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China: The Not-Yet Revisionist Power

Within the field of international relations, powerful states are sometimes thought of as belonging to one of two camps: status quo or revisionist. Status quo powers tend to be those that are better placed and thus more satisfied with the international order. Countries such as the United States, France, Japan, and others generally would be considered status quo powers. Revisionist powers tend to be those that are dissatisfied with their place in the international order, possess both the necessary strength *and* resolve to overthrow or radically modify that order, and actualize such desires. Russia, Iran, and others are generally thought of as being revisionist states. Worrying many is the continued trend of a rising China which according to one publication has been the most read about news story of the 21st century.¹ Given this and coupled with the fact that China continues to rise, debate on whether China is a status quo or revisionist power is abundant. Nonetheless, such debate is often ambiguous as Dr. Alastair Johnston points out that “it is not clear that describing China as a revisionist or non-status quo state is accurate at this moment in history.”² I contend that China resides for the moment within the status quo camp. However, I believe that China will in the future gain the requisite strength to emerge as a revisionist power. Critics of such a thesis will surely argue that for China to do so would be fool hardy but “the absence of clear evidence of an active effort by the PRC to fundamentally alter the distribution of power regionally or globally does not mean that such a

¹ “Top News Stories of the 21st Century,” Global News Monitor, <http://www.languagemonitor.com/predictive-quantities-indicator/bin-ladens-death-one-of-top-news-stories-of-21th-century/>.

² Alastair Iain Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?,” *International Security* Vol. 27, No. 4 (Spring 2003): 6.

desire does not exist.”³ China adopted the strategy of “hiding our light, nurturing our strength”⁴ under Deng Xiao Ping in order to deceive other world powers of China’s intentions while gathering strength for its objective. China is the not yet revisionist power of the 21st century.

In 2011, US President Barak Obama announced the United States’ renewed commitment to its Asian partner nations in his acclaimed “Asian Pivot.” Given that this announcement was made in the midst of US military budget cuts and the fact that it was specifically announced that US Pacific Command would not be affected carries with it significant mistrust between the intentions of both Chinese and American leaders. Up to now, China has not had the power necessary to overturn the global order and an attempt to do so would unravel its long term priority of sustained economic growth by destabilizing its own economic environment. As Richard Nixon pointed out “Military security has to rest, ultimately, on economic and political stability.”⁵ For China to haphazardly and irresponsible flex its muscles in response to the Obama Administration’s announcement of an “Asian Pivot” would only work to contain and isolate itself in the manner that many in China believe the US and its allies are already seeking to do.⁶ More detrimentally for China is that countries which it retains some friendly relations with would most likely be driven into the arms of the Americans as well.⁷ Therefore, Chinese leaders have rightly concluded—however much they dislike the current global environment—that to overthrow the existing global order at this time is not in their interests.

³ Ibid., 48.

⁴ Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China’s Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 112.

⁵ Richard Nixon, “Asia After Viet Nam,” *Foreign Affairs* (October 1967): 117.

⁶ Michael Green and Wu Xinbo, “Regional Security Roles and Challenges,” *Debating China: The U.S.-China Relationship in Ten Conversations*, ed. Nini Hachigan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 198-220.

⁷ Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China’s Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 308.

Many China scholars believe that China chooses its top leaders based on the kind of leader that will be necessary to lead the nation through the future challenges that are likely to occur:

Just as Hu Jintao had the right kind of personality to represent China in the 2000s during its low-keyed period of peaceful rise, so Xi Jinping has been chosen to speak for a China that is expected to be increasingly powerful and assertive in the second decade of the twenty-first century.⁸

The day could very well come when we wake up and “feel the hot breath of this economic dragon on our backs.”⁹ China is the not yet revisionist power of the 21st century.

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⁸ Ibid., 62.

⁹ Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 5.