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New Kid on the Block: China's Pursuit of International Hegemony and the Transformation of the World Order

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Abstract

This literature review examines China's rise as an emerging international hegemon and its impact on the transformation of the global order. Grounded in Organski's power transition theory, the study explores this framework's theoretical principles and empirical evidence while distinguishing it from classical realism. The review outlines the phases of power transition—potential power, transitional growth, and power maturity—and applies these phases to China's historical trajectory from an agrarian economy to an industrialized global power. Special emphasis is placed on pivotal milestones, including Mao Zedong's economic strategies, Deng Xiaoping's market reforms, and Xi Jinping's assertive policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through the lens of power transition theory, the article highlights China's strategic efforts to challenge Western dominance, particularly the United States (US), and reshape the international order. This study raises critical questions about the future of global leadership and stability amidst the shifting power dynamics between a declining US and a rising China.

Key Words

China's Rise, Power Transition Theory, Global Order Transformation; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); U.S.-China Competition

1. Introduction

Within this literature review, the writer seeks to explain the rise of China into an international hegemon, which consequently changed the world order and the power balance between existing hegemonies. Using the power transition theory developed by Organski, the writer aims to explain the principle and empirical reasoning behind such ascension. This literature review will start with an explanation of power transition theory, specifically its definition, aspects, and phases of the power transition theory. In this literature review, the writer attempts to correct the common misconception regarding power transition theory and how it relates to classical realism and other power-based approaches in international relations. The writer will then use the rise of China as a study case to explore the empirical evidence of power transition theory, proving its relevance within international relations. At the end, the writer will summarize the literature review and the references.

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2. Understanding Power Transition Theory

Power transition theory in international relations seeks to explain the causes of wars and mechanisms for maintaining peace by examining shifts in the balance of power among nations. A.F.K. Organski introduced this theory in 1958 through his book "World Politics." Organski suggests that today's global instability stems from rapid changes in population, politics, and a nation's industrial capabilities (Organski, 1968, p. 338). This is because Emerging forces are undergoing significant transformation, contributing to this instability where dissatisfaction incentivizes them to rise and challenge a declining hegemon that will more likely than not resist change. Power transition theory has four different aspects to it. First, the existence of one or multiple hegemon refers to a state that has the most power in the international system and has the willingness to impose its powers on other states. Second is the existence of a rising state or a coalition of states threatening to reshape the international order and overtake the hegemon. Third, the dissatisfaction of the rising state towards the status quo is the prerequisite of that initial willingness to reshape the world order (Lebow & Valentino, 2009, p. 391). Fourth, hierarchy is the primary differentiation with the balance of power and realism. Fifth, there is an imbalance in the growth of power and capabilities (Organski, 1968, p. 338).

As the writer has previously mentioned, it is unwise to try to group power transition theory and realism as both are fundamentally different. Even if both power transition theory and realism consider a state's international power as a source of explanation for the cause of war, therefore putting the state as a primary focus, there is a massive difference between the two. Realism emphasizes the anarchic structure of the international system, the distribution of power and capabilities, and the actors' willingness to survive within the aforementioned anarchy. Therefore, realism believes in the balanced distribution of power between stakeholders in order to maintain stability, and changes to such balance are dangerous (Rauch, 2013, pp. 1-2). Contrary to popular belief, power transition theory is fundamentally different. Unlike classical realism, Organski's power transition theories see the world as more organized rather than chaotic. This is the consequence of how hegemon can force their preferences and interests on other states. Behaviors are established, and states learn what to expect from one another. This ability to force other states improves the hegemon's wealth, security, and prestige, but also at the expense of the other states (Lebow & Valentino, 2009, p. 390).

The question becomes how these transitions occur. Organski divides it into three phases: 1) The phase of potential power, 2) The phase of transitional growth in power, and 3) The phase of power maturity. The first phase is called the phase of potential power. In this phase, a state has not been industrialized; it is still primarily agricultural, and most of the population lives in rural areas. The productivity of its economy is low, and therefore, most people's living standards are still low. Industrial output is minor or even does not exist. Technical skills of the population are low (Organski, 1968, pp. 340-341). The second phase is called the phase of transitional growth in power. In this phase, the state went through a rapid transition into an industrial stage from its previously agricultural state. During this process, the state's power substantially increased compared to other states, either agricultural or industrialized. Within this phase, specific changes occur. Growth within the industries in cities increases. People are moving away from farming and other agricultural means in rural areas to industry and service-related jobs in the cities. The economy's productivity increases, and people have better living standards. The third phase is called the phase of power maturity. Such a phase is achieved when a state has been fully industrialized. Technology is rapidly improving and will continue to do so in the future. The economy would also continue to rise but at a slower pace than before. The ability to improve the production and distribution of wealth and living standards is still improvable. However, note that the third phase is not a 'happily ever after' ending for the state. The massive rapid acceleration

of industrialization and an increase in power has plateaued. They cannot massively increase their economy just like in the second phase. These changes will not just suddenly disappear overnight within this phase. They will continue, but simply not at the same rate as before; this is because massively slowing down runs the risk of falling behind other states. Therefore, a state may continue to grow despite its power declining during this phase. This is because power is inherently relative and not absolute. It is not necessarily just the power of a state but also the relation that power has with the power of other states (Organski, 1968, pp. 341-343).

3. Case Study: The Rise of China and Its Challenge to the US Hegemony

To empirically see the implementation of power transition theory, the writer seeks to explain the transformation of China from an agricultural, socialist, war-torn state into an economic giant trying to break the Western domination in the international system. During the first two decades of the communist regime under Mao Zedong, economic development in China started with a problematic attempt to transform and industrialize the massively underdeveloped agrarian economy. Before the Civil War, the Chinese economy was primarily dominated by agriculture, 64.5 percent of the national income, and continued until the early years of communist control (Zheng, 1971, pp. 1-22). The government comes up with two economic plans: to restore the deteriorated economy as fast as possible and begin a rapid industrialization of the economy. In order to apply those economic plans, the government unveiled a myriad of economic strategies. First, Mao Zedong unveiled the 'First Five-year Plan' similar to the one used by Stalin during the early years of the soviet union. The plan focused on rapid industrialization at the expense of other sectors of the economy. China then began to build the industry from scratch by allocating most of its investments to the industrial sector. This proved to be successful at the beginning of the industrialization process, in which the capacity of the industry improved substantially. Nevertheless, the same improvement does not spread to other industries, such as agriculture, whose growth lagged far behind in comparison to the industry sector (Learning Academy, 2022; Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023; Zheng, 1971, p. 3). Therefore, due to the unbalanced growth, a second development strategy was introduced, known as the Great Leap Forward. The plan was devised as a way to simultaneously and equally accelerate the growth of most sectors, primarily agriculture and industry. While initially successful, it was short-lived. In the end, the failed economic policy combined with terrible weather conditions resulted in a famine that killed tens of millions of people in China, ultimately reversing all of the economic growth and instead creating an economic crisis that spanned a few decades (Zheng, 1971, pp. 3-6; Brown, 2012; Vox, 2023; Szczepanski, 2019).

After Mao Zedong died in 1976, Deng Xiaoping reformed China's economic policy. He decided to break away from socialist-style economic policies and prioritize the free market principles, opening China to Western foreign investments and establishing economic ties with many countries, including normalizing relations with the US. In Deng's own words, "Black cat, white cat, what does it matter what color the cat is as long as it catches mice?" (Morrison, 2013). This marks the beginning of China's transitional growth in power. In 1979, China implemented extensive economic reforms, including incentivizing farmers to sell crops on the open market, establishing four coastal special economic zones to attract foreign investment and technology, and decentralizing economic policymaking across various sectors, particularly in trade. This involved granting economic control to provincial and local governments, encouraging entrepreneurship among citizens, and designating more coastal regions and cities as open areas for free-market experimentation, offering tax and trade incentives. State price controls on numerous products were gradually removed. The impacts of these reforms have been substantial. Since the reforms, China's economy has grown significantly faster than before. From

1979 to 2018, China's GDP averaged 9.5%. This means that, on average, China has managed to double its economy every eight years.

However, something is currently missing within the equation; despite being one of, if not the most, growing economies in the world, up until 2012, China has not shown a particular willingness or massive dissatisfaction with the world order. Everything is about to change under Xi Jinping. Xi Jinping's leadership has propelled China to unprecedented power and influence, challenging the existing international order dominated by the United States. This, due to his assertive nationalism and foreign policy, emphasis on ideology, economic strength, military modernization, and consolidation of power, suggests that China under Xi Jinping is more likely to challenge the status quo and seek to assert its dominance in the international order.

This is evident in the introduction of his ambitious policies and their implication towards the international order, such as the 'Belt and Road.' China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) was launched during the early years of Xi's presidency with various boosts to economic integration and connectivity with states in Asia, Africa, Europe, and beyond. At the same time, the US, as a hegemon who is unwilling to be overtaken, also launched a similar project. In June 2021, with the backing of the Biden administration, the G7 nations introduced the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative. This effort by the United States and its allies aims to offer an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative proposed by China (Zhao, 2021, pp. 248-260). One thing that makes the BRI seen as lucrative is its very few requirements. Typically, in order to receive investment from the West, there are many strict ethical standards. This is not the case with China. Therefore, it was never surprising that the BRI is prevalent in many less democratic countries. In order to fund the BRI project, China established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (Qian et al., 2023, pp. 217-237). AIIB is seen as China's response to the perceived dominance of Western-led institutions like the World Bank; the AIIB was initiated by China and is viewed as a means for Beijing to expand its influence and overtake US economic dominance, particularly in Asia. It has gained considerable support from countries outside the US and is focused on infrastructure development in the region. China's growing influence challenges the status of the US, which has been the world's lone superpower for the last several decades. Isolation due to the "America First" rhetoric of the Trumpism political movement is trending in the US, meaning that there is an erosion of trust of countries, even with the US allies, since the US is investing less and, therefore, losing influence worldwide. The BRI is China's way of leveraging that lack of trust to gain power and become a global leader. China and other anti-western states founded BRICS to expand its influence further. BRICS comprises Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, representing emerging economies focusing on economic cooperation and challenging Western dominance. The G7 includes advanced economies like Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the US, addressing broader global issues beyond economics. China's presence in BRICS shows its willingness to expand its influence among emerging economies, countering US dominance and promoting a more diverse global order (Conte, 2023; Bachtiar & Rafly, 2023; Lailah & Virgianita, 2023). As such, the relationship between the US and China has become increasingly competitive. All we have to do is wait and see who comes out on top.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the power transition theory broke the norm and argues in the opposite direction. It argues that a balance of power and willingness between the declining 'veteran' and the dissatisfied 'new kid on the block' to maintain or pursue dominance and sit on top of the throne of the international order is ultimately dangerous. Just like a human, it must grow up to fulfill its powerful and dominant potential. The power transition through which each state 'grows up' is

divided into three phases: the phase of potential power, in which the state is still preindustrial and possesses little power compared to any industrial state; the stage of transitional growth in state, during which the nation industrializes and experiences a tremendous spurt in its power; and the stage of power maturity, when the nation is fully industrial and when it continues to grow in wealth but declines in power about that of other nations just entering stage two. China is growing and will continue to do so for a long time. The transformation of China from an insignificant state to an economic force to be reckoned with and the declining and aging US, which is slowly losing its grip on power dominance, urged us to consider one burning question: Who will then rule the world?

Conflicts of Interest

The author has declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

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