No. 3

From Offensive Realism to Defensive Realism:
A Social Evolutionary Interpretation
of China's Security Strategy

Tang Shiping

The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) was established in January 2007 as an autonomous School within the Nanyang Technological University. RSIS's mission is to be a leading research and graduate teaching institution in strategic and international affairs in the Asia Pacific.   To accomplish this mission, it will:

- Provide a rigorous professional graduate education in international affairs with a strong practical and area emphasis

- Conduct policy-relevant research in national security, defence and strategic studies, diplomacy and international relations

- Collaborate with like-minded schools of international affairs to form a global network of excellence

Graduate Training in International Affairs

RSIS offers an exacting graduate education in international affairs, taught by an international faculty of leading thinkers and practitioners.   The Master of Science (MSc) degree programmes in Strategic Studies, International Relations, and International Political Economy are distinguished by their focus on the Asia Pacific, the professional practice of international affairs, and the cultivation of academic depth.   Over 120 students, the majority from abroad, are enrolled in these programmes. A small, select Ph.D. programme caters to advanced students whose interests match those of specific faculty members.   RSIS also runs a one-semester course on *'The International Relations of the Asia Pacific'* for undergraduates in NTU.

Research

RSIS research is conducted by five constituent Institutes and Centres: the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS, founded 1996), the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR, 2002), the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS, 2006), the Centre for the Advanced Study of Regionalism and Multilateralism (CASRM, 2007); and the Consortium of Non-Traditional Security Studies in ASIA (NTS-Asia, 2007).   The focus of research is on issues relating to the security and stability of the Asia-Pacific region and their implications for Singapore and other countries in the region. The S. Rajaratnam Professorship in Strategic Studies brings distinguished scholars and practitioners to participate in the work of the Institute.   Previous holders of the Chair include Professors Stephen Walt, Jack Snyder, Wang Jisi, Alastair Iain Johnston, John Mearsheimer, Raja Mohan, and Rosemary Foot.

International Collaboration

Collaboration with other professional Schools of international affairs to form a global network of excellence is a RSIS priority.   RSIS will initiate links with other like-minded schools so as to enrich its research and teaching activities as well as adopt the best practices of successful schools.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to understand the "grand theory" or belief system that is guiding China's security strategy today and that may guide China's security strategy tomorrow, through a social evolutionary approach.

This paper thus has two principal goals, one theoretical and one empirical. The theoretical goal is to advance a social evolutionary approach for understanding states' security strategy (or foreign policy in general). The empirical goal is to offer a new interpretation of the evolution of China's security strategy with the social evolutionary approach.

I argue that China has firmly evolved from an offensive realism state under Mao Zedong to a defensive realism state under Deng Xiaoping and thereafter. By underscoring the major mechanisms behind this evolutionary process, I further argue that China is unlikely to revert to the offensive realism mindset in its past.

The rest of this paper is constructed as follows. Section I offers a brief critique of non-evolutionary approaches toward state behaviour. Section II introduces the basic theoretical framework, stating explicitly what constitutes an evolutionary approach toward states' security strategy. Section III briefly outlines the fundamental differences between offensive realism and defensive realism and underscores why whether a state is an offensive realism state or a defensive realism state is important. Section IV examines China's security strategy under Mao and China's security strategy under Deng and his successors, underscoring the fundamental differences between the two strategies through the lens of offensive realism and defensive realism. Section V advances an evolutionary explanation for the transformation of China's security strategy. Section VI draws some policy implications and concludes.

****

From Offensive Realism to Defensive Realism:
A Social Evolutionary Interpretation of China's Security Strategy

I. Non-evolutionary Approaches toward State Behaviour:

A Critique

Understanding state behaviour under anarchy, or developing an adequate theory of foreign policy, remains an important goal of the science of international relations.

Because of the enormous implications of getting China's strategic orientation right, there has not been a lack of debate on the nature of China's security strategy. From this debate emerges a major difficulty—a difficulty to deal with "the problem of time". This difficulty can be posed simply as the follows: can time cause transformational changes to state behaviour (and international system at large)? Put it differently, does a state behaves in one way mean that it will behave in the same way in the present and the future? Or, even if one's reading of state's past or present behaviour is correct, how can we know that it will stand today (or tomorrow)?

I contend that the fundamental reason behind this difficulty and, consequently, our inability to reach a firmer understanding about China or any other state's security strategy, has largely been that we have been employed *socially* non-evolutionary approaches in understanding states' strategic behaviour and international politics in general. Because the international system has always been an evolutionary system and states are like organisms operating within the system, and states and the system co-evolve, a socially non-evolutionary approach for understanding state behaviour cannot but be inadequate, if not misleading or totally wrong. To understand states' behaviour in an evolutionary system, a genuine socially evolutionary approach is

required.[1]

By social evolution, it is meant that human society has always been an evolutionary system. Moreover, the evolution of human society has not been driven by material factors alone but by the combination of material factors and ideational factors. This prominent role played by ideational factors in social evolution is what most distinguishes social evolution from natural evolution. As a result, any attempt to understand social changes must be based on a social evolutionary approach. a social evolutionary approach toward social change (including the evolution of international politics) must be both materialistic and ideationalistic, although it must give material forces the ontological priority.[2] Moreover, a social evolutionary approach must also bring material forces and ideational forces into an *organic* synthesis: In a social evolutionary approach, material forces and ideational forces must interact with each other, rather than function independently, to drive social changes.[3]

This section offers a brief critique of the non-evolutionary approaches toward states' behaviour, thus laying the ground for advancing a genuinely evolutionary approach. As it becomes clear, despite many explanations (or theories) of foreign

---

[1] By emphasizing that my approach is "socially" evolutionary, I want to firmly distance myself from the sociobiology approach, which is deceptively evolutionary because it asserts that human behaviours are largely determined by genes and thus is supposedly grounded in the hard science of biology. But the evolution of human society cannot possibly be and has not been a purely or even largely biological process. Social evolution is fundamentally different from biological evolution because a fundamentally new mechanism of inheritance, inheritance of acquired characters through (individual and social) learning operates in social evolution. Sociobiology thus is deeply flawed for understanding the evolution human societies. For critiques of sociobiology in international politics, see Duncan S. A. Bell, Paul K. MacDonald, "Correspondence: Start the Evolution Without Us" in *International Security* 26(1), pp. 187–198, Summer 2001; Joshua S. Goldstein, "The Emperor's New Genes: Sociobiology and War" in *International Studies Quarterly* 31(1), pp. 33–43, March 1987. For a recent application of sociobiology to international relations, see Bradley A. Thayer, *Darwin and International Relations: On the Evolutionary Origins of War and Ethnic Conflict*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004. I elaborate on the social evolutionary approach elsewhere. For a good introduction to social evolution, see Geoffrey Hodgson, "Is Social Evolution Lamarckian or Darwinian?" in John Laurent and John Nightingale (Eds.), *Darwinism and Evolutionary Economics* (pp. 87–120), Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2001.

[2] See, John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (pp. 55–56, 110), New York: Free Press, 1995.. I prefer the dichotomies of material forces vs. ideational forces and materialistic vs. ideationalistic because idealism has been taken by the dichotomy of realism vs. idealism and idealism can mean "utopianism".

[3] For lack of a better word, I am adopting Schumpeter's usage of "organic" for describing Marx's analysis of capitalism: Marx brought historical, political, and economic analysis together to arrive at a holistic understanding of capitalism. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (p. 82). London: Allen and Unwin, 1970.

policy look almost poles apart, they are actually fundamentally similar because all of them have been non-evolutionary or only semi-evolutionary.[4]

A. *The Un-evolutionary Approach*

The un-evolutionary approach toward state behaviour has two major variants: the (structural) realism theory-driven approach and the historical- or cultural-legacy approach.

The first variant, an approach heavily influenced by structural realism theory, holds that international politics is essentially a repeat of history. Waltz provided the clearest statement on this assumption: "The texture of international politics remains highly constant, patterns recur, and events repeat themselves endlessly."[5] As a result, states' behaviour will not (and cannot) change that much either: they will balance, seek hegemony and largely forsake cooperation.[6] Overall, these realism theory-driven analyses tend to reach a rather gloomy prediction of state behaviour, usually with little empirical support.[7]

The major reason is, of course, that structural realism pays scant attention to the

---

[4] Other than the un-evolutionary and semi-evolutionary approaches discussed here, there has also been a pseudo-evolutionary approach in IR literature: the long-cycle approach and the sociobiology approach (see above). The long-cycle approach is pseudo-evolutionary simply because it merely employs evolution as an analogy or metaphor (Modelski and Pozanski, 1996: 316), and an evolutionary system does not go through cycles. These two approaches have little relevance in the understanding of foreign policy because they are mostly interested in generalization at the system or structure level without any intent to develop an application to the state's foreign policy. See George Modelski, *The Long Cycles in World Politics*, London: Macmillan, 1987; George Modelski and Kazimerz Pozanski, "Evolutionary Paradigms in the Social Sciences" in *International Studies Quarterly* 40(3), pp. 315–319, September 1996.

[5] Furthermore, Waltz attributed the cause of this "striking sameness in the quality of international politics" to "the enduring anarchic character of international politics", see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979. See also John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (p. 2), New York: Norton, 2001. While Waltz and Mearsheimer may represent the extreme end of a spectrum, realism overall is a non-evolutionary approach. I develop this argument in detail elsewhere.

[6] Waltz actually relies on a selection mechanism to explain these behaviours, see Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (pp. 74–75); idem, "Reflections on Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics" in Robert O. Keohane (Ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (pp. 322–345, p. 331), New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. Waltz's theory, however, is still un-evolutionary because selection in his framework merely eliminates behaviours that are inconsistent with the imperatives of anarchy without generating new behaviours (e.g., cooperation).

[7] For instance, some analyses on China's security behaviour were carried out by scholars with almost no knowledge of China or even East Asia in general, and the supporting "evidences" of their analyses, other than theoretical arguments, largely consist of citing one another's work.

role of ideas in shaping human societies. As K. J. Holsti points out, "realism is essentially a materialist explanation of political behaviour … Without them (i.e., ideas), you cannot see change in history, and therefore you tend to see international politics as a very static game".[8] In essence, the realism theory-driven approach denies the possibility of social evolution through ideational changes. Social evolution is all material,[9] and there is no *independent* role for learning, especially social learning.[10]

The second variant of the non-evolutionary approach can be labelled the historical legacy approach or cultural determinism. This approach basically holds that historical legacy or culture largely determines a state's behaviour.[11] More recently, this approach has metamorphosed into the more fashionable "strategic culture" approach. Despite being "more rigorous in conceptualization and methodology", however, this new wave of strategic culture approach faces the same difficulties as its predecessors—its inability to explain why a particular culture (but not another one) is important in understanding a state's strategic behaviour and how that particular culture was selected and adopted—and works with this approach tend to simply assert that a particular culture matter.[12] As a result, works with this approach (old or new)

---

[8] Kalevi J. Holsti, quoted in Adam Jones, "Interview with Kal Holsti" in *Review of International Studies* 28, pp. 619–633, at pp. 629–630, 2002.

[9] Hence, the purely materialistic approach towards social evolution subsumes the sociobiology approach because the latter insists that social evolution is largely determined by our genes.

[10] Levy argues that "learning has essentially no independent explanatory power in those (neo-realism) theories", see Levy, "Learning and Foreign Policy", pp. 297–298. Such a view is certainly not true for defensive realists like Jervis. Moreover, (neo-)realism does not postulate that states will always adjust to material (structural) change correctly. Realism merely postulates that if states do not adjust rightly, they will be punished. In this sense, realism does allow for the possibility of learning and the role for perceptions and misperceptions, although many realists have chosen to neglect them so far. See Peter Feaver et al., "Correspondence: Brother, Can You Spare a Paradigm? (Or Was Anybody Ever a Realist?)" in *International Security* 25(1), pp. 165–193, Summer 2000, 166. Hence, a more accurate view on the role of learning in realism theories is that realism denies that there is much of a role for social learning.

[11] Culture is usually defined as a social habit that is deeply ingrained (thus relatively resistant to change) within a community, and it is shaped by history. Therefore, historical legacy and culture approach often reinforce each other, and one may take them as the same.

[12] Johnston differentiated the strategic cultural approach into three waves and claimed that the third wave is "more rigorous in conceptualization and methodology" without recognizing (or admitting) that the first and third waves essentially arrive at the same conclusion: "It is the culture, stupid!" See Alastair Iain Johnston, "Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China" in Peter J. Katzenstein (Ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (pp. 216–316, at p. 221, fn. 8), New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. For two major works on this third wave, see Alstair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism:*

remain largely "speculation rather than scholarly inquiry",[13] and reflects perhaps more about their authors' individual preferences (to prove their point) than the real story, despite all the archives and original texts cited.

The major problem for this variant of the static approach is essentially the same as that of the first variant of the static approach, albeit from a completely opposite starting point.[14] This historical-legacy or culturalist approach is fundamentally a purely ideationalist approach. It insists that cultural (ideational) factors largely determine states' strategic behaviour (although when pushed hard, it may claim that culture was shaped by material forces).[15] As a result, this approach inevitably faces the unpleasant prospect that it needs a new strategic culture to explain each important change in a state's strategic behaviour. Yet, if there has been a series of strategic cultures, the culturalist approach cannot tell us why the cultures have not remained the same or how they have been changed. In any case, aren't cultures, by their definition, supposed to be highly stable and resistant to change?

Because of their fundamentally un-evolutionary nature, these two approaches cannot deal with the challenges posed by changes. They have to either deny changes or to explain changes with a list of "cultures" without telling us how those cultures

Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995; Elizabeth A. Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrines Between the Wars*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. For a critique of this new wave of culturalism, see Douglas Porch, "Military 'Culture' and the Fall of France in 1940: A Review Essay" in *International Security* 24(4), pp. 157–180, Spring 2000; Jack Snyder, "Anarchy and Culture: Insights from the Anthropology of War" in *International Organization* 56 (1), pp. 7-45, 2002. One can also argue that works in this category refuse to seriously consider (or easily discount) non-cultural explanations for states' behaviour. I will develop this argument further elsewhere.

[13] Norton S. Ginsberg, "On the Chinese Perception of a World Order" in Tang Tsou (Ed.), *China in Crisis, II* (pp. 73–92, at p. 74), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968. For an earlier review and critique of the explanatory approaches towards China's foreign policy, see Friedrich W. Wu, "Explanatory Approaches to Chinese Foreign Policy: A Critique of the Western Literature" in *Studies in Comparative Communism* 13(1), pp. 41–62, 1980.

[14] Indeed, because of their fundamental similarity (both are static and emphasize one side of the social system—either material or ideational), the two approaches were often brought together from time to time to arrive at an even more static and grim assessment of states' strategic behaviour (e.g., Gilpin's theory of hegemonic war and power transition theory, plus China's *parabellum* strategic culture), often with little or no empirical support.

[15] I use "ideationalism" and avoid "idealism" because idealism has another meaning: "utopianism".

came into existence: Neither position is satisfactory or tenable.

B. *The Partially Evolutionary Approach*

The partially evolutionary approach is prominently represented by constructivism, with neo-liberalism as its milder form.[16] The major reason why constructivism is more evolutionary than the un-evolutionary approach is that constructivism gives more weight to the transformational power of ideas in shaping human societies.[17]

In other words, the partially evolutionary approach recognizes ideational change, or the evolution of ideas, as a major driver behind social evolution. Unlike the realism theory-driven approach, the constructivism approach holds that social evolution is not all material and an important force of social evolution is ideational change. Unlike the culturalist approach, the constructivism approach does not take culture as something that can stay static but something that is constantly evolving. Indeed, constructivism actually seeks to explain cultural changes.[18]

The problem with the partially evolutionary approach of constructivism, however, is that it tends to lose balances on two fronts. First, it tends to over-emphasize ideas and de-emphasize material forces (e.g., power, geography and technology). As Wendt has put it explicitly: "The most important structures in which states are embedded are made of ideas, not material forces."[19] As a result, social evolution has now become

---

[16] Neo-liberalism is simply a milder form of constructivism. See Jennifer Sterling-Folker, "Competing Paradigms or Birds of a Feather? Constructivism and Neo-liberal Institutionalism Compared" in *International Studies Quarterly* 44(1), pp. 97–119, 2000.

[17] Indeed, Adler's manifesto for his constructivist approach has the title "Cognitive Evolution". Wendt's discussion on the transformation of different anarchies also has a primitive evolutionary element embedded in it. See Emanuel Adler, "Cognitive Evolution: A Dynamic Approach for the Study of International Relations and Their Progress" in Emanuel Adler and Beverly Crawford (Eds.), *Progress in Postwar International Relations* (pp. 43–88), New York: Columbia University Press, 1991; Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Makes of It" in *International Organization* 46(2), pp. 391–425, 1992.

[18] To put it differently, culture is a dependent variable for constructivism, while an independent variable for cultural determinism.

[19] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theories of International Politics* (p. 309), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. In doing so, Wendt has contradicted his earlier approving citation of John Searle that "brutal facts have ontological priority over institutional factors". Wendt admitted that he was employing a narrower

mostly, if not purely, ideational: "Ideas all the way down."[20] Such a position, however, is simply untenable because "material circumstances … affect the intellectual evolution and policy choices of political decision markers is not in dispute."[21]

The second front is that whereas neo-realists like Waltz emphasizes only selection at the level of state survival and de-emphasizes (social) learning,[22] constructivism now tends to emphasize social learning (especially positive learning) and de-emphasizes selection, both at the level of learning and at the level of state survival.[23] At the learning level, constructivism emphasizes positive learning, while neglecting the fact that learning is essentially an evolutionary process in which selection through negative learning plays a fundamental role. Regarding state welfare, constructivism emphasizes the reward of being positively socialized by certain ideas, while neglecting the impact of (negative) selection of ideas despite selection is a major mechanism through which states learn--States will be punished if they do not learn certain ideas (e.g., self-help).

Because the partially evolutionary approach of constructivism emphasizes certain aspects while neglecting other aspects of social evolution, it is only partially, and not completely, evolutionary.

II. A Social Evolutionary Approach towards State Behaviour

In this section, I introduce the social evolutionary approach for understanding states'

---

definition of material forces and he has been giving more weight to material forces more recently (Wendt, personal communication, February 2006). Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (pp. 55–56, 110).

[20] Wendt, *Social Theories of International Politics* (p. 90).

[21] Robert G. Herman, "Identity, Norms and National Security: The Soviet Foreign Policy Revolution and the End of the Cold War" in Peter J. Katzenstein (Ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (p. 276), New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

[22] Waltz did not pay much attention to learning (especially social learning) at all. Waltz did not emphasize selection at the level of learning either. See fn. 4.

[23] Part of the reason why constructivism tends to carve such an opposing position against (neo-)realism may be the necessity to differ in the academic debate. I define positive learning below.

strategic behaviour.[24] It differs from un-evolutionary and partially evolutionary approaches in three key aspects.

First, in our evolutionary approach, material forces (the objective world) and ideational forces (the subjective world) work together organically rather than independently to drive social changes.

More specifically, although ideational forces do come back to influence the evolution of the material world, material forces retain ontological priority because the objective world serves as the ultimate testing ground (or the source of selection pressure) of ideas.[25] Ultimately, humans must anchor its ideas (or learning) to the objective material world although at any given time our knowledge may not capture the objective reality.[26] Moreover, at any given time, neither material forces alone nor ideational forces alone can determinate a state's foreign policy although states' security strategies tend to reflect the objective reality in the long run (because states will be punished, sometimes severely, if they persist in adopting the wrong ideas).[27] With this formulation, our evolutionary approach corrects the mistakes regarding the ideational forces committed by the purely materialist approach and restores some balance to the constructivism approach when it comes to material forces.

---

[24] I use "approach" rather than "theory" because many tend to have a restricted definition of "theory". For instance, Colin Elman asserts that "a theory of foreign policymakers determinate predictions for dependent variable(s) that measure the behaviour of individual state". See Colin Elman, "Horses for Courses: Why not Realist Theories of Foreign Policy?" in *Security Studies* 6(1), pp. 7–53, at p. 12, Fall 1996.

[25] John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (pp. 55–56), New York: Free Press, 1995.

[26] By stating that the objective world is the source of selection pressure on ideas, we mean that human societies tend to adopt ideas that can benefit them in the objective world. Such a formulation does not deny the possibility that societies often adopt ideas that are bad for social welfare. Otherwise, the whole world would be developed and the world would have been far more peaceful.

[27] In this light, the debate on the end of the Cold War has obscured the real story due to its polarization. Both sides (the materialists and the ideationalists) tend to marginalize the impact of the forces favoured by the other side. On the one hand, counterfactually, will the Soviet Union under Gorbachev fundamentally rethink its past policies had those policies succeeded splendidly? The answers to this question must be no. Thus, material forces must have played an important role. On the other hand, why didn't Gorbachev choose to reform gradually (i.e., the Chinese way) rather than go with the "Big Bang" approach advocated by (Western) economists just fresh from graduate school? Hence, ideational forces have also played an important role. On the first part of this argument, see Randall L. Schweller and William C. Wohlforth, "Power Test: Evaluating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War" in *Security Studies* 9(3), pp. 60–107, esp. pp. 99–102, 2000.

In the context of making security strategy, the material world consists of at least the following dimensions: the geographical environment of the state; the absolute power of the state; the international (including regional) structure (i.e., the distribution of power); (military) technology; the relationship between the state and other states; and the nature of the international system (i.e., whether it is offensive realism system or a defensive realism system).[28] The ideational world consists of at least the following dimensions: ideologies, culture, beliefs, habits and memories. Ideational forces influence a state's choice of strategies through two primary channels. They influence how a state learns about the objective world (in turn, the pool of possible ideas for making strategies) and what ideas eventually win the competition for the right to make strategies.

Second, the social evolutionary approach accepts it as self-evident that the process of human learning itself is an evolutionary process.[29] In the context of making security strategies, the process usually goes like this. At the beginning, there are multiple ideas for a possible strategy, and states do not simply pick one idea and deploy it as a strategy. Instead, these ideas engage in a competition for the right to be adopted as the strategy through debates and political struggles in the marketplace of ideas. Eventually, some ideas are selected out and some ideas emerge as winners, and only ideas that win become part of a strategy.[30]

---

[28] I elaborated on the first five of these dimensions in great detail in Shiping Tang, "A Systemic Theory of the Security Environment" in *Journal of Strategic Studies* 27(1), pp. 1–32, 2004. The last dimension was discussed in Shiping Tang, forthcoming.

[29] This ideas was first developed by Popper but received virtually no attention from IR scholars. Popper developed the original thesis that knowledge is an evolutionary process in conjecture and refutation. Lakatos and Kuhn basically accepted the central idea that knowledge is an evolutionary process but refined and modified other aspects of Popper's theory. See Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 1963; *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.

[30] An evolutionary process must have three distinctive stages: generation of diversities (mutations), selection and stabilization of the selected genotypes and phenotype traits. As such, the selection of ideas is a typical evolutionary process. Legro documented this type of evolutionary process without using the label "evolution". See Jeffrey Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.

Third, our evolutionary approach adopts a far more inclusive definition about learning.[31] For instance, according to our framework, the differentiation of adaptation to environment (i.e., structural adjustment) versus learning is useful, though fundamentally flawed.[32] This is so because for human beings, adaptation is a form of learning. At the very least, adaptation requires assessing the (strategic) environment and assessment requires learning. Adaptation and learning are thus merely two facets of a multi-faceted process called human learning. Likewise, our evolutionary approach also rejects the dichotomy of tactical learning versus strategic learning, because all processes of learning are strategic.[33]

Moreover, our framework pays equal attention to both negative learning and positive learning. After the rise of constructivism (or ideational theories of international politics), it is positive learning that has received the most attention in IR literature.[34] Yet, because human beings tend to continue to do what has worked (due to inertia), it is highly likely that negative learning has played an equally, if not more, important role in shaping human behaviour than positive learning has. "Failure is the mother of all success." Indeed, it has been this process of negative learning (and only then positive learning) that makes human knowledge an evolutionary process.[35]

As a result, our evolutionary approach brings together various forms of learning (Table 1). At any give time, all forms of learning processes may be at work. While it

---

[31] For a review of the literature on learning in international relations, see Jack S. Levy, "Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield" in *International Organization* 48(2), pp. 279–312, 1994.

[32] Levy, "Learning and Foreign Policy", pp. 296–298; Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Nuclear Learning and U.S.-Soviet Security Regimes" in *International Organization* 41(3), pp. 371–402, 1987. For an application of this dichotomy in China's foreign policy, see Alastair Iain Johnston, "Learning Versus Adaptation: Explaining Change in Chinese Arms Control Policy in the 1980s and 1990s" in *China Journal* 35, pp. 27–61, 1996.

[33] For instance, a positive learning process is still strategic even though it does not lead to behavior change (because it reinforces the behavior patter ex ante).

[34] Negative learning means that one learns from one's own and others' failure (trial and error) while positive learning means just the opposite. Negative learning typically takes the form of disproving existing conjectures, perceptions and hypotheses. Positive learning typically takes the form of the spreading of good ideas. Good ideas and bad ideas, of course, can be differentiated only by testing them in the objective world.

[35] Popper, *Objective Knowledge* (pp. 261–265). Levy also noted that individuals and organizations tend to learn more from failure than success. Levy, "Learning and Foreign Policy", p. 304. Legro examined the process of ideational changes through the collapse of old ideas and consolidation of new ones without using the phrase "negative learning". Legro, *Rethinking the World*.

may be difficult or impossible to assign weight to any particular form of learning, it is possible to trace the overall learning process and assess its outcome.[36] More importantly, the learning process does not just happen in a vacuum. It happens within the international environment, with both material forces and ideational forces at play.[37]

The whole evolutionary process can be captured in Figure 1. The differences between our evolutionary approach and the non-evolutionary approaches are summarized in Table 2, with the most obvious difference being the causal chain towards a particular strategy in our framework is much more lengthy and complex than that in other approaches.[38]

III. Offensive Realism versus Defensive Realism[39]

A. Offensive realism versus defensive realism: The differences

In the past century, debates among major grand theories (or paradigms) of international politics (e.g., realism, neo-liberalism, constructivism and critical security theory) have, to a very large extent, shaped the development of the study of international politics as a science. As these inter-paradigms debates rage on, an important division inside the realism camp emerged. Offensive realism and defensive realism, two strands of realism with fundamental divergences, has begun to part ways. These two strands of realism, despite starting from the same set of bedrock assumptions of political realism in international politics, arrive at fundamentally

---

[36] I leave it to the discretion of other authors on how many types of learning they want to focus on to understand a particular issue or process.

[37] I thus concur with the constructivist claim that the ideational environment is an integral part of the international environment although I strongly disagree with the claim that the bulk of the international environment is ideational. Wendt, *Social Theories of International Politics* (pp. 96, 309).

[38] In other words, other approaches tend to rush to a conclusive interpretation of a state's security strategy, perhaps for the sake of academic and policy debate.

[39] This section draws from my book manuscript, "Defensive Realism: A Systematic Statement".

divergent conclusions about the nature of international politics.[40]

For our discussion here, two aspects of their differences are worth emphasizing.

First, an offensive realism state seeks security by *intentionally* decreasing the security of others, whereas a defensive realism state does not seek security by intentionally decreasing the security of others.

Second, two offensive realism states threaten each other's security intentionally. As a result, the conflict of interest between them is not only genuine, but also genuinely irreconcilable. An offensive realism state believes that not only has the nature of international politics always been *fundamentally* conflicting, but also that conflict is necessary in international politics ("either I kill you or you will kill me"). There is very little or no common interest among states other than temporary alliance in an offensive-realism world. As such, offensive realism states see no possibility of genuine cooperation among themselves other than (temporary) alliances. Consequently, an offensive realism state does not consider cooperation to be a serious strategic option. Instead, it dedicates all of its available resources to the preparation for the inevitable conflict (and, ultimately, war).[41]

In contrast, two defensive realism states do not threaten each other's security intentionally. As a result, while there may be genuine conflicts of interest between them, some of these conflicts are not genuinely irreconcilable. Hence, while defensive

---

[40] For a long time, because offensive realism and defensive realism subscribe to the same set of bedrock assumptions of political realism towards international politics and the two theories have been using the same set of vocabularies despite these words or phrases meaning quite different things for the two theories, many conceptual and logical confusions reign, and the fundamental differences between these two realisms have not been adequately recognized. I offer a more systematic treatment of the two theories in "Defensive Realism: A Systematic Statement". For the core assumptions of political realism in international politics, see Benjamin Frankel, "Restating the Realist Case: An Introduction" in *Security Studies* 5(3), pp. xiv–xvi, Spring 1996; Randall L. Schweller and David Press, "A Tale of Two Realisms: Expanding the Institutions Debate" in *Mershon International Studies Review* 41, pp. 1–32, at p. 6, 1997.

[41] Offensive realism further argues that cooperation is not only inherently difficult due to states' concern for relative gains but also risky and even dangerous because states can often cheat and the cost of being cheated is often prohibitive. See Joseph Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism" in *International Organization* 42(3), pp. 485–507, 1988; Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (pp. 33, 51–53). This position is unnecessary.

realism also believes that the nature of international politics has been fundamentally conflicting for most of human history and some of these conflicts of interest are genuinely irreconcilable (e.g., when facing a Hitler), defensive realism does not believe that states must necessarily end up in actual conflicts whenever they have conflicts of interest. Cooperation is another option of resolving conflicts. Moreover, defensive realism believes that states can indeed overcome the obstacles posed by anarchy to achieve cooperation under many circumstances.[42]

B. Differentiating Defensive Realism States and Offensive realism States

Because of the fundamental differences between offensive realism and defensive realism, whether China's actions are grounded in offensive or defensive realism has critical policy implications for other states. If China is guided by the former, it is threatening or will eventually threaten other states' security intentionally. As such, the rational choice for other (defensive realism) states is to maintain a robust deterrence and defence position with China, while waiting for a regime change that embraces defensive realism to take place in China.[43] In contrast, if China is guided by defensive realism, then it will not threaten other states' security intentionally. As such, the rational choice for other states is to seek cooperation with China, and eventually integrate China into the global order, making it a "stakeholder" (i.e., an engagement approach). In other words, planning a sound China policy depends on figuring out

---

[42] In other words, defensive realism believes that at least some of the conflicts (with size unspecified) are avoidable and unnecessary. Charles Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-help" in *International Security* 19(3), pp. 50–90, 1994; Robert Jervis, "Realism, Neo-liberalism and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate" in *International Security* 24(1), pp. 42–63, 1999; Andrew Kydd, "Sheep in Sheep's Clothing: Why Security Seekers do not Fight Each Other" in *Security Studies* 7(1), pp. 114–155, 1997.

[43] Here, I am assuming that most states in today's world are defensive-realism states themselves. Even when facing an offensive-realism state, the approach of a defensive-realism state will be very different from that of an offensive-realism state. The later will at least adopt a hard containment approach, if not actively preparing and eventually launching preventive wars. For a more detailed discussion on the differences between the operational code of a defensive-realism state and that of an offensive-realism state, see my "Defensive Realism: A Systematic Restatement". I am grateful for Mike Glosny for reminding me to clarify this point.

what grand theory of international politics is guiding and will guide China's security strategy.[44]

So how do we tell whether a state's security strategy is guided by offensive realism or defensive realism? Kydd suggests four criteria: ideology (intolerant or tolerant); policy towards its domestic minorities; policy towards its weaker neighbours; and military and arms-control policy.[45] I believe the following two criteria are more suitable for differentiating a state that embraces offensive realism from one that embraces defensive realism, and they subsume Kydd's criteria.[46]

The first criterion is whether a state recognizes the existence of the security dilemma and understands at least some of its implications.[47] A state that embraces defensive realism understands it. States cannot escape from the security dilemma simply by accumulating more and more power; states can only try to alleviate it by pursuing cooperation. In contrast, a state that embraces offensive realism either denies the security dilemma or tries to escape from it.

The second criterion is whether a state exercises self-restraint and is willing to be constrained by other countries.[48] These two measures are the basic means to send

---

[44] This exercise of assessing other states' intention applies only to defensive realists because offensive realists simply assume all states to be aggressive. Thus, the containment/engagement debate has an explicit or implicit assumption about other states' intentions. Moreover, the debate also reveals different individuals' general assumption about the nature of international politics and their preferences for security strategy. Those who hold a pessimistic view about the nature of international politics are more likely to be offensive realists (i.e., hawks) and support containment while those who hold an optimistic view are more likely to be defensive realists (i.e., doves) and support engagement.

[45] Kydd, "Sheep in Sheep's Clothing", pp. 141–147.

[46] There is a common perception that searching for material wealth (or national power) through economic growth and armament is the signature of hard *realpolitik* or offensive realism. This perception is incorrect because both offensive realism and defensive realism deem power accumulation as an important means of self-help towards security. Moreover, economic growth is inherent to improving citizen's welfare and no states can be blamed for trying to improve its citizens' welfare through pursuing economic growth. The difference regarding power between offensive realism and defensive realism lies in the external means towards power. Offensive-realism states seek to increase its relative power by intentionally harming others, while defensive-realism states do not.

[47] For the security dilemma, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (pp. 67–76, 349–355), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976; "Cooperation under the security dilemma" in *World Politics* 30(2), pp. 167–214, 1978. Again, much confusion exists among IR scholars regarding the security dilemma. I clarify these confusions in "Revisit the Security Dilemma". Of course, most decision makers do not understand the whole complexity of the security dilemma dynamics.

[48] Exercising self-restraint and being willing to be constrained are two sides of the same coin because being

costly signals of reassurance (thus alleviating the security dilemma) and demonstrate benign intentions. [49] A state embracing offensive realism does not exercise self-restraint and is not willing to be constrained by others because it has to constantly seek and exploit opportunities of weakening others. In contrast, a state embracing defensive realism exercises self-restraint and is willing to be constrained because it does not seek or exploit opportunities of weakening others.

With these criteria and clarification, we can now move on to assess the nature of China's security strategy from Mao to Deng, and now to Jiang and Hu.

IV. China's Security Strategy:

From Offensive to Defensive Realism[50]

There is little doubt that China's security strategy is still firmly rooted in realism. In seeking to overcome the memory of "a century of national humiliation" (*bainian guochi*) at the hands of the West and Japan, generations of Chinese have strived to build a strong and prosperous China. Many Chinese elites believe that because of its size, population, civilization, history and, more recently, its growing wealth, China should rightly be regarded as a great power (*da guo*).[51] This strong belief in the utility of power and motivation to accumulate power firmly anchors China's security strategy within the realist camp.[52]

---

willing to be restrained is a form of self-restraint. When a state accepts the constraint *even if* it has the power to overthrow those constraints, it is exercising self-restraint. See Charles Glaser, "Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models" in *World Politics* 44(2), pp. 497–538, at pp. 519–527, 530–532, 1992; Jeffery W. Talioferro, "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited" in *International Security* 25(3), pp. 128–161, at pp. 129, 159–60, 2001; Tang, "A Systemic Theory of the Security Environment", pp. 6, 27–28.

[49] I develop this theme in detail in Tang, *Defensive Realism: A Systematic Restatement*, forthcoming.

[50] This section draws partly from Shiping Tang and Peter Hay Gries, "China's Security Strategy: From Offensive to Defensive Realism and Beyond" in *EAI Working Paper* No. 97, October 2002, East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore.

[51] For instance, Deng Xiaoping remarked: "China is definitely a pole in multi-polarization." Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping Vol. 3* (p. 353), People's Press, 1993.

[52] Of course, even today, most states are realism states due to the evolution of international politics as a

The more important question is whether China is an offensive realism state or a defensive realism state.[53]

A. Offensive realism under Mao

Within our criteria, China's security strategy under Mao was largely offensive realism in nature.[54]

China under Mao expounded an intolerant ideology of overthrowing all imperialist or reactionary regimes in Asia and the world at large. More importantly, China under Mao (together with the former Soviet Union) actively supported revolutions (or insurgencies) in many developing countries, thus intentionally threatening those countries that it had identified as imperialists or their lackeys (*zougou*) and proxies (*dailiren*).[55] This sense of being threatened was perhaps most severe among China's neighbouring states that were allies of the United States and its Western allies (e.g., Southeast Asian countries).[56]

system. See Tang, forthcoming. For realism's core assumptions, see Tang, *Defensive Realism: A Systematic Statement*, forthcoming.

[53] Many may question whether it is appropriate to label Mao an offensive realist and Deng, a defensive realist. As long as one admits that there are fundamental differences between the two men's approaches towards security, the evolutionary interpretation outlined below should hold. Also, to label a state one of offensive realism or defensive realism does not mean that the state will behave exactly as theory advocates. The labelling exercise is best understood as an approximation.

[54] Johnston argued that Mao was an offensive realist, while Feng challenged Johnston's conclusion. Both Johnston and Feng's papers have serious theoretical problems because they do not fully grasp the difference between offensive realism and defensive realism, as well as the difficulty involved in determining whether a state is an offensive realist or a defensive realist when that state faces clear and present danger. See Huiyun Feng, "The Operational Code of Mao Zedong: Defensive or Offensive Realist?" in *Security Studies* 14(4), pp. 637–662, 2004; Alastair Iain Johnston, "Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China" in Peter J. Katzenstein (Ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (pp. 216–316), New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

[55] The rationale behind this strategy is Mao's doctrine of "surrounding the cities from the countryside". The best work on this is still Tang Tsou and Morton H. Halperin, "Mao Tse-tong's Revolutionary Ideology and Peking's International Behaviour" in *American Political Science Review* 59(1), pp. 80–99, 1965.

[56] I do not differentiate offensive realism based on some ideological calculation (e.g., Maoism, the Bush doctrines) and offensive realism based on power calculation (e.g., imperialism). Of course, in the first decade after the founding of the PRC, both China and the United States were offensive realists towards each other. China was supporting de-colonization in Southeast Asia while the U.S. was engaging in sabotaging inside China (e.g., Tibet) to destabilize the PRC government. Both were engaging in the "capabilities disaggregation" of each other and they also fought a war against each other. For capabilities disaggregation, see Robert P. Hager, Jr. and David A. Lake, "Balancing Empires: Competitive Decolonization in International Politics" in *Security Studies* 9(3), pp. 108–48, 2000.

Second, as a staunch Marx-Leninist, Mao believed that conflicts in international politics were necessary and inevitable. To transform the world into a socialist world, struggles—including armed struggles—against imperialists and their proxies were necessary.[57] As a result, despite having settled some major disputes with several neighbouring states (e.g., Burma, Mongolia, Pakistan), seeking security through cooperation was never high on the agenda of China's security strategy at that time.

Third, China under Mao largely believed that all of the People's Republic's security problems were due to other countries' evil policies,[58] rather than the interactions between China and other states. In essence, China under Mao had little understanding of the dynamics of the security dilemma.[59] As a result, other than the "Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence",[60] China under Mao initiated few measures to assure regional states of China's benign intentions.

To summarize, China under Mao had largely been an offensive realism state.

B. The Gradual Transition to Defensive Realism under Deng

Among China hands, there is little disagreement over the largely defensive realism nature of China's security strategy today, whether China is labelled an "integrationist" power, a "globalist" power, a non-revisionist and no-imperial power, or simply a state embracing "defensive realism and beyond"; or whether China's grand strategy and diplomacy is characterized as Neo-Bismarckian, "New Diplomacy", or "engaging

---

[57] One can also argue that Mao does not really differentiate domestic politics and international politics: They are simply two stages of the worldwide revolution towards the final triumph of socialism.

[58] Such a belief would be correct for much of China's modern history, at least until the end of the World War 2 and the anti-Japanese war. After the founding of the PRC, however, some of China's security difficulties could no longer be attributed solely to other states' policies. Almost every state tends to see itself as a victim of others' (evil) behaviour, and this tendency is an important psychological factor that exacerbates the security dilemma. See Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (pp. 67–76, 349–355).

[59] China, of course, was not the only country that did not recognize the security dilemma at that time. The concept of the security dilemma was not taken seriously in IR literature until Jervis' two path-breaking studies, and the concept has perhaps remained largely unabsorbed by policymakers in most countries, including the United States. See Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*; "Cooperation under the security dilemma" in *World Politics* 30(2), pp. 167–214, 1978.

[60] The "Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence" is a defensive realism doctrine.

Asia".[61] At the very least, most analysts reject the notion that China is an offensive-realism state (i.e., an expansionist, revisionist, or imperialist) today.

There are at least four threads of evidence supporting the argument that post-Mao China has gradually transformed itself into a state embracing defensive realism.

The first is perhaps the most obvious. China has toned down its revolutionary rhetoric and has backed up its words with deeds. Most clearly, it has stopped supporting insurgencies in other countries, even if they were initiated by communist elements.

The second is that China has now clearly recognized some of the most critical aspects of the security dilemma and its implications.[62] Touring several Southeast Asian countries in 1978, Deng Xiaoping was given his first lesson on the security dilemma. He was surprised to find that China's earlier policies of exporting revolution and its unwillingness to resolve the issue of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia had made many Southeast Asian countries suspicious of China's intentions.[63] As a result, Deng realized that China's security conundrum in the 1960s and 1970s had not been the work of external forces alone but rather the interaction between China's behaviour and the outside world. This interdependent and interactive nature of security is, of course, one of the major aspects of the security dilemma.

The third thread of evidence is that China has demonstrated self-restraint and

---

[61] Chen Mumin, "Going Global: Chinese Elite's View on Security Strategy in the 1990s" in *Asian Perspectives*, pp. 133–177, 2005; Avery Goldstein, "An Emerging China's Emerging Grand Strategy: A Neo-Bismarckian Turn?" in G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno (Eds.), *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific* (pp. 57–106), New York: Columbia University Press, 2002; Justin S. Hempson-Jones, "The Evolution of China's Engagement with International Governmental Organizations" in *Asian Survey* 45(5), pp. 702–721, October 2005; Alstair Iain Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?" in *International Security* 27(4), pp. 5–56, 2003; Evan Mediros and Taylor Fravel, "China's New Diplomacy" in *Foreign Affairs* 82(6), pp. 22–35, 2003; David Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order" in *International Security* 29(3), pp. 64–99, 2005; Tang and Gries, "China's Security Strategy."

[62] Alstair Iain Johnston, "Socialization in International Institutions: The ASEAN Way and International Relations Theory" in G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno (Eds.), *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific* (pp. 107–159. p. 130), New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. Of course, one should not expect states to grasp all the (defensive) implications of the security dilemma.

[63] Lee Kuan Yew, former Primer Minister of Singapore and now Minster Mentor, might have played a pivotal role in transforming Deng's understanding. See Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965–2000* (pp. 663–668), Singapore: The Straits Times Press and Times Media, 2001.

willingness to be constrained by others.[64] This aspect is perhaps most prominently demonstrated in China's memberships in international organizations and institutions as well as its increased presence in treaties since 1980s.[65] Because international organizations, institutions and treaties are all rule-based, China's increasing memberships in them and conforming to the rules there were in place before China's entry (i.e., made by others) unambiguously signals its willingness to be restrained by others.[66]

Finally, security through cooperation, the hallmark of defensive realism, has become a pillar of China's security strategy under Deng. Two aspects of this dimension are worth noting. The first is that China has pursued a strategy of maintaining amicable relationships with its neighbours (*mulin youhao, wending zhoubian*) since Deng, mostly through reassurance and building cooperation.[67] While such a strategy certainly has a dose of hedging against the bad times of U.S.-China relations embedded in it, the strategy still reduces the anxiety among neighbouring countries about China's rise, thus helping in alleviating the security dilemma between China and regional states. The second is that China has also ventured into multilateral

---

[64] Deng's famous "*taoguang yanghui*" doctrine is a preaching for self-restraint. Unfortunately, this doctrine has been mis-translated to be synonympous with "*woxin changdan*", which means "biding one's time to seek revenge when one is strong enough". In fact, *taoguang yanghui* simply means to "lie low". See Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works Vol. 3* (p. 321).

[65] Hempson-Jones, "The Evolution of China's Engagement with International Governmental Organizations"; Alastair Iain Johnston and Paul Evans, "China's Engagement with Multilateral Security Institutions"; and Margaret M. Pearson, "The Major Multilateral Economic Institutions Engage China"; all in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross (Eds.), *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power* (pp. 235–273, 207–234), London: Routledge, 1999.

[66] Whether these institutions have changed China's preferences for outcomes or preferences for strategies, or whether China's behaviour in this arena is due to rational calculation or ideational socialization is not crucial here, and one can easily imagine that both calculations play a role. See Goldstein, "An Emerging China's Emerging Grand Strategy", p. 73; Johnston, "Socialization in International Institutions", pp. 130–131. Instrumentalist (or realist) institutionalism (or neoliberalism) is quite common among states and defensive realism is instrumental when it comes to the role of institutions in international politics. For defensive realism's stand on institutions, see Glaser, "Realists as Optimists"; Jervis, "Realism, Neo-liberalism and Cooperation". For instrumental neoliberalism, see John G. Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. For a critique, see Randall L. Schweller, "The Problem of International Order Revisited: A Review Essay" in *International Security* 26(1), pp. 161–186, 2001.

[67] Reassurance is part of cooperation-building. I elaborate on reassurance in detail in Tang, *Defensive Realism: A Systematic Restatement*, forthcoming. For a brief discussion, see Shiping Tang, "Correspondence: Uncertainty and Reassurance in International Politics," *International Security*, 32 (1), pp. 180-183, 2007.

security cooperation organizations and institutions, mostly prominently the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Shanghai Cooperative Organizations (SCO). While these security cooperation institutions may or may not have changed states' choice of goals, they have institutionalized a degree of (security) cooperation among states, thus changing states' preferences for strategies. As a result, the security dilemma between China and regional states has not been exacerbated but rather alleviated.[68]

Overall, there is ample evidence to support the interpretation that China's current security strategy is firmly rooted in defensive realism, with a dose of instrumentalist institutionalism.

V. An Evolutionary Interpretation of the Shift

So how do we make sense of China's gradual but yet undeniable shift from a security strategy based on offensive realism to one based on defensive realism?

A (structuralism) realism-driven (i.e., a purely materialistic) approach explains this shift by arguing that China has finally learnt the lesson that it is simply not capable of challenging the hegemon-centric international order (i.e., the status quo). Thus it is merely biding its time.[69] A semi-evolutionary approach makes the case that China has indeed been socialized by the norms and institutions of the international order. They both got something right, but not the whole picture.

The following narrative reconstructs the history of this fundamental shift with the social evolutionary approach briefly outlined above.

A. The Meaning of the Material World: Getting the Environment Right

---

[68] Alice D. Ba, "China and ASEAN: Re-navigating Relations for a 21st Century Asia" in *Asian Survey* 43(4), pp. 622–647, 2003; Alan Collins, *The Security Dilemmas of Southeast Asia*, London: MacMillan, 2000, chap. 5; Goldstein, "An Emerging China's Emerging Grand Strategy", p. 86.

[69] Of course, the implicit message of this interpretation is that when China gets stronger to challenge the international order, it will. The culturalist approach has no good explanation for changes.

On the material front, four aspects are worth emphasizing. The first is the geographical location of China. China has many countries as its neighbours, and the region has highest concentration of great powers (i.e., the U.S., Japan, Russia, and India). Second, the unipolar moment proves to be lasting and there is no clear sign that U.S. is in decline. Third, China is still a poor country with very limited capabilities, although its power has been increasing rapidly for the past two decades. Finally, the international system has firmly evolved from a Hobbesian world into a Lockeian world, and expansion and conquest is no longer a legitimate option for advancing a state's security interest.

The meaning of these material factors for China's security strategy has been gradually recognized (or learned) over the years.

On geography, from its security difficulties in the 1950s to 1970s, China has come to recognize that its geographical location dictates that it cannot afford to adopt an offensive realism strategy because other countries can easily form a counter-availing alliance (i.e., balancing of threat).

On international system, China flirted with the idea of accelerating multipolarization in the early 1990s, partly because it had envisioned that the "unipolar moment" would really be just a moment. China soon realized, however, that different international structures have often been the result of unintended consequences, and structural changes cannot be accelerated.[70] One cannot escape from the structure; one can only live with it.

On national power, after two decades of robust growth, the Chinese elite could generally feel that China's power is on the rise, and this growing power has given China more confidence in managing its grand transformation. As a result, China feels

---

[70] For instance, Hitler desired a unipolar world but actually ended up in creating a bipolar world. Likewise, Gorbachev intended to prolong the bipolar system but ended in creating a unipolar world.

more secure perhaps than any other time in the past two centuries, giving it more reason to stay on its current course and behave moderately. A more self-confident China thus is more likely to be a responsible power.[71]

On the nature of the international system, most Chinese elite recognize that time has really changed: There is very little chance that China can take back its lost territories by force *even if* China becomes powerful enough, because territorial expansion and conquest is no longer a legitimate option.[72] As such, most Chinese elites harbour no illusion of re-conquering its lost territories, and they accept that China has to make peace with its traumatic modern history, or at least to live with it.

B. Learning and Ideas

As expected, all forms of learning have been at play in the process of generating potential ideas for making China's new strategy.

China has certainly learned from its past experiences. Two major lessons deserve special mentioning. The first lesson is that "self-reliance", an idea formidably initiated by Mao Zedong himself, is equivalent to self-isolation and will not get China anywhere.[73] The open-and-reform policy, of course, necessitates China to maintain a working, if not always cordial, relationship with the outside world.

The second lesson is literally "anarchy is what states make of it",[74] in the sense China is not merely a passive consumer, but also an active shaper, of its security environment. In other words, from its own experiences, China has gradually come to

---

[71] Zhang Yunling and Tang Shiping, "More Self-confident China will be a Responsible Power" in *The Strait Times*, 2 October 2002. For the theoretical argument why it is the case that the more secure a state feels, the more likely it will behave moderately, see Glaser, "Political Consequences of Military Strategy"; Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma".

[72] Mark W. Zacher, The Territorial Integrity Norm: International Boundaries and the Use of Force. *International Organization* 55 (2), pp. 215-250, 2001.

[73] Friedrich W. Y. Wu, "From Self-reliance to Interdependence? Development Strategy and Foreign Economic Policy in Post-Mao China" in *Modern China* 7(4), pp. 445–482, October 1981; Yan Xuetong, "The Rise of China in Chinese Eyes" in *Journal of Contemporary China* 10, pp. 34–35, 2001.

[74] I am borrowing Wendt's famous title here for good reason. See Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Makes of It" in *International Organization* 46(2) pp. 391–425, 1992.

recognize that its own behaviours have been at least partly responsible for its security conundrum in the 1950s and 1960s. This lesson, of course, helps China recognize the interdependent nature of security and part of the dynamics and implications of the security dilemma. As a result, Chinese leaders now understand that, because of China's vast size and power potential, most small to medium-sized regional states do have reasons to feel uneasy about China's growing power and demand Chinese self-restraint, *even if* China does not intentionally threaten others. As a result, Chinese leaders and its elite today are more nuanced and rational when it comes to dealing with the various versions of the "China threat" theory. [75]

Other than learning from its own experiences, China has also learnt from the experiences of others. In the past decade, Chinese leaders and foreign-policy experts have undertaken a major project that seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of other rising powers in history so that to draw appropriate lessons and avoid mistakes made by other great powers.[76] From this project, the idea of a direct confrontation with the incumbent hegemon (i.e., the United States) and overthrowing the existing international system has been firmly ruled out. Consequently, many have recognized that the only viable option is for China to rise within the system. By doing this, China will not only have more say and influence in reshaping the future of the system as it continues to grow, but will also be more likely to make its rise a peaceful one.[77] A further lesson from this project has been that one of the major reasons why

---

[75] Tang Shiping and Zhang Jie, "Introduction: China Threat Versus Living with China" in Tang Shiping, Zhang Jie and Cao Xiaoyang (Eds.), *Lenzhan hou Jinjin Guojia duihua zhengce yanjiu* [The Evolution of Regional States' China Policy after the Cold War] (pp. 1–7), Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2005.

[76] In November 2006, China broadcasted a prime time TV series called "Daguo Jueqi" [The Rise of Great Powers]. This series can be understood as a product for the general public from the project, aiming to stimulate further debates and educate its people on subject. For news report about the series, see http://news3.xinhuanet.com/english/2006–11/27/content_5394691.htm, accessed on 8 December 2006.

[77] The strategy of "peaceful rise and development" can be understood partly due to this recognition. For early expositions of this notion of rising within the system, see Tang Shiping, "Once Again on China's Grand Strategy" in *Zhanlue yu Guanli* [Strategy & Management] No. 4, pp. 29–37, 2001; Zhang Baijia, "Change Oneself, Change the World" in *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* [China Social Science] No. 1, pp. 4–19, 2002. Goldstein also noted that China tried to learn lessons from the experiences of the Soviet Union. See

Great Britain was able and the United States has been able to remain a leading power has been that both states have supported an open trading system and served as a large market for the world.

Finally, there is social learning. On this front, the ASEAN Regional Forum has been a major platform for China to learn the benefits of multilateralism and the "ASEAN way", and its transformational impact on China's strategic thinking and behaviour has been well documented. As a result, China now has an "epistemic community" of defensive realists (and instrumental neoliberalists) when it comes to promoting security cooperation and multilateralism.[78]

C. The Competition of Ideas and Outcomes

With so many competing ideas, how has China been able to come up with a more-or-less coherent security strategy in the past decade or so? The answer, again, is that it has been an evolutionary process: by filtering certain ideas out and certain ideas in. I illustrate this process with the important debate on "peace and development", which re-started after the 1999 U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and continued to around 2002.

The debate was important because it was about whether China's earlier more-or-less optimistic assessment of its security environment was really sound. In other words, has human history really entered into an era of "peace and development" or was this assessment simply a Chinese pipedream? Put it differently, is the outside world (mostly the U.S. and regional states) generally friendly or fundamentally hostile

Goldstein, "An Emerging China's Emerging Grand Strategy", p. 70.
[78] For an assessment of ARF's impact on China's security thinking and policymaking bureaucracies, see Rosemary Foot, "China in the ASEAN Regional Forum: Organization Process and Domestic Models of Thought" in *Asian Survey* Vol. XXXVIII No. 5, pp. 425–440, May 1998; Johnston, "Socialization in International Institutions"; Cheng-chwee Kuik, "Multilateralism in China's ASEAN Policy" in Working paper-05-03, SAIS, John Hopkins University, 2003.

towards China?[79]

There were basically two camps in the debate. The pessimist camp holds that the 1999 U.S.-NATO intervention in the former Yugoslavia (and the U.S. bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade) symbolized the return of the world to a pre-Westphalia Hobbesian world in which a state's sovereignty was not respected--The strong dictate what they want, and the weak suffer what they must. If so, then the whole grand strategy of open-and-reform will have to be greatly modified, if not totally rejected. In contrast, the optimist camp holds that despite small to medium-sized states' sovereignty being challenged if they do not conform to certain rules dictated by the Western states, world politics *per se* is not going to return to a pre-Westphalia Hobbesian world.

In the end, despite prominent dissenting voices, the optimist camp carried the day. Along the way, certain ideas were removed or weakened during the process while others were selected (or strengthened).

For instance, the idea that China should rise within the system is in while the idea that China rise outside the system (or challenge the system) is out. As such, China will integrate further with the international system, not withdraw from it. The more recent rise (and demise) of the "peaceful rise" doctrine can be understood as a further manifestation that the optimistic view still retains the upper hand.

Likewise, the idea of strengthening China's relationships with regional states through greater assurance and cooperation is further strengthened (partly because of the uncertainty associated with the U.S.-China relationship). The rationale is that as long as regional states do not go along, the U.S. will be hard pressed to effect a hard

---

[79] The journal *Shijie Zhishi* [World Affairs] devoted two special issues to this pressing question. See *Shijie Zhishi* No. 15 & 16 (April 2000). See also Zhang Ruizhuang, "Reassess China's International Environment: Peace and Development is not the Trend of Our Time" in *Zhanlue yu Guanli* [Strategy & Management] No. 1, pp. 20–30, 2001; Shi Yinghong, "Correctly Assess World Order and its Trend" in *Zhanlue yu Guanli* No. 4, pp. 103–105, August 1999.

containment against China even if it wants to. As a result, China initiated the process of building a free-trade area with ASEAN, joined the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) of ASEAN states, and further institutionalized the Shanghai Cooperation Organizations.

Undoubtedly, there have been several developments in the real world that tend to lend more support to the optimist camp. For instance, the success of China's economy in the past two decades provides justification for continuing the present policy, thus further strengthening the voice of the globalists.[80] Likewise, the reluctance of most regional states to adopt the hard containment advocated by the neo-con hawks in Washington, as outlined in the 2001 QDR, also strengthened the voice that most regional states were not hostile towards China even when Washington was.

Therefore, the net result from the debate has actually been that China emerged from it with more confidence rather than with a bleak picture of its future and the outside world. Such a result is extremely important because individuals who hold an optimistic view of the outside world tend to be defensive realists whereas individuals who hold a pessimistic view of tend to be offensive realists.[81] With the optimists winning the debate, the probability that China will continue with its presently defensive realism strategy increases.

D. Summary

My evolutionary interpretation of the evolution of China's security strategy points to

---

[80] According to Chen, more than half of the elite interviewed can be classified as "globalists". Chen, "Going Global", p. 168. In academia, Zhang Yunling's paper on interdependence in 1988 can serve as the landmark of the globalist voices. Zhang Yunling, "Interdependence in World Economy" in *European Studies* No. 4, pp. 1–10, August 1988.

[81] Indeed, whether a state holds an optimistic or a pessimistic view about the outside world is related to the fundamental difference between the two strains of realism that can be captured by a single question: Are there fellow defensive realism states out there? For offensive realists, there are few, if any, genuine security-seeking states. In contrast, while not denying there may be offensive realism states, defensive realists believe that there are some, if not many, genuine defensive realism states. See Mearsheimer, "Tragedy of Great Power Politics", pp. 29, 34; Glaser, "Realists as Optimists", pp. 60, 67, 71–72.

the conclusion that while any one of the driving forces may not be enough to propel China into its present security strategy and keep China with it, the combinations of these driving forces has been able to transform China into a firm defensive realism state and there is a high probability that China will remain such a state. From a more holistic and evolutionary approach, I believe that the probability that China will remain a defensive realism state is much higher than the probability that it will become an offensive realism state in the future when it becomes stronger. This is so because many forces have perhaps irreversibly propelled China into a defensive-realism state. Plus, evolution does not go backwards or through cycles. Time has had transformational impact on China's security strategy.

Conclusions

The social evolutionary interpretation of China's security strategy here has implications for both research and policy. Research wise, my approach offers a more organic thus more nuanced account for the evolution of states' security strategy.

After the Waltzian structural revolution, students of international politics have embraced parsimony as a guiding light for advancing our understanding of international politics. Too often, pundits have pitted some variables (e.g., power, structure) against others (e.g., ideas). Yet, as Waltz himself has argued, "the explanatory power of a theory, not its parsimony, is the criterion of a theory's success".[82]

The social evolutionary approach implicitly rejects the notion that seeking parsimony when it comes to understanding complex phenomena is always a virtue, and consequently the practice of pitting variables against one another. This is merely a

---

[82] Kenneth N. Waltz, "Theory of International Politics is not Theory of Foreign Policy," in *Security Studies* 6 (1), pp. 54-57, at p. 57, 1996.

candid admission that the world is really very complex, rather than an unwanted challenge to the goal of attaining parsimony in scientific research.[83] In the end, the social evolutionary approach calls for a more empirical, systemic, and evolutionary approach to understanding states' behaviour. Following the competing ideas within a state is a good way to start in understanding that state's strategy and behaviour.

Moreover, consistent with the un-teleological nature of the evolutionary approach, the social evolutionary approach calls for modesty in our goal. The best that we can aim for when it comes to a theory of foreign policy can only be a probabilistic theory, not a determinately predictive theory. Trying to impose a determinately predictive theory to states' behaviour can only lead us to the "abuse (or misuse) of history".[84]

Furthermore, the social evolutionary approach takes an important step towards theorizing the interaction between the material and ideational worlds that has stubbornly been under-theorized,[85] partly because of the polarizing and unproductive debate between extremely materialistic positions (i.e., structural realism) and extremely ideationalistic positions (i.e., "radical" constructivism).

Policy wise, the social evolutionary interpretation reduces the uncertainty about China's future behaviours. While many have complained that it is difficult to apprehend China's strategic intentions because of the murkiness of China's policymaking process, I contend that China's security behaviour has projected a rather clear picture of its security approach and its future direction. China's general security strategy is firmly rooted in defensive realism and is gradually adding a dose of

---

[83] While the notion that the world is really complex seems so obvious, not everyone keeps that in mind. For instance, Colin Elman failed to recognize it as a potential cause of why we cannot reach a determinate theory of foreign policy. See Elman, "Horses for Courses", pp. 13, 22–32. A genuinely evolutionary approach has to admit and work with complexity. For a recent treatise on complexity in social life, see Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

[84] Dale Copeland's dynamic differential theory of major war is one recent attempt that seeks to impose a determinately predictive theory to state behaviour and he had to rely on "abuses of history" for support. See Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000. For a critique, see Robert G. Kaufman, "On the Uses and Abuses of History in IR Theory" in *Security Studies* 10(4), pp. 179–211, 2001.

[85] Herman, "Identity, Norms, and National Security", p. 276.

(instrumental) neoliberalism. Moreover, the social evolutionary interpretation points to the conclusion that China's security strategy is most likely to remain one of defensive realism and it is unlikely to go back to an offensive-realism mindset.

If China's security strategy is now firmly rooted in defensive realism and even leaning towards neo-liberalism, the principal implications for the United States, the Asia-Pacific region and the world is that the outside world can afford to take a more relaxed approach towards China's rise and engagement with China is the way to go. While China may become more powerful, it is unlikely that it will use its newly gained power to intentionally threaten other states. And if there is a security dilemma between China and another state, two genuine defensive realism states can find a way to signal their true benign intentions and work out their differences. For that, both China and the world have something to celebrate.

Table 1

Major types of learning

| Individual learning	Social learning
Negative learning (trial-and-error)	Positive learning
Learning from one's own experiences	Learning from others' experiences

Table 2
Non-evolutionary versus evolutionary approaches

The Process of Making Strategies	Un-evolutionary approach		Partially evolutionary approach	Evolutionary approach
	Realism	Culturalism	Constructivism /Neoliberalism	
	Material world	Ideational world	Ideational world + material world	Material world + ideational world
	Assessing, learning	Operational code	Process: Interaction and socialization	Assessing, learning
			Identities/Interests	Ideas about strategies
				Competition, selection, and stabilization
	Security strategies	Security strategies	Security strategies	Security strategies
	Deployment of strategies	Deployment of strategies	Deployment of strategies	Deployment of strategies
	Process leading to outcomes: interaction	Process leading to outcomes: interaction	Process leading to outcomes: interaction and socialization	Process leading to outcomes: interaction and socialization
	Outcome	Outcome	Outcome	Outcome
	Mechanism of feedback: selection	Mechanism of feedback: none, culture determines	Mechanism of feedback: unclear	Mechanism of feedback: selection and learning

Figure 1

The social evolution of strategy
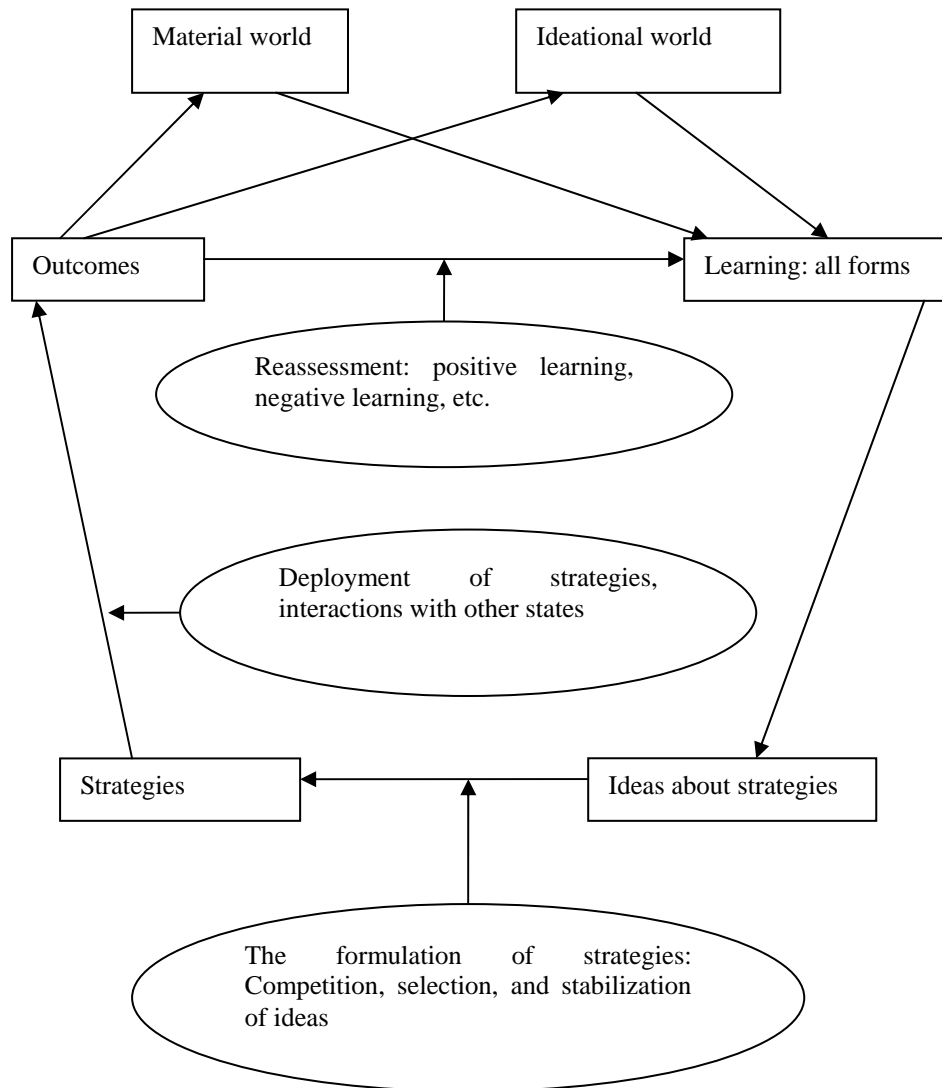
State of Security and International Studies Series