Russia cannot and should not be in an alliance relationship because despite the fact that they share several interests their views on the future world order is different. Notwithstanding its desire to reform some of its parts, China gains from the existing order and wants to be a part of globalized world. However, Russian experience of globalization is a negative one and that's why its leadership have different views for the future. Unlike Beijing's economic focus, Moscow has a military focus on world affairs. Furthermore, alliances need a leader and none of these two powers has the intention of letting the other to take the lead.⁴⁵ Still, both states consider the other as an important actor and partner in regional and international issues. While Russia mainly tries to use the "China card" as leverage against the West and benefit from the Chinese capital, for

⁴³ William C. Martel, "An Authoritarian Axis Rising?", *The Diplomat*, 29 June 2012, <http://thediplomat.com/2012/06/an-authoritarian-axis-rising/>, (access date: 23 June 2020).

⁴⁴ Flynt Leverett and Pierre Noel "The New Axis of Oil", *The National Interest*, 1 June 2006, <http://nationalinterest.org/article/the-new-axis-of-oil-1145>, (access date: 23 June 2020).

⁴⁵ Anonymous informant #2, personal communication, 4 April 2018.

China, Russia is important in securing its northern and western borders, modernizing its military, assuring the flow of raw materials and balancing the excesses of the US dominance in the era of post-hegemony.⁴⁶ According to a Chinese foreign policy scholar, China and Russia can get along well mainly because of the US pressure on them.⁴⁷

Sino-Russian relations improved substantially from rock-bottom since the end of the 1980s. After almost thirty years long break, relations were normalized in 1989 and strengthened significantly since then. The burden of history always had an important influence on bilateral relations. To overcome this burden and improve bilateral relations, in 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev offered a territorial concession on the eastern part of the Sino-Soviet border and stated his country's readiness to discuss any issue, at any time with China. Beijing, on the other hand, expected Moscow to satisfy its previously specified three prerequisites for normalizing relations. As the Soviet Union took steps for meeting them by withdrawing Soviet troops from Mongolia and the Sino-Soviet border, ending the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and ending the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, relations improved accordingly and in October 1988 both sides reached an agreement on the eastern part of the border and on the continuation of talks about the western border. Later, during Gorbachev's historic visit to Beijing in 15-18 May 1989, relations were officially normalized.⁴⁸

The pace of improvement in bilateral relations slowed for more than three years until China recovered from the post-Tiananmen isolation and Boris Yeltsin felt the need to change Russia's Western-centric foreign policy towards a multidimensional one and made his first state visit to China in December 1992.⁴⁹ During another visit by Yeltsin to Beijing in 1996, Russia and China declared their intention of establishing a "strategic partnership of equality, mutual confidence and mutual coordination directed towards the 21st century".⁵⁰ In following April, this time in Moscow, Jiang and Yeltsin issued a joint statement on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order, which announced their desire of leaving power politics and hegemony aside and achieve "the establishment of a peaceful, stable, just and rational new

⁴⁶ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics*, Baltimore, Brookings Institution Press, 2008.

⁴⁷ Anonymous informant #3, personal communication, 13 April 2018.

⁴⁸ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, pp. 27-28; Chi-kwan Mark, *China and the World*, pp. 105-106.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29; Gilbert Rozman, "The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership: How Close? Where To?", in James Bellacqua, ed., *The Future of China-Russia Relations* Kentucky, University Press of Kentucky, 2010, p. 13.

⁵⁰ United Nations, "Joint Declaration by the Republic of China and the Russian Federation", (25 April 1996). <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/51/127>, (access date: 25 June 2020).

international political and economic order”.⁵¹ This joint statement reflected both China’s Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence and the principles of its new security concept that was to be issued in the following year. Three years later, on July 16, 2001, Jiang and Vladimir Putin signed the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation that was based on equality, mutual benefit, respecting national unity and territorial integrity, respecting differences in political, economic, social and cultural development, mutual coordination in all fields and “the maintenance of peace, security and stability in Asia and the world”. Furthermore, both sides stressed their willingness to cooperate in the United Nations (UN) and in strengthening this institution as the central organization in maintaining the stability and balance in the world order.⁵² In 2002, the strategic partnership was defined by the two states as “a new type of state-to-state relations based on non-alignment and non-confrontation, and which are not directed against third countries”.⁵³ According to China, this partnership is an example of its rejection of “Cold War minded alliances” and request for the creation of a new type of relations based on its new security concept.

In line with their requests for a multipolar world, during this period, China and Russia opposed unilateral moves of the heartland such as NATO’s enlargement to Eastern Europe, NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999 and the unilateral withdrawal of the US from 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and its plans for developing a TMD system in Asia-Pacific.⁵⁴ However, this ‘solidarity’ did not last long and despite their 2001 commitment to consult each other on important foreign policy decisions, Russia’s moves like its casual acceptance of the US withdrawal from the ABM, approval of US military presence in Central Asia and the conclusion of the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty in 2002 without prior consultation with China taught a lesson to Beijing on the reliability of Moscow.⁵⁵

In the post-2003 period, as a response to unilateral attempts of the Bush administration, Sino-Russian relations gained pace again. While both sides

⁵¹ United Nations, “Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order”, 23 April 1997, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/234074>, (access date: 25 June 2020).

⁵² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation”, 24 July 2001, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t15771.shtml, (access date: 25 June 2020).

⁵³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Joint Declaration by the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China”, 2 December 2002, <http://www.mid.ru/bl.nsf/900b2c3ac91734634325698f002d9dcf/9d22082391597d6443256c85005303e1?OpenDocument>, (access date: 28 July 2020).

⁵⁴ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, p. 50; Deng Yong, “Hegemon on the Offensive”, p. 359.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

opposed the 2003 Iraq War, China, “instead of openly criticizing the US, let Russia to take the lead with France and Germany”.⁵⁶ On July 1, 2005, Hu and Putin signed the China-Russia Joint Statement on 21st Century World Order that reflected Hu’s idea of “building a harmonious world” by calling for a bigger role for the developing world and respect to diversity in the world order.⁵⁷

In fulfilling their calls for a multilateral world order, China and Russia went beyond official statements and collaborated in international organizations like United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) grouping. Despite the fact that their cooperation in the UN dates back to the 1990s, especially since 2000 they have taken similar positions on the UNSC resolutions from imposing sanctions to Iran and Myanmar to military intervention in Syria. By collaborating in the UNSC, China and Russia tried to achieve similar objectives which were reflected in their above-mentioned joint statements/declarations: protecting sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, protecting security through maintaining stability and balance in the world order, building their international image as important players, and promoting their own economic and political interests.⁵⁸ Furthermore, in the last few years, these two states started following more assertive but at the same time status-quo oriented voting behaviors both to reach their objectives of a multilateral world order and to oppose the revisionism of the US.⁵⁹ Barry Buzan, on the other hand, claims that since China is a rising power, it is not comfortable with its place in the Western-dominated international society and demands a more democratic international society and thus, cannot be viewed as a status-quo power.⁶⁰ However, here, the word “status-quo” is used in the sense that China and Russia try to overcome the marginalization of the UN system in the global decision-making by bringing the UNSC back to its previous central position and at least in rhetoric supporting the UN principles. Therefore, it can be claimed that China and Russia are trying to defend the order established at the end of the Second World War against the

⁵⁶ Rosemary Foot, “Chinese Strategies in a US-Hegemonic Global Order”, p. 87.

⁵⁷ People’s Republic of China and Russian Federation, “China-Russia Joint Statement on 21st Century World Order”, 2 July 2005, <http://www.politicalaffairs.net/china-russia-joint-statement-on-21st-century-world-order/>, (access date: 25 June 2020).

⁵⁸ Peter Ferdinand, “The Positions of Russia and China at the UN Security Council in the Light of Recent Crises”, European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, 5 March 2013, <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/8548d4c3-e486-42e7-9462-7e3ed914a470>, (access date: 20 June 2020).

⁵⁹ Joel Wuthnow et al., “Diverse Multilateralism: Four Strategies in China’s Multilateral Diplomacy”, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2012, p. 279.

⁶⁰ Barry Buzan, “China in International Society: Is ‘Peaceful Rise’ Possible?”, *The Chinese Journal of Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2010, p. 17.

unilateral revisionist intentions of the US. This policy should not be seen in opposition with their demands for more say in world affairs.

Together with Russia, China also collaborates with other emerging states in different international institutions and groupings. One of the most salient of these is BRICS. Since BRICS is formed of important economic partners and these partners, despite their differing and conflicting interests on many issues, share many common interests in global political economy, China considers BRICS as an important mechanism for reforming the world order.⁶¹ The same is also true for other members of BRICS. That is why since 2008, every year before G20 meetings BRICS states convene to coordinate their positions on issues regarding the global political economy. For example, in September 2009, at the G20 gathering, BRICS succeeded in convincing G7 members both to elevate G20 as the premier forum for economic coordination and to reform IMF quotas.⁶² However, just because the IMF quota reform was not realized then, in July 2014, BRICS announced the creation of a New Development Bank to finance infrastructure and ‘sustainable development’ projects both in BRICS countries and other developing countries.⁶³ Although this has been an important step from BRICS in fulfilling their demand for a multilateral world order, this bank should not be regarded as a challenge to the Bretton Woods institutions, but as a complement.

Notwithstanding many shared interests, Sino-Russian relationship also involves important (potential) problems that may create frictions in the future. First, since the end of the Cold War while Russia has been relatively declining, China is rising and the economic power gap between the two states is widening in China’s favor. Second, demographic differences between the two countries make Russians worry about a future Chinese takeover of Russian Far East. Third, qualitative and quantitative imbalances in bilateral trade, which is in favor of China, disturb Russians. Forth, Russia is worried about China’s rapidly increasing military expenditures, which is the second largest in the world after the US. Fifth, Russia’s unilateral moves to intervene in internal affairs of its neighbors as in the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014 conflicts with China’s sensibility to the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs.⁶⁴ Still, despite being uncomfortable, China refrain from criticizing its strategic partner’s

⁶¹ Li Mingjiang, “Rising from Within: China’s Search for a Multipolar World and Its Implications for Sino-US Relations”, *Global Governance*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2011, p. 335.

⁶² Joel Wuthnow et al., “Diverse Multilateralism”, pp. 283-284.

⁶³ Daniel Runde, “The BRICS Bank, Bretton Woods, and U.S. Disengagement”, *Foreign Policy*, 20 July 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/20/the-brics-bank-bretton-woods-and-u-s-disengagement/>, (access date: 10 June 2020).

⁶⁴ Peter Ferdinand, “The Positions of Russia and China”, pp. 20-24; Gilbert Rozman, “The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership”, pp. 15-22.

offensive actions publicly.⁶⁵ Finally, the competition between China and Russia in Central Asia, notwithstanding their simultaneous increased cooperation in the region, is intensifying.⁶⁶ This final point gained prominence as China's regional economic presence increased, particularly after Xi announced the BRI. According to a Chinese Russia expert, Moscow is disturbed by China's economic assistance to and growing economic importance in Central Asian countries because China's attempts to establish a great corridor of trade in the region with the BRI has the potential to make Russia economically irrelevant for both regional states and China.⁶⁷

Despite potential problems, developments in Ukraine and sanctions implemented against Russia by the heartland states strengthened Sino-Russian relations, especially China's position in the relationship. As these sanctions disturb Russia's economic ties with the West and access to financial sources, China emerged as the only major alternative source to meet Russia's economic and financial needs in return for concessions from Russia like opening some sectors of its economy to China's access.⁶⁸ Furthermore, their joint approach to the Syrian crisis bring these two powers even closer, in areas like the Middle East, where they did not have very close relationship beforehand. As their relations deepened and mutual trust enhanced, Russia also softened its policy of not selling China its most advanced weaponry such as the SU35 fighter jet and the S400 anti-aircraft missile system.⁶⁹ 2017 onwards, the Trump administration's aggressive policies like pursuing a trade war against China and implementing sanctions against both China and Russia provide a fertile ground for further cooperation among Beijing and Moscow.

In short, notwithstanding their competing economic and political interests in Central Asia and potential future problems in other areas, since the early 1990s, China and Russia incrementally elevated their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership.⁷⁰ Due to the challenge the US poses to these strongest contender states, they could even manage their competing interests through their partnership in Central Asia, a region that is neighboring both China and Russia

⁶⁵ Liselotte Odgaard, "Beijing's Quest for Stability in its Neighborhood: China's Relations with Russia in Central Asia", *Asian Security*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2017, p. 48.

⁶⁶ Peter Ferdinand, "The Positions of Russia and China", pp. 20-24; Gilbert Rozman, "The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership", pp. 15-22.

⁶⁷ Anonymous informant #2, personal communication, 4 April 2018.

⁶⁸ Dmitri Trenin, "China's Victory in Ukraine", Project Syndicate, 31 July 2014, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/dmitri-trenin-says-that-only-one-major-country-stands-to-gain-from-russia-s-conflict-with-the-west>, (access date: 10 June 2020).

⁶⁹ Liselotte Odgaard, "Beijing's Quest for Stability in its Neighborhood", p. 47.

⁷⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "President Vladimir Putin of Russia Meets with Wang Yi", 5 April 2018, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/t1548996.shtml, (access date: 20 June 2020).

and carrying the characteristics of being a periphery zone of the world order. Furthermore, due to its development needs and potential threats like political instability and terrorism it bears, Central Asia has become an area for cooperation, especially in the security area, between Beijing and Moscow under the banner of the SCO. Therefore, instead of considering Sino-Russian relations on the basis of conflict-cooperation dialect, it is more useful to realize the special kind of strategic partnership they are trying to establish⁷¹, particularly in the face of a declining US dominance.

Experiencing Regional Leadership

China, in parallel to its deepening relationship with Russia, strengthened its relations with Central Asian states. Similar to the Russian case, resolving border issues played an important role in first establishing and then improving its relations with the region. For China, securing the old Soviet border and maintaining stability in Xinjiang meant that it could direct its attention to securing its core interests of economic development, national unity and territorial integrity. Since Russia has been the most influential actor in the region from the mid-19th century, engaging with Central Asia through Russia was critical in providing security and stability in the region.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were also involved in the Sino-Russian border negotiations and all together these five states were named as the “Shanghai Five” after signing the 1996 Agreement on Strengthening Mutual Military Confidence in the Border Region in Shanghai, which included the creation of a 100-km-wide military-free zone at the border. The success of these states in demarcating the border opened the way for establishing the SCO in 2001 with the participation of Uzbekistan.⁷² In short, China’s initial policy towards Central Asia was security oriented.

As a security organization, the principle aim of the SCO has been to fight against the three evils of terrorism, separatism and extremism which are cross border and non-traditional security threats that cannot be countered by a single state.⁷³ For that purpose, SCO members have developed a number of measures to increase their cooperation and joint operation capabilities to counter any transnational threats. For example, from 2002 to 2015, they conducted fifteen

⁷¹ Liselotte Odgaard, “Beijing’s Quest for Stability in its Neighborhood”.

⁷² Peter Ferdinand, “Sunset, Sunrise: China and Russia Construct a New Partnership”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 5, 2007, p. 854; Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, p. 105.

⁷³ Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, “Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation”, 2002, <http://eng.sectsc.org/documents/>, (access date: 5 June 2020); Song Weiqing, “Feeling Safe, Being Strong: China’s Strategy of Soft Balancing Through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *International Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 5, 2013, p. 667.

joint military exercises, and the China-Kyrgyzstan counterterrorism exercise in 2002 was China's first ever joint military exercise. These exercises also contributed to Sino-Russian strategic partnership and decreased the trust deficit while at the same time improved their joint operability on counterterrorism. Thus, the organization enhances all member states', but especially China's and Russia's incentives to co-manage the security environment of the region.⁷⁴

Though the SCO was founded mainly as a security organization, non-security aspects like economic, political and social/cultural relations were and are also taken into account by its members, especially by China.⁷⁵ While Russia's focus is more security oriented, China gives importance to trade, energy and economic relations as well and tries to increase its influence in the region by creating a stable environment based on cooperation. This way it aims to secure energy flows from the region, gain access to markets and contribute to the development of its western areas and the region.⁷⁶ Furthermore, China also links economic development with security matters, which is far more important to Beijing than economic gains, and thereof supports the development of the region because for China, as these countries develop and get richer, they will have domestic stability and thus, their citizens will shy away from terrorist organizations.⁷⁷

Since its establishment, China has been on the driver's seat in the SCO and this is the first of its kind in which China has taken the lead. Even though China and Russia are seen as sharing the leadership in the organization, Russia mainly remains aloof and prefers engaging with the region through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) where China is not included. However, this does not mean that China enjoys a sole leadership in the SCO. Russia is still there as the long-time leader of the region and competes with China for regaining its dominant position of the pre-2001 period. By increasing their options, this competition creates opportunities for other members of the SCO to maximize their benefits by maneuvering between the two.⁷⁸ Thus, Central Asian states should not be regarded as just passive recipients and figurants, but as players that implement differing policies towards Beijing and Moscow.⁷⁹

China's leadership role can be viewed as a learning process where Beijing has been gaining experience in improving its leadership skills, engaging in multilateral diplomacy and stabilizing its neighborhood through a non-collective

⁷⁴ Liselotte Odgaard, "Beijing's Quest for Stability in its Neighborhood", pp. 46-49.

⁷⁵ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, p. 104.

⁷⁶ Peter Ferdinand, "Sunset, Sunrise", p. 854; Song Weiqing, "Feeling Safe, Being Strong", p. 668.

⁷⁷ Anonymous informant #2, personal communication, 4 April 2018.

⁷⁸ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, pp. 117-123; Gibert Rozman, "The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership", p. 22.

⁷⁹ Liselotte Odgaard, "Beijing's Quest for Stability in its Neighborhood", p. 44.

security regime that is not directed at any third party.⁸⁰ Thus, similar to learning by doing process of the early years of its reform period, China is following the “crossing the river by feeling for stones along the way” method.⁸¹ Furthermore, the organization can be regarded as a reflection of China’s “harmonious world” approach. Throughout the process, China has been successful in generating new institutional norms and concepts like the “Shanghai Spirit” and “New Outlook on Security” and promoting them as the institutional norms of the organization. Such that, principles reflected by these concepts are included both in the SCO Charter and in declarations like the June 2006 declaration. This way, China aims to create solidarity among members so that they will share common perceptions regarding regional matters.⁸² China, according to a Chinese Russia expert, has not yet defined a guideline for its own leading role in world affairs and thereof, as an emerging power, must benefit from any useful peaceful project.⁸³ Thus, Beijing’s efforts show its eagerness in creating new institutions that suit its core interests of security, sovereignty and development.⁸⁴ Still, even though China seems to be successful in creating solidarity, at least in rhetoric, in the SCO, in practice it has not been an easy process and problems still exist among member states⁸⁵, especially since the inclusion of India and Pakistan to the organization.

It has been a hard process for China to get the support of other SCO members on many issues regarding the region, especially in the early years. For example, in the post-9/11 period, the US was welcomed by most members and managed to set up military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, one of which was close to China’s western border, Xinjiang autonomous region. Even though China also supported the “war on terror” and shared intelligence with the US, it was not happy with these bases. However, since it had no capacity to challenge the US presence in the region by itself, it preferred “soft balancing” through the SCO. Yet, it was not successful in convincing other members to challenge the US existence until the “color revolutions” erupted in 2005. Only then the organization issued a joint declaration calling for the withdrawal of US troops from its members. Two years later, at the Bishkek summit, the SCO stated that the security in the region must be provided by regional states.⁸⁶ Thus, attempts for forcing regime changes in some Central Asian states were more influential

⁸⁰ Peter Ferdinand, “Sunset, Sunrise”, p. 855; Song Weiqing, “Feeling Safe, Being Strong”, p. 668.

⁸¹ Song Weiqing, “Feeling Safe, Being Strong”, p. 668.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 675; Elizabeth Wishnick, “Why a “Strategic Partnership”? The View from China,” in James Bellacqua, ed., *The Future of China-Russia Relations* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), p. 70.

⁸³ Anonymous informant #2, personal communication, 4 April 2018.

⁸⁴ Song Weiqing, “Feeling Safe, Being Strong”, p. 675; Joel Wuthnow et al., “Diverse Multilateralism”, p. 281.

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Wishnick, “Why a “Strategic Partnership””, p. 70.

⁸⁶ Song Weiqing, “Feeling Safe, Being Strong”, pp. 670-673.

than Chinese diplomacy in changing the attitudes of other member states towards the presence of the US troops in the region. Still, Chinese influence should not be underestimated since its economic power was also crucial in gaining other members' support for its leadership role. China, by focusing on long-term gains, has been financing infrastructure projects such as building highways and providing loans for cooperative and economic projects in the region.⁸⁷ In this context, the BRI plays an important role and with it, Beijing aims to link the Chinese Dream with its neighborhood and make it an Asian, even a Eurasian, Dream.

In sum, China's efforts in the SCO to promote international norms and concepts and to strengthen its relationships with its neighborhood show its eagerness in creating new institutions that suits its core interests of security, sovereignty and development. Furthermore, China's attitude towards the SCO and member states reflects its demands for a multilateral and democratic world order. However, it is hard to claim that the SCO is a tool of China in countering the US-led world order. A Chinese Russia expert even claims that to weaken Russia's influence in the region the US supports China in Central Asia.⁸⁸ Thereby, instead of a tool for directly challenging the US, for Beijing, the SCO should be viewed as a mechanism to balance the excesses of US unilateralism in the world order.

Conclusion

In the post-1978 period, by transforming itself in a capitalist state, China has become the second largest economy and the leading contender state in the global political economy. This transformation sparked a debate among IR scholars on the intentions of China. While some have claimed that following the footsteps of previous rising powers China will eventually challenge, militarily if necessary, the US-centered international system, some others have argued that because China benefits enormously from the system it will continue to comply with the rules of the game. Since the 1980s, neo-Gramscian Critical Theory has also become a part of the debate on how to conceptualize hegemony. Unlike problem-solving mainstream theories, by focusing its attention on the processes of change and enlarging the definition of hegemony in the world of state-society complexes, it has been trying to reveal and propose alternative world orders. Within this scope, here, through its relations with the three layers of the global political economic system, namely core, semi-periphery and periphery, Beijing's intention and capacity to challenge the US-led world order is evaluated.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 678-679; Peter Ferdinand, "Sunset, Sunrise", p. 854.

⁸⁸ Anonymous informant #2, personal communication, 4 April 2018.

Sino-American relations, since 1989, have experienced ups and downs. Throughout this period, China has been the biggest beneficiary of the existing order and never challenged the US leadership directly. On the contrary, it has been eager to integrate deeper into the system and to finance the US budget deficit, and it seems that will continue to do so, at least, in the medium term. Thus, Chinese and US economies intertwined with each other. China took a firm stand against the US actions only if these actions concerned China's so-called core interests. On other issues such as the invasion of Iraq, the Syrian crisis and US bases in Central Asia, Beijing preferred balancing the excesses of US policies through multilateral platforms and international institutions such as the SCO, BRICS and the UN. However, especially in the post-2000 era, China's increasing interaction with the world through the going out strategy and the BRI, its calls for respecting differences in development strategies and a bigger role for the Third World in the world order limit the policy options of the US in dealing with problems in different parts of the world.

Unlike the claims of some realist thinkers that China is going to challenge the international system overtly, there is still a huge power gap (both in terms of material power and soft power) between China and both the US in particular and the Western core in general, and Chinese leaders are well aware of this fact. Furthermore, since it has been the biggest beneficiary of the existing world order since 1978, for the moment, China has no grand strategy for establishing a completely new world order. The only grand strategy, according to Chinese IR scholars, Beijing thus far has is the BRI⁸⁹, which is an ambitious initiative. However, it is hard to claim that it is a direct challenge to the US-led world order. Thus, even if China is going to replace the US as the world's largest economy in the coming decades, unlike the claims of offensive realists, it does not seem likely that China will repeat the mistakes of the Third Reich and challenge the US militarily. In other words, China and the US are not "destined for war".

However, China is not satisfied with the Western-centric characteristic of the world order. On any given occasion, Chinese leaders demand a more democratic order that is non-hegemonic. China's calls for multilateralism and respect for different ways of development help counter-hegemonic movements in creating an alternative "universal common" based on multiculturalism against the "one-civilisation vision"⁹⁰ of the US, which under the "universal" (neo-)liberalism argues for standardized political and economic policies. In other words, China, by promoting new concepts like "harmonious society" and by demanding a multilateral world order in which the Global South has more voice, facilitates counter-hegemonic forces in their struggle to delegitimize the

⁸⁹ Anonymous informant #1, personal communication, 21 March 2018.

⁹⁰ Robert W. Cox and Michael G. Schechter, *The Political Economy*, p. 191.

established order, especially when Trump administration's hostility towards multilateralism is taken into consideration. Nevertheless, non-Western societies still have a long way to go before creating a new counter-society based on norms and principles contradicting and challenging those of the (post-) hegemonic order, if they ever will be able to do so.

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