

Vladimir Ajzenhamer

University of Belgrade – Faculty of Security Studies

The Theory behind the Practice? The One Belt, One Road Project – Toward a Chinese International Relations Theory

Abstract

This paper's main focus is to examine the reasons why no authentic "Eastern" theories of international relations have been proposed and explore the possibility that China, one of today's most influential states, could achieve a disciplinary breakthrough in the near future and formulate its own theory of world politics, unencumbered by Western theoretical matrices. The author devotes special attention to the Belt and Road Initiative, analyzing the key postulates of the project and attempting to discern the elements of a "future" Chinese international relations theory in them.

Keywords:

International Relations, theories of international relations, Great Debates, Chinese international relations theory, the Belt and Road, *wang dao, ba dao, fu zeren daquo*

INTRODUCTION

The field of International Relations (IR) have made the first steps under the wing of American and British academic circles. This assertion was out of question among authorities in the newly-established field, who tried to explain (even rectify, as someone could say) increasingly complex world of politics in the interwar period. The discipline flourished after the end of

World War II, growing from “childhood” to “youth”, forced by mankind’s recognition of the possibility that it could be self-destructed in one of global conflicts which are near to come. The fear of such a scenario and the growing awareness of the need for more responsible world politics, but also “more responsible” warfare as Carl von Clausewitz’s continuation of politics by other means, provided an incentive for social sciences to take more interest in studying this area of social life. This is why the following decades saw the establishment of numerous university departments and institutes for the study of contemporary IR.¹ Although this was undoubtedly a global trend, the West remained the “home address” of IR. In the US, the UK and the rest of Western Europe, various theories of world politics (and related phenomena) flourished and the IR, which was put forward by those intellectual circles, became the main scholarly criterion of the discipline but also its most familiar voice.

At the other end of the world (at the so-called Orient) however, the development of IR took a significantly different course. The theoretical playfulness, which had become the most prominent property of intellectual exploration of world politics in the West, was entirely absent. Although the final years of the Cold War (and the following decade) had led to somewhat of a postcolonial paradigmatic turn in social sciences, the decolonized Orient could not be build on this momentum to develop an authentic, “home-grown” theoretical approach to issues in international politics. The main focus of this paper is to analyze what was brought by this situation and to explore the possibility that China, the most influential “Eastern” state today (and one of the most influential countries globally), could make a disciplinary breakthrough in the foreseeable future and put forward its own IR theory (IRT), unencumbered by Western theoretical matrix. The first part of the paper therefore discusses current IR theories, which have been somehow a “prerogative” of Western authors, ever since they first emerged. Then we proceed to analyze in detail the reasons that have led to the lack of “non-Western” IR theories, with special emphasis on China. Finally, we direct our attention to the Belt and Road Initiative as one of today’s most ambitious international economic projects, whose political and security implications could radically transform the established ways of world politics. In analyzing the key postulates of the project, we seek to identify the elements of a “future” Chinese IRT. In the conclusion, the author provides his viewpoint on why a Chinese IRT is both inevitable and necessary for the future development of this discipline.

¹ Vojin Dimitirjević, Radoslav Stojanović, *Međunarodni odnosi*, Službeni list SRJ, Beograd, 1996, p. 5.

IR THEORIES AS AN ACADEMIC “PREROGATIVE” OF THE WEST

It would not be a mistake to say that IR “matured” as a direct result of numerous debates among representatives of different schools of thought, which date back to the field’s earliest days. These disputes are known among IR scholars as the Great Debates and they are at the heart of a kind of a disciplinary mythos serving to “distinguish IR theoretically more clearly and more authentically from other social sciences (mainly those sprang from the emerging, newly-established academic field). Highlighting the significance of certain debates in IR should give us insight into the difference between insignificant theoretical and methodological disagreements, commonplace in every social science, and “grandiose” debates that have paved the way for the future development of the newly-established academic discipline.”²

The First Great Debate began in the interwar period. Inspired by the grim political reality, which was steeped in the inevitability of another global conflict, the First Debate arose between two schools of thought crossing swords on the issue of states’ actions in post-war (from today’s perspective also pre-war) international circumstances. “In the debate between the theoretical “patriarchs” of the discipline, idealists held fast to the (largely defunct) international order built around the League of Nations. In an attempt to see world politics for what it *was*, not what it *should be*, realists turned to a Hobbesian interpretation of world politics, reformulating the famous philosopher’s maxim about man’s “lupine” nature into a (self-standing) paraphrase – *A state is a wolf to another state*. Whereas idealists believed international institutions to be the key for preventing the looming crisis, realists favored the accumulation of power as the guarantee for state survival in the troubled, anarchic waters of world politics.”³

The Second Great Debate had a more pronounced scholarly side and focused mainly on epistemological issues. During the 1960s, traditionalists and behavioralists engaged in a methodological debate on the emerging discipline’s epistemological methods. The behavioralists’ demands for IR’s greater “scientificity” challenged the prevalent traditional interpretation of events in the international political arena. Realists and idealists, former opponents from the First Great Debate, thus found themselves on the same

² Vladimir Ajzenhamer, „Bojno polje praxis: realističko-konstruktivistički duumvirat i ‘posrtanje’ liberalnog internacionalizma”, *Međunarodni problemi*, Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu, Beograd, Vol. LXIX, No. 2–3/2017, pp. 263–264.

³ *Ibid*, p. 264.

side, sharing the viewpoint that “no scientific theory could ever capture the interplay of so many factors nor explain choice by human beings who could learn by experience”.⁴ Both schools were proponents of the historiographic approach and believed strongly that IR had to focus on the study of pivotal events that determined the course of human history. This “traditional” view was challenged by behavioralists, characterized by Hedley Bull,⁵ one of the most prominent participants of this debate, as the representatives of the “scientific” approach⁶ (albeit with a considerable amount of sarcasm). Behavioralists considered it “possible and desirable to employ the achievements of logical positivism, the hypothetical-deductive method and behavioralism in the study of international politics, with the aim of obtaining results in the study of phenomena in the international sphere that are exact and measurable, that have the greatest possible general validity and are intersubjectively verifiable”.⁷

The Third and Fourth Great Debate are not as easy to outline, mostly because they involved a large number of contending theoretical paradigms. The Third Great Debate is usually characterized as a debate between the proponents of realism, pluralism and structuralism,⁸ but there are also interpretations that this was the case for realism, liberalism and radicalism.⁹ The Fourth Great Debate is most commonly described as a debate between “neorealists, neoliberals and constructivists, but the proponents of post-structuralism, critical theory, feminism and others took part in it as well. There are, however, opinions that the Third Debate was also the final one. Scholars such as Robert Keohane, Yosef Lapid and David A. Lake refuse to “label” the “paradigmatic wars” as a Great Debate and advance the thesis that the Third Great Debate took place between positivists and so-called re-

⁴ David Lake, “Theory is dead, long live theory: The end of Great Debates and the rise of eclecticism in International Relations”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, issue 3, 2013, p. 569.

⁵ Bull, one of the most important representatives of the so-called English School, a school of thought focusing on “the moral, political and social properties of international society” (Martin Griffiths, C. Steven C. Roach, M. Scott Solomon, *Fifty key thinkers in International Relations – Second edition*, Routledge, New York & London, 2009, p. 211), defended the traditional approach in the study of international relations, whose scientific merit was denounced by certain behavioralists.

⁶ Hedley Bull, “International Theory: The Case for a Classical Approach”, *World Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1966, pp. 361–362.

⁷ Dragan R. Simić, „Još jedanput o ‘četiri velike debate’ (Crnice iz istorije nauke o međunarodnim odnosima)“, *Politička revija*, Institut za političke studije, Beograd, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2008, p. 1474.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1475–1476.

⁹ David Lake, “Theory is dead, long live theory: The end of Great Debates and the rise of eclecticism in International Relations”, *op. cit.*, p. 570.

flectivists, with emphasis on its ontological dimension. Lake tends to refer to this Debate as the “Final Debate”, followed by a pluralistic détente, with multiple mid-level theories existing side by side in “paradigmatic peace” without major disputes and the quest for a grand, comprehensive IR theory gradually being abandoned”.¹⁰

Be that as it may, all four (or three) theoretical “clashes”, as well as the current paradigmatic peace, have something important in common. They are all profoundly Western-centric i.e. *occidental* in origin. This is because the metatheories that have been the bone of scholarly contention in IR in the past few decades (and the subsequent mid-level theories) were all formulated in Western academic circles and developed using their theoretical templates (even when they “took root” in other parts of the world). The East (both the Middle East and the Far East) failed to make its unique contribution to the field’s theoretical development, rendering IRT something of a “prerogative” of the West.

WHY IS THERE NO CHINESE IRT?

It is worth saying that IR theories were by no means entirely Western-centric in content despite their occidental roots. Although this may have been the case in the first few decades of the field’s development, the Third and Fourth Great Debate led to great progress in the attempts of certain IR scholars to see world politics through the eyes of those parts of the world which were outside the Occident. The impetus lent by Edward Said to post-colonialism as a paradigm raised quite a storm in social sciences by inverting the canonical theoretical perspectives. This trend did not bypass IR, which was faced with the task of providing an explanation not only for the principle of bipolar balance in the shadow of the Cold War, but also for the events in those parts of the world where decolonization had just been completed.¹¹ Said is credited with debunking the notion of the Orient as an undisputed geographical, cultural and political given. Instead, the Orient was “unmasked” as a pejorative discourse construct produced by the centuries-long occidental exploitation of discourse as a powerful instru-

¹⁰ Vladimir Ajzenhamer, „Bojno polje praxis: realističko-konstruktivistički duumvirat i ‘posrtanje’ liberalnog internacionalizma”, op. cit., pp. 265–266.

¹¹ The age of colonialism ended in the first few decades after the end of the World War II with the retreat of European colonial powers from Africa and the Middle East. Decolonization had its dramatic escalation with the Algerian War of Independence (1956–1962), an exceedingly violent armed conflict in which Algerians won independence from the French colonial rule.

ment for justifying the imperial and colonial violence of the West against the East. Edward Said “uncompromisingly tries and sentences numerous authors, travel writers, literary figures, politicians and, above all, scholars who provided the material for the orientalist construct that would, as a consequence, give legitimacy to the colonial subjugation of non-Western societies”.¹² Said’s study of orientalism would usher in a new era in the attitude of Western academic circles toward the former colonies and with the arrival of this “so-called cultural turn the world of IR had seemed astonishingly reflexive and heterodox. The promise of new encounters less encumbered by supremacy and prejudice, the softening of hard orientalism with awareness and apprehension of difference and growing critical awareness of the question of identity in IR offered new openings. No singular worldview fully ordered things or was the order of things”.¹³

Paradoxically, the majority of influential IR scholars still belonged to its Western schools of thought despite the field’s growing interest in the Eastern “point of view” on international relations. The “liberated” Orient passed up the opportunity to find its own academic voice, despite becoming the focus of study of IR, this time as a subject of world politics and not merely its object (or, in Said’s concept, its “victim”). Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya believe that no authentic Eastern school (or schools) of IR has emerged because all of its main theories are rooted in Western philosophy, political theory and history.¹⁴ Another reason is that they are highly “Eurocentric” in their interpretation of world history and current political events. In support of their thesis, Buzan and Acharya invoke the occidental roots and properties of the main theoretical matrices of IR: realism, neorealism, strategic studies, liberalism, neoliberalism, Marxism, the English School, critical theory, constructivism and postmodernism. These authors point out that “both classic and neorealism project onto the rest of the world history their basic Europe-derived story of international anarchy and balance of power politics as a permanent, universal structural condition [...] Strategic studies is rooted in the tradition of the Western way in warfare and its classics: Clausewitz (Napoleonic wars), Mahan (British naval practice and strategy) and a host of responses to developments in Western military tech-

¹² Nataša „Rubikova kocka” postkolonijalizma: teorijski sinkretizam i novi izazovi u postkolonijalnim studijama“, *Međunarodni problemi*, Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu, Beograd, Vol. LXIX, No. 2–3/2017, p. 313.

¹³ Mustapha Kamal Pasha, *Islam and International Relations*, Routledge, London and New York, 2017, p. 21.

¹⁴ Barry Buzan, Amitav Acharya, “Why is there no non-Western International Relations theory?” in Barry Buzan, Amitav Acharya (eds.), *Non-Western International Relations theory*, Routledge, London and New York, 2010, pp. 6–10.

nology (tanks, aircraft, nuclear weapons etc.) [...] Liberalism and neoliberalism have clear roots in European political and economic theory (Cobden, Hobson, Kant, Locke, Smith), and in the Western practice of political economy from the nineteenth century onwards [...] Marxism is the main reaction against and counterpoint to liberalism's response to the rise of an industrial economy in the West [...] The English School has its roots in much of the same Western political theory as realism (Hobbes, Machiavelli) and liberalism (Kant), albeit with more prominence given to Grotius and the idea that states can and should form among themselves an international society [...] Critical theory has roots in Marxism [...] Constructivism and postmodernism both have roots in Western philosophy of knowledge and social theory, building particularly on the work of modern European social theorists such as Bordieu and Foucault".¹⁵ Buzan and Acharya suggest other possible reasons that led to the lack of "non-Western" IR theories. There is always the possibility that Western theories have already unearthed the true nature of international relations and that there is therefore no room left for significant "innovation" in the field. There is also the possibility that there are authentic "homegrown" theories in certain Eastern academic circles, but that they have remained marginalized and unknown to the wider academic community due to language barriers.¹⁶ The possibility that the theory "market" has been monopolized i.e. that Western theories have acquired a Gramscian hegemonic status also needs to be taken into account. As the oppressed Eastern societies gradually consciously and unconsciously accepted, the imposed Western political and economic patterns (even after decolonization had been completed) as their own norms (for example, the key elements of Westphalian sovereignty), they "copied" the Western view of international relations. Different historical experiences, the development of local (academic) institutions and local political and cultural contexts are also part of the equation. For instance, the experiences of the World War I and II were not as traumatic for many Asian societies as they were for the European continent and the United States. It is also questionable to what extent those societies struggling with numerous existential issues such as poverty, lack of infrastructure at all levels of social life and political instability have the luxury of lamenting and theorizing about the nature, directions and perspectives of world politics. According to Buzan and Acharya, all of this gave the West a considerable advantage in the study

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 6–9.

¹⁶ The language barrier works both ways. Since most of the relevant work in IR has been written and published in the English language, it raises the issue of its "usability" and "(un)availability" outside anglophone countries, which also raises the question of whether it is (im)possible to keep abreast of the latest trends in the discipline.

of international relations, which is in itself another reason why there have been no strong theoretical competitors in the Eastern “stands” of the global academic arena.

Does this mean that the East is utterly indifferent to the study of international relations? This is an easy question to answer. Eastern societies are actively engaged in the academic analysis of foreign policy *praxis* and diplomatic history, which attests to their interest in the events on the international political scene. The People’s Republic of China, which we have chosen as a kind of a case study for this paper, is a good example of vibrant academic activity in the study of international relations, although it has (thus far at least) not made its authentic theoretical contribution to the field. In China, the academic study of international politics began in the so-called Republican Period (1912–1949), when numerous courses related to the field were included in the syllabuses of Chinese universities during the 1920s and 1930s. For example, as many as fourteen courses with an international dimension were taught at Tsinghua University in Beijing. The League of Nations, International Organization, International Law, IR, Diplomacy and Japanese Politics were only some of the courses taught at Tsinghua University at the time.¹⁷ After the end of the civil war and the founding of the People’s Republic of China, two significant institutions for the study of world politics were established. The China Foreign Affairs University was founded in 1955.¹⁸ The China Institute of International Studies, one of today’s most influential think tanks, was set up in 1956.¹⁹ Both institutions were established under the auspices of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Significantly, three departments of international politics were founded in the course of one year (1963–1964) – at Peking University, Renmin University and Fudan University.²⁰ Also, the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations was founded only a year later.²¹ After the 1979 reforms and the beginning of opening up to the outside world, IR began to establish itself as a modernized academic field (aimed not only at practice, but also at theory), similar to the one that had been developing for half a century in the West. It was not until the post-Mao era that China succeeded in “creating intellectual space and securing institutional opportunities for

¹⁷ Yongjin Zhang, Teng-chi Chang, “Introduction – The Making of Chinese international theory?”, in Yongjin Zhang, Teng-chi Chang (eds.) *Constructing a Chinese school of International Relations – Ongoing debates and sociological realities*, Routledge, London and New York, 2016, p. 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

disciplinary IR to take roots".²² IR continued to develop under the considerable influence of Western, especially American, theories. It is interesting to note that out of eighty-five key theoretical works translated from English into Chinese by 2009, more than 90% had been written by U.S. authors.²³ This is why Yongjin Zhang and Teng-chi Chang are right to observe that "The internationalization of the American IR theoretical discourse in China was often celebrated as the 'progress' in Chinese scholars' theoretical understanding of IR. The colonization of Chinese IR's intellectual terrain can perhaps best be illustrated by the fact that even Chinese academic debates on the prospect of China's peaceful rise was originally 'structured around the three mainstream IRTs'. Self-identified Chinese realists, Chinese liberals and Chinese constructivists grappled among themselves with the question whether China's peaceful rise is possible, largely reproducing the same debates in United States".²⁴ Wan Jiangli and Barry Buzan arrive at the same conclusion, emphasizing that as much as 78% of work on international relations written in China between 1978 and 2007 dealt with the study of liberalism, realism and constructivism. They conclude that such a trend "created a somewhat copycat culture, mechanically applying Western concepts without questioning their appropriateness".²⁵

The copycat culture mentioned above was of course not the only reason why Chinese academic circles did not put forward an authentic, "homegrown" IRT. The various reasons listed by Buzan and Acharya discussed previously apply to China as well. This is especially true of those arguments that testify to differences in historical experiences, in the development of local institutions and in local political and cultural contexts. First and foremost, China lived through the atrocities of the First and Second World War torn between the traumatic experiences of the October Revolution (which led to the collapse of the neighboring Russian Empire and, consequently, to anarchy on Russia–China borders) and the military-political rivalry with Japan, which would soon turn into an open Japanese aggression and the occupation of some parts of the Chinese territory. These experiences were steeped in local turmoil, which would determine the future course of Chinese history and its social and political development – the founding of the Republic (1912), the civil war between the Kuomintang and the Commu-

²² Ibid, p. 6.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Wang Jiangli, Barry Buzan, "The English and Chinese Schools of International Relations – Comparisons and lessons", in Yongjin Zhang, Teng-chi Chang (eds.) *Constructing a Chinese school of International Relations – Ongoing debates and sociological realities*, op. cit., p. 132.

nist Party of China (1927–1937) and the Chinese Communist Revolution (1945–1949).²⁶ Such a complex interplay of global and local conflicts inevitably resulted in a different perspective on the global war heritage of the first half of the 20th century from the one that played the decisive role in spurring the development of Western IR theories. The institutional limitations in the Republican period that made it necessary to hire foreign faculty members (mainly from the U.S.) and Chinese faculty members educated at Western universities should also be taken into account. Another major limitation stemmed from the cultural and political context created after the People's Republic of China was founded, especially during the so-called Cultural Revolution, when “for a decade, all Chinese universities and research institutes were either closed down, or stopped operating at their full capacity”.²⁷ Zhang and Chang note that the complete isolation of Chinese scholars from Western trends in disciplinary development and a complete lack of dialogue with Western academic circles during the Chinese “ostracism” from the international community (1949–1979) had an equally disastrous effect on the development of Chinese IR.²⁸ There is, furthermore, the previously discussed argument concerning Gramscian hegemony, which most certainly contributed to the emergence of the “copycat” academic practice and the glorification of Western scholarly achievements – practical, technological as well as theoretical (including IR theories). Perhaps this situation arose from the frustration of Chinese intellectuals with the experience from the Opium Wars – the painful memory of the Chinese empire's devastating military defeat by Western powers precisely on account of their technological superiority.

Having elaborated on what caused the lack of Chinese IR theories, we can legitimately ask whether China's current economic (and, increasingly, political) rise – China is seen by many as the future leading world power – can provide fertile ground for the development of “homegrown” theories that would be a reflection of China's “new” worldview and perspective on world politics.

²⁶ The civil war between the Kuomintang (the Nationalist Party of China) and the Communist Party of China was fought between 1927 and 1950, with a hiatus of several years brought about by the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). The ideologically motivated conflict, in which foreign powers were also indirectly involved (the Chinese communists were backed by the Soviets, while Western powers supported the Chinese nationalists), ended in the defeat of the Kuomintang (its retreat to Taiwan) and the proclamation of the People's Republic of China.

²⁷ Yongjin Zhang, Teng-chi Chang, “Introduction – The Making of Chinese international theory?”, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

XI JINPING'S BELT AND ROAD AS A STIMULUS FOR A CHINESE IRT

The Belt and Road project, originally promoted as One Belt, One Road,²⁹ is a multilateral project aimed at reviving and enhancing economic cooperation along the historic Silk Road.³⁰ The idea “came from the top of the current Chinese political leadership, and its creator and main promoter is Chinese President Xi Jinping. The project of economic integration and cooperation of a large number of countries in the vast geographical space of Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa is popularly characterized as the *New Silk Road*, and involves the construction of infrastructure and the development of trade connections along the land and sea routes that should connect the Republic of China and the rest of the Central Asian countries with the large continental land mass, with which they make Eurasian land and the African continent”.³¹

The Belt and Road project comprises two separate subprojects – a land route and a sea route. The Silk Road Economic Belt is the project's land-based component, intended to establish infrastructure connections among the countries along the “route” of the old Silk Road. The economic belt has been envisioned as the economic and infrastructural integration of a vast geographic expanse from China in the east, across Central and Western Asia, the Middle East, Eastern and Central Europe, all the way to Western Europe. The aim of the Belt is “to build a ‘Eurasian land bridge’ – a logistics chain from China's east coast all the way to Western Europe; and to develop the economic corridors connecting China with Mongolia and Russia, central Asia and South-East Asia”.³² The other subproject is the 21st Cen-

²⁹ During state visits in 2013, Chinese president Xi Jinping presented the initiative as One Belt, One Road. In september 2015, China's National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce announced the Belt and Road as the project's official name in English (Yeroen van der Leer, Joshua Yau, “China's new silk route, The long and winding road”, PwC's Growth Markets Centre, Singapore, 2016, p. 2)

³⁰ The name for the network of caravan routes connecting the Mediterranean and the Far East in classical antiquity and the Middle Ages.

³¹ Vladimir Ajzenhamer, “Ethnic-Religious Otherness Production as Security Challenge to the New Silk Road Project (An example of Turkish influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republic of Serbia)”, in Shao Binhong, Vladimir Cvetković, *The One Belt, One Road: The Balkan Perspective, Political and Security Aspects*, Faculty of Security Studies, University of Belgrade, 2016, p. 214.

³² Barbara Woodward, Stephen Phillips, “One Belt One Road – A role for UK companies in developing China's new initiative. New opportunities in China and beyond”, China-Britain Business Council, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, London, 2015, p. 6.

ture Maritime Silk Road, which includes the maritime section connecting China and Europe via the South China Sea, the South Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. The aim of the “maritime road” is “to build efficient transport routes between major ports in various countries, including the development of an economic corridor through the Indian Ocean, better connecting China with South Asia, the Middle East, Africa and the Mediterranean”.³³

It is important to emphasize that the Belt and Road project is predominantly economic (and partly cultural) in its nature, and that it does not involve “any form of political or security integration of the countries involved in this project”.³⁴ It is, however, impossible to deny that this is a project which includes “close to 65 countries somehow connected, covering more than half of the world’s population (c. 4.4 billion), around 30% of the global economy and a total infrastructure investment need of around US\$5 trillion”.³⁵ It is therefore easy to see how such an ambitious and costly multilateral project “inevitably means there are inherent risks, ranging from legal and financial challenges to political or social instability and regional disputes”.³⁶

These risks call for the scholarly study of the Belt and Road project and for its advantages, drawbacks, scope and limitations to gain solid theoretical underpinnings. If we accept the reflectivist proposition that “theories can shape the behavior of actors, just as the behavior of actors can contribute to the formulation of theories”³⁷, an authentic and innovative Chinese IRT would be of more than obvious use to China’s foreign policy *praxis* (in this particular case, the Belt and Road project). Above all, it would help avoid the hidden traps in the theoretical interpretations by Western authors, who most commonly describe China’s rise and its foreign policy ambitions in terms that cause concern for most of the general public around the world.

As we have already pointed out, Western analyses lament over China’s (in)ability to assert itself as the world’s leading power by peaceful means. In this context, realists view China’s rise through a Kindlebergerian he-

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Vladimir Ajzenhamer, “Ethnic-Religious Otherness Production as Security Challenge to the New Silk Road Project (An example of Turkish influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republic of Serbia)”, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

³⁵ Yeroen van der Leer, Joshua Yau, “China’s new silk route, The long and winding road”, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

³⁶ Barbara Woodward, Stephen Philips, “One Belt One Road – A role for UK companies in developing China’s new initiative. New opportunities in China and beyond”, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

³⁷ Vladimir Ajzenhamer, „Bojno polje praxis: realističko-konstruktivistički duumvirat i ‘posrtanje’ liberalnog internacionalizma“, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

gemonic matrix, according to which world politics cannot be stable without a global hegemon. In order for China to become a global hegemon, it first needs to challenge the global supremacy of the current hegemon – the United States. John Mearsheimer points out that China “would surely pursue regional hegemony, just as the United States did in the Western Hemisphere during the nineteenth century”.³⁸

From a liberalist perspective, China could also be questionable on at least two grounds – its economy and its values. In terms of its economy, China is a serious challenger of the Bretton Woods system and (because of its communist system) it is also the antipode of liberal democracy with regard to its values.

Finally, constructivism, relying on the less “tangible” conceptual tools such as constructs, meaning and discourse, can easily turn China into an inimical Other,³⁹ whose threat will help reunite Western Atlantic-centered states in terms of their identity. The need for a Chinese theoretical alternative is therefore evident. On the one hand, it would serve as adequate support to the ongoing New Silk Road project, providing it with a theoretical foundation and valuable help in dispelling doubts about the sincerity of China’s intentions. On the other, it would open the door for the project to continue to develop and evolve, bolstered by the interaction between theory and practice.

The key elements of the Belt and Road project – the mutual economic interest of a large number of partners (the so-called *win-win situation* for all involved), the absence of politicization and the respect for the political diversity of all participants, and China’s consistent renunciation of hegemonic aspirations (as a form of legitimizing the anarchic nature of international relations) – are all an excellent starting point for formulating an authentic, “homegrown” theory. There are already intimations of this possibility (albeit in a rudimentary form), manifested in the terms that have informally become a part of China’s economic diplomacy in the last few decades. These are *wang dao* (Chinese for “the way of leadership”) and *fu zeren daguo* (Chinese for “responsible great power”). Openly showing its desire to increase its global influence and act in *da guo feng fan* (Chinese for “great power

³⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York and London, 2001, p. 401.

³⁹ The constructivist concept according to which each collective identity is based on the Self and the Other, where the role of the Other is to increase our sense of community with those who are similar to us and strengthen the Self by posing a threat and being different. (See also: Iver Nojman, *Upotrebe Drugog – “Istok” u formiranju evropskog identiteta*, Beograd: Službeni glasnik, Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku, Beograd, 2011).

style”), China “came up with the concept of ‘great power style’ to counter the ‘China threat’ rhetoric that was heard in some parts of the world. It was framed by Chinese elites as ‘the way of leadership’ (王道, *wang dao*) instead of the way of hegemony (霸道, *ba dao*)”.⁴⁰

The origins of these concepts “can be retrieved from ancient Chinese debate between ‘rule by morality’ and ‘rule by coercion’, as well as the practice of the tributary system. To put it simply, good emperors rule by morality and lead by example, while hegemonic emperors rule by coercion”.⁴¹ These concepts have been successfully applied by Beijing several times already, “such as when China maintained the value of its renminbi (RMB) during the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, when it exempted Africa from US\$ 10 billion in debts in 2000, and when Chinese leaders went on shopping sprees across continents during the recent global financial crisis”. Yang Jiang notes that China was careful to present itself as a “benevolent” great power, whose actions were markedly different from the actions of “predatory” powers such as the U.S., in relations with smaller and developing countries (especially those in Asia, Africa and Latin America). Jiang points out that “It is notable that China’s self-portrayal of ‘great power style’ bears resemblance to ‘benign hegemony’, a form of leadership that is considered crucial, if not optimal, for order by some Western theories. It seems to suggest the single existence of a benign hegemon, which had been sorely desired in international society before the arrival of China”.⁴² This is a crucial point for China’s potential IRT – it provides a theoretical “explanation” (and “conceptualization”, when it comes to economic and political practice) of China as a long-awaited benevolent leader (who is not a hegemon), whose leadership (not hegemony) is underpinned by the principles of a responsible great power, which respects the mutual and individual interests of all members of the international community, as well as their political diversity. By virtue of its ambitiousness and comprehensiveness, the Belt and Road project is a more than adequate empirical example for developing a theoretical framework of this kind.

⁴⁰ Yang Jiang “Great Power Style’ in China’s Economic Diplomacy: Filling the Shoes of a Benign Hegemon?”, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Brill, Hague, No 6/ 2011, p. 65.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION – WHY DO WE NEED A CHINESE IRT?

This question is not as difficult to answer as it may seem at first. The first two decades of the 21st century are nearly as turbulent as the first decades of the 20th century, when the field of IR emerged. The similarities are striking: the faltering of “old” powers, the rise of new ones, the thirst for revisionism, the crumbling of the widely-accepted system of values, the decline of international institutions... The theoretical trends relating to the study of world politics consistently reflect this state of affairs. The vicious circle of debates that have been mulled over repeatedly, lacking a real winner and real losers, remains the ultimate theoretical achievement the West is capable of. Only a few decades earlier, realism, liberalism and constructivism had a largely justified “exclusive right” to success in explaining the workings of the global city-state. If nothing else, the inventiveness they showed in searching for answers to burning questions in world politics justified their right to be placed on the field’s pedestal. Nevertheless, their reign has long resembled that of a usurper rather than a legitimate rule with the blessing of the global academic community. The birth of a Chinese IRT is therefore inevitable and simply a matter of time.

IR (desperately) needs “new blood”, a new perspective and a new metatheory to provide answers about the international “principles” the world is governed by – a world which is becoming increasingly novel as well. Such a theory, like all other great theories that preceded it, would not only be an eloquent witness to global events, but would reflexively serve to remedy their actors’ practical politics (as was the case with liberalism and realism, whose ideas had been incorporated in U.S. foreign policy doctrines for decades). As pointed out by Edward Carr: “Political thought is itself a form of political action. Political science is the science not only of what it is, but of what ought to be.”⁴³ If they accept this idea as their motto, IR scholars from China will find themselves in a position to influence not only the development of their own field, but also the events around the world that are the focus of its study. What remains to be seen is which underlying concept they will adopt as the basis of their future paradigm – *wang dao* or *ba dao*.

Translated by:
Jelena Bošnjak

⁴³ Edward Hallet Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939*, Perennial, New York, 2001, p. 5.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Ajzenhamer, Vladimir, „Bojno polje praxis: realističko-konstruktivistički duumvirat i ‘posrtanje’ liberalnog internacionalizma“, *Međunarodni problemi*, Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu, Beograd, Vol. LXIX, No. 2–3/2017.
2. Ajzenhamer, Vladimir “Ethnic-Religious Otherness Production as Security Challenge to the New Silk Road Project (An example of Turkish influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republic of Serbia)”, in Shao Binhong, Vladimir Cvetković, *The One Belt, One Road: The Balkan Perspective, Political and Security Aspects*, Faculty of Security Studies, University of Belgrade, 2016.
3. Bull, Hedley, “International Theory: The Case for a Classical Approach”, *World Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1966.
4. Buzan, Barry, Acharya, Amitav, “Why is there no non-Western International Relations theory?” in Barry Buzan, Amitav Acharya (eds.), *Non-Western International Relations theory*, Routledge, London and New York, 2010.
5. Carr, Hallet Edward, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939*, Perennial, New York, 2001.
6. Dimitirjević, Vojin, Stojanović, Radoslav, *Međunarodni odnosi*, Službeni list SRJ, Beograd, 1996.
7. Griffiths, Martin, C. Roach, C. Steven, Solomon, M. Scott, *Fifty key thinkers in International Relations – Second edition*, Routledge, New York & London, 2009.
8. Jiangli, Wang, Buzan, Barry, “The English and Chinese Schools of International Relations – Comparisons and lessons”, in Yongjin Zhang, Teng-chi Chang (eds.) *Constructing a Chinese school of International Relations – Ongoing debates and sociological realities*, Routledge, London and New York, 2016.
9. Jiang, Yang, “‘Great Power Style’ in China’s Economic Diplomacy: Filling the Shoes of a Benign Hegemon?”, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Brill, Hague, No 6/ 2011.
10. Jovanović, Nataša, „‘Rubikova kocka’ postkolonijalizma: teorijski sinkretizam i novi izazovi u postkolonijalnim studijama“, *Međunarodni problemi*, Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu, Beograd, Vol. LXIX, No. 2–3/2017.
11. Lake, David, “Theory is dead, long live theory: The end of Great Debates and the rise of eclecticism in International Relations”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, issue 3, 2013.
12. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York and London, 2001.

13. Nojman, Iver, *Upotrebe Drugog – “Istok” u formiranju evropskog identiteta*, Beograd: Službeni glasnik, Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku, Beograd, 2011.
14. Pasha, Kamal, Mustapha, *Islam and International Relations*, Routledge, London and New York, 2017.
15. Simić, R. Dragan, „Još jedanput o ‘četiri velike debate’ (Crtice iz istorije nauke o međunarodnim odnosima)“, *Politička revija*, Institut za političke studije, Beograd, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2008.
16. van der Leer, Yeroen, Yau, Joshua, “China’s new silk route, The long and winding road”, PwC’s Growth Markets Centre, Singapore, 2016.
17. Zhang, Yongjin, Chang, Teng-chi, “Introduction – The Making of Chinese international theory?”, in Yongjin Zhang, Teng-chi Chang (eds.) *Constructing a Chinese school of International Relations – Ongoing debates and sociological realities*, Routledge, London and New York, 2016.
18. Woodward, Barbara, Philips, Stephen, “One Belt One Road – A role for UK companies in developing China’s new initiative. New opportunities in China and beyond”, China-Britain Business Council, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, London, 2015.