Alternative realities: Explaining security in the Asia-Pacific

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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

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.
Karl Marx.

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 and 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’ (Dunne et al 2013: 418).

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’ suggest that their approach allows plausible predictions to be made about the actual practice of international relations (Elman 1996; Waltz 2000). 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 is such circumstances remains high (Gilpin 1981). 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 (2001; 2010), 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 (Drezner 2007). 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 essay, 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 behavior of their ‘greater’ counterparts through processes of socialization (Acharya 2001; Kivimäki 2014). Such claims are currently being put to a searching examination by unfolding events in the region.

The central argument of this paper 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) behavior 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.

This paper 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 recognize that structures may have a determinative ontological significance that effectively shapes and delimits contemporary political and strategic outcomes. The second half of the paper 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 paper, 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.

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 preexisting structures that shape and to some extent determine behaviors and collective actions. This is not, it should be emphasized, to suggest that structures
inevitably trump agency in some crudely deterministic, much less entirely predictable way. What it does imply, however, is that social structures, or enduring, regular, routinized patterns of social activity influence the way that actors behave (Wight 1999). 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 theorization is explicitly rejected by Bhaskar and other advocates of CR (Patomäki and Wight 2000). 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’ (Bhaskar 2011: 191).

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 organized. 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.’ (Joseph 2007: 357).

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 organizations long after their original purposes had ceased to be germane is a widely recognized phenomenon (Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Pierson 2000). 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 (Farmer et al 2004). 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 (Khan 1998; Varkkey 2012), and ones with particular relevance for this discussion.

Before contrasting the CR position with the more familiar and influential realist paradigm that continues to dominate so much international relations practice, two further points are worth emphasizing. First, Patomäki and Wight (2000: 233) 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.’ In other words, despite that fact that states—or more accurately, perhaps, policymakers, 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 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 (Beeson 2006). For critical realists like Jonathan Joseph (2008: 110) hegemony ‘comes to represent the political (or we might also say agential) moment in the reproduction of social structures.’ 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. (Joseph 2008: 120)
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 (Dalby 2014). 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. Recognizing the limited and contingent nature of human agency is 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 behavior 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 characterize neo-realism in particular are very different from the emphasis that critical realists place on addressing ontological questions. Putting the epistemological cart in front of the ontological horse is described by Bhaskar (2010: 13) as an ‘epistemic fallacy’. Put differently, the nature of structures has to be unpacked before we can understand why they have the effects that they do, critical realists contend. By contrast Waltz (1979: 80) 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.’ 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 (Copeland 2000).
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 realize 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 (1987) 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. John Mearsheimer (2001) 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.

This claim about the supposed likelihood of conflict between China and the US has been developed in the recent discourse about the ‘Thucydides trap’ (Allison 2015). 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 ‘globalization’, which is associated with increased levels of transnational governance and cooperation (Guzzini 1993). 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 (Lebow 1994). 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 or realism’ (Ashley 1984), do we have to concede—no matter how reluctantly—that they have a point, and that a minimalist description of ontological reality is no obstacle to making meaningful observations and even predictions about state behavior?

Before we assess how well some of 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 (1999), 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 behavior causes some constructivists to give little, if any, consideration to the role of enduring, institutionalized structures (Bell 2011). 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 institutionalized 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 (Risse-Kappen 1994). Contextualizing ideational influence and recognizing 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 paradigms (Hall 1986; 1993). In East Asia’s case, the structural context in which East Asia’s distinctive security relationships have unfolded has often been downplayed in favor of an emphasis on norms, ideas and a broad cultural inheritance.

The general argument being advanced here is that, while ideas, norms and culture may be influential at the margins, they operate within a constraining array of structures that delimit the policy options and even the thinking of policymakers. Critical realists are right to stress the ontological primacy and real impact of such structures; they are also right to recognize 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 (Booth and Wheeler 2008). Rather ironically, therefore, while constructivists might help us to understand just how this process works, their general commitment to a ‘progressive’ set of norms leads them to downplay the influence of less attractive ideas. We have to recognize 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. The rise of China and its desire to play a bigger influence in the extant institutional order and promotes ideas of its own about their possible is the most important illustration of this possibility (Kupchan 2014; Chin and Thakur 2010).

**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’ (Mearsheimer 2006). Whether this presages some sort of hegemonic transition is a moot point (Beeson 2009a), 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 neighbors because of its economic importance, not because of the attractiveness of its ideas. On the contrary, China’s ‘soft power’ is minimal (Beeson and Xu 2015), 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.

*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 (Grieco 1999). 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 (1994/95), 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 (Eaton and Stubbs 2006; Acharya 2009. The implication of this argument is that regional development, and even the behavior of great powers is susceptible to being influenced, perhaps even changed, by the behavior 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 preliminary remarks 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 great 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 (Beeson 2013).

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 (Beeson 2003). Consequently, there are path-dependent constraints on state behavior 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 exclude the possibility that its existence will have real effects and influence the behavior 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’, which van Langenhove (2013) sees as vital to effective regional action, was effectively foreclosed. 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 emphasized by conventional IR realists, as well the ideational/ideological influences that have been highlighted by constructivists (Ba 2006), and by those operating in a broadly Marxist tradition (Cox 1987).

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 hand, the US had an overwhelming economic and strategic preeminence in the aftermath of the war (Maddison 2007). Even liberals recognize that the dialectical interplay between long established, underlying structural transformations in an increasingly integrated transnational capitalist economy, and the sort of American values that reinforced and to some extent naturalized this emerging world order (Ikenberry 2004). 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 (Beeson 2009b). 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. Indeed, for many realists, especially from the US itself, there is a certain inevitability and systemic benefit about the nature of American primacy (Wohlforth 1999; Friedberg 2011).

In this structurally constrained context, therefore, there are clear limits to the ability of less powerful actors such as ASEAN to play an influential role (Jones and Smith 2007), despite claims about the organizations ability to modify international norms and even influence the behavior of more powerful states. Certainly to 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 (Beeson 2014).

In part, the sheer number of competing regional initiatives and visions of one sort or another can explain this ineffectiveness. There are simply too many proposals and organizations 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—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 organizations such as ASEAN have little capacity to influence.

*The rise of China an its implications*

The story of China’s reemergence 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 emphasizing. First, the political economy of China is quite unlike its counterparts in the West (Peck and Zhang 2013). 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 (Beeson 2014). China, by contrast, has a very different political model and is in a very different geopolitical position. Whereas Japan remains in a subordinate and complaint position to the US, China is increasingly less inhibited by the specter of American power, which many analysts in China judge to be in relative decline (Schweller and Pu 2011). 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 realists point to.

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 (Breslin 2007). China is now the principal trade partner of all of its neighbors, 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 recognize that its symbiotic economic relationship with China leaves both sides vulnerable to shifts in economic policy and/or economic conditions in the other (Cohen and DeLong 2010).

The key question, of course, is whether such interdependency is sufficient to influence or inhibit the behavior 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 (Steinfeld 2010). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, most attention among IR scholars of all types has focused on policymaking elites and the way they have (or have not) been ‘socialized’ into different patterns of behavior as a consequence of their integration in an
essentially ‘Western’ international order (Ba 2003). While it is clear that China is not the source of destabilizing revolutionary ideology that it once was (Tucker 2014), it is far from clear that the thinking or ambitions of its leaders have been transformed as a consequence.

Johnston (2008) has provided some of the most persuasive accounts of the possible impact of socialization processes on China’s elites. Chinese officials play an increasingly prominent role in major international organizations and many observers in China recognize the undoubted benefits that have flowed to the PRC as a consequence of its participation in international regimes and forums. And yet Johnson (1995) has also produced one of the most compelling accounts of the influence of what we would now describe as realist thinking in China. 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 (Qin 2009). 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’ (Zhang 2012; Pillsbury 2015), some points are clear. From a theoretical perspective critical realism’s focus on underlying structural transformation and its potential impact on both capacities and ambitions 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 (Layne 1997). Without this role in the past and in the future East Asia would have been a far more unstable place, the argument goes (Friedberg 2011). 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. (Kaplan 2014: 31).

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 behavior as a rising power. China is modernizing 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 (Zeng et al 2015).

While there may nothing inevitable about the way that the tensions in the South China Sea play themselves out, it is important to recognize 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 policy making 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 neighbor policy’ of three or four years ago, to a much more aggressive position today (Beeson and Li 2014). While this does not mean the conflict is inevitable or that negotiation is impossible (Fravel 2011), it has become increasingly commonplace to draw parallels with the situation that obtained in Europe before World War 1 (Coker 2014), or as we have seen, ancient Greece. The point to emphasize 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 (Economy 2014; Lampton
forthcoming)—it is China’s material development and its potentially transformative impact on what Buzan and Waever (2003) call the extant ‘regional security complex’ that makes his actions and even ideas so consequential.

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 recognize—rightly—that they will be the stronger party in a bilateral negotiation and thus potentially able to browbeat a ‘pathetic adversary’ like the Philippines (Kaplan 2014: 127). On the other, extant institutions that ought to be well placed to influence Chinese behavior according to constructivists have had almost no influence (Beeson forthcoming). This is hardly surprising. Not only are there doubts about the ability of institutions to constrain powerful states at the best of times, but organizations in the Asia-Pacific are actually designed to have minimal impact and to encourage sovereignty enhancement rather than sovereignty pooling (Narine 2004). The ASEAN Regional Forum is the principal manifestation of this possibility (Emmers and Tan 2011). 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 criticize China as a consequence. ASEAN’s vaunted solidarity has looked threadbare when members have been forced to choose between national and collective interests (Storey 2013).

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 hope (Ross 2012). 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 recognize 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 in the way that realists predict, or that the US hopes (Le Mière, 2013), but it is evident that this interaction has its
Concluding remarks

The epigram from Marx at the beginning of this essay remains as relevant as ever, even if some of his predictions about what this might mean do not. Capitalism has proved surprisingly durable. This is not to say that it will remain so, of course, but it is far from clear, much less inevitable, what might replace it even if it did succumb to its own internal contradictions. But even if Marx has proved to be no better than anyone else at predicting the future, his ideas continue to animate contemporary debates, none more so than critical realism. The principal insight that critical realism offers—social structures have an inherited, preexisting 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 emphasize the power of ideas and voluntarism. Nowhere are the shortcomings of this approach more evident that in contemporary East Asia and the more broadly conceived Asia-Pacific.

In this regard, at least, traditional realists have some important points to make. There is no doubt that China’s material transformation and its concomitant impact on the wider region 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 some generalized cultural inheritance that is likely to encourage stability and a cooperative approach to problem solving. On the contrary, China display a resolute unwillingness to adhere to practices or agreements it judges likely to impinge on its sovereignty or ability to act autonomously.

At a time when the Asia-Pacific region looks increasingly unstable and when the possibility of conflict—intentional or otherwise—looks increasingly likely, 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 realist 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. Recognizing our pre-existing social inheritance for what it is could be an important part of changing it for the better.

References


