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Alternative realities: Explaining security in the Asia-Pacific

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Abstract

The central argument of this article is that constructivists in particular underestimate or even ignore the importance of the 'real' structural inheritance that shapes state (and the political elites that represent them) behaviour. Even though the future is indeterminate, some outcomes are decidedly more likely than others, especially where policymakers believe they inhabit a strategic universe of zero sum outcomes and where self-reliance and assertion remain important. I suggest that 'critical realism' offers a way of accounting for the institutional structures that shape international behaviour. The first half of this article makes the case for a critical realist approach. The second half illustrates the possible importance of this claim with reference to the contemporary geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific region.

Keywords

Critical Realism; Security; Asia-Pacific; Institutions

> The crucial question in philosophy [is] not whether to be a realist or an anti-realist, but *what sort* of realist to be.
>
> Roy Bhaskar

One of the more surprising things about the study of International Relations (IR) is that scholars can come to such radically different views about what's actually happening in the world. Clever people contemplating precisely the same set of events can come to strikingly dissimilar conclusions about their significance and causes, to say nothing of their likely trajectory. One might intuitively expect that greater expertise and the continuing refinement of the techniques and theories we use to try to make sense of the world would help us to come to some sort of consensus about big events, their underlying dynamics and possible impacts. Nothing could be further from the truth – even if we believe that such a thing exists, of course. If anything, the field is becoming more contested and 'progress' – another loaded, contentious, and surprisingly unpopular term – remains elusive. In short, 'there remains no agreement on what constitutes proper theory in IR'.[1]

Despite a lack of epistemological consensus this has not stopped some scholars from claiming that particular forms of IR scholarship have a firmer grip on reality than others. Self-described 'realists'

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[1] Tim Dunne, Len Hansen, and Colin Wight, 'The end of International Relations theory?', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:3 (2013), pp. 405–25.

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suggest that their approach allows plausible predictions to be made about the actual practice of international relations.[2] The principal claim made by realists is that the very constitution of the international system, its underlying dynamics, and the assumptions that policymakers hold, makes a struggle for power and dominance both rational and inevitable. The possibility – indeed, the likelihood – of conflict in such circumstances remain high.[3] At moments of hegemonic contestation or even transition, when a rising power may seek to supplant a declining one, the chances of conflict are further increased, some argue. This is, according to prominent realists like John Mearshiemer,[4] precisely the circumstance that obtains in the Asia-Pacific; conflict between the US and China is the all too predictable result, he claims.

Many observers find such claims theoretically unconvincing and normatively unpalatable. Instinctively, perhaps, we might like to think that 'we' are in charge of our fates, that our ideas and actions make a difference, and that the future is not preordained. There are many reasons for believing that this is, in fact, the case. The future is clearly not predetermined and the actual practice of international relations is capable of springing great surprises; none more so than the abrupt ending of the Cold War, perhaps. And yet it is also evident that international relations occurs in a specific set of historical circumstances that delimits the range of possible futures. Indeed, the fact that (some) states remain the most consequential actors in an inter-state system is perhaps the defining feature of the last four or five hundred years.[5] The question is how much such inherited 'structures' might determine the actions and ideas of today's policymakers.

To look at the contemporary Asia-Pacific region, which is the principal focus of this article, the answer would seem to be 'quite a lot'. The growing tension created by the 'rise of China' and its increasingly aggressive territorial ambitions, discussed in more detail below, is but the most glaring illustration of this possibility. And yet for many observers, the 'long peace of Asia' is an indicator of the importance of ideas, cultural and social practices, and the ability of small states to influence the behaviour of their 'greater' counterparts through processes of socialisation.[6] Such claims are currently being put to a searching examination by unfolding events in the region.

The central argument of this article is that constructivists in particular underestimate or even ignore the importance of the 'real' structural inheritance that shapes state (and the political elites that represent them) behaviour and places real limits on future possibilities. Even though the future is indeterminate, some outcomes are decidedly more likely than others, especially where policymakers believe they inhabit a strategic universe of zero sum outcomes and where self-reliance and assertion remain important. Ironically, constructivists might actually tell us something important about the persistence and propagation of the realist ideas that are central to the growing strategic rivalry in the Asia-Pacific.

[2] Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Structural realism after the Cold War', *International Security*, 25:1 (2000), pp. 5–41; Colin Elman, 'Horses for courses: Why not neorealist theories of foreign policy?', *Security Studies*, 6:1 (1996), pp. 7–53.

[3] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[4] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); John J. Mearsheimer, 'The gathering storm: China's challenge to US power in Asia', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 3:4 (2010), pp. 381–96.

[5] Daniel W. Drezner, *All Politics is Global: Explaining International Regulatory Regimes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[6] Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (London: Routledge, 2001), Timo Kivimäki, *The Long Peace of East Asia* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014).

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This article begins with a brief theoretical discussion of the nature of 'realism'. The key point here is that it is not necessary to be a realist of the traditional IR variety to recognise that structures may have a determinative ontological significance that effectively shapes and delimits contemporary political and strategic outcomes. The second half of the article illustrates the possible importance of this claim with reference to the contemporary geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific region.

Rival realisms

There is more than one sort of realism. For the purposes of this article, the relevant forms of realist thinking are to be found firstly, in the IR paradigm that has historically dominated the study and practice of international politics; and secondly, in a form of 'critical realism' that is primarily applied to the natural sciences. I shall argue that critical realism offers a way of understanding the historically contingent context in which international relations plays out, as well as the impact of realist thinking in IR theory and practice. Before attempting to unpack the differences between different forms of realism, however, it is helpful to say something about the equally contested idea of 'structures', which plays an important part in these debates.

Structures are one of those 'essentially contested concepts' that often generate more heat than light,[7] but they arguably provide an important if sometimes neglected and/or unacknowledged backdrop for contemporary developments in the practice of international relations. There is a large literature about the possible nature and impact of structures from a range of different perspectives, and this explains both the disagreements about their importance and their potential influence. For the purposes of the following discussion, however, the notion of structural constraints helps to explain the contingent circumstances that confront and to some extent delimit the choices facing actors or agents. The implication of this claim, as Colin Wight succinctly points out, is that 'not only do the intrinsic properties of social agents never manifest themselves independently of social context, but the social context, in large part, constitutes what properties an agent has'.[8] Put differently, even key concepts such as 'hegemony', 'capitalism', or – most importantly here, perhaps – 'the state' are ultimately manifestations of collective, geographically and historically-specific, social practices, actions, and understandings. Their precise nature will vary as a consequence, but they will always have a 'structural' quality that helps to determine how agency is exercised.

It is also important to note at the outset that, even if Alexander Wendt is right to argue that 'international life … [is] constituted largely by social rather than material structures',[9] the latter remain crucial, too. We would not be having a debate about the significance of 'China's rise', for example, were it not for the remarkable material transformation that has occurred there. China's unparalleled economic development has given it a much greater regional significance. The way in which the rest of the region and the world responds to this reality and the choices China's leaders make will shape security outcomes for the foreseeable future and be manifest in a range of political,

[7] Walter B. Gallie, 'Essentially Contested Concepts', paper presented to Proceedings of the Aristotelian society (1955).

[8] Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 168.

[9] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 20.

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economic, and strategic structures. Although there are important differences in the way various theoretical traditions approach the idea of structures, as we shall see, at this stage it is useful to think of them as the enduring combinations of material and social forces that shape and constrain behaviour in specific historical and geographic circumstances.

Critical realism

Critical realism (CR) is associated primarily with the work of Roy Bhaskar. One of the central contentions of CR is that human societies are distinguished by pre-existing structures that shape and to some extent determine behaviours and collective actions. This is not, it should be emphasised, to suggest that structures inevitably trump agency in some crudely deterministic, much less entirely predictable way. On the contrary, the interaction of structure and agency is a central feature of social existence and one with inherently open-ended, non-determinative, and 'emergent' properties. What it does imply, however, is that social structures, or enduring, regular, routinised patterns of social activity, influence the way that actors behave.[10] Crucially, the focus is on the accretion and impact of *collective* rather than individual actions. Indeed, methodological individualism of the sort that has exercised a pervasive influence in much economic and political theorisation is explicitly rejected by Bhaskar and other advocates of CR.[11] As a consequence, 'a practically-oriented critical realist approach would seek to determine to what extent enduring underlying structures are being reproduced in novel forms and to what extent the structures themselves are being modified or even transformed'.[12]

This stance has important methodological and epistemological implications. CR suggests that we inherit a pre-existing social order replete with social structures, practices and *ideas* about how such a society and its institutions should be organised. In other words, structure and agency are inescapably interconnected and should be considered as part of a whole. While agents have the capacity to modify or change the structures of which they are a part, they are not autonomous. Social structures have an objective ontological 'reality' and primacy – if only because of their necessary pre-existence – that inevitably shapes and limits what agents can do. In direct contradiction to the methodological (and normative) assumptions that inform constructivist explanations of the long peace of Asia, for example, critical realists argue that 'rather than focusing on rules, norms and practices (with structure either being reduced to these or derivative of them), we should start with social structure, seeing rules, norms and practices as the media by which social structures are (largely unintentionally) reproduced and occasionally transformed'.[13]

The possibility that seemingly empowered, autonomous agents might unconsciously – or consciously, if they judge themselves to benefit from them – reproduce social structures is important when trying to account for the apparent durability of particular social practices. The continuing existence of specific organisations long after their original purposes had ceased to be germane is a

[10] Colin Wight, 'They shoot dead horses don't they? Locating agency in the agent-structure problematique', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:1 (1999), pp. 109–42.

[11] Heikki Patomäki and Colin Wight, 'After postpositivism? The promises of critical realism', *International Studies Quarterly*, 44:2 (2000), p. 233.

[12] Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 191.

[13] Jonathan Joseph, 'Philosophy in international relations: a scientific realist approach', *Millennium*, 35:2 (2007), p. 357.

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widely recognised phenomenon.[14] Even more significantly, the existence of 'structural violence' of one form or another, whether based on race, class or gender, is an example of the manner in which more broadly based pre-existing social structures effectively determine the life chances and even the very consciousness of millions of individuals.[15] Even powerful and seemingly autonomous individuals may be instrumental – consciously or unconsciously – in reproducing the social structures or networks of relationships that give them authority and even legitimacy. The durability of patron-client relationships and patronage politics in much of Southeast Asia, for example, are telling examples of this possibility,[16] and ones with particular relevance for this discussion.

Even more pertinently, the well known influence of historical legacies of one sort or another on contemporary security problems in the East Asian part of the Asia-Pacific cannot be understood without considering the possibility that different societies are composed of what Bhaskar described as 'articulated ensembles of relatively independent and enduring structures'.[17] Not only do specific issues such as China's territorial claims, the division of the Korean peninsula, the status of Taiwan, or the notoriously difficult and unproductive relationship between China and Japan, for example, have their roots in the particular history of the region, but the way such problems are understood and acted upon also varies because of particular and very specific national circumstances.[18] Distinctive national 'strategic cultures' are a product of unique long-run historical trajectories of a sort that distinguishes China,[19] and of more recent changes in regional great power relations. Japan's strategic reliance on the United States and the subsequent social embedding of a widely supported anti-militarist sentiment is an especially illuminating example of this possibility – and one that is often neglected within the dominant realist scholarship in this area.[20]

Before contrasting the CR position with the more familiar and influential realist paradigm that continues to dominate so much international relations practice, however, two further points are worth emphasising. First, Heikki Patomäki and Colin Wight argue that 'it makes no sense, and this is the key error, to treat the levels of the state and the international system as related as agents to structures'.[21] In other words, despite that fact that states – or more accurately, perhaps, policy-makers, diplomats, and officials – act, their actions cannot be understood in isolation from the underlying structurally embedded, socially constituted reality of which they are a part. Thinking in

[14] Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, 'Ideas and foreign policy: an analytical framework', in J. Goldstein and R. Keohane (eds), *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 3–30; Paul Pierson, 'Increasing returns, path dependence, and the study of politics', *American Political Science Review*, 94:2 (2000), pp. 251–67.

[15] Paul Farmer, Philippe Bourgois, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Didier Fassin, Linda Green, H. K. Heggenhougen, Laurence Kirmayer, and Loc Wacquant, 'An anthropology of structural violence', *Current Anthropology*, 45:3 (2004), pp. 305–25.

[16] Mushtaq H. Khan, 'Patron-client networks and the economic effects of corruption in Asia', *The European Journal of Development Research*, 10:1 (1998), pp. 15–39; Helen Varkkey, 'Patronage politics as a driver of economic regionalisation: the Indonesian oil palm sector and transboundary haze', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 53:3 (2012), pp. 314–29.

[17] Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality*, p. 78.

[18] Mark Beeson, *Regionalism and Globalization in East Asia: Politics, Security and Economic Development* (2nd edn, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014).

[19] Alastair Ian Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[20] Thomas U. Berger, 'From sword to chrysanthemum: Japan's culture of anti-militarism', *International Security*, 17:4 (1993), pp. 119–50.

[21] Patomäki and Wight, 'After postpositivism?', p. 233.

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terms of 'levels of analysis' may serve a limited heuristic purpose, but it is an ultimately misleading reification. The second point to make is that when contemplating the larger social reality of which the 'international system' is such a prominent part, critical realism offers a potentially illuminating explanation of the nature and impact of hegemony, an idea that also has important purchase among traditional realists, liberals and even constructivists.[22] For critical realists like Jonathan Joseph, hegemony 'comes to represent the political (or we might also say agential) moment in the reproduction of social structures'.[23] More specifically:

> in its agential sense hegemony relates to conscious, reflective, intentionality as is the case with hegemonic projects. However, our understanding of these must also recognise hegemony's relation to structural properties of pre-existing and relatively enduring social relations that possess powers of enablement and constraint. The manifestation of hegemony is a concrete, contingent outcome of these different causal powers.[24]

Importantly, it is not necessary to be a Marxist or to adopt a 'critical' perspective to appreciate the dialectical nature of this process, or the possibility that there may be other forces other than class relations at work in determining social outcomes. Indeed, what Bhaskar called the 'four planes of social activity' include both the material forces and class-based relations that are central to Marxist interpretations, as well as a more constructivist-style awareness of the possible importance of intersubjectivity and identity.[25] As we shall see, this sort of inclusive framework provides a way of thinking about the evolution and operation of security relations in the Asia-Pacific.

The CR approach, therefore, provides a powerful reminder of the possibility that the arena of international relations is neither unstructured nor politically innocent. Situated agents are able to take advantage of, and to some extent shape, the social context of which they are a part. But it is a context with finite material limits that constrain as well as enable (for those with power, at least). The continuing, inescapable geopolitical importance and reality of such material constraints and limitations are evident most emphatically in our collective relationship with the natural environment.[26] While we are undoubtedly capable of exercising collective agency and actually changing the material configuration of the planet itself, the physical laws and scientific realities they are predicated upon will continue to exist whether we do or not. Recognising the limited and contingent nature of human agency is consequently important, even if its implications remain contentious.

Traditional realism and its critics

At one level, 'traditional' realism in IR looks well placed to say something about collective behaviour under historically contingent, structurally constrained circumstances. After all, realism's principal preoccupations – the balance of power, sovereignty, anarchy, and the presumed struggle for survival this engenders – all look to have structural qualities and/or antecedents. Indeed, at first blush CR and realists operating in IR might be thought to have a good deal in common. However, the sort of pared-down abstractions that characterise neorealism in particular are very different from the

[22] Mark Beeson, 'American ascendancy: Conceptualising contemporary hegemony', in M. Beeson (ed.), *Bush and Asia: America's Evolving Relations with East Asia* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 3–23.
[23] Jonathan Joseph, 'Hegemony and the structure-agency problem in International Relations: a scientific realist contribution', *Review of International Studies*, 34:1 (2008), pp. 109–28.
[24] Ibid., p. 120.
[25] Roy Bhaskar, *Plato, etc: Problems of Philosophy and Their Resolution* (London: Routledge, 2009).
[26] Simon Dalby, 'Rethinking geopolitics: Climate security in the Anthropocene', *Global Policy*, 5:1 (2014), pp. 1–9.

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emphasis that critical realists place on addressing ontological questions. Putting the epistemological cart in front of the ontological horse is described by Bhaskar as an 'epistemic fallacy'.[27] Put differently, critical realists contend that the nature of structures has to be unpacked before we can understand why they have the effects that they do. By contrast, Kenneth Waltz argues that 'abstracting from the attributes of units means leaving aside questions about the kinds of political leaders, social and economic institutions, and ideological commitments states may have'.[28] The presumed pay off of this famously parsimonious approach is the claim that neorealists are able to predict how states with similar attributes are likely to behave.[29]

Even those realists who take a more historically informed view of great power relations are invariably equally preoccupied with the distribution of power in the international system, the implications this may have for the extant order, and for the ability of individual states to realise their competing interests. While such scholars may be alert to the particular properties of individual states, the primary focus remains on changes in the underlying distribution of power and the relative standing of the dominant states of the era. Robert Gilpin has provided perhaps the most influential statement of this kind, and his conclusions are broadly in keeping with the realist tradition: material transformations affect the extant balance of power leading to a clash between rising and declining powers.[30] Mearsheimer has adopted ideas about the possibility of hegemonic rivalry in times of systemic instability to argue that a clash between China and the US is almost certain as a consequence of underlying shifts in the distribution of power.[31]

This claim about the supposed likelihood of conflict between China and the US has been developed in the recent discourse about the 'Thucydides trap'.[32] Two things are especially noteworthy about this idea. First, the structural parallels with ancient Greece look inherently improbable given the intervening transformation of the international system that may be loosely subsumed under the rubric of 'globalisation', which is associated with increased levels of transnational governance and cooperation.[33] Moreover, the advent of nuclear weapons has, it seems, contributed to the decline of interstate war that is such a noteworthy feature of the contemporary era.[34] Having said that – and this is the second point – the increased tensions between China and the US in the South China Sea actually seem to support some of the claims made by those who think that great power conflict is inevitable. So despite the well known claims about the 'poverty of realism',[35] do we have to concede – no matter how reluctantly – that realists have a point, and that a minimalist description of ontological reality is no obstacle to making meaningful observations and even predictions about state behaviour?

Up to a point, perhaps. One explanation for the alleged poverty of realism is its focus on a relatively limited set of structural variables, in this case an inter-state system composed of supposedly similar

[27] Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality*, p. 13.
[28] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), p. 80.
[29] David C. Copeland, 'The constructivist challenge to structural realism: a review essay', *International Security*, 25:2 (2000), pp. 187–212.
[30] Gilpin, *War and Change*.
[31] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.
[32] Graham Allison, 'The Thucydides trap: Are the U.S. and China headed for war?', *The Atlantic*, 24 (2015).
[33] Stefano Guzzini, 'Structural power: the limits of neorealist analysis', *International Organization*, 47:3 (1993), pp. 443–78.
[34] Ned R. Lebow 'The long peace, the end of the Cold War, and the failure of realism', *International Organization*, 48:2 (1994), pp. 249–77.
[35] Richard K. Ashley, 'The poverty of neorealism', *International Organization*, 38 (1984), pp. 225–86.

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sovereign entities under conditions of anarchy. But as liberals and scholars of international-political economy have never tired of pointing out, this neglects the possibly pacifying and/or transformative impact of international economic integration.[36] Not only are there other important structures that help to constitute the overall international order, but they may also actually change the way that individual states calculate and pursue their respective 'national interests'.[37] Some liberals argue that the institutionalisation of this more complex economic and strategic order actually helps to explain its durability.[38] Even if this currently remains a moot point, it is clear that in the period since the Second World War, East Asia's remarkable economic transformation and the political and economic restructuring it engendered, cannot be understood without recognising the facilitating impact of American hegemony.[39] And yet it is also clear that there are limits to the ameliorative influence of commerce: relations between China and Japan remain poisonous despite the vast increase in their economic interdependence.[40]

Before we assess how well some of traditional realism's predictions and explanations actually stack up in the context of the Asia-Pacific, it is worth making a few brief remarks regarding constructivism's very different claims about the durability of Asia's long peace and the importance of norms and ideas in underpinning this. In some ways constructivists look well placed to provide both a more convincing account of the constituent parts of the regional order in East Asia, as well as the sorts of ideas and practices that have come to distinguish it. Chris Reus-Smit,[41] for example, has provided a very persuasive explanation of the different purposes to which state power has been put and the way key institutions have evolved over time to provide a constitutional basis for specific international orders. And yet while these sorts of constructivist-inspired accounts may provide a more plausible analysis and explanation of the underpinning ontological reality that comprises the key elements of different international orders, other scholars working in broadly similar ways do not always take the implications of such analyses seriously.

On the contrary, the preoccupation with ideas and agency as the principal explanation of actor behaviour causes some constructivists to give little, if any, consideration to the role of enduring, institutionalised structures.[42] While many might agree that ideas are important, the key challenge for constructivists has always been explaining which ideas and why. The more persuasive responses to this challenge have consequently taken seriously both the institutionalised context from which ideas emerge and come to be influential, as well as the domestic and international political environment that allows some ideas to gain traction.[43] Contextualising ideational influence and recognising its relationship to contingent historical circumstances allows more plausible accounts to be given of the factors that may encourage (or inhibit) the adoption of ideas, norms, or even new policy

[36] Erik Gartzke, 'The capitalist peace', *American Journal of Political Science*, 51:1 (2007), pp. 166–91.
[37] Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1977).
[38] G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
[39] Richard Stubbs, *Rethinking Asia's Economic Miracle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005).
[40] James Reilly, 'A wave to worry about? Public opinion, foreign policy and China's anti-Japan protests', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 23:86 (2014), pp. 197–215.
[41] Chris Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
[42] Stephen Bell, 'Do we really need a new "constructivist institutionalism" to explain institutional change?', *British Journal of Political Science*, 41:4 (2011), pp. 883–906.
[43] Thomas Risse-Kappen, 'Ideas do not float freely: Transnational coalitions, domestic structures, and the end of the Cold War', *International Organization*, 48:2 (1994), pp. 185–214.

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paradigms.[44] In East Asia's case, the structural context in which East Asia's distinctive security relationships have unfolded has often been downplayed in favour of an emphasis on norms, ideas, and a broad cultural inheritance.

In this context it is important to remember that East Asia's security relations are a reflection of a unique history that illustrates the complex nature of the structures that evolved there. The most distinctive manifestation of this possibility was the 'tribute system' in which a number of other East Asian states acknowledged China's dominance. Significantly, as David Kang points out, the tribute system was 'far more than a thin veneer of meaningless social lubricants … its ideas and institutions formed the basis of relations between states'.[45] The point to emphasise is that the key institutions of what English School scholars refer to as 'international society' are not universal, but reflect a specific constellation of historical, geographic, and cultural factors that constitute a distinctive structural backdrop against which contemporary international relations play out.[46]

The general argument being advanced here is that, while ideas, norms, and culture may be influential, they operate within a constraining array of structures that delimit the policy options and even the thinking of policymakers.[47] Critical realists are consequently right to stress the ontological primacy and real impact of such structures; they are also right to recognise that the future remains indeterminate. While traditional realist IR scholars may be deluded in believing that they can predict the future on the basis of a redistribution of power in the international system, this does not necessarily make them wrong or their views uninfluential. On the contrary, in the complex dialectic between structure and agency the very prominence of realist thinking and its pervasive influence on policymakers may help to contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy.[48] Rather ironically, therefore, while constructivists might help us to understand just how this process works, a common commitment to a 'progressive' set of norms leads them to downplay the influence of less attractive ideas. We have to recognise that 'bad' ideas can be just as influential as 'good' ones; in the right structurally embedded circumstances, they may also be ascendant and actually reinforce the very structures and practices that many constructivists seek to change or downplay.[49] The rise of China and the desire of its leadership to exert a bigger influence over the extant institutional order and promote ideas of their own about the way the broadly conceived international system operates is the most important illustration of this possibility.[50]

[44] Peter A. Hall, *Governing the Economy: The Politics of State Intervention in Britain and France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Peter A. Hall, 'Policy paradigms, social learning, and the state: the case of economic policymaking in Britain', *Comparative Politics*, 25:3 (1993), pp. 275–96.

[45] David C. Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 9.

[46] Barry Buzan and Yongjin Zhang (eds), *International Society and the Contest Over 'East Asia'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Erik Ringmar, 'Performing international systems: Two East-Asian alternatives to the Westphalian order', *International Organization*, 66:1 (2012), pp. 1–25.

[47] Brian P. Klein, 'Hegemony and strategic culture: American power projection and Alliance defence politics', *Review of International Studies*, 14:2 (1988), pp. 133–48.

[48] Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008).

[49] Ayse Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[50] Charles A. Kupchan, 'The normative foundations of hegemony and the coming challenge to Pax Americana', *Security Studies*, 23:4 (2014), pp. 219–57; Gergory Chin and Ramesh Thakur, 'Will China change the rules of global order?', *The Washington Quarterly*, 33:4 (2010), pp. 119–38.

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Security in the Asia-Pacific

The key dynamic in the Asia-Pacific at present is the 'rise of China' and the response of the United States to the emergence of what realist IR scholars describe as genuine 'peer competitor'.[51] Whether this presages some sort of hegemonic transition is a moot point,[52] but it is clear that the basis of this new dynamic is primarily material rather than ideational. In this regard, at least the realists are undoubtedly correct: the reason we are all interested in China, and the cause of its prominence in the world's economic, political and strategic affairs, is its historically unparalleled economic development. China asserts an influence over its neighbours because of its economic importance, not because of the attractiveness of its ideas. On the contrary, China's 'soft power' is minimal,[53] but this does not mean that the views of its political and economic elites are without influence. It does mean, however, that the actions and beliefs of China's policymakers may produce outcomes that are more likely to accord with realist rather than constructivist interpretations or reality – however impoverished that 'reality' may be conceptually.

It is worth briefly re-emphasising what the CR approach adds to existing depictions of security relations in the Asia-Pacific. First, history matters, especially when it comes to thinking about the formation and constraining legacy of extant structures. Not only do such structural inheritances help to account for very different security practices in Western Europe as opposed to East Asia,[54] for example, but they also provide a powerful reminder of the impact and composition of different structural milieus across the world. Second, the precise nature of the structures will require detailed analysis and unpacking, but the dialectical interaction between economic, political, and even cultural factors highlighted by CR can help to determine and explain potentially disparate outcomes that delimit future trajectories. The growing interest in China's 'geoeconomic' influence, for example, cannot be understood without paying attention to its specific history and the potential of both its economic leverage as well as more conventional strategic expressions of its 'rising power'.[55]

Third, while William Tow and Brendan Taylor have provided a useful heuristic for thinking about distinctive regional 'security architectures',[56] CR can add analytical and historical depth to this sort of discussion, especially when trying to explain the relative attractiveness (or otherwise) of specific institutional constellations. The key point to emphasise in this context is that the structural inheritance that shapes security outcomes in any particular region is a manifestation of distinctive historical trajectories that include economic, political, and cultural/normative factors, as well as more narrowly conceived 'security' concerns. Indeed, one of the potential advantages of CR is that it provides a framework for making sense of the way such diverse forces actually crystallise in specific

[51] John J. Mearsheimer, 'China's unpeaceful rise', *Current History* (2006), pp. 160–2.
[52] Mark Beeson, 'Hegemonic transition in East Asia? The dynamics of Chinese and American power', *Review of International Studies*, 35:1 (2009), pp. 95–112.
[53] Mark Beeson and Shaomin Xu, 'Leadership with Chinese characteristics: What role for soft power?', in S. Kingah and C. Quiliconi (eds), *Global and Regional Leadership of BRICS Countries* (London: Springer, 2015), pp. 169–88.
[54] Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Why is there no NATO in Asia? Collective identity, regionalism, and the origins of multilateralism', *International Organization*, 56:3 (2002), pp. 575–607.
[55] Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer Harris, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
[56] William T. Tow and Brendan Taylor, 'What is Asian security architecture?', *Review of International Studies*, 36:1 (2010), pp. 95–116.

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structural forms. This is nowhere more apparent than in the identity, boundaries, and institutional form assumed by different regions.

Regions are what we make of them

For both critical and IR realists, regions are either not terribly important in themselves, or simply arenas in which great power rivalries may play out.[57] For critical realists, questions of regional formation and identity are largely epiphenomenal expressions of underlying structural realities, albeit indeterminate ones reached through dialectical interplay. For realists such as Mearsheimer,[58] institutions are given short shrift and judged to be incapable of changing the underlying dynamics that have always shaped competition between great powers. Such views are in stark contrast to constructivists who argue that the creation of regional institutions and even identities can have a major – perhaps a decisive influence – on the way international relations are practiced and actually play out at the regional level.[59] The implication of this argument is that regional development, and even the behaviour of great powers is susceptible to being influenced, perhaps even changed, by the behaviour of secondary states with little obvious claim to significance. The quintessential example of this possibility is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Given the attention ASEAN attracts in debates about the evolution of international relations in the Asia-Pacific, a few brief observations are in order. First, ASEAN was itself a product of a specific geopolitical environment that was distinguished by a bipolar contest between rival great powers. While ideological contestation played a much larger role then than it does in contemporary regional contestation, the structural bifurcation of the large parts of the world, and of East Asia in particular was especially noteworthy. ASEAN was a direct consequence of this structurally-embedded demarcation as weaker, newly independent states sought to achieve greater security and a putative collective presence in a geographic area dominated by extra-regional powers. The creation of 'Southeast Asia' was the geographically and institutionally limited expression of this pursuit of security. Despite ASEAN's famously lofty rhetoric, its real driving force had very little to do with shared visions, cultural attributes or ideas – even if they came to provide a convenient legitimating discourse.[60]

The consequent preoccupation – even obsession – with preserving national sovereignty and the inviolability of the state is one of the defining features of regional polities of all types, and of the institutions that they have created.[61] Consequently, there are path-dependent constraints on state behaviour that have an underlying structural component. Even if we accept that the inter-state system in East Asia is a relatively recent *creation* and artifact of European imperialism that does not

[57] Joseph M. Grieco, 'Realism and regionalism: American power and German and Japanese institutional strategies during and after the Cold War', in E. B. Epstein and M. Mastanduno (eds), *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies After the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 319–53.

[58] John J. Mearsheimer, 'The false promise of institutions', *International Security*, 19:3 (1994/5), pp. 5–49.

[59] Sarah Eaton and Richard Stubbs, 'Is ASEAN powerful? Neo-realist versus constructivist approaches to power in Southeast Asia', *The Pacific Review*, 19:2 (2006), pp. 135–55; Amitav Acharya, *Whose Ideas Matter? Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

[60] Mark Beeson, 'Living with giants: ASEAN and the evolution of Asian regionalism', *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 1:2 (2013), pp. 303–22.

[61] Mark Beeson, 'Sovereignty under siege: Globalisation and the state in Southeast Asia', *Third World Quarterly*, 24:2 (2003), pp. 357–74.

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exclude the possibility that its existence will have real effects and influence the behaviour of the elites that lead these states.

Second, and relatedly, the possibility that the 'Asia-Pacific' or 'East Asia' could actually exist, much less play an impactful role, or have the qualities of 'actorness', of a sort that Luke van Langenhove sees as vital to effective regional action, was effectively foreclosed.[62] With China on the 'wrong' side of the Iron Curtain, there was simply no possibility that a wider regional order of any sort, be it economic, political or strategic, could actually come into being, much less play a determinative role in regional relations. Consequently, it is not sufficient or illuminating simply to look at the rhetorical declarations that accompanied the formation of ASEAN, or of the ideological justifications that underpinned America's prominent strategic engagement in the region, for that matter. What is required, I suggest, is adopting the sort of structurally based account of hegemonic influence that has emerged out of critical realism. Such an approach allows us to take seriously both the material properties emphasised by conventional IR realists, as well the ideational/ideological influences that have been highlighted by constructivists,[63] and by those operating in a broadly Marxist tradition.[64]

The key structural 'variable' in this context, of course, was America's postwar hegemony or primacy, as realists prefer to call it. While it is evident that values and norms did play a role in shaping the attitudes of policymakers in the US toward the East Asian region in the aftermath of the Second World War, the structural basis and consequences of American power were what counted. On the one hand, the US had an overwhelming economic and strategic pre-eminence in the aftermath of the war.[65] Even liberals recognise that there was an important dialectical interplay between the underlying structures of an increasingly integrated transnational capitalist economy, and the sort of American values that reinforced and to some extent naturalised this emerging world order.[66] On the other hand, the effect of its geopolitical project in the 'Asia-Pacific' was to create an ideological and geopolitical division within the region that would not be overcome until the Cold War actually ended.[67] Even then, the status of various regional projects came to reflect shifts in the underlying distribution of power in ways that mirror some of realism's broader predictions. What realists are less able to account for is the rather fluid, contested, and open-ended nature of the process. This reluctance to contemplate the sort of unpredictable 'emergent' change that is highlighted by CR, may be explained by the fact that for many realists, especially from the US itself, there is perceived to be a certain inevitability and systemic benefit about the nature of American primacy.[68]

In this structurally constrained context, therefore, one that includes strategic, economic, and political factors, there are clear limits to the ability of less powerful actors such as ASEAN to play an

[62] Luke van Langenhove, 'What is a region? Towards a statehood theory of regions', *Contemporary Politics*, 19:4 (2013), pp. 74–490.
[63] Alice D. Ba, 'Who's socializing whom? Complex engagement in Sino-ASEAN relations', *Pacific Review*, 19:2 (2006), pp. 157–79.
[64] Robert W. Cox, *Production, Power, and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).
[65] Angus Maddison, *Contours of the World Economy, 1–2030 AD* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[66] G. John Ikenberry, 'Liberalism and empire: Logics of order in the American unipolar age', *Review of International Studies*, 30:4 (2004), pp. 609–30.
[67] Mark Beeson, 'Geopolitics and the making of regions: the fall and rise of East Asia', *Political Studies*, 57 (2009), pp. 498–516.
[68] Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

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influential role,[69] despite claims about the organisations ability to modify international norms and even influence the behaviour of more powerful states. Certainly the so-called 'ASEAN Way' of voluntarism and consensus has been influential, at least at the level of providing a rhetorical template and veneer of legitimacy for regional institutions. However, the fact that subsequent regional institutional initiatives such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the East Asia Summit, have all felt obliged to subscribe to the ASEAN style of diplomacy has meant that very little of any substance has been achieved.[70] Put differently, while constructivists may usefully highlight the discursive importance of particular ideas about regional identity and institutional practice, accounting for the relatively limited impact of such ideas requires us to acknowledge the influence and structural impact of material factors, too.

The sheer number of competing regional initiatives and visions of one sort or another in the Asia-Pacific is also a contributing factor to their relative ineffectiveness. There are simply too many proposals and organisations with overlapping agendas and claims to authority for any to act effectively. A more fundamental explanation, however, may be found in the profound structural transformation that has occurred in the political-economy of the region[71] – no matter how it is defined. The flurry of rival institution-building is symptomatic and reflective of this underlying change; the real drivers of change may be found in the larger contest that has been sparked by the so-called 'rise of China', itself a manifestation of long-term structural transformations that organisations such as ASAEN have little capacity to influence.

The rise of China and its implications

The story of China's re-emergence as a major international actor has been told many times, but it remains remarkable nevertheless. Until recently, the primary focus of attention was China's unparalleled economic expansion, which has happened on a scale and at a speed with no historical precedent. Two points about this process are worth emphasising. First, the political economy of China is quite unlike its counterparts in the West.[72] While China's economic ascent owes much to the 'developmental state' tradition pioneered by Japan, at least Japan had the great merit of being a democracy, albeit a rather unusual one.[73] China, by contrast, has a very different political model and is in a very different geopolitical position. Whereas Japan remains in a subordinate and compliant position to the US, China is increasingly less inhibited by the spectre of American power, which many analysts in China judge to be in relative decline.[74] While ideational influences may help to explain the different attitudes in Japan and China the factor that gives them particular saliency is a material redistribution of power of precisely the sort that traditional realists point to.

[69] David M. Jones and M. L. R. Smith, 'Making process, not progress: ASEAN and the evolving East Asian regional order', *International Security*, 32:1 (2007), pp. 148–84.
[70] Beeson, *Regionalism and Globalization in East Asia*.
[71] Joe Studwell, *How Asia Works: Success and Failure in the World's Most Dynamic Region* (London: Profile Books, 2013).
[72] Jamie Peck and Jun Zhang, 'A variety of capitalism ... with Chinese characteristics?', *Journal of Economic Geography*, 13:3 (2013), pp. 357–96.
[73] Mark Beeson, 'Security in Asia: What's different, what's not?', *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 1:1 (2014), pp. 1–23.
[74] Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, 'After unipolarity: China's visions of international order in an era of U.S. decline', *International Security*, 36:1 (2011), pp. 41–72.

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The importance of this underlying material transformation is even more visible in a second important development: China's integration into the international capitalist economy. Since China began a process of economic opening under Deng Xiaoping, which was consolidated and dramatically accelerated by its accession to the World Trade Organization, it has profoundly affected the region of which it is now the largest economic actor.[75] China is now the principal trade partner of all of its neighbours, a material reality that means they have to consider carefully how they manage their diplomatic ties. While such interdependency is no guarantee of cordial relations, as China's fractious relationship with Japan reminds us, it plainly exerts some influence, nevertheless. Indeed, even the US has to think carefully about how it deals with China as at least some American policymakers recognise that its symbiotic economic relationship with China leaves both sides vulnerable to shifts in economic policy and/or economic conditions in the other.[76]

The key question, of course, is whether such interdependency is sufficient to influence or inhibit the behaviour of either the US or China. In this – rather neglected – context, at least, constructivists ought to have something important to tell us. After all, there plainly has been a major shift in the norms, values, and attitudes of Chinese people and actors in the increasingly prominent economic sector.[77] While this domestic transformation is a useful illustration of the reconfiguration of China's specific structural inheritance, it is also important to recognise that it makes some subsequent domestic and foreign policy outcomes more likely as a consequence. On the one hand, there is nothing inevitable about the dialectical interaction of political and economic forces in China or the necessary emergence of democracy, for example.[78] On the other hand, existing, deeply interconnected political and economic forces in China are influencing foreign policy and ideas about the 'national interest' in distinctive and often unpredictable ways.[79]

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, most attention among IR scholars of all types has focused on policymaking elites and the way they have (or have not) been 'socialised' into different patterns of behaviour as a consequence of their integration in an essentially 'Western' international order.[80] While it is clear that China is not the source of destabilising revolutionary ideology that it once was,[81] it is far from clear that the thinking or ambitions of its leaders have been transformed as a consequence. Indeed, the consolidation of personal power and authority by Xi Jinping and his direct oversight of many of the most important areas of policymaking in China are indicative of a regression to an earlier era of personalised authority and control.[82] The point to emphasise is that such reforms are emerging from China's distinctive amalgam of political, economic, and social forces that constitute the structured

[75] Shaun Breslin, *China and the Global Economy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).
[76] Stephen S. Cohen and J. Bradford DeLong, *The End of Influence: What Happens When Other Countries Have the Money* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).
[77] Edward S. Steinfeld, *Playing Our Game: Why China's Rise Doesn't Threaten the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
[78] Kellee S. Tsai, *Capitalism Without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).
[79] Jeffrey A. Bader, *How Xi Jinping Sees the World … and Why* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2016); Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox, 'New foreign policy actors in China', *SIPRI Policy Paper* 26 (2010).
[80] Alice Ba, 'China and Asean: Renavigating relations for a 21st-century Asia', *Asian Survey*, 43:4 (2003), pp. 622–47.
[81] Nancy B. Tucker, *The China Threat: Memories, Myths, and Realities in the 1950s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).
[82] Chun Han Wong and Jeremy Page, 'China's Xi Jinping tightens his hold on Communist Party', *Wall Street Journal* (27 October 2016).

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environment within which policy is made. Some ideas and initiatives will be more widely supported and feasible as a consequence in China, just as they are elsewhere.[83]

Alastair Johnston has provided some of the most persuasive accounts of the possible impact of socialisation processes on China's elites.[84] Such studies have assumed increased importance as Chinese officials play an increasingly prominent role in major international organisations and many observers in China recognise the undoubted benefits that have flowed to the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a consequence of its participation in international regimes and forums. And yet Johnston has also produced one of the most compelling accounts of the influence of what we would now describe as realist thinking in China.[85] Not only is there a long history of such perspectives informing security policy in China, but they are also currently being reinforced by a growing adherence to the sort of realist thinking that dominates in the West.[86] Ironically, Chinese students returning from American universities with their newly minted PhDs have introduced a good deal of this.

While there are mixed opinions about the existence, nature, and significance of China's 'grand strategy',[87] some points are clear. From a theoretical perspective, critical realism's focus on underlying structural transformation and its potential impact on both the capacities and ambitions of individual states is especially important and illuminating. Without such an underlying material transformation, there would be little interest in, or debate about, China's policy intentions. At a practical policy level, however, the indeterminate impact of structural pressures means we need to focus on the changing foreign policies that are facilitated by changes in the distribution of power. In this regard, IR realists have some important points to make that appear to be borne out by recent events.

Confrontation in the South China Sea

The escalating tensions in the South China Sea are inevitable and all too predictable according to realists. For many such observers, America's strategic presence and its role as an 'offshore balancer' – rather than Asian cultural practices or diplomacy – is the explanation of the long peace of Asia.[88] Without this role in the past and in the future East Asia would have been a far more unstable place, the argument goes.[89] Importantly, it is not even necessary for Asian states to become democracies to enjoy the benefits of this stability. Even now, it is claimed,

> it is the balance of power itself, even more than the democratic values of the West, that is often the best preserver of freedom. That also will be the lesson of the South China Sea in the twenty-first century – one more that the humanists do not want to hear.[90]

[83] Walter Mattli and Ngarie Woods, 'In whose benefit? Explaining regulatory change in global politics', in W. Mattli and N. Woods (eds), *The Politics of Global Regulation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 1–43.
[84] Johnston, *Cultural Realism*.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Yaqing Qin, 'Development of international relations theory in China', *International Studies*, 46:1–2 (2009), pp. 185–201.
[87] Feng Zhang, 'Rethinking China's grand strategy: Beijing's evolving national interests and strategic ideas in the reform era', *International Politics*, 43:3 (2012), pp. 318–46; Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015).
[88] Christopher Layne, 'From preponderance to offshore balancing: America's future grand strategy', *International Security*, 22:1 (1997), pp. 86–124.
[89] Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*.
[90] Robert D. Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific* (New York: Random House, 2014), p. 31.

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Whether 'freedom' was best preserved by propping up repressive authoritarian regimes and fighting the two bloodiest wars in the region's history is a moot point. But whatever one thinks of this rather cold-blooded strategic calculus and justification of American foreign policy on normative grounds, China seems to be fulfilling many of the expectations realists have about its likely behaviour as a rising power. China *is* modernising its military; it *is* behaving more aggressively in pursuit of territorial claims; and it is not unreasonable to assume that its strategic planners *would* prefer it if the US retreated to its own hemisphere and left the PRC free to exert a greater sway over its 'core' sphere of influence. Indeed, this is precisely the sort of strategy that has been advocated by at least some strategic thinkers in China itself.[91]

While there may nothing inevitable about the way that the tensions in the South China Sea play themselves out, it is important to recognise that there has been a highly consequential change in China's strategic and foreign policies that coincides with its rising economic and military importance. The foreign policymaking process in China is notoriously and deliberately opaque, but there is little doubt that it has shifted abruptly from the so-called 'charm offensive' and 'good neighbour policy' of three or four years ago, to a much more aggressive position today.[92] While this does not mean the conflict is inevitable or that negotiation is impossible,[93] it has become increasingly commonplace to draw parallels with the situation that obtained in Europe before the First World War,[94] or as we have seen, ancient Greece. The point to emphasise is that conflict is increasingly possible. While agency still matters – Xi Jinping is clearly a powerful figure who is pushing greater Chinese nationalism and self-assertion[95] – it is China's material development and its potentially transformative impact on what Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver call the extant 'regional security complex' that makes his actions and even ideas so consequential.[96]

The limited significance of norms, ideas, and even laws has been thrown into sharp relief by China's actions. On the one hand, China refuses to contemplate any multilateralisation of its manifold territorial disputes. China's leaders recognise – rightly – that they will be the stronger party in a bilateral negotiation and thus potentially able to browbeat a 'pathetic adversary' like the Philippines.[97] On the other, extant institutions that ought to be well placed to influence Chinese behaviour according to constructivists have had almost no influence. This is hardly surprising. Not only are there doubts about the ability of institutions to constrain powerful states at the best of times, but organisations in the Asia-Pacific are actually *designed* to have minimal impact and

[91] Jinghan Zeng, Yuefan Xiao, and Shaun Breslin, 'Securing China's core interests: the state of the debate in China', *International Affairs*, 91:2 (2015), pp. 245–66.
[92] Mark Beeson and Fujian Li, *China's Regional Relations: Evolving Foreign Policy Dynamics* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2014).
[93] M. Taylor Fravel, 'China's strategy in the South China Sea', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 33:3 (2011), pp. 292–319.
[94] Christopher Coker, *The Improbable War: China, the United States and Logic of Great Power Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[95] Elizabeth C. Economy, 'China's imperial president: Xi Jinping tightens his grip', *Foreign Affairs*, 93:6 (2014), pp. 80–9; David M. Lampton, *Following the Leader: Ruling China, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).
[96] Bary Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
[97] Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron*, p. 127.

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to encourage sovereignty enhancement rather than sovereignty pooling.[98] The ASEAN Regional Forum is the principal manifestation of this possibility.[99] As if this was not enough of a problem, ASEAN itself has been divided by China's foreign policy as mainland Southeast Asian states like Cambodia are showered with aid and assistance, making it reluctant to criticise China as a consequence. ASEAN's vaunted solidarity has looked threadbare when members have been forced to choose between national and collective interests.[100]

The net effect of ASEAN's inadequacies and China's increased assertiveness has been to encourage a rather traditional-looking response from the US, albeit one that may not have the effects its architects hoped.[101] In part as a consequence of its own desire to 'pivot' or 'rebalance' toward a relatively neglected region, and in part at the urging of insecure maritime states such as the Philippines and even Vietnam, the US is exhibiting a growing willingness to directly push back against China's expansionary policies. It is not necessary to take a view on the relative merits of this case to recognise that this does, indeed, look like precisely the sort of confrontation between a rising and relatively declining power that realists have predicted. This does not mean that it will play out it in the way that realists predict, or that the US hoped,[102] but it is evident that this interaction has its origins in a long-running material and structural transformation of the region, nevertheless.

Conclusion

The principal insight that critical realism offers – social reality has an inherited, pre-existing structural quality that delimits the context of contemporary actions – may not be entirely novel, but its significance is generally overlooked or willfully ignored by those who emphasise the power of ideas and voluntarism, or simply the power of power. Nowhere are the shortcomings of such approaches more evident than in contemporary East Asia and the more broadly conceived Asia-Pacific. Critical realism provides a framework for making sense of the complex, dialectical interactions between political, economic, cultural, and strategic forces that ultimately constitute the different structural legacies that distinguish one region from another. Unpacking these structures not only helps to explain which ideational and material factors are important at different times in different places, but such an analysis can also suggest why some ideas and institutions do – or do not – have an impact and influence.

In this context, at least, it is important to recognise that traditional realists have some important points to make. There is no doubt that China's material transformation has had a profound impact on the region of which it is the most important part. This enhanced impact would have obtained if China's influence had been confined to the economic sphere. Now, however, it is clear that China is actively pursuing a larger, more aggressive role in pursuit of what it takes to be its national interests. The possibility that such interests may be socially constructed, malleable, and contingent doesn't make them any less consequential. It certainly doesn't mean they are reflective of regional norms or

[98] Shaun Narine, 'State sovereignty, political legitimacy and regional institutionalism in the Asia-Pacific', *Pacific Review*, 17:3 (2004), pp. 423–50; Mark Beeson, 'Multilateralism in East Asia: Less than the sum of its parts?', *Global Summitry* (2016).

[99] Ralf Emmers and See Seng Tan, 'The ASEAN regional forum and preventive diplomacy: Built to fail?', *Asian Security*, 7:1 (2011), pp. 44–60.

[100] Rowan Callick, 'ASEAN's future dim after weak statements on China Sea ruling', *The Australian* (27 July 2016).

[101] Robert S. Ross, 'The problem with the pivot', *Foreign Affairs*, 91:6 (2012), pp. 70–82.

[102] Christian Le Mière, 'Rebalancing the burden in East Asia', *Survival*, 55:2 (2013), pp. 31–41.

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some generalised cultural inheritance that is likely to encourage stability and a cooperative approach to problem solving. On the contrary, China displays a resolute unwillingness to adhere to practices or agreements it judges likely to impinge on its sovereignty or ability to act autonomously, as its recent response to the decision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague on its territorial claims in the South China Sea reminds us.[103]

While this does not mean that war is inevitable, it does mean that when the possibility of conflict in the Asia-Pacific region – intentional or otherwise – looks increasingly possible, we need theories that can explain what is happening, not what we would like to happen. This is, of course, the familiar dichotomy between 'is' and 'ought' that traditional realists have often highlighted. While realists may have a point about this – a good deal of analysis of the region's security dilemmas *does* contain large amounts of wishful thinking – the future is not predetermined, nevertheless. The circumstances in which we make our collective history may be constrained, but they are not foreclosed. Critical realism offers an important but comparatively neglected way of unpacking and accounting for the differing structural constraints that shape and delimit divergent security outcomes and practices in different parts of the world. Recognising our pre-existing social inheritance for what it is could be an important part of changing it for the better.

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[103] Andrew Browne, 'China digs in its heels after tribunal's ruling', *Wall Street Journal* (12 July 2016).

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