Debating China’s Peaceful Rise

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To the editors (Zhang Xiaoming):

China’s comprehensive power (especially economic power) has grown at an astonishing pace in the 30 years since the Chinese government brought into effect the policy of reform and opening, drawing the attention of the international community to what has been dubbed ‘China’s rise’. This rise and its implications for Western-dominated international society became hot topics in the post-Cold War period, prompting a spate of books in the early 1990s on ‘China’s rise’. William H. Overholt’s The Rise of China: How Economic Reform is Creating a New Superpower is an early example of the literature.1 Around that time Chinese scholars also began writing on China’s rise. Yan Xuetong and his colleagues published in 1998 a book under the title China’s Rise: an Assessment of the International Environment.2 Although

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at the close of the 1990s certain Western scholars still doubted that China would rise to become a great power,\(^3\) it is fair to say that at the beginning of the 21st century, ‘the rise of China as a great power has become nearly conventional wisdom among most scholars, pundits, and policy-makers in the West.’\(^4\) Western analysts have since taken into serious account the impact on international society of a rising China. ‘Peaceful rise’, a concept articulated by certain Chinese strategists and expressed by top Chinese leaders in 2003, is now a research topic in itself in IR scholarship.\(^5\) The titles of more than 20 English-language books published over the 10-year period 2000–2009 include in their titles the words ‘China’ and ‘rise’, according to the author’s information.\(^6\)


A recent article entitled ‘China in International Society: Is “Peaceful Rise” Possible?’ by Barry Buzan is representative of Western scholarly writings on China’s rise. Although the issue Professor Buzan addresses is by no means new, the article nonetheless merits attention, having been produced by an eminent scholar of the English School of International Relations, and hence reflecting the school’s most recent thinking on the relationship between a rising China and Western-dominated international society. The article’s central argument is that it will be extremely difficult over the next 30 years for China to maintain a peaceful rise. In Buzan’s own words, ‘China is at a turning point bigger than any since the late 1970s, and some of the policies that have worked quite successfully for the past thirty years will not work for the next thirty. Continuing with “peaceful rise” is going to get more difficult.’ Professor Buzan is thus pessimistic in his assessment of China’s ability to continue rising peacefully over the next 30 years, and of the future relationship between China and international society. It is not my purpose here to judge whether or not Professor Buzan is correct in his prediction; only the next 30 years will tell if China can continue to rise peacefully. What I would like to do, though, is to raise and discuss a few points with respect to Buzan’s argument.

First of all, Professor Buzan’s assessment of China’s ability to continue her peaceful rise and of her future relations with international society relates to the English School discourse on international relations. His approach, therefore, might be taken as one that applies the English School conception (or conceptions) of international society to the rising China phenomenon.

In my view, Professor Buzan’s doubts as to the prospects of China’s continuing to rise peacefully are rooted in his understanding of China’s status within Western-dominated international society. Buzan does not perceive China as a ‘status quo’ member of international society but as a ‘revisionist state’. As such, rapidly rising China, dissatisfied with both Western-defined international institutions and its status within them, pursues change in the West-dominated international system. Buzan raises as an example the fact that China is not yet a G8 member, and points out the emphasis China places on the pluralist principles of sovereignty, non-intervention, nationalism, territoriality, balance of power, anti-hegemony, diplomacy, and international law, which oppose the liberal solidarist values of human rights, democracy and environmentalism. He also mentions China’s advocacy of the democratization of international relations. Buzan moreover infers that the Chinese regard the market economy as a means to certain ends rather than as an end in and of itself. In Buzan’s

eyes, the role China seems to play of a reformist revisionist state within Western-dominated international society imbues certain characteristics. They are:

A reformist revisionist accepts some of the institutions of international society for a mixture of calculated and instrumental reasons. But it resists, and wants to reform, others, and possibly also wants to change its status. This sounds like the best description of China’s position in contemporary international society. China accepts on an ideational basis the pluralist, coexistence institutions. It accepts at least instrumentally the market, resists the more politically liberal institutions, and wants to increase its status/rank. In line with its resistance to democracy, China is uncomfortable with the predominantly Western world society/global civil society, with which it does not deal well (most obviously in relation to Tibet), and which as Clark argues is a key driver of the normative deepening of international society (democracy, human rights, environment).

In other words, China may still be regarded as a problem state or a potential problem state within the international community, and a rising China, therefore, presents a major challenge to Western-dominated international society.

As earlier mentioned, Professor Buzan’s argument with respect to China’s status within international society can be traced to the framework of the English School discourse. Although there is no consensus on the origins, membership and theoretical features of the English School,8 its scholars generally cleave to the conception of international society, or society of states, as the theoretical core of the school. Hedley Bull’s characterization of international society in his seminal book *Anarchical Society* remains by far the most authoritative articulation of the English School conception of international society.9 Adam Roberts also recently stated that an ‘anarchical society’ of states is ‘the central idea of the English School.’10 The conception of international society, or society of sovereign states, originates in European international society, which has since expanded into a global or universal international society, according to the core writings of the English School.11 Although international society is constantly evolving, Western

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states have until now maintained a firm grip on its development direction. Non-Western states can only expect to be recognized as legitimate members of the international community once they have accepted the standards of civilization as defined by these Western countries. The so-called standards of civilization are, of course, also developing and evolving. In recent years, certain English School scholars have begun a discourse around the concept of ‘new standards of civilization’, wherein democracy and human rights are the core elements. Using these changing ‘standards of civilization’ as a yardstick for assessing the behaviour of China (and other non-Western countries) and for determining China’s status within international society prefigures the conclusion that China is still a problem state, or a potentially problem state, vis-à-vis Western-led international society, in light of criticisms that have been levelled against China for its human rights record and non-democratic governance.

Buzan shares the concerns of fellow English School and other Western scholars that a ‘non-democratic’ rising China might challenge the dominant position of the West in international society. The article emphasises, for example, that the English School is worried not about the rise of China, in and of itself, but about the political orientation of a rising China. The English School conception (or conceptions) of international society, in construing Western standards as universal and using them to evaluate the behaviour of non-Western countries, thus clearly connotes ethnocentrism or Eurocentrism. Professor Buzan and others of the English School have criticized the ethnocentric or Eurocentric tendencies of Martin Wight, Hedley Bull and other classical English School scholars, yet Buzan himself seems not completely to have transcended the influence of the practice, a difficulty his article makes readily apparent.

Second, Professor Buzan’s analysis expresses the views of some, but not all English School scholars. As mentioned earlier, Buzan purports in his article to be applying the theoretical framework of the English School to his analysis of China’s position within international society. In his own words: ‘My main contribution thus comes from viewing China’s position in the world

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through the theoretical lens of the English School, and its principal idea of international society.’ At no point in the article, however, does Buzan specify his exact conception of international society. Although international society is the theoretical core of the English School, when it comes to defining it, different scholars have different understandings of the international society conception. Pluralists and solidarists express contrasting opinions with respect to the relationship between sovereignty and human rights, hence to the very essence of international society. This difference of opinion is the source of controversy between the two groups of English School scholars. Pluralists, such as Martin Wight and Hedley Bull, and their contemporary followers Adam Roberts and Robert Jackson, lay emphasis on the principles of sovereignty and non-interference. It should be pointed out that, of the two, Wight’s thinking on these issues is relatively complex and perhaps less specific, and that Bull’s thinking in his later years altered a little. Solidarists such as R. J. Vincent, Nicholas Wheeler, and Tim Dunn, on the other hand, pay much attention to the ethos in international society of transnational solidarity and human rights, laying emphasis on the universal nature of human rights and of the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention. Wheeler and Dunn have made explicit their view that human rights has become a ‘new criteria’ for assessing a state’s legitimacy in international society and for judging the correctness of its behaviour; moreover that humanitarian intervention has become ‘legitimate practice within international society.’ Another group of English School scholars, among them Andrew Hurrell, holds a position somewhere between pluralism and solidarism wherein sovereignty remains the fundamental framework of the society of states known as international society, albeit with major normative changes as a result of globalization. They are characterized, as Hurrell observes, by greater solidarism and the substantial challenge this


poses to the ‘would-be great powers’ of China, India, Russia, and Brazil, whose preference is for ‘the older pluralist norms of sovereignty and non-intervention.’ These normative changes preclude any ‘retreat’ to the minimalist international society mode of sovereign state coexistence that pluralists Martin Wight and Hedley Bull propose. It is evident that Professor Buzan’s understanding of international society differs from that of the pluralist wing of the English School, and appears close to that of the solidarist camp.

China’s view of international society, on the other hand, with its emphasis on the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention, seems closer to that of the English School pluralists. If one considers China and its relations with international society through the lens of the solidarist faction of the English School, China might indeed appear as a ‘problem state’, because its behaviour and points of view do not conform to the fundamental components of the ‘new standards of civilization’: democracy and human rights.

Third, Professor Buzan’s piece obviously applies realist logic. He indeed says in the article that his analysis of China’s relations with the international community applies the analytical framework of the English School conception of international society, and also incorporates the power politics of realism, as expressed in the comment, ‘Alongside this there will also be a measure of realist power political analysis and an attempt to show how this relates to international society.’ Realists are prone towards comparisons of state power within international relations. Applying realist thinking to an analysis of China’s future relations with international society or system prefigures also a pessimistic conclusion; that China will rise to challenge the status quo of international order. Well-known offensive realist, John Mearsheimer, for example, points out that ‘International politics is a nasty and dangerous business, and no amount of goodwill can ameliorate the intense security competition that sets in when an aspiring hegemon appears in Eurasia.’ Professor Buzan’s point of view is less extreme than that of such hard-nosed realists as John Mearsheimer, but his assessment of China’s rise is to some extent founded on realist logic. Buzan says, for example, that China will, as it rises and grows in power, reduce dependence on the United States and come to oppose United States’ position as a world leader. Professor Buzan’s pessimistic conclusion on the future of China’s relationship with international society, therefore, is in one way attributable to nascent realist influence.

Finally, Professor Buzan seems over-determined in his assessment of the coming thirty years of Sino-US relations by virtue of his apparent attempt to assert a scientific prediction of them. This approach is at odds with the argument of most scholars of the English School (especially classical thinkers Wight and Bull) wherein nowhere in the realm of international relations is there an iron law that precedes predictions of the future. In this sense, Buzan seems again to parallel the thinking of realist thinkers. In reality, both China and international society have been in a constant process of change, and just how they will evolve remains far from certain. China’s relationship with international society will inevitably alter as changes take place, but exactly how and in what way is impossible to predict. Although China’s peaceful rise in the near future might not be easy, it is excessively certain and over-determined that it will be difficult to maintain over the next 30 years.

Professor Buzan makes a similar prediction on China’s future relationship with Japan. He argues that as China continues to rise its relationship with Japan will outweigh in significance that with any other state. He says:

From the point of view of both China’s peaceful rise and international high politics generally, China’s relationship with Japan is perhaps the most important in the world… Falling into balance of power relations with Japan, India and Southeast Asia would largely confine its sphere to Asia. This is why the China-Japan relationship matters so much for China at both the regional and global levels. It is almost the defining problem for China’s peaceful rise. Yet as things stand now, by allowing its relationship with Japan to fester, China strengthens the US position in East Asia, undermines its prospects for peaceful rise in its region, compromises its role in international society, and weakens its bid for global power status. If peaceful rise is taken seriously, then both by strategic logic and the logic of international society, maintaining bad relations with Japan is a major error for China.

I again find this argument on the future of Sino-Japanese relationship is over-determined.

In sum, Professor Buzan’s article represents the thinking of certain scholars of the English School on China’s relations with international society, and applies realist logic to the rise of China. Professor Buzan indeed raises insightful view points on China’s rise and the impact it has on the international community. It is the view of this author, though, that his prediction of China’s future international relations seems over-determined.

Barry Buzan Replies:

Let me start by thanking Qin Yaqing and Zhang Xiaoming for their thoughtful and stimulating responses to my arguments about the prospects for China’s peaceful rise. Before I begin to tackle our differences, the

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important thing to note is that all three of us agree on the central issue: peaceful rise is definitely possible, but the future is full of uncertainties and the continuation of peaceful rise will not be easy. Within this big frame of agreement I will immediately concede one major point. I argued that the next 30 years will be more difficult for peaceful rise than the 30 years since China’s reform and opening up began. My reasons for this were focused on four systemic factors: China’s increased importance in international society, the crisis in the world economy, the likelihood of environmental issues becoming a pressing collective problem, and the weakening of US leadership/hegemony including the collapse of the Washington consensus. These arguments about external factors have not been contested by either commentator, and I stand by them. I neglected, however, to see the reforms of the past thirty years from a Chinese perspective, and I accept unconditionally that when viewed from inside, the domestic reform process for China has not been at all easy since 1978, and will not be easy for the next thirty years either. The transition from a command to a market economy, despite the enrichment, power and progress it brings, is inherently disruptive and turbulent. The market creates continuous pressure to adapt not just on the economy, but also on society, culture, politics and individual lives. No country has made this transition easily, and once the market has taken root, no country can rest on its laurels without risking stagnation and loss of power. China is not, and will not be, an exception to this rule. Looked at in this way, there is from a Chinese domestic perspective much more continuity, and much less of a turning point, than I suggested.

That said, both Qin and Zhang criticize me for thinking wrongly about China. Qin thinks that I am locked into a particularly Western way of ‘entity’ thinking which is inherently zero-sum and conflictual, while Zhang thinks that within an English School framing I am both too solidarist (thus pushing China into conflict with liberal values) and too realist (thus taking a deterministic view of power rivalry). Although they start from different sources, these critiques end up in much the same place: that my mode of thinking over-determines conflict between China and the West. Since this is not what I think, I will use the rest of this reply to explain why there is less difference than Qin and Zhang seem to think between their understanding of China’s peaceful rise and mine.

Qin stages his critique in terms of dialectics, and that is a good way to unfold the argument. I do not wish to get involved in a deep philosophical debate about dialectics. There are many different understandings of it, and a debate about the nature of dialectics can easily become one about the whole agenda of philosophy. Qin sets out two views of dialectics: a Western ‘entity’ one, which is taxonomical, egoistic, necessarily conflictual, and looks to a zero-sum outcome between thesis and antithesis; and a Chinese ‘process’ one, which is fluid, relational, non-conflictual, and sees thesis and antithesis
as a type of *yin* and *yang*, interdependent, mutually constitutive and co-evolving. The view of dialectics with which I was raised, and which I still hold, is neither of these. It is rooted in a Hegelian, and up to a point Marxist, position in which thesis gives rise to its opposite antithesis, and the resultant tension or contradiction between the two eventually generates a synthesis which takes elements from both to form something new. This synthesis then becomes the new thesis and the cycle begins again from a different starting point. In the words of Engels:

> the world is not to be comprehended as a complex of ready-made things, but as a complex of processes, in which the things apparently stable no less than their mind-images in our heads, the concepts, go through an uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away.\(^{22}\)

This understanding falls somewhere between Qin’s two poles. It is ‘entity’ based in its egoistic view of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, and conflictual in that it rests on the tension between opposites. But it most definitely does not imply that the tension between thesis and antithesis must resolve itself by the victory of one over the other. It is not zero-sum. The ‘synthesis’ outcome is always something new arising out of and resolving the initial contradiction. In Marxist dialectical materialism, this ‘something new’ was held to have progressive tendencies, but I remain open minded about that, thinking that the dialectical process can move in both good and bad directions, the judgment depending on one’s point of view. Either way, thesis and antithesis are both altered by their encounter, which makes this form of dialectics similar to Qin’s ‘process’ model in which there is relational co-evolution. In the end, it might not be of much practical importance whether the synthesis comes out of the encounter or whether it was somehow inherent in the elements to begin with.

Extending Qin’s use of market versus planned economy as an example, the workings of this Hegelian model can be seen in how the dialectics of political economy unfolded both during and after the Cold War. Liberal democratic capitalism, represented by the US, can be seen as the thesis, and command-economy totalitarianism, represented by the Soviet Union, can be seen as the antithesis. There was certainly a very powerful egoistic, ‘entity’ quality to this relationship, and its antagonism underpinned the zero-sum conflict of the Cold War. Nowhere was this existential rivalry better expressed than in George Kennan’s famous ‘X’ article in 1947, which set out what became the Western policy of containment. Yet even in this archetypical cold-warrior piece, the logic of the synthesis is clearly apparent. Kennan

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argues that part of Western strategy must be to give capitalism a human face, to make it progressive and attractive enough so that it would stand as a refutation of the Marxist predictions about class conflict and the inevitable decay and crisis of capitalism.\(^{23}\) As a consequence, Western capitalism did not only face down the Soviet challenge militarily, but also transformed itself into the social democratic welfare state (more thoroughly in Europe, where the Soviet challenge was stronger, than in the United States), so taking on some of the characteristics of its rival. On the other side, China eventually led the way for the communist states to adopt elements of the market. Following the logic of this dialectic, one can see how the weakening of the Soviet challenge during the 1980s, and its disappearance during the 1990s, allowed parts of the West (the United States and Britain, in particular) to move away from the welfare state back towards the more extreme capitalism of neoliberalism and the Washington consensus. Arguably, the current economic crisis means that this extreme position has now followed the Soviet one into the dustbin of history, leaving the field open for new experiments in how to build stable, efficient forms of political economy centred on the market.

This feels very much like ‘process’ dialectics, with relational dynamics driving endless changes in the ‘entities’ of thesis and antithesis. In part, this is a process of convergence, as thesis and antithesis borrow elements from each other. But the logic of dialectics is endlessly branching, so that the new synthesis becomes the thesis and starts the cycle again. In this sense, Qin is right that there are no status quo actors and all can be seen as some form of revisionist. But he is wrong to say that either my thinking or Western dialectics ‘provides no room for a middle way’. The whole attraction of Hegelian dialectics is precisely that it works against the zero-sum logic of one element totally eliminating the other. The West may have won the Cold War against the Soviet Union, but was itself transformed in the process. China neither won nor lost the Cold War, but like the West was transformed by its dialectic into a new synthesis. This kind of dialectics means that the social world is permanently locked into a process of encounter, adaptation and change. By unleashing the huge energy and creativity of civil society, a market economy necessarily strengthens and accelerates this co-evolving dynamic. The flexibility, innovation and rapid response of markets, means that the whole dialectical process is speeded up.

Starting from this understanding of dialectics, there is much less difference between my views of China in international society and those of both Qin and Zhang, than they imply. I do not see conflict between China and the West as inevitable, though it is possible. Neither do I think that the stronger side has to, or can, force the other side to become identical to itself. The

dialectic will inevitably change both. The aim is how best to manage the dialectical process between them so as to achieve the peaceful rise outcome. My view of dialectics in relation to political economy is much more social than material. I don’t see anything inevitable or determined about how the encounters of ideas work out. A social dialectics means that material forces don’t take care of themselves. How the indeterminate future becomes the known present is all about what people think and say, how they talk and relate to each other, and what they do. Here I depart from both the utopian material determinism of Marxist and some liberal dialectics, and the gloomy conflict determinism of realists. I am perhaps close to Qin’s relational idea, which seems similar to constructivist thinking in which agents and structures are mutually constituting.

From this perspective, my concern with realists is about how their discourse, if it becomes dominant, can shape the dialectic so as to bring about the ‘inevitable’ conflict it predicts. In China, as elsewhere, there is no single dominant mode of thinking, but many strands. Some may follow Qin’s ‘process’ dialectics mode, but realism is also still an influential school of thought in China. And since there are synergies between realism and Marxism, both of which assume the permanence of conflict, these two schools reinforce each other. Realist thinking is also strong in the US, and could become so again in Japan if the Japanese people come to fear China’s rise. My concern is that the dialectics of relations between China and the United States, and China and Japan, could fall victim to this self-fulfilling logic unless active measures are taken to prevent the dialectics unfolding in that way. That was one key theme of the argument in my article, though I also took an aside to show how even within realist logic a strong case could be made for improving Sino-Japanese relations. Zhang seems to mistake my flagging up of this danger as acceptance of the realist analysis. Not so.

Liberals are to some extent in the same game of self-fulfilling prophecy, trying to talk their more idealist vision of the future into being. Much liberal universalism fits with Qin’s extreme form of ‘entity’ dialectics, where one side has to win by remaking everything in its own image. From the wars of religion, through the 19th century ‘standard of civilization’, to the current liberal campaigns to universalize Western standards of property rights, human rights, and democracy, there has been a strong strand in Western

thinking and practice that seeks to homogenize international society along Western lines. For what might be called ‘offensive liberals’, peace arises from a logic of homogenization and sameness, and this is true both of the economic liberal logics (all accept the market), and political ones (all become liberal democracies). I accept this as an important fact about contemporary international society and do not think that it can be brushed aside as a mere analytical preference as Zhang seems to suggest. It is one of the obstacles that China will have to face in the next phases of working out how best to achieve peaceful rise.

It is mainly for this reason that I draw attention to the regional option in the two articles that Qin mentions. My regions argument reflects the view that at the moment the great political-economy dialectic of the Cold War, and indeed of the last two centuries, has come to the end of its main cycle. Both its free market thesis and its statist, command economy anti-thesis have become ideologically untenable as their lack of balance exposed their flaws. What we have learned over the past two centuries is that neither the state nor the market can rule alone, and neither can be substituted for society. Both state and market have to adapt to the societies and cultures they contain. In this sense, the political economy question is more open than it has been for some time. The practical evidence of the last two centuries shows that neither wealth nor power can be sustained without the market, but that the market by itself is unstable. The new synthesis into whose time we are entering, is that the way forward must be some blend of state and market, and that this blend cannot be a one-size-fits-all, but must adapt itself to the cultural diversity that is still an important and vigorous legacy of history in human affairs. That view best fits with a more regionalised world in which different mixtures of state and market will express local preferences and conditions. Over time, the relative merits and flaws of these mixes will become obvious, and each will learn from the others.

In this synthesis phase, unlike over the past two centuries, no extremes of thesis and antithesis are in play about how to organize the political economy. There are to be sure important differences about democracy, human rights, intervention and the environment, and also about the nature, size, and role of the state. But there are no huge global differences as in the past about whether the market should be in play or not: all agree that the way forward is with some mix of state, market, and society. And within that general consensus there is a wider range of agreement on the institutions of international society than previously. Sovereign equality, human equality, territoriality, nationalism, international law, and diplomacy provide a shared foundation on which differences can be discussed and hopefully

mediated. Consequently, unless the self-fulfilling prophecy of realist logic becomes dominant in key countries such as China and the United States, the dialectics of the coming decades will not be as dangerous as they were during the Cold War, and a more decentralized structure of political economy might well be the best path for international society.

To my mind, the English school’s idea of international society offers the most congenial framework for thinking about this. As Vigezzi says of the English school, it looks ‘for the connection between present and past, but not so much to make predictions about the future as to discover the nature of the existing alternatives and to make a better rounded choice between them’. Zhang is correct to point out that the pluralist wing of English school thinking is precisely built around the idea that a degree of international order can be created among states even when each is concerned to preserve and cultivate its own distinctive culture and politics. A recent book by Charles Kupchan reinforces this idea. It brings extensive historical case studies together to argue, against the ideas of liberal universalists, that what he calls ‘stable peace’ can be built among states with quite different forms of political economy. But as Kupchan argues, this process is neither easy nor automatic, and nor is it guaranteed by economic interdependence alone. It requires strategic and political restraint on both sides.

A peaceful rise for China is certainly possible, and the nature of the dialectic provides easier conditions for it than were available during the past two centuries. In addition to managing specific key relationships with the United States and Japan, the main task ahead for China and others is to find ways of managing the transition to a less Western centric international society. China, as I argued, needs to think harder than it has done so far about what kind of international society it wants both regionally and globally. China is now too big and too powerful to take a back seat. Deng’s famous injunction that China should keep a low political profile needs to be reconsidered, and at the very least adapted to circumstances that are very different from those in play when he uttered it. If China is to succeed at peaceful rise, it needs to play the role of a responsible great power in managing a difficult phase in the evolution of international society. How stable or how turbulent the coming transition will be will depend as much on decisions taken in Beijing as on those taken in Washington, Brussels, Tokyo, or New Delhi.