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Abstract

The rise of China is a major theme in international relations for both scholars and statesmen. Based on existing theories, namely the power transition theory and the balance of power theory, China’s rise is forecasted to be violent, either by challenging the existing hegemon or by inviting counterbalancing efforts. Nonetheless, these arguments are highly controversial and lead to a neglect of theorization about rising great powers. Therefore, this article attempts to revisit and revive the theoretical discussions and present a refined theory of rising great powers that can explain the past and illuminate the future. To provide a clear picture of capabilities, the refined theory exclusively focuses on material variables. The theory demonstrates that the different material contexts in which great powers rise explain the differences in their external behaviors and how they are treated by existing great powers.

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From this point of view, although China may simply be another rising great power in modern history, the material context of its rise is different. It is precisely this difference that explains the peacefulness of this rising great power.

1. Introduction

The rise of China is a major theme in international relations for both scholars and politicians. According to established theories about the general patterns of great power behavior, namely the power transition theory and the balance of power theory, the rise of great powers is often violent, leading to cold wars, major wars, or even world wars. China’s rise is forecasted to be no exception, either by challenging the existing hegemon—the United States—or inviting U.S.-led counterbalancing efforts. However, these clear-cut theoretical arguments fail to explain China’s current benign pattern known as “peace and development” and thus have inspired considerable debate. Years have passed, and there is now “a very loose consensus” that the consequences of China’s rise are highly uncertain and are affected by a complex set of factors of which no one can be sure. Such a trend of relying on ad hoc explanations is neither acceptable nor healthy for international relations as a discipline. If the complexity of the real world were to prevent clear-cut theorizing, the scholarly efforts of the past half century would have been subverted.

This article intends to reverse this trend by reviving the theorization of rising great powers, explaining the past and illuminating the future using a clear-cut theoretical argument. The article is divided into three major sections. The first and second sections discuss the power transition theory and the balance of power theory, respectively, and the third section proposes a refined theory that corrects the flaws identified by the first and second sections. In this regard, the refined theory presented here is not a new invention but a revised version of the balance of power theory that includes insights from power transition theory. For the sake of parsimony, the refined theory focuses exclusively on material variables, yielding a clear picture of capabilities and eliminating institutional and perceptional factors.

In other words, the refined theory indicates that the different material contexts in which great powers rise explain the differences in their patterns of behavior and how they are treated by existing great powers. From this point of view, China may simply be another rising great