

# INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY AND ITS LIMITS IN FORECASTING CHINESE BEHAVIOR TOWARDS THE US. THE CASE OF BALANCE OF POWER THEORY AND POWER TRANSITION THEORY

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**Abstract:** *The literature on international relations pays special attention to China's rise since the "opening of China" in 1978, trying to identify and make predictions about China's behavioral patterns in its relationship with the United States and the current international system. Not surprisingly, international relations theories have been considered – from Morgenthau to present –, useful tools for predicting the evolution of major events in the international relations system. Using different theoretical lenses we can infer different outcomes regarding the complicated US-China relationship especially now, when the Chinese economic and social transformation seems to be accompanied by a revival of its own traditional concepts aimed at formulating a „Chinese school”, of international relations, characterized by the rejection of the realist assumptions that point almost every time to an imminent confrontation and placing both countries on even more profoundly contrasting positions. Therefore, starting from the balance of power theory and the power transition theory, this article aims to identify the extent to which the two theories prove explanatory and predictive value and can be useful tools for inferring China's behavior in the context of the current aggressive discourse that characterizes the relationship between the two countries. Also, this paper is aiming to analyze the limits we can identify in the existing literature on both theories.*

**Keywords:** *Balance of power theory; Power transition theory; forecasting; peace; conflict; identity; international relations theory; ideal-types; threat; pax Americana.*

## Introduction

How can we truly understand the implications of a complicated relationship between the US (as an exponent of the capitalist Western world) and China (a representative of the emerging states and agent of change) considering that China's behavior indicates a growing desire to represent an alternative model of responsibility, which is assigned distinct legal, moral and social meanings (Chan 2013). Moreover, the conflict between the two states is not only for material gains, but also out of the desire to gain on the ground of moral principles and ideology more than experts in the field admit, considering that theories belonging to the realist research program give a very little importance for these endogenous factors such as culture.

Relevant in this regard, at least in order to infer the meanings of the PRC's position towards the US, are the statements of the Chinese officials who speak more and more about a decline of the US but not from the perspective of relative power, but about a "Decline of Hegemony and Thought", from the perspective of principles or lack thereof, even talking about a new type of international relations: „for a big country, the decline of thought is much more dangerous than that of power. In the 21st century, a multi-polar and globalized era, no country should resort to Cold War mentality to contain other countries. These outdated thoughts do not work in the present world” (Yucheng, The So-called `US Decline` is a Decline of Hegemony and Thought 2021).

In fact, it took the Chinese Communist Party six years to formulate the notion of *peaceful rise* to conceptualize China's new image, and two more years for the notion of *harmonious world* – a creation of the totalitarian party. Both concepts focus on the China's

rise model, responding directly to the existing external fears about the "Chinese threat" (Meixing 2007).

China does not miss any opportunity to reject the "profiling of civilizations" (made by the US and its allies) and notions such as: `clashes of civilizations`, `attempts to distort or denigrate non-Western civilizations` (Yi, Wang Yi Attends and Addresses the Opening Ceremony of the 48th Session of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers 2022), discriminatory rhetoric against certain religions and civilizations, the supremacy of the white race (Lijian 2022), the biased attitude of the West towards other civilizations (Yi, Promoting True Democracy for a Better Future of Humankind 2022), ideological confrontation (Yi, Wang Yi Attends and Addresses the Opening Ceremony of the 48th Session of the OIC 2022) and the monopolization of the definition of democracy by US standards, without taking into account the enormous cultural, historical and civilizational differences between states (Lijian, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference 2021).

Instead, China is proposing an alternative centered on a new responsible leader whose mission is to build a community with a common future for humanity and the progress of human civilization. This model, as Xi Jinping pointed out at the Davos Forum, takes the form of a "community of common destiny", based on dialogue, nonconfrontation, the promotion of inclusion and the rejection of all forms of unilateralism, protectionism, hegemony and power. China is thus proving a behavior that resembles a theoretical adaptation (L. Yucheng 2022) designed to identify "benign" variants for almost every realistic assumption.

The alternative model promoted by China is based on the BRICS project, transformed from a contested project into a geostrategic threat, linking major players on three continents, a model of developing countries that the United States does not represent. Recently, in the context of US visits to Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea - perceived by China as an attempt to reorganize the alliance system by excluding China and the BRICS -, BRICS joint statement promoted talks between members of the organization to clarify the principles, standards and criteria needed for an extension process (BRICS Joint Statement on "Strengthen BRICS Solidarity and Cooperation, Respond to New Features and Challenges in International Situation" 2022).

Formulas such as *community with common destiny* (Jiechi 2022), *peaceful coexistence* (Jiabao 2004) and *harmonious world* (Embassy of the PRC in the Republic of Namibia 2005) summarize the model promoted by China, which portrays the PRC as a responsible state and a defender of the "global common goods". In fact, this unique model of international relations, distinct from that of Western powers, saw its first victory when the United Nations first adopted China's key foreign policy concept in UN resolutions – *Community of common destiny for mankind* (U.N. General Assembly 2019).

In general, China is committed to never becoming a hegemon. For Chinese leaders, this is a behavior responsible for achieving world peace.

In order to better understand China's behavior, we first start with the balance of power theory and the power transition theory assumptions and analyze their explanatory and predictive ability, taking them as ideal types and combining them to observe "the extent to which these ideal constructions resemble or deviates from reality" (Poede 2022, 14-15).

## **1. Predictions regarding the position of the PRC vis-à-vis the USA**

International relations theories and history are powerful tools that, if applied correctly, are constructive for managing today's complicated bilateral relations between the world's fastest growing power and the world's only superpower during a global shift in power (Zhiqun 2006, 23).

Not surprisingly, the major theoretical approaches that have shaped the discipline of international relations from Morgenthau to present have all had in common, as one of their main objectives, the anticipation of the future (Fettweis 2004, 82). The role of theories has not always been exclusively to explain the past or the present, but also to scrutinize, or at least to provide clues to future developments in the international system.

To be able to formulate explanations or make predictions about future events, we first need some specific indicators. If in the twentieth century we appreciated the position of a state according to its location on the map – according to the famous aphorism of Napoleon Bonaparte "Each state makes the policy of its own geography" (Buse 2012) –, now the discipline of international relations puts at our disposal a multitude of tools by which we can explain the place and role of a state in the complex network of the world system.

Among these indicators that operationalize the concept of "power", central to the realistic research program, we also find a multitude of determinants of designing the power of states according to their material or immaterial character as: demographic profile, level of technological development, military capabilities, territorial vector, economic development, cultural factor, national will, configuration of perceptions/attitudes, cultural determinants, place and role in international institutions, resources or quality of government (Răceanu 2005, 28).

Thus, we consider the predictive capacity of a theory as a test of its maturity, the moment when this activity becomes one of its standard and routine practices, representing the main way of testing theories. In Kuhn's words, "The success of a paradigm is at first more of a promise. Normal science consists in the fulfillment of this promise, an achievement accomplished by extending the knowledge of those facts which the paradigm portrays as particularly significant" (Kuhn 1999, 86).

The interest in making predictions about how China will position itself in relation to the United States is not difficult to guess. Predictions of international relations theories point to an imminent confrontation. There are many arguments for maintaining peace in the developed world, including theories of peace, such as the theory of democratic peace or the theory of economic interdependence, which argues for the disappearance of the inevitability of war due to its high costs.

Considering the theory of economic interdependence – the main argument for maintaining a peaceful relationship between the US and China – we must keep in mind that when the relationship is driven by fear, interdependence not only can but also has a propensity for conflict. As one British observer put it after a visit to Germany, "Each of these new chimneys is a pistol directed to England." (Jervis 2006, 40)

This is even more complicated considering the recent events. In the context of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, China finds itself in a position to choose to stay with Russia, as an exponent of the anti-Western alliance, or to detach itself from it in a choice that would be a demonstration and a promise to the International Community, displaying the image of a responsible state. For now, China prefers to put forward ambiguous concepts that absolve it of the imperative of an answer.

Thus, our task is to assess the predictive power of the balance of power theory and power transition theory, considering current events that characterize the Sino-US relationship, to infer clues about their possibilities and limitations.

### *1.1. Balance of power theory*

Although most balance of power theories are realist theories, not all realist theories of international relations are balance of power theories. There are a variety of reformulations of the theory conceptualized by Kenneth Waltz. Each begins with the central assumptions to which specialists add additional hypotheses and empirical content (Levy 2004, 31) by

operationalizing power and other key concepts (Vasquez and Elman 2012, 153). As a result, various theories of power balance generate conflicting propositions about states actions and interactions.

Balance of power theory is one of the most fundamental concepts in the study of international relations. The concept is a product of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although the balance of power becomes an instrument of international relations after the Peace of Westphalia of 1648.

A shortcoming of this theory is its ambiguity. There are a multitude of common meanings assigned to the balancing act that relate to: 1) power configuration - the distribution of military assets in the system at a given time; 2) a description of the policy of a state, characterized by the performance of actions designed to lead to a particular configuration of power (The role of the United Kingdom in the 20th century and that of the United States in the 21st century) and 3) the balance of power used as a symbol that expresses a realist approach to international relations. George W. Bush's inaugural address is suggestive, with the U.S. president using the balance of power as a symbol when he said, "America remains committed to the world (...) by shaping a balance of power that promotes freedom" (President George W. Bush's Inaugural Address 2001).

Moreover, due to the unprecedented distribution of power after the end of the Cold War, the definition of balancing was refined in the sense that the difficulty of challenging the existing hegemony led to new forms of balancing such as: soft balancing, opaque balancing, hard-balancing, between which we can hardly identify specific differences (Layne 2011, 200-203).

Another manifestation of the BPT's ambiguity is its application in the contemporary world characterized, in the post-Cold War era, by the multiplication of international actors, accelerating interdependence, spatial-temporal compression and globalization.

Despite the historically unprecedented power of the United States at the beginning of the 21st century, the other leading states in the international system have not balanced against the United States, either by forming defensive alliances or by massively consolidating their capabilities (Layne 2011, 30). One possible explanation might be Walt's balance of threat theory which tells us that the lack of balance is due to the "benevolent" hegemony of the United States.

Moreover, the existence of many cases in which the predictions of the balance of power theory did not occur, leads many authors to try to formulate explanations for such theoretical shortcomings, thus maintaining a process of reformulation and readjustment of central hypotheses to suit specific cases, which is perceived as a degenerative approach. William Wohlforth and Richard Little offer several examples of systemic results incompatible with the theory that challenges the universality of the concept: the ancient system of the Middle East (900–600 BC), the system of Greek city-states (500–330 BC), the ancient Indian system (500–200 BC), the ancient Chinese system (656–221 BC) or the East Asian system between 1000–1800 AD) (Wohlforth, Little and Kaufman 2007).

Another problem arises from the difficulty of identifying the balancing behavior. At first glance, such behaviors cannot be easily observed, given the many analytical problems we find in the literature such as: 1) the moment of balancing; 2) balancing intensity; 3) the extent of the balancing (the number of units engaged in balancing); 4) the existence of a preventive war and 5) endogeneity (Vasquez and Elman 2012, 156-161).

Another problem concerns the conditions of applicability of the theory. Balance of power theorists admit the existence of biases such as the *Eurocentric bias* and the *great power bias*.

The first refers to the fact that the "logic" of the balance of power has not been applied outside the European continent (Yaqing 2016). Moreover, the evidence for the balance of

power theory is based on the modern system of the great European powers of the last hundreds of years, starting with the Treaty of Westphalia, or even starting with the period of the Italian city system from 1494-1495. Thus, the application of the power balance theory to the Sino-US relationship could lead to erroneous attributions of China's behavior, especially since Chinese theorists argue that the existing international relations theories cannot provide an explanation for how the world works, arguing that these theories based on the belief of the European Enlightenment favors the rationality of individual actors over social and procedural relativity, which would underlie Chinese thinking (Yaqing 2016).

This Eurocentric bias has profoundly influenced the balance of power theory. The very concept of balancer, although a general principle, almost always refers to the United Kingdom. However, the Chinese multistate system from 722 BC and 481 BC contradicted these hypotheses, leading to the formation of a universal empire under the rule of the Qin dynasty that lasted until 221 BC (Vasquez and Elman 2012, 164).

Another shortcoming of the balance of power theory stems from the fact that the phenomenon of globalization – a central concept of the current international system – is not mentioned at all in the voluminous literature on the balance of power.

### *1.2. Power transition theory*

The power transition theory was originally advanced by the A.F.K. Organski in 1958, as a competitor of the balance of power theory. The idea that power parity leads to war contrasts with the classical realist theory of Hans Morgenthau, Henry Kissinger, and Kenneth Waltz. The theory of power transition does not see the international system as anarchic, but as a hierarchical order in which actors accept their positions based on the relative distribution of power. The theory holds that a hegemonic system will be stable because it is in the hegemon's best interest to maintain the political and military order.

The goal of states is not to maximize power, but to maximize gains and maintain a dominant position in the system. The balance of power theory implies that the actions of states are dictated by an insatiable appetite for power, while the theory of power transition is that states fight for control over international rules and regulations, as well as over the values that govern relations between states (Zhiqun 2006, 23).

The main flaw of the neorealist balancing argument is that it cannot predict when or how states will act. The choice of tactics and timing depends on many factors, such as the level of perceived threat and the economic or military capacity of states. According to Kenneth Waltz, the balance of power theory allows us to say that a new balance of power will be formed, but not how long it will last. National and international conditions determine this. Waltz predicts either balancing strategies or a balanced system (result). It does not help us to predict a state of peace or war (Organski and Kugler 1989, 177).

This theory is again useful to world leaders at the beginning of the 21st century, as the international system is undergoing profound changes. The turning point is probably best established at the end of the Cold War in 1991. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States remained the only superpower in the international system (Organski and Kugler 1989).

In contrast to the balance of power theory, power transition theorists believe that the system always has a dominant power at the top of the international hierarchy. The process of unequal development of state power, however, creates both the existing hegemon and the future challenger when a state undergoes a significant internal transformation. Based on a central premise of the theory, such a state will be unsatisfied with the existing international order that the hegemonic power has constructed. Therefore, the dissatisfied state will challenge the hegemon to change the system (Jianren 2019, 9).

Thus, from the perspective of PTT, the international system represents a hierarchy of states that are distinguished by how strong they are and by the degree of satisfaction they have with the international status quo – criteria based on which Organski developed the typology of states in the international system as follows: 1) *strong and satisfied*; 2) *strong and dissatisfied*, 3) *weak and dissatisfied*; 4) *weak and dissatisfied* (Organski and Kugler 1989, 172). According to this theory, wars are fought between the strongest states in the hierarchy of power, in order to change or preserve the status quo.

Dissatisfaction is, however, a subjective term. That's why Organski believed that a challenger, such as China, probably does not share the fundamental values of the system and usually acts against them (Lai 2011, 18). Organski postulated that the power transition follows five stages: preponderance, pre-parity, parity, post-parity, and the preponderance of the challenger as the new global power (Lai 2011, 173-175). Although the literature abounds in interpreting what characterizes satisfaction or dissatisfaction at the state level, few papers strictly analyze China's behavior in terms of these indicators, often attributing benign or revisionist behavior as a reaction to the perceived threat.

According to Organski, when the growing power reaches 80% of that of the hegemonic power, the process of power transition begins; and when the increasing power exceeds 120%, the process of power transition has been completed (Jianren 2019, 34).

If we look at the economic data, judging by the Gross National Product (GNP), the measure that combines the demographic and economic aspects of a state's productivity (Organski and Kugler 1989, 190), the stage at which the US-China relations are now is in the pre-parity stage (stage 1).

Applying Organski's formula, at this stage, the challenger (China) can withstand the demands of the dominant nation, the USA, which implies that at this level of power, sufficient conditions for conflict exist. Because the dominant state is committed to preserving the status quo, it has little incentive to challenge it. After all, the international order is designed to support the dominant power.

Therefore, satisfaction and power are important determinants of peace and conflict. A critique of the PTT could refer to the absence of an agreed way to measure the degree to which a state is satisfied or dissatisfied with the existing status quo. Moreover, the central variable of PTT, on which the desire of the rising power to start a war is based and which should, therefore, be adjusted in the direction of a peaceful transition, is dramatically underdeveloped in both theory and practice.

Many authors believe that in the Chinese view, rather than refraining from interfering in what is considered China's internal affairs, Western states should even give China a privileged status as a reward for the exploitation of the Chinese people in China's "Century of humiliation". This view can give us an indication of China's dissatisfaction with its current status in the international system. Some Western analysts have pointed out that Chinese leaders use this type of "victimization" to legitimize government action and gain internal support for promoted policies.

Other experts even suggest that there is a "culture of shame and humiliation" that would even be a "nationalist myth" in China (Organski and Kugler 1989). Not surprisingly, China ranks first in terms of public confidence in its own government. According to a global confidence survey, about 91% of Chinese respondents said the Chinese government is doing the right thing (Statista 2022).

Therefore, the conflict between China and the United States may not only be related to relative gains of power, but also to ideological and moral principles. Thus, to understand the foreign policy of a state, we cannot pay attention exclusively to national characteristics, as realists do, nor can we treat the beliefs of leaders as one-dimensional. Instead, we must opt for an integrated approach (Jianren 2019, 3).

Returning to the satisfaction variable, it works in two ways: while dissatisfaction increases the risk of war, satisfaction decreases it (Rauch and Wurm 2013, 58). To summarize the argument, the powers that are dissatisfied and strive to change the status quo must build the necessary military capabilities. The comparison of the alliance portfolios of the provocateur and the dominant power is necessary because a dissatisfied power is most likely looking for allies who share the same interest in challenging the status quo.

China's relations with "pariah" states such as Iran, Sudan, North Korea or, more recently, Russia are most often invoked. However, it would be a mistake to consider China such a state. China poses another type of threat to the United States: "*Russia is a well-armed 'rogues state' trying to undermine an international order that it can never hope to dominate. Instead, China is an equal competitor that wants to shape an international order that it can aspire to dominate*" (Dobbins, Shatz and Wyne 2018).

In the last years, however, China's foreign policy has undergone a fundamental transformation. Beijing has moderated its ideology to promote international engagement, joined multilateral arms control efforts and introduced socio-economic reforms that have extended the freedom and individual rights of its citizens.

I consider that a sensitive point of the PTT, which is also one of the main hypotheses, is precisely the attribution of satisfaction or dissatisfaction to China because it is not an ally of the USA and did not play any role in establishing the current international order and the "rules of the game". Thus, the presumption that hegemonic power is a satisfied state is unfounded. Because the PTT clearly considers the hegemonic power to be satisfied with the existing status quo, power transition theorists are only considering the possibility of a war initiated by China (the rising power); they do not believe that hegemonic power can provoke a war. Even if the hegemonic state is satisfied with the status quo, it could be dissatisfied with the power shift tendency, wherein case the hegemon may initiate a preventive war.

The aggressiveness of Chinese officials' speech is becoming increasingly visible as China is portrayed as a threat, indicating that it wants greater recognition and "voice opportunities", the lack of which seems to generate dissatisfaction. The Chinese are disturbed by the popularization of the "Chinese threat" and categorize the action as a racist act that has a long tradition in the Western imagination.

China has yet to prove its intentions. However, in many parts of the globe, China is ahead of the United States in terms of trust as an ally, and Africa is one of the best examples.

More and more African countries cite China as a trusted ally; in fact, just as many people in the Ivory Coast point to the PRC as their country's most trusted ally, being mentioned almost as often as the United States by the people of Ethiopia, Malaysia, and Tanzania (Pew Research Center 2007). In 36 African countries, the United States is the most popular model of national development (cited by 30% of respondents), followed by China (24%) (Lekorwe, Chingwete and Okurub 2016). The situation is different in Asia. In all ASEAN Member States, confidence in China has declined exponentially. The lowest level is recorded in the Philippines (82.1%), Vietnam (75.4%), Thailand (67.9%), Indonesia (60.5%) and Myanmar (59.6%).

Meanwhile, China's share of distrust in Cambodia – seen as China's closest ally in the region – has fallen from 53.8% in 2020 to 42.3% in 2021. Among respondents who do not trust China's actions at the regional level, 51.8% believe that China's economic and military power could be used to threaten the interests and sovereignty of their countries (Seah, Hoang and Thao 2021).

The United States has defined China as a strategic threat. The Obama administration used phrases such as "Sino-US competition," and the Trump administration clearly defined the PRC as the main competitor of the United States (Jianren 2019, 2). First of all, it is not clear why China and the United States did not experienced a clear paradigm shift in

diplomacy before 2010, but since then they have undergone dramatic changes, culminating in the new US strategy for the Indo-Pacific region aimed at preventing China from "*creating a sphere of influence in the region, combining its economic, diplomatic, military and technological power and becoming a world power*" (Indo-Pacific Strategy of The United States 2022, 5). Second, the US, as the dominant power, may seem more dissatisfied than China, being the first to change its diplomatic paradigm. After 2010, the US implemented the Asia Pivot Strategy, trying to change the existing international framework and rebuild order in the Asia-Pacific region by expanding its influence in three key areas: security, politics, and economics. For its part, China wants the US to withdraw from the region (its mere presence after the end of the Cold War being seen as an anomaly), as it considers itself to be a politically, economically, and culturally viable alternative (Lai 2011, 24).

However, the current dynamic, which still seems to remind us of the warning that Napoleon gave to the world about 200 years ago, tells us that this "negotiated change" is still far from occurring, the conventional wisdom according to which China will be the next global power still generating paranoia outside of China and promoting megalomania in China.

Another condition that contributes to the inclination towards peaceful transitions is affinity, which refers to the recognition of a common identity, be it ethnic, historical, or ideological, and therefore a common understanding and acceptance of a certain order that changes without being altered by the relative accumulation of power of one of the parties.

This could be why that negotiated change is so difficult to achieve, as any negotiation requires a minimum of intercultural readiness. Moreover, culture conditions the perceptions of states on reality, truth, time and even space (Cercel 2019, 154).

Can we predict a peaceful transition similar to that between the United States and the United Kingdom in the late 1800s and early 1900s, considering that the existence of an emotional affinity and collective identities, does not exist in the case of US-China relation?

As Huntington noted, culture and cultural identities influenced the pattern of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world, with the most intense conflicts between Muslim and Asian societies on the one hand and the West on the other. Of the two main opponents, China was seen as a more dangerous opponent because the Muslim world did not have a central state to lead fragmented Muslim nations, but a unified, strong, and assertive China could.

Moreover, in Joseph Nye's opinion (Nye 2009, 110-113), China has broken the US monopoly on soft power. Beijing has become increasingly adept at developing its own brand of "soft power" based on its culture, diplomacy, and the attractiveness of its own system — "market authoritarianism" — as an alternative to the American model.

In addition to those mentioned above, China's threat to the US *pax americana* has multiple other sources: AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and, more recently, adaptations of this initiative to new global challenges such as 'Health Silk Road', 'Digital Silk Road', or 'Green Silk Road'. Indeed, it has been suggested that the BRI is part of a strategy to establish Beijing's dominance over the Eurasian "heart" (Layne, *The US–Chinese power shift and the end of the Pax Americana* 2018, 102) to use the term introduced by Halford Mackinder, which was very popular in the early 20th century.

## **2. The limits of anticipating the behavior of the United States and China in the current international relations system**

The approach to predictions from the perspective of structural theories of international relations faces some inaccuracies in the expected outcome. Based on the theories described above, we can infer a few limitations regarding the possibility of anticipating the behavior of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China: 1) *the existence of the*



*Eurocentric bias; 2) the lack of a sufficiently long time frame to allow theories to be tested; 3) the cultural dissimilarity, which leads to the positioning of the two states on theoretically contrasting positions and 4) the perception both states have of the power potential and the disponibility for conflict and cooperation.*

The first limitation refers to one of the conditions of applicability of power balance theory. Power balance theorists admit the existence of biases such as the Eurocentric orientation and the **bias** of the great powers. The first refers to the fact that the "logic" of the balance of power has not been applied outside the European space (Yaqing 2016). I believe that the application of the balance of power theory to the relationship between the People's Republic of China could lead to misstatements of China's conduct.

Another important element is the existing **perception**, at a certain moment, on the decision-making process, as well as on one's own power potential. The characteristics of national power formulated by Hans Morgenthau have a post-hoc character, which does not allow us to outline a true view of the behavior of states in relation to the perception of their own capabilities. Therefore, rough estimates and misperceptions can lead to wrong decisions when it comes to initiating a policy (Răceanu 2005, 29).

Another limitation would be the time frame considered too short to evaluate the views of the theories: "What has happened so far seems to contradict the predictions of offensive realism (...) too little time has passed" (Fettweis 2004, 80). There is a feeling among some researchers that the international system is currently in a phase of transition and that it will take longer for the nature of the next phase to become apparent. However, Mearsheimer does not disclose the time frame for making a correct assessment, which leads us to believe that this is the one that flows to a possible (perhaps) confirmation of the predictions of his theory.

Moreover, the knowledge of theories by decision makers can make states act as a self-denial. Although we should not exaggerate the influence of the literature on world politics, actors can pay attention to academic theories and change their behavior accordingly (Jervis 2006, 40). How should we understand the PRC's policy now, considering it seems to act in accordance with realistic assumptions, denying them and condemning realistic rhetoric at the same time?

Starting from the close link between foreign policy and national identification, which leaders and actors resort to and which they seek to impose in accordance with their political projects and existing psychological needs, I consider that another relevant argument is the **cultural/identity dissimilarity and the impact of these factors on US-Chinese perceptions** of vital/ secondary interests and the disponibility for conflict or cooperation.

Starting from the premise that: "the higher the degree of affinity between two states in terms of strategic interests, economic ties or membership in common international organizations, the lower the likelihood of conflict" (Maoz, Kuperman and Terris 2006, 669), I think the implications are all the more relevant to the evolution of the Sino-US relationship.

Another limitation that we can identify and that derives from the existing cultural differences between the two states, is represented by the **contrasting positions** of both states from a **theoretical** point of view. The phenomenon of Chinese ascension has contributed to the development of non-Western theories and concepts. Proponents of Chinese theory of international relations often point out that the history, culture, norms, and worldview, specific to the Asian region, are different from those advanced or derived from the West. This idea also resonates with the dissatisfaction felt with the epistemic value of the main existing theories, all of which have a Western analytical or normative basis (Acharya and Buzan 2017).

Discipline in international relations faces a sense of dissatisfaction in China with the current state of international relations. The main reason for dissatisfaction would be the marginalization of the non-Western world, as well as the failure of these theories, deeply

rooted in a European spirit, to explain the dynamics that transgress the Western world and the absence (from the literature) of the non-Western states contribution to international events after the end of World War II (A. Acharya 2016):

As a result, China's rise has added impetus to attempts to build new theories. Yanqing Qin of Beijing University of Foreign Affairs says China's theory of international relations "is likely to come along with the great economic and social transformation that China has experienced" (Yaqing, Why is there no Chinese international relations theory 2007, 313). Although the consensus on the true significance of *Chinese characteristics* has not yet been fully determined, many researchers argue that the establishment of a Chinese theory of international relations or a "Chinese school" of international relations is desirable. From this perspective, Confucianism, Marxism, *Tianxia* („all under heaven”) (Tingyang 2021, 7) are traditional concepts used by Xi Jinping today when he talks about his plan to create „*world-class socialist universities with Chinese characteristics and to cultivate the next generation of socialists*” (Xinhua 2022), arguing that China is a country with a special national history, culture and context that „*cannot blindly follow others or simply copy foreign standards and models. Instead, it must proceed from the country's realities and blaze a new path to building world-class universities with Chinese characteristics*” (Xinhua 2022).

Representative approaches to Chinese thinking on international relations, to name just a few, are: Qin Yaqing's relational theory; Yan Xuetong's moral realism, Zhao Tingyang's "Tianxia"; the globalism of H.M. Ling; Jiang Qing Confucianism; Wang Yiwei; Hih-yu Shih; Yan, Xu et al. whose contributions may be the starting point for a non-Western theory.

Although still evolving, the process of formulating a Chinese theory of international relations seeks to include traditional Chinese concepts and avoid taking Western concepts at all costs, which makes "China's socialization" an even more complicated process.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, I consider that the only permanent and unchanging reality in international relations is change, and if for Kenneth Waltz "the ability of a theory to explain is more important than its ability to make predictions." (Waltz 2012, 76), for proponents of the power transition theory, the emphasis is on identifying how the final state of peace or conflict is reached.

If we look at the two theories "in the mirror", we notice that while the power balance theory seeks rather to explain the dynamics of interactions between states at the international level - making predictions by reformulating the assumptions of the basic theory to explain real developments, even at the risk of obtaining a degenerative theory –, the classical theory of the power transition (and its reformulations) seeks to formulate rather "*if...then...*" type of predictions.

I believe that in order to explain the evolution of the US-China relationship, the possibility or impossibility of a peaceful power transition between the two and even how it is reached, both theories provide us with useful tools for interpreting the behavior of the two states. To capitalize on the various theoretical positions, we must adopt a pluralistic approach in order to achieve a construction as comprehensive as possible that allows us to use all available indicators that can help us provide answers about the *process* and *effect* by presenting and operationalizing strategic competition for power.

**Table no. 1.** The main assumptions and limits of Balance of Power Theory and Power Transition Theory

	THE CAUSES OF CONFLICTS	ACTORS	STABILITY	SYSTEMIC ORDER	REASONS FOR STATE ACTION	LIMITS	CHARACTER
<b>BALANCE OF POWER THEORY</b>	<b>Power asymmetry</b> - power is not evenly distributed throughout the system.	<b>Classical actors: states.</b> They condition and are conditioned, in turn, by the system.	<b>Uniformly distributed power across units;</b> Avoiding hegemony (forming alliances, anti-hegemonic coalitions).	<b>Anarchical</b> - characterized by zero-sum game and competition for supremacy.	<b>Accumulation of power /</b> achievement of <b>instrumental goals.</b>	Exaggerated modification of central assumptions to preserve the ability to explain empirically observed facts;  Contradictory assumptions (eg unbalanced US power immediately after the end of the Cold War);  Inability to identify balancing behavior (timing, intensity, scope) and the difference between it and preventive warfare.  The theory has biases based on Western historical experience.	<b>Dynamic, procedural type:</b> balancing strategies.  Theory predicts the implementation of balancing strategies or a balanced system. It does not predict a state of peace or war.
<b>POWER TRANSITION THEORY</b>	<b>Power is distributed evenly</b> at the level of two state units (parity).	That seek to <b>preserve the current system - status quo states.</b>  That seek to <b>change the system: revisionist states.</b>	<b>Predominance:</b> the existence of a hegemon to maintain political and military order.	<b>Hierarchical</b> international order.  States are divided according to the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction felt with the current international order.	<b>Maximize earnings;</b> Obtaining a dominant position in the system;  <b>Control over international rules, norms and values;</b>  Maintaining / changing the <b>status quo.</b>	The central concept of the theory, dissatisfaction, is a subjective term and supports various interpretations.  The possibility of a peaceful transition is poorly developed and attributed to cultural affinity, although it is considered a negligible criterion.  Lack of clear criteria for awarding state satisfaction / dissatisfaction.  Attributing, a priori, the dissatisfaction of the rising state (never to the hegemon).	<b>Static (result):</b> Peace or war.

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