The Return of Revisionism

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China’s rise has been characterised by economic and military growth. This growth has closed the gap between China and the US and ignited debate regarding the likelihood of a revisionist China challenging the status quo in the Asia-Pacific region. Ongoing debate about whether or not China is a revisionist or status quo power has been overtaken by events. Recent developments in the South China Sea indicate that China is already revising aspects of the status quo at the regional level, but it is doing so in small and incremental ways. This paper examines China’s incremental approach to revisionism as a unique political phenomenon in the twenty-first century.
Introduction

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s there was extensive debate regarding the rise of China and the implications of an ascendant China for international security.¹ This decade much of the debate has turned to whether or not China poses a threat to the long-standing preponderance of the United States as a political and strategic actor. China's rise has typically been characterised by its economic and military growth, which has closed the gap between China and the US. Arguments about the extent of American retrenchment in the Asia-Pacific have a rich history,² and much of the debate has been framed in the language and concepts of relative decline.³ This paper does not seek to reproduce this familiar argument, but instead views the rise of China as a case study of the return of revisionism in the twenty first century. Earlier debate has questioned whether or not China is a revisionist or status quo power. Recent developments in the South China Sea suggest that this debate has been overtaken by events.⁴

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China is already revising aspects of the status quo at the regional level, but it is doing so in small and incremental ways. Shambaugh argues that Beijing has taken a “moderately revisionist” approach to foreign policy in recent years in order to “selectively alter rules and ‘balance of influence’ largely from within existing institutions.” If this is true, China’s approach to instigating change in the international system contrasts traditional conceptions of revisionism. This paper examines the return of revisionism in the twenty first century. It begins with the central question in the literature on China’s rise: will China challenge the status quo underwritten by US power? It then examines the conceptual limits of the dichotomy between revisionism and status quo powers and proposes that China’s revisionist behaviour does not fit into traditional definitions. Finally, the paper argues that China’s behaviour represents an incremental form of revisionism which seeks to make small adjustments to the status quo rather than directly challenge US primacy.

**China’s Challenge**

Much of the current debate about China’s rise is focused on the possibility that China will soon challenge US preponderance in the Asia-Pacific region. China’s well-documented economic growth and slowly increasing assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea, have fuelled concerns that the PRC is or will soon be in a position to begin circumscribing America’s regional role and changing the existing power structure in East Asia and perhaps beyond. To one side of the debate arguments range from the China threat thesis, in which the

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PRC represents a potentially malevolent rising power, to fatalistic structural arguments, in which the PRC is a relatively benign rational power who will be compelled to challenge the existing order for sensible reasons and become an enemy of the West by circumstance rather than choice. To the other side of the debate arguments often list economic, social, political and domestic governance issues which present substantial disincentives to revisionism. They sometimes paint the PRC as a particularly benevolent government which uses its charm to promote friendship and harmony in order to facilitate a peaceful rise. Another view is that China is not ready to assert, and assume the costs of, leadership yet. Finally, many optimists point out that the security implications of China’s rise are not only based on China’s actions and intentions, but also on the perceptions and reactions of others.

Although China’s challenge to the stability underwritten by US-leadership in the wider Asia-Pacific region is primarily a by-product of International Relations concepts which are

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prominent in the West, it is subject to Thomas’ Theorem and is real to the extent that it is perceived to be real. This is identified by security dilemma logic as a serious political hazard because misunderstandings between major powers can lead to catastrophic outcomes. Added to this challenge is the historical record of rising powers, which rarely depicts peaceful power transitions. For many commentators a key lesson from previous experiences is that rising powers which are dissatisfied with the existing order are likely to present a problem for incumbents. Perceptions of power transition are particularly important because they link general assumptions about the security implications of rising powers to specific circumstances and policy responses. However, it is important to note that perceptions about the intentions and capabilities of rising powers are not always accurate. It is entirely possible to misinterpret circumstances or misperceive events and diplomatic signals. The security dilemma is by nature a dilemma because actions are taken in the absence of complete

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information. If states responded to genuine attempts to threaten their security, there would be no dilemma. It is reaction to false perceptions that create a dilemma at all.19

Perceptions also matter beyond the security dilemma. States signal their preferences to one another in order to deliberately influence perceptions.20 States also decide which international norms they value and observe and which they do not approve of based on preferences which are informed by their perceptions and understandings of complex relationships between actors.21 For example, commentators point to China’s membership of international organisations as a signal of its acceptance of prevalent norms in the international system.22 However, institutional membership only demonstrates acceptance of rules, not necessarily the norms that underpin them. The extent to which states perceive norms to align with their interests can be a powerful motivating force in international relations and a clear signal of a state’s preferences. The extent to which states accept rules as transaction costs is a potential indicator of influence23 rather than a demonstration of status quo orientation. Nevertheless,

the notion of socialisation through international institutions remains popular amongst international relations scholars.24

Socialisation is widely seen as a positive influence on states because the status quo is often equated with stability in the international system.25 Because stability is desirable and instability is undesirable, status quo orientation is positive and anything else is akin to a destabilising influence and in some cases can constitute a threat to states whose preferences are supported by the existing system. The language used to conceptualise China’s rise often implies that an attempt to alter existing norms in the international system would be an affront to the stability and security of all states within the system. For example, a pervasive theme in the literature is the phrasing that China’s rise will challenge the US or contest the international order.26 This kind of loaded language frames China’s rise in combative terms. Change is synonymous with risk and continuity with security. However, the extent to which this conceptualisation of change in the international system is true for individual states depends greatly on a state’s level of satisfaction with existing power structures and the preferences and values those structures represent.

This casts dissatisfaction with the international system, and concomitant differences in preferences in it, as undesirable behaviour from the perspective of satisfied states. It comes as no surprise, then, that popular narratives of China’s rise are largely framed in the language of revisionism. The concept of revisionism is commonly defined as dissatisfaction with the international order, which can be characterised as “the prestige, resources, and principles of the system,” and the desire to revise the system in a significant way. Revisionism is thereby a “desire to redraft the rules by which relations among nations work.” Schweller contrasts status quo and revisionist states by the balance between the value a state places on what it possesses relative to the value it places on what it covets. By this logic, a state which values what it covets more than what it possesses will likely exhibit revisionist behaviour. Conversely a status quo state will be reasonably satisfied with its situation, or at least value its possessions to a greater extent than its aspirations, and will exhibit risk-averse behaviour. This depicts revisionist states as less predictable than status quo states.

With greater risk propensity and an axe to grind, revisionists appear to pose a legitimate concern to satisfied states. However, the debate about which label best applies to China in the twenty first century is primarily an exercise in categorical reasoning and argument by terms. For example, in 2000 Condoleezza Rice argued that “China is not a ‘status quo’ power but

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29 Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?.”
one that would like to alter Asia’s balance of power in its own favor.” The fact that China may seek to improve its position in the regional order was sufficient for Rice to deem the PRC a “strategic competitor” and not the partner that it has once been labelled by the Clinton administration. By that logic, China is a liability to status quo states and remains “a potential threat to stability in the Asia-Pacific region.” An important caveat to this terminology is that preservation of the status quo in inaccurately framed as neutral when it seeks to promote the interests of particular states. This begs the question of whether the concepts of revisionism and threat are genuinely closely related or if the conflation of change with instability and uncertainty creates a dichotomy into which China does not appropriately fit.

**Revisionism and its limits**

Traditional conceptions of revisionism set a high threshold. A state must first have revisionist objectives. The state’s leader must then definitively articulate those objectives. The state does not have to publicly disclose its intentions, but it needs to have committed itself to a policy course of revisionism. Finally, the state must demonstrate revisionist behaviour and a willingness to incur costs in the pursuit of revisionist aims. There are two key aspects to this definition. The first is intent and the second is action. Neither is sufficient to label a state as revisionist because intention without capability is of minor consequence and action without

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
explanation is speculative rather than categorical. In this conception, revisionism is related to the distribution of power in the international system.\textsuperscript{37} Revisionist states must consider their aims to be within their means. As such, states which lack what they perceive to be the requisite capabilities to challenge status quo orthodoxies will not enact revisionist policies. To do so would risk failure and insecurity. Conversely, committing to revisionist aims but taking little action to pursue change would undermine a state’s credibility as an agent of change in the international order.\textsuperscript{38}

The link between power and revisionism reaffirms the assumption that revisionist aims must constitute substantial changes to the status quo. This intensifies the importance of correctly identifying revisionist states to status quo powers. This explains the substantial literature focused expressly on the rise of China as a potential threat to the status quo. However, the debate about whether China is a revisionist or status-quo power is often more about how these terms are configured, than the substance of China’s foreign policy or behaviour.\textsuperscript{39} Questions about whether China is a status quo or revisionist power tend to ask for a single definitive answer which demonstrates a firm commitment to uphold existing norms or clearly challenge them.\textsuperscript{40} This debate has been overtaken by a series of events, most notably in the South China Sea, in which the PRC has demonstrated its willingness to act against


\textsuperscript{40} Huiyun, "Is China a Revisionist Power?."; Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?."
mainstream conventions without necessarily or directly challenging them.\textsuperscript{41} Yet the debate persists because commonly used concepts of revisionism are based on a stark dichotomy between revisionism as fundamental change and status-quo orientation as passive or defensive acquiescence.

Contemporary theories assume that states are either status quo or revisionist with little scope for states with mixed interests or preferences across different dimensions of the international system.\textsuperscript{42} This binary leads to assumptions that revisionism is comprehensive dissatisfaction with the ‘nature and governance of the system.’\textsuperscript{43} Yet, historically revisionist powers have primarily pursued “recognition and standing” to a greater extent than “specific alterations to the existing rules and practices that constituted the order of the day.”\textsuperscript{44} This is consistent with Chinese foreign policy, which increasingly emphasises recognition of China’s growing status and prestige in the international system.\textsuperscript{45} China’s behaviour also indicates that it is willing to accept some costs to change aspects of the status quo without overstepping. For example, Beijing’s unilateral announcement of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea in November 2013 indicates the willingness to contest the status quo in a way


\textsuperscript{43} Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics: 199.


which does not undermine the legitimacy of its norms. Interestingly, Beijing co-opted a Western practice and used it in a way which demonstrated that China’s interests don’t always align with the West’s. This practice challenges the dichotomy between revisionism and status quo orientation. These concepts do not adequately account for China’s behaviour. Either China’s behaviour is not revisionist or China’s revisionism is different.

China’s revisionism highlights three problems with a simple dichotomy between revisionist and status quo states. The first problem is that there are several dimensions of international politics which revisionism can affect.\(^4\) The international system is not a single structure of power, rules, norms and preferences. It is a complex of all of these attributes combined. States can be satisfied with certain aspects of the system and not others. For example, China may be dissatisfied with the distribution of power, recognition of its status or some international norms, most notably the Western preference for contingent sovereignty. Meanwhile it could be satisfied with existing rules and institutions which facilitate trade and diplomacy. The second problem is the extent of the challenge that revisionism presents to the status quo. Popular approaches suggest that minor revisionist aims are not sufficient to warrant the concept of revisionism. Moreover, Davidson argues that it would be “theoretically and empirically useless” to consider minor revisionist aims as revisionism.\(^5\) Yet it is entirely possible that a state could pursue minor aims in order to maintain stability while adjusting accepted norms towards its own preferences. The third problem is that revisionism is framed as a clear and direct challenge to the status quo. A challenge does not


necessarily need to be decisive or immediate to be revisionist. Emphasis on power transition and hegemonic wars has skewed the literature towards a confrontational image of revisionism. China’s foreign policy clearly demonstrates that a slow, incremental approach to revising the international order is possible.

**Incremental revisionism**

China’s foreign policy represents the return of revisionism in the twenty first century. Contemporary revisionism has two characteristics which differentiate it from traditional concepts of revisionism. The first characteristic is that the challenge to the status quo need not be absolute. Distilling a popular argument that China is a status quo power, Wohlforth asks why a revisionist state would be dissatisfied with the order which had facilitated its rise. \(^48\) Historical precedents of rising power dissatisfaction aside, the answer seems to be simple pragmatism. At a time when a rising power can not affect the system it has to accept those circumstances beyond its control. As its power grows it no longer has to accept all aspects of the status quo. It is illogical to suggest that any international system which has facilitated China’s rapid growth is necessarily the system that is best suited to manage China’s ascendance. While China did benefit from the system to some extent, it would be dangerous to assume that the outcome of China’s engagement indicates China’s preference for that system. A more cautious reading of recent history would be that China demonstrates that a rising power can make the most of its situation in an international system largely geared towards others’ preferences. \(^49\)

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Rather than fitting the stereotype of a revisionist state that is “alienated from” and “threatened by” the system they oppose, China is seeking advantage in an international order of America’s design. It is now asserting claims to greater status and recognition as in international actor. China’s leaders want to maintain economic growth, but they also want China to be strong and respected as a leader in its region. China needs stability in the international order to facilitate continued growth, but it also needs the system to change to accommodate its ascension and ambitions for influence and prestige. These competing interests need not translate directly to revolutionary revisionism. Changes to the international order could entail a reshaping of rules and norms which suit the China’s interests without destabilising or dramatically altering existing power relationships within the system. If this is the case, then we could expect China to behave essentially as it has for the last two decades; to seek to preserve many of the rules with which it complies in key international political and economic institutions, while undermining the legitimacy of the norms and values it does not support.

The second characteristic of incremental revisionism is that it is slow moving. In the 1990s, Storey used the phrase ‘creeping assertiveness’\(^{52}\) to describe China’s foreign policy approach to dealing with the Philippines regarding maritime disputes. Applied more broadly, this could be seen as one thread in a larger policy approach of incremental change. China’s increasing claims to contested territories, such as Arunachal Pradesh and the Scarborough Shoal, and its


\(^{52}\) Storey, Ian James, "Creeping Assertiveness: China, the Philippines and the South China Sea Dispute," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 21(1), 1999.
unilateral declarations, such as the East China Sea ADIZ and Beijing’s claim to sovereignty over the majority of the South China Sea, indicate a pattern of small changes which add up to a larger change over time. There are two ways to view this trend. One is that China is slowly creating space for itself as it grows. The other is that China has is playing a long game for more significant changes it would like to see in the international order. Either view could turn out to be correct, but both suggest a fundamentally different approach to revising aspects of the system that a revisionist state is dissatisfied with.

China’s slow-moving approach to change could also be a way to build confidence in its capacity to exercise leadership in the Asia-Pacific region. A key aspect of leadership in the international system has historically been the ability to create and sustain international institutions. Prior to the First World War, Great Britain established the international gold standard system. After the Second World War, the US established the UN and Bretton Woods institutions. China is currently a member of many major international institutions in which the US exercises significant leadership. However, Beijing's desire to remain subjected to American preferences may begin to wane as its power increases. A clearly revisionist position might be to introduce a competing institution and attempt to usurp or challenge an incumbent’s leadership. An incremental approach may be to alter the norms embedded in the institution to reflect different preferences. If institutional preferences begin to accommodate China to a larger degree, then China could successfully revise the system and exercising leadership within multilateral institutions without directly confronting the US or the status quo.

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In combination, these characteristics indicate that contemporary revisionism is incremental in nature in two senses. It seeks to change some aspects of the international system without fundamentally challenging or replacing the existing structure. It also seeks to make smaller changes rather than transformative changes. The cumulative effect is a form of revisionism which changes the system over time from the inside rather than overtly contesting the status quo or incumbent hegemon. This approach is not without difficulty, though. Many of Beijing’s attempts to justify its foreign policies have attracted hostility from the West by co-opting status quo norms for revisionist purposes.\(^54\) For example, Beijing asserts that the distance of Guam from the continental United States is comparable to China’s claim to sovereignty over four-fifths of the South China Sea.\(^55\) The concomitant interest-norm paradox generates suspicion about China’s motives to the extent that observers mistake Western interests for international norms of behaviour. A clear example is the allegation that China does not play by international rules when it pursues its own interests.\(^56\) An increasingly assertive China is both a byproduct and means of incremental revisionism and it appears that both are here to stay.

**Conclusion**

The return of revisionism to international security has been a relatively quiet affair. Traditional conceptions of revisionism do not adequately account for China’s behaviour and

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often mistake status quo orientation for neutrality. Debates about whether China is a revisionist or status quo power simplify a complex situation in which the PRC is not especially malevolent or benign and in which incentives to revise or sustain the status quo are not absolute. The relationship between revisionist and status quo positions is not binary. China has interests which do not coincide with the Western interests which have shaped the international system over the last seven decades. Like all rising powers which preceded it, China will pursue its own interests and preferences in the international system as its power grows. This presents three challenges for traditional understandings of revisionism. The first challenge is that revisionism can selectively influence different dimensions of international politics. The second challenge is that revisionism can target minor preferences without threatening the entirety of the status quo. The third challenge is that revisionism can be slow and indirect.

China is already revising aspects of the status quo, particularly at the regional level, but it does not fit the image of a revisionist rising power. China’s revisionism has two characteristics which differentiate it from traditional concepts of revisionism. The first characteristic is that the challenge to the status quo is not absolute. China has not sought to dethrone the US and assume its mantle at the core of international affairs. The second characteristic is that China’s attempts at revisionism have so far been slow-moving and incremental in nature. This sets it apart from revolutionary revisionists of past eras. China is rising in an international system of American design and is seeking greater status and recognition as in international actor. Characterising China’s pursuit of its self-interest as a threat to the status quo is counterproductive. Furthermore, recognising that Beijing’s
revisionism is qualitatively different to the revisionism displayed by Wilhelmine Germany and Imperial Japan is a significant caveat to current debates about the security implications of China’s rise. This is an important consideration because the extent to which China threatens the status quo is largely proportional to the extent to which status quo states are willing to accommodate at least some of its aspirations.

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