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“Competing visions of ‘greatness’: Incompatible identity narratives as drivers of an emerging Sino-American rivalry in the South China Sea”

Abstract
Against the backdrop of geopolitical tensions between the United States and China in the South China Sea, this paper claims that we are witnessing the early stages of great power rivalry. However, whereas most IR scholars turn to realist approaches to explain such rivalry, this paper investigates a critical, but theoretically under-developed, driver of US-China rivalry, namely identity dynamics from a social psychological perspective. Specifically, the paper examines two prominent indicators of the emerging rivalry – the US Freedom of Navigation Operations and China’s artificial islands construction project – demonstrating how these strategic practices in the South China Sea are primarily motivated by the dominant narratives of state identity in each country. Importantly, these narratives, describing the way each country envisions its own positive distinctiveness or “greatness”, are seen as incompatible in key respects, thus shaping the co-existence of China and the United States, notably in the South China Sea. That is, the universalistic American narrative about being “leader of the free world” is increasingly at odds with the particularistic Chinese narrative about “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”.

[NB!! early draft version, June 2017]
Introduction

No bilateral relationship is more critical to international order than that between China and the United States. By far the two largest economies in the world as well as its two biggest military spenders, China and the United States seem to be in a league of their own on the international stage. But rather than forming an axis of stability in the shape of a G2 that jointly manages international order, Beijing and Washington have in recent years often found themselves at loggerheads over bilateral trade, human rights issues or the South China Sea. Indeed, although official US-China relations occasionally may appear warm and friendly, as witnessed for instance during the first summit between Donald Trump and Xi Jinping in Mar-a-Lago, the two countries generally seem to view each other as rivals rather than partners. Not only do ideological differences – even with Donald Trump at the helm – run deep between the illiberal, authoritarian People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the self-proclaimed standard bearer of liberal democracy, but China is also the only great power capable of challenging US geopolitical dominance in the Asia-Pacific region anytime soon. Such observations have inspired a burgeoning literature on the emerging – some would say unfolding – great power contest between Beijing and Washington.¹

While the scope and intensity of this great power contest remains highly debated among IR scholars and policy analysts, there is little disagreement that over the past decade the South China Sea has been the primary arena for conflict between Beijing and Washington.² On the surface of it, recurring tensions in the South China Sea concern a set of unresolved territorial and maritime disputes between the PRC and several of its Southeast Asian neighbor states. On closer inspection, however, these disputes at the same time serve as the backdrop for an emerging great power rivalry between China and the United States. Officially, Washington takes no position on the territorial disputes in the contested waters, but the United States has nevertheless shored up its strategic presence in the area to stem the tide of what most observers view as growing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea.³ In short, this assertiveness involves a rapid expansion of the power projection capacity of the Chinese navy and coast guard forces, the construction and semi-militarization of several artificial islands in the Spratly archipelago and not least Beijing’s willingness to pursue its expansive maritime and territorial claims in a confrontational manner against rival claimant states.⁴ To counter this, the Obama administration – as part of its “Rebalance to Asia” – ramped up US naval presence in the area and promoted “a network of like-minded partner states that sustains and

¹ See e.g. Ross (1999; 2009); Friedberg (2000; 2011); Christensen (2001; 2015); Goldstein (2005); Layne (2009); Yan (2010); Kissinger (2012); Steinberg and O’Hanlon (2015); Zhao (2015).
² Tellingly, even critics of the otherwise widespread notion that China has become more assertive admit the South China Sea has witnessed a more assertive approach from Beijing (Johnston, 2013: 19; Jerdén, 2014: 69-74).
³ For an introduction to US official strategy in the South China Sea, see Pentagon (2015).
⁴ Forsby (2016: Chapter 3).
strengthens a rules-based regional order".\textsuperscript{5} China, on the other hand, has repeatedly railed against what it sees as US militarization of the South China Sea and a larger scheme to contain the rise of China.\textsuperscript{6}

That the South China Sea has become the primary arena for geopolitical competition between China and the United States reflects its strategic importance to both countries. Beijing claims to have historic rights to most of the South China Sea, unabashedly ignoring a ruling to the contrary in July 2016 by the International Court of Arbitration in the Hague.\textsuperscript{7} Moreover, PRC government representatives have, in private talks with their U.S. counterparts, conveyed the message that they view the South China Sea as a "core interest", thereby potentially elevating it to the same status as Taiwan and Tibet, which are regarded as non-negotiable issues concerning the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the PRC.\textsuperscript{8} In the face of US opposition, however, Beijing has so far shied away from announcing it publicly. On their side, US officials have on numerous occasions pointed to the South China Sea as a critical waterway in terms of freedom of navigation.\textsuperscript{9} Hence, Pentagon has conducted a number of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOS) in the South China Sea, which have targeted what the US considers to be excessive Chinese maritime claims, notably in the vicinity of China’s newly constructed artificial islands.\textsuperscript{10} Having received extensive media coverage and drawn stern reactions from Beijing, these FONOS seem to offer concrete manifestation of a great power rivalry in the making.

This paper delves into the US-China rivalry in the South China Sea in order to identify its main underlying drivers. Since the rivalry clearly manifests itself in a geopolitical fashion, most IR scholars would readily assume that we should turn to realist-inspired IR perspectives in order to account for the rivalry. When maritime claims clash in a resource-rich strategic waterway, miniscule reefs are being turned into sizable strongholds replete with military hardware and both sides build up their naval power projection capacity in the area, surely this will take us squarely into the realm of power and security dynamics, traditionally the preserve of realism. Yet, I will contend that power and security dynamics are not the only, perhaps not even the most important, driver of geopolitical competition between Beijing and Washington in the South China Sea. While standard realist accounts of power and security dynamics do provide an overall theoretical framework for understanding the emergence of great power rivalry, realism seems less useful in explaining the two most prominent and controversial aspects of the observed geopolitical behavior in the South China Sea, namely China’s construction of artificial islands and the US Freedom of Navigation Operations. To put it bluntly, central

\textsuperscript{5} For an official overview of the US Rebalance from the White House, see TWH (2015).
\textsuperscript{6} See e.g. Xinhua (2016).
\textsuperscript{7} For an official view from the Chinese foreign ministry, see MFAPRC (2016).
\textsuperscript{8} See e.g. Wong (2010); Reuters (2015).
\textsuperscript{9} Carter (2012); Pentagon (2015); Mattis (2017).
\textsuperscript{10} Etzioni (2016), Rapp-Hooper and Edel (2017).
aspects of Chinese assertiveness and US countermeasures do not primarily reflect a search for maritime security or a struggle for strategic control over the South China Sea.

Instead, this paper finds identity-generated dynamics to constitute a key motivational driver not merely of the observed geopolitical competition in the South China Sea, but also more broadly of the emerging great power rivalry between China and the United States. I argue that basic identity dynamics, stemming from the cognitive need of all social groups for positive distinctiveness, play a pivotal role in generating this rivalry, as the two countries define their great power roles in terms of seemingly incompatible narratives of greatness. With regard to the South China Sea, my argument is that Chinese assertiveness – the artificial islands being a case in point – is deeply shaped by a narrative about the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, promising to restore China to its historic great power position and to regain control over lost rights and territories, notably in the South China Sea. On the other hand, US efforts to step up its strategic presence in the South China Sea have been centered on a narrative about the indispensable role of the US as a liberal hegemon and standard bearer of a rules-based maritime order, as encapsulated in the Freedom of Navigation Operations. Using a range of mostly official sources to identify the motivation behind China’s assertiveness and US countermeasures in the South China Sea, it is demonstrated how conceptions of great power identity constitute a powerful motivational driver on either side of the emerging great power rivalry.

Following this introduction, the paper consists of three main sections and a conclusion. In the first section, I single out two distinct types of explanatory logics that seem most likely to be the key drivers of a great power rivalry between China and the United States. One of these drivers is described here as the logic of power (and security), which is informed by the realist school of IR. The other driver, which I will refer to as the logic of identity, takes its point of departure in social psychological theories of identity constitution, adapted to a state-centric IR constructivist framework. Against this theoretical backdrop, it is argued that a great power rivalry between China and the United States can be generated and sustained by both the logic of power and identity. In the second section, the paper zooms in on the South China Sea, examining those patterns of geopolitical behavior that are reflective of an emerging rivalry between Beijing and Washington. Although they are often attributed to underlying power and security dynamics, I contend that realism cannot adequately account for the observed geopolitical patterns, especially in relation to China’s artificial islands construction and the US FONOS. Accordingly, the third section takes a closer look at how the logic of identity seems to shape not only Beijing’s assertiveness, but also Washington’s strategic countermeasures, focusing specifically on China’s artificial islands construction and the US FONOS. The main part of the section concentrates on US-China relations during the second term of the Obama administration, since this is when the logic of identity has come to the fore. The last part extends the analysis to the Trump administration in order to ask if the Trump presidency has changed the way the logic of identity shapes the rivalry between Washington and Beijing.
Being the primary arena of geopolitical competition between Beijing and Washington, the South China Sea can be seen as a critical case in assessing the relative explanatory power of power and security dynamics as set against identity-related dynamics. If the latter approach is corroborated by the present case study, it has wider implications, drawn out in the conclusion, for the longstanding IR debate between scholars with realist and constructivist leanings. Moreover, if conceptions of identity are part and parcel of the their geopolitical positioning in the South China Sea, the overall rivalry between a rising China and a still dominant United States is likely to be either fueled or mitigated to the extent that Chinese and US leaders frame their bilateral relationship in terms of (in)compatible identity conceptions. The potential policy implications of this insight are suggested in the conclusion.

Explaining the emerging great power rivalry between China and the United States

Are China and the United States bound to be great power rivals in the 21st century? This has become one of the key questions of the IR discipline, triggering extensive debate already back in the 1990s, as the wider implications of China’s impressive rise started to manifest themselves. While optimists, either playing down the risks of great power conflict in a globalized world of interdependent economies or envisioning the socialization of the PRC into the Liberal Order, long seemed to have the upper hand in the debate, pessimists became increasingly vocal in the wake of the global financial crisis, which turned out to further accelerate the narrowing GDP gap between China and the United States.\textsuperscript{11} In the current decade, the combination of growing Chinese assertiveness and the US Rebalance to Asia has played into the hands of a growing choir of IR scholars and policy analysts who see recent development trends as part of an emerging (or already unfolding) great power rivalry between Beijing and Washington. Most of these pundits ground their analysis in a set of more or less explicitly articulated realist premises centered on power and security dynamics. Yet, I will argue that we may reach the same conclusion about an emerging great power rivalry from a very different theoretical point of departure.

This section identifies two distinct explanatory IR logics that may account for the emergence of great power rivalry between China and the United States: a realist logic of power and a constructivist-oriented logic of identity. The first part of the section draws on a range of standard realist arguments to derive the logic power, whereas the second part outlines a new logic of identity in international relations predicated on Social Identity Theory.

\textit{How the logic of power can be a driver of great power rivalry}

\textsuperscript{11} For a useful and still relevant overview of the basic arguments of realist pessimists and optimists, see Friedberg (2005: 17-29). For an updated version of the debate, see Christensen (2015: 1-8).
Realist scholars tend to be pessimistic about the consequences of China’s rise in the sense that they see China as a potential challenger to the United States, the dominant power in the international system. In theoretical terms, the pessimism of realist scholars follows from an understanding of international relations as fundamentally shaped by the anarchical structure of the international states system, which breeds insecurity and competition, forces states to rely on self-help behavior and prevents them from transcending power politics and recurring cycles of great power rivalry. As realists like to point out, history is replete with tragic examples of rivalry and war between rising and falling great powers, and the current systemic power shift is bound to have some of the same disruptive effects on the existing international order. The relative distribution of power among states thus becomes a key variable in realist theory, shaping overall relations between great powers and determining the intensity of security competition in the system.

It is against this backdrop that I will refer to a realist “logic of power” as a basic driver of great power rivalry in the international system. While framing a realist logic in terms of power, but not security, dynamics could seem like an overly narrow conceptualization – partially reflective of a long-standing intra-realist dividing line between offensive and defensive realists – I will contend that it makes sense to emphasize the power dimension in this context for. First of all, security concerns do not really seem to be the primary motivational driver of the geopolitical competition we have witnessed between China and the United States, if by insecurity we mean a sense of existential urgency and profound uncertainty about the survival of either country, prompting them to resort to extraordinary measures. Even during the Obama administration’s “Rebalance to Asia” overall balancing dynamics between China and the United States have been rather indirect and moderate, thus far from resembling the type of acute security dilemmas that have shaped great power relations in the past. In fact, with the partial exception of US deployment of the THAAD missile defense system to South Korea (which allegedly erodes China’s nuclear deterrent), the observed patterns of militarization and geopolitical behavior do not directly threaten the overall security of Beijing and certainly not Washington. For these reasons, I will argue here that if we are to employ realism to account for the emerging great power rivalry between China and the United States, such a realist approach should be framed primarily as a logic of power.

Turning more specifically to the emerging great power rivalry between Beijing and Washington, realist scholars have long predicted that the rise of China would bring it on a

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12 For an example of a realist optimist, see Glaser (2011).
13 See especially Waltz (1979); see also Mearsheimer (2001). Realists are themselves divided into several camps; for an introduction, see e.g. Brown et al. (1995); Elman & Jensen (2014).
14 On US-China relations as viewed from the prism of realist power transition theory, see Beeson (2009); Allison (2017).
15 Such a reading of what security dynamics are really about draws on securitization theory (Buzan et al., 1998).
16 See e.g. Ikenberry (2014); Jones (2014: Chapter 7).
17 Panda (2017a).
course of collision with the United States. Most prominently, John Mearsheimer has famously claimed that “China cannot rise peacefully” [...] I believe that that China will try to dominate the Asia-Pacific region much as the United States dominates the Western hemisphere.” As China’s economic, political and military clout grows, Beijing will seek to expand its zone of influence in the region and to pursue its interests more forcefully. Or in the words of Wang Jisi, one of China’s leading IR scholars with realist leanings, “Based on the country’s enhanced position, China’s international behavior has become increasingly assertive.” Drawing on a number of key realist assumptions, Aaron Friedberg in his book A Contest for Supremacy observes in a similar vein that “Like other rising great powers, it [i.e. China] will ultimately seek to alter the existing institutional architecture in ways that are more conducive to its interests.” In short, growing Chinese power enables Beijing to assume a larger role in Asia and to pursue its interest more assertively, thereby paving the ground for an emerging rivalry with the United States.

On its side, the United States perceives the rise of China as a threat to its dominant position in the region, according to realists. Once again John Mearsheimer has phrased this view in rather stark terms: “[T]he United States can be expected to go to great lengths to contain China and ultimately weaken it to the point where it is no longer a threat to rule the roost in Asia”. This is presumably the kind of reasoning that has guided the Obama administration’s efforts to shore up its already extensive network of partners and allies in Asia in order to check and contain China’s rising power. Another realist scholar, Ashley Tellis, has stated that “US interests are deeply threatened by the prospect that China might integrate the Indo-Pacific periphery through a network of trading relations that could become the foundation for an impermeable sphere of influence centered on Chinese economic, geopolitical and cultural primacy in Asia.” Hence, Tellis envisions that the two countries will be locked down in “an open-ended struggle for strategic dominance in Asia [where] the competition for military advantage is embedded in an equally significant rivalry over geopolitical positioning”. Along the same lines, Yan Xuetong, probably the single most prominent Chinese realist scholar has argued that “The United States aims to maintain its global dominance, and China to resume its world leading position. This structural conflict makes political competition between them inevitable.”

In sum, realist scholars certainly expect China and the United States to engage in great power rivalry, grounding their predictions in various versions of what I have termed a realist logic of power.

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18 See Friedberg (1993); Layne (1993; 2009); Waltz (1993).
21 Friedberg (2011: 54; see also 37-38).
22 Mearsheimer (2010: 390).
24 Ibid.: 89.
How the logic of identity can be a driver of great power rivalry

The study of social identity dynamics in IR has been spearheaded by mainstream constructivists, who have drawn on various bodies of mostly sociological and social psychological literatures. Although these literatures conceptualize and theorize social identity in different ways, they tend to coalesce around some shared propositions about the basic drivers of social identity constitution: The need for social identification (the collective ‘self’, ‘us’, the ‘in-group’) and the need for social differentiation (the collective ‘other’, ‘them’, the ‘out-group’). In this subsection, I employ Social Identity Theory (SIT), a cognitive variant of social psychology, to briefly outline a logic of social identity dynamics that can explain the emerging rivalry between China and the United States.

Originally developed in the late 1970s by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, SIT aimed to demonstrate that the mobilization of in-group favoritism – if not inter-group conflict in itself – can be accounted for merely in terms of cognitive biases inherent in all human beings. On the basis of experimental tests, SIT claims that social groups, even groups constructed at random, invariably engage in social identity dynamics with each other by means of social categorization, identification and comparisons, thereby creating in-group loyalties and out-group demarcations. This cognitive predisposition to differentiate between social in-groups and out-groups constitutes an important motivational driver of social behavior, which helps human collectivities to order and manage their social world. Drawing on these SIT-based insights, one may identify two fundamental identity needs of all social groups: the need for social distinctiveness and the need for positive self-esteem. While it can be useful to distinguish between these two social psychological needs in some explanatory contexts, it is more convenient here to merge them into an “aggregate”, which I will refer to as the need for positive distinctiveness.

The incorporation of insights from SIT into IR opens up several avenues for hypothesizing about the motivational drivers of state behavior. Some of these avenues have already been explored by IR scholars, as the IR discipline has witnessed a growing interest in SIT as part of a broader turn towards psychological theories. The widespread use of SIT by IR scholars suggests an unproblematic translation of SIT’s theoretical universe of intra-state social groups.

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25 See e.g. Wendt (1992); Adler and Barnett (1998); Cronin (1999); Hopf (2002); Hymans (2006); Rousseau (2006); Steele (2008).
26 For a thorough introduction to the logic of social identity, see Forsby (2016).
27 See especially Tajfel (1978); Tajfel & Turner (1979); see also Brewer (1979); Hogg and Abrams (1988). SIT also focuses on non-cognitive psychological (e.g. emotional) dimensions of social identification, but here I concentrate on the cognitive aspect.
28 For some useful introductions to SIT, see Hogg (2004); Hornsey (2008); McDermott (2009); from an IR perspective, see also Larson (2012).
29 Forsby (2016: Chapter 3).
30 Other IR scholars have similarly toned down the distinction between these two SIT-derived psychological needs (see e.g. Larson and Shevchenko, 2010).
31 See e.g. Mercer (1995); Kowert (1998); Cronin (1999); Hymans (2002); Gries (2005); Mercer (2005); Flockhart (2006); Hymans (2006); Greenhill (2008); Lebow (2008); Curley (2009); Wohlforth (2009); Larson (2012).
to the state-centric realm of international relations. In fact, the incorporation of SIT into IR
does come with some strings attached, but these are largely negligible as long as one employs
SIT in the minimalist version outlined above.\textsuperscript{32} It is against the theoretical backdrop of SIT
that I will set out the key assumptions of an IR logic of social identity that may help explain
great power rivalry. Firstly, like other social groups the state may be perceived as a social in-
group constituted in relation to other state-based out-groups; secondly, as a social group the
state strives to satisfy its basic need for positive distinctiveness in relation to salient out-
group states; thirdly, in addressing its basic identity needs, the state (i.e. its government
representatives) articulates an official narrative about how the in-group stands in relation to
salient out-group states; fourthly, the dominant identity narrative of the state, describing how
it stands out internationally in a positive sense, plays a critical role in shaping its foreign
relations to salient out-group states. Fifthly, such identity-generated sources of self-perceived
“greatness” are pivotal to the grand strategies of great powers.

If we turn to US-China relations, it almost goes without saying that both countries view each
other as a salient out-group states, being the two most powerful states in the system.
Moreover, both Beijing and Washington strive to satisfy their identity-generated need for
positive distinctiveness by delineating, in a narrative form, the nature of their respective
international greatness. Now, the central question is to what extent these narratives of
greatness are seen as mutually incompatible in a way that leads the two countries to engage in
great power rivalry. I will argue here that central components of the dominant official
narratives of both Chinese and US national identity jar against each other, being a constant
and profound source of conflicting strategic interests and thus an emerging great power
rivalry between Beijing and Washington. To be sure, official statements from US or Chinese
government representatives on bilateral relations tend to downplay these differences of
identity in favor of proclamations along the lines that “the United States welcomes the rise of a
China that is peaceful, stable, prosperous and a responsible player in global affairs”, and “we
want to deepen mutual understanding with the United States on each other’s strategic
orientation and development path.”\textsuperscript{33}

However, if we take a look at how both China and the United States phrase their great power
narratives in terms of the need for positive distinctiveness, the relative incompatibility of
their respective identity conceptions soon becomes clear. In both countries, the dominant
narrative strands of identity revolve around deep-seated notions of exceptionalism, which are
critical to articulating their respective positive distinctiveness as great powers.\textsuperscript{34} Yet, whereas
the exceptionalist strand of Chinese identity is largely confined to a set of Sino-centric
conceptions, US exceptionalism dovetails with an equally powerful narrative strand of
universalism that embraces all of mankind. More specifically, in the present decade the
dominant narrative of Chinese identity has drawn on the unique characteristics of China’s
historical development, creating a powerful discursive linkage between China’s glorious past

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} On the main differences between the theoretical settings of SIT and IR, see e.g. Wohlforth (2009: 36-38);
\item \textsuperscript{33} See respectively TWH (2015c) and xi (2016).
\item \textsuperscript{34} See Feng (2013).
\end{itemize}
as “the Middle Kingdom”, its recent humiliations at the hands of Western imperialists and its present national rejuvenation whereby China reasserts its great power status in the face of salient out-group states like the United States. US national identity, on the other hand, has been – at least until the Trump presidency – framed primarily by a narrative of the United States of America as the historical bedrock and present standard bearer of a set of universal liberal-democratic values and principles, urging the US to stand up to despotism and illiberal practices as the leader of the free world.

Based upon the proposed logic of social identity, I argue that the basic need for positive distinctiveness constitutes an important motivational driver of relations between China and the United States, setting the scene for an emerging great power rivalry. Insofar as the key narratives of Chinese and US national identity, describing the way each country envisions its own greatness, are seen as incompatible in key respects, it will affect the overall co-existence of the two countries on the international stage. It raises the question to what extent Chinese and US narratives of greatness are construed as mutually incompatible. This takes us to the South China Sea as a maritime arena for US-China relations, since the identity-generated narrative guidance of conflicting strategic interests is most clearly demonstrated here.

**The limits to the logic of power in the South China Sea**
Literature


