



Understanding the Challenge of China's Rise: Fixing Conceptual Confusion about Intentions

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Abstract

What are intentions and how should states decipher them? For scholars, the debate about uncertainty and intentions lies at the heart of international relations. And yet there are theoretical and empirical issues with how scholars have defined, measured, and operationalized intentions to date in the context of understanding China's rise. This article reviews the English and Chinese language literature on intentions and revisionism and presents five propositions that should drive research moving forward. First, a theory of intentions requires a definition distinct from aspirations, motives, preferences, objectives, goals, and grand strategy. Second, states' intentions about ends should be analyzed independently from those about means. Third, assessments of whether a country's intentions are good or bad are subjective and vary based on from which country's perspective the analysis is undertaken. Fourth, states' intentions vary not only by issue area, but also within a particular issue area, just as international institutions, or territorial disputes. And lastly, while there may be uncertainty about intentions, that does not make them unknowable. Embracing these five propositions allow for a more productive research agenda and policy recommendations based on data-driven research instead of wishful thinking.

Keywords Intentions · Revisionism · Power transition · US-China relations · Great power competition

Intentions and Understanding China's Rise

How should scholars and policymakers understand Chinese intentions? Both have noted the importance of more effectively deciphering what China wants and how Beijing plans to achieve its goals to best cater U.S. strategy. Former Ambassador to

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China Gary Locke admitted, it is “a question mark, by people all around the world and governments all around the world, as to what China’s intentions are [45].” Former PACOM commander Harry Harris noted that Chinese land reclamation is “great wall of sand” that raised “serious questions about Chinese intentions [20, 41].” As Ambassador Robert Blackwill decried “American misunderstandings of China’s objectives over nearly two decades rank as one of the three most damaging US foreign policy errors since the end of World War II” and will have “dangerous strategic consequences ... for the United States and its allies and friends [7].” These problems are unfortunately likely to persist; even though deciphering Chinese intentions is a core competency of the US intelligence community, there is no rigorous training or framework for how analysts should go about this critical task.¹

What are intentions and how should states decipher them? For scholars, the debate about uncertainty and intentions lies at the heart of international relations.² Fundamental differences between offensive and defensive realism lie with differing assumptions about state intentions and states’ abilities to decipher others’ intentions. [15, 27, 66]; whether exogenous factors, just as international institutions or norms and ideas, can shape what a country wants is central to the theoretical frameworks of liberalism and constructivism [53]. Intentions play a particularly central role in IR theories about rising powers and great power competition, which most agree currently characterizes U.S.-China relations. Power is insufficient to understand whether power transitions lead to war; Beijing’s intentions greatly determine the degree of threat to the United States and its allies that the China’s rise may pose [, 44, 60, 66]. Many are concerned that if the US misunderstands China’s aims as expansionist, Washington will pursue aggressive responses that “at best ... [are a] waste of resources” and at worst provoke “a security dilemma and a spiral toward war [29].” Others lament that the US and China are on a path to conflict due to China’s intentions of becoming the preeminent power in Asia, and yet others maintain that the US has not pursued the necessary balancing measures to protect its position and interests [50]. There are some scholars, however, who highlight the U.S.’s growing ties with other countries, such as Japan, Australia, and key Southeast Asian countries, as a key example of the U.S. engaging in appropriate balancing behavior, though not containment, against China’s rise [47].

Deciphering Chinese intentions, and thus the implications of China’s rise, has been a primary focus of international relations scholars and policymakers over the

¹ I have come to this conclusion based on my own training and work experience in the intelligence community as well as from interviewing senior intelligence officers.

² The paper reasonably focuses on all the challenges of evaluating intentions of a rising power. However, it is important to note that there is the additional challenge of signaling intentions. For instance, Chinese leaders and top diplomats often complain that US counterparts have “misjudged” China’s intentions. “The US has misperceived and miscalculated China’s strategic intention.” President Xi Jinping Has a Video Call with US President Joe Biden. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*. March 19, 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220319_10653207.html. While there are incentives for Chinese leaders to create this narrative to counteract negative US assessments, there is an extensive literature on the difficulties of signaling, for instance Fearon, James. 1997. Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 1: 68–90; Jervis, Robert. 1978. Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma. *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2: 167–214.

past thirty years. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the discourse was about how to define a rising power and how China fit the bill. Indeed, the potential of China's rise was largely discounted; Charlie Kupchan, for example, wrote in 2002 that Europe "will inevitably rise up as America's principal competitor," not China, which he thought was "decades away from entering the top ranks [42]."

But by the turn of the century, scholars were becoming increasingly concerned about the prospect of instability and war as the result of China's rise [8, 24, 25]. Such warnings were posed by John Ikenberry, who questioned whether the American-led liberal international system could survive a moment of power transition that is "fraught with danger [35]," and Tom Christensen who argued that "with certain new equipment and certain strategies, China can pose major problems for American security interests, and especially for Taiwan, without the slightest pretense of catching up with the United States by an overall measure of national military power or technology [14]." Scholars evaluated whether a peaceful rise was possible, and in particular, whether countries would balance against China and whether China was a status quo power [1, 37, 39]. With the benefit of being able to analyze more recent Chinese behavior, Rush Doshi has argued that Chinese strategy developed in stages, beginning with less assertive strategy, to limit balancing by other countries before revealing its more overtly revisionist strategy [16].

This specter of inevitable conflict — China's threatening to displace the US as the global hegemon — was encapsulated in the concept of the "Thucydides trap," popularized by Graham Allison [2]. As China has met and exceeded expectations for growth on all fronts in the last decade, anxieties grew, as did the intensity of academic attention. The ascendance of Xi Jinping and the beginning of a slew of economic projects like the One Belt One Road, interpreted by many as a tool in the framework of strategic competition with the US [21], caused many to see China as increasingly expansionist. Scholars like Aaron Friedberg warned that the US is at risk of losing its preeminence in Asia by not countering China's rise with enough force, and reports by think tanks [6]³ concluded that the US needed to abandon the hope of China liberalizing and adopt a new grand strategy. Some more alarmist analysts, like Department of Defense policy adviser Michael Pillsbury, have characterized China as having a grand scheme to supplant the US as the sole global superpower [54]. There are also those who downplay the threat of a rising China through reaffirming American power [4] or emphasizing China's weaknesses and domestic challenges [22, 61].⁴

Indeed, the range of academic inquiry and conflicting viewpoints is a testament to the complexity of understanding China and its role on the global stage. Central to all these debates is how we understand intentions. In this essay, I summarize recent

³ See Blackwill, Robert D., and Ashley J. Tellis. 2015. Revising U.S. Grand Strategy Toward China. Council on Foreign Relations, Council Special Report, No. 72, March 2015. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Tellis_Blackwill.pdf.

⁴ See Shirk, Susan L. 2007. *China: Fragile Superpower: How China's Internal Politics Could Derail Its Peaceful Rise*. New York City: Oxford University Press; and Fingar, Thomas, and Oi, Jean 2020. *Fateful Decisions: Choices That Will Shape China's Future*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

positions on Chinese intentions, from both western and Chinese theorists. I then focus on the state of the field on intentions and argue that despite its centrality, there are significant problems with how scholars have defined and measured intentions to date. I present five propositions about intentions that I hope advance scholarship in this area. I conclude with some thoughts about how an operationalized treatment of intentions will serve policymakers.

How to Define Intentions

International relations theorists use many different definitions for intentions. David Edelstein defines intentions based on desired outcomes, risk preferences, and feasibility; that is, intentions are a “state’s ambitions, how it is likely to achieve those ambitions, and the costs it will bear to realize those goals [19].” Other scholars focus on how a state plans to achieve its goals, or “preferred strategies [58],” “ideas that states adopt about how best to achieve goals [44],” “actions that a state plans to take under certain circumstances [58],” or whether a state will use military force to achieve its goals [71]. Robert Jervis posits that intentions are related to resolve and the willingness of states to run risks in that they are “the actions he will take under given circumstances (or, if the circumstances are hypothetical, the actions he would take if the circumstances were to materialize) [36].”

The first proposition about a theory of intentions is that the definition requires distinction from aspirations, motives, preferences, objectives, goals, and grand strategy. Intentions consist of purposefully designing or manipulating means to achieve some end — there is “a clearer formulation and greater deliberateness.”⁵ Aspirations, by contrast, regard no plan of action to ensure its feasibility; aspirations can become intentions once a state clearly makes its achievement a priority and adopts a strategy to do so. Motives are reasons for the action, while intentions are the intended action [26]. An objective implies “something tangible and attainable in the foreseeable future.”⁶ A goal refers to “something attained only by prolonged effort and hardship.”⁷ Objectives and goals are subordinate to intentions as tactics and operations are subordinate to strategy: a country must put deliberate effort toward achieving several objectives and goals to actualize its broader intentions. Grand strategy is the “process by which the appropriate instruments of power (means) are arrayed and employed to accomplish the national interests (ends) [17].” For states that have a grand strategy, theoretically the intentions in specific key issue areas should contribute to overarching, national-level goals. States may not have a grand strategy, but still have intentions in key areas that are seen to advance a state’s interests.

⁵ The <http://merriam-webster.com> Dictionary, s.v. “objective (adj.),” accessed January 10, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/objective>.

⁶ The <http://merriam-webster.com> Dictionary, s.v. “objective (adj.),” accessed January 10, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/objective>.

⁷ The <http://merriam-webster.com> Dictionary, s.v. “goal (n.),” accessed January 10, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/goal>.

The Values “Intentions” Can Take

Second, what values do international relations scholars give to intentions, or what types of intentions can a state have? The terminology in this regard has ballooned, with little discussion of how the various conceptions overlap or contradict one another. Intentions can be.

aggressive/peaceful [58], hostile/benign [50, 58], revisionist/status quo [49], offensive/defensive, greedy/security-seeking [28], or malign/benign [29]. A state's revisionist classification — integrated, bridging, isolated, rogue — depends on its access to the existing order and the degree to which it bridges structural holes in institutional networks [29, 31]. A state's intentions can range: status quo; limited and unlimited opportunistic, in which a state favors change but does not actively seek it; and limited and unlimited expansionist, in which a state is actively planning to seek a change to the distribution of power to achieve a hegemonic position [71].

The problem with these existing conceptions of intentions is that some refer to what a state hopes to achieve, while others refer to how it plans to achieve it.⁸ For example, Xiaoyu Pu points out that China's “peaceful rise” policy resists the status quo/revisionist dichotomy, since its rise is both unlikely to result in the violent overthrow of American hegemony, and very likely to alter the international balance of power [56]. Chan, Hu, and He accept the status quo/revisionist dichotomy, but argue that automatically associating a rising power with revisionism ignores the status quo supportive actions in which China engages [9]. Thus, the second proposition is that a theory of intentions requires analytically separating ends from means, but including both in the concept — process intentions and outcome intentions.

Process intentions are defined by the preferred methods and the factors that influence how a country thinks it is best to achieve its goals. This part of the variable includes four factors: time horizons, degree of military force used versus other methods, efficiency, and degree of involvement of and reliance on other countries or institutions. Time horizon refers to when a country hopes to actualize its intentions; it is greatly determined by its discount factor, or the extent to which the future cost-benefit ratio must be better than that today for a state to be willing to delay the realization of its intention.⁹ Efficiency refers to the balance of costs and benefits of a particular strategy; it is influenced by national ideas about best practices in achieving its

⁸ For example, Goddard's work assumes revisionist then defines revisionist intentions based on the process through which a country tries to achieve its revisionist goals. Some measurement schemes include both, such as Yarhi-Milo's concept. One exception is Robert Jervis, who defines intentions based solely on process, referring to them as preferred strategies, “about how states plan to realize their goals, whereas interest, motives, and preferences answer the question of what those goals are.”

⁹ David Edelstein measures this in terms of short- and long-term horizons. Leaders with short time horizons are focused on the immediate future in a general state of affairs that they do not expect to change dramatically. Leaders with long time horizons are more focused on a world that emerges after some predictable, but not necessarily certain, transformation of the underlying structure within which they operate. See Edelstein, David. 2017. *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press: 5.

foreign-policy goals — to be competitive, successful states will try to achieve their goals at the lowest political, military, economic, and reputational cost possible.¹⁰ This calculation depends largely on how other states respond — that is, whether they provide positive inducements or punishment for particular courses of action.¹¹

Outcome intentions refer to “what one wants to bring about, accomplish or attain.”¹² This variable includes three factors: ranking of preferable outcomes, likelihood of success (feasibility), and risk preferences. States may change the ranking of their outcome intentions or revise them based on what is considered possible — an aspiration for one leader may become an intention for another if the strategic environment changes to become more conducive to the realizing of that intention. Or, when current approaches “produce bad results, new ‘replacement ideas’ might alter the state’s intentions if these ideas offer a ‘feasible alternative world view [44].’”

In most cases, the greatest uncertainty in analyzing outcome intentions concerns the risks a country is willing to take to achieve the outcome. In the security realm, risk preferences are innately related to resolve — what price is a country willing to pay to achieve a specific intention? If another actor substantially increases the risks or costs associated with a particular intention, a state may abandon it in favor of a related but more limited goal. Risk preferences associated with outcome intentions greatly determine the degree of risk associated with a rising power. For example, Charlie Glaser argues that “greedy” states are willing to accept risk for non-security expansion, while “non-greedy” states are not [26]. On the other hand, if orthodoxy and status quo policies produce benefits for a state, it is less likely that it will accept the risk of trying to remake the system [44]. Either way, a state may be less risk-averse when it is trying to gain something new than when it is trying to prevent losses [65].

The distinction between process intentions and outcome intentions is important because a country may have revisionist outcome intentions but pursue those goals within the confines of acceptable international behavior. For example, a country may want to change the territorial status quo but do so peacefully — like China’s peaceful reunification policy with Taiwan — or through legitimate international means, like Kosovo declaring independence: the Assembly of Kosovo voted to declare independence from Serbia in 2008, an act which was legitimized by the 2010 International Criminal Court’s ruling that it was a legal secession [32, 63].

An area where this distinction is useful in studying Chinese behavior is in international institutions. Once a diplomatically isolated country, China had, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, joined fifty international governmental

¹⁰ National ideas about best practices in achieving foreign-policy objectives do three things, according to Jeff Legro: “they empower certain domestic interests’ groups over others, they generate expectations against which performance is assessed, and they either facilitate or impede the possibility for a new strategy to emerge.” Legro, Jeffrey. 2007. What China Will Want: The Future Intentions of a Rising Power. *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 3: 516.

¹¹ States may avoid trying to alter others’ intentions through cooperation and inducement because it can create serious risks. See Edelman, David. 2002. Managing uncertainty: Beliefs about intentions and the rise of great powers. *Security Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1: 1–40.

¹² The <http://merriam-webster.com> Dictionary, s.v. “intention (n.),” accessed January 10, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intention>.

organizations and 1275 international non-governmental organizations [40]. That was seen as evidence of China's contentment with the status quo, as though countries never try to promote their own interests through institutions. In any case, China's attempts to coopt institutions for its own purposes suggest problematic outcome intentions — undermining preferred US norms and replacing them with Chinese ones [12].

But China's attempts to gain agenda-setting power through greater leadership roles is exactly why institutions influence outcomes. For example, China is now the highest contributor to UN peacekeeping missions of the Permanent Five (tenth overall). Beijing is in a strong position to lobby for approval of peacekeeping operations (PKOs) in areas where China's economic equities and citizens are concentrated and then deploy PLA personnel there under an umbrella of UN legitimacy [48]. In South Sudan, where China has agreed to acquire one-sixth of the country's oil output in return for infrastructure loans, China lobbied successfully for oil facilities to be included in the UNMISS mandate (over the objections of local opposition forces) [23, 55]. China initially tried to get its PLA troops assigned to protect the oil fields, but in the end they were sent to Juba, where they were needed more.

Another example is China's attempt to gain control over institutions through leadership positions. Beijing lobbied successfully for the Interpol presidency, for example, which former vice minister for public security Meng Hongwei assumed in 2016 [13]. During his tenure, the agency was more focused on arresting dissidents and corrupt officials, and China managed to sign extradition treaties with Italy, Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, Hungary, and France. Although Meng's presidency was cut short after his disappearance and subsequent corruption allegations, China once again gained considerable influence in Interpol with the 2021 election of Hu Binchen — the deputy director-general of the Chinese public security ministry's international coordination department — to the executive committee [46].

To square the circle, some scholars argue that China is a "revisionist" power, not a "revolutionary" power [57]. According to this view, China seeks to increase its influence, adjust rules in its favor, and change aspects of the order that it views as undermining its interests — rather than seeking to upend the system entirely. Others similarly describe Chinese revisionism as "soft revisionism," seeking a more peaceful redistribution [33]. Chinese scholars claim that China is "offering its own ideas and initiatives to improve the international order system," without overthrowing it. At the same time, however, they assert that the idea of a single liberal international order is mythical. Scholars such as Yan Xuetong claim that Beijing's objective is for international norms to rest on a truly inclusive multilateralism [70]. I would agree with that assessment but note for conceptual clarity that China has revisionist outcome intentions, not process intentions, with respect to international institutions; countries are revolutionary powers when they have both.

Measuring Intentions

The third proposition addresses the measurement issue. The values the variable has taken and how it has been measured have largely been subjective, under-specified, and contain inherent judgments that may not be objectively accurate. Are US attempts to maintain hegemony benign or malign? The US believes they are benign, but China believes them to be malign because the structural shifts in China's favor mean the US's attempts to reverse trends target China. In other words, if the desired change is "good" is it revisionist and destabilizing? How do we understand the intentions of countries that work toward a more equitable system of power? Is China's Air Defense Identification Zone defensive or offensive? Is the move to set up the Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank (AIIB) — an international financial institution proposed by China intended to provide finance to infrastructure projects in the Asian region — revisionist or status quo [34]? It is revisionist in that it is a new institution, but status quo in that China chose to work within an institutionalized framework to exercise its power. Where does coercive diplomacy fall in the dichotomy between peaceful and aggressive intentions?

In other words, existing measurements of intentions can seem randomly applied and uninformative in explaining what a country is doing and how others should respond. In its application, scholars often see revisionist intentions as bad and status quo intentions as good. But the US was revisionist after WWII: it set up the network of international institutions that make up the current international system. And now China is leveraging those institutions for its benefit, an approach which many label revisionist even though they were designed to shape how states exercise power. Thus, China can support the international system and simultaneously be aggressive or revisionist [19].

China sees its intentions as defensive [52], in particular regarding disputed territories in which it proactively defends its claims and protects itself from foreign interference. Chinese leaders publicly state that “China will never seek hegemony and never go in for expansion.” Further, Chinese leaders “claim that they do not seek to seize, invade, or conquer the territories of other countries ... and argue that past uses of force and territorial disputes have been limited, punitive, and the result of external provocations.” But its behavior is changing facts on the ground — for example, in the South China Sea. So can a country be defensive and revisionist [52]?

It is more accurate, then, to assess whether intentions are detrimental or beneficial for specific actors. Chinese intentions to control more of the South China Sea, for example, is detrimental to US interests, even if China pursues those interests without using force. While detrimental to the US, China's challenge of US naval dominance in East Asia may be seen as a positive development by other countries. The US insists that freedom of navigation of military vessels is a universally established and accepted practice enshrined in international law, but not all countries accept that interpretation. Argentina, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, the Maldives, Oman, and Vietnam argue that warships have no automatic right of innocent passage in their territorial seas. Twenty other developing countries insist that military activities such as close-in surveillance and reconnaissance by a country

in another country's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) infringe on a coastal state's security interests and therefore are not protected under freedom of navigation.

Unsurprisingly, most Chinese scholars focus on this measurement issue when pushing back on western conceptions of intentions. They claim that the US, with its violations of countries' sovereignty, exorbitant military spending, frequent use of threats and force, and undermining of preexisting agreements (like abandoning the Iran nuclear deal), is the more revisionist state [10]. Wei Zongyu, a professor at Fudan University, uses similar metrics, stating that four characteristics define a revisionist power: 1) an increase in military spending, 2) a tendency to use coercion or military force to solve problems, 3) the disregarding or violation of international rules, and 4) a lack of participation in and recognition of important international institutions [68]. While he does not explicitly claim the US is revisionist, he states that "if a state fails to satisfy any of these criteria, it would be difficult to label it as a status quo power [68]." A professor at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Tang Xiaosong, believes that existing hegemony like the US also engage in threatening and coercive behavior and seek continued power accumulation. Tang lists several measures to prove that China does not "harbor different or opposite opinions to the international community" and thus does not have revisionist intentions — like the fact that, compared to the US, China has used its Security Council veto powers fewer times, has signed and ratified more international human rights conventions, and spends less on defense [62]. More recently, the Trump administration stimulated another boom of Chinese studies that hold that China is actually the defender of the existing international order while the US is the real revisionist state [3, 10, 11, 67].

States Have Multiple Intentions

Another problem with measurement: many scholars try to box all of a country's intentions into one category, leading to muddled assessments. For example, Jeff Legro argues that China is a status quo power, except for Taiwan, its position on US hegemony, and its response to pressure to democratize [44]. David Edelstein argues that China may cooperate with the international community in the short term, even if it has long-term revisionist intentions [19]. Alastair Iain Johnston claims China has become more assertive only on some specific issues, like the South China Sea and East China Sea, and that these issues do not represent a larger shift in Chinese attitudes [38].

These examples illustrate the fourth proposition: intentions can vary by issue area — and thus it is empirically problematic to analyze one variable describing everything a state wants. Sebastian Rosato alludes to this problem when he argues that states "can have intentions regarding any sphere of activity, including security, economic, and humanitarian affairs," yet, "in the case of great power politics, however, analysts are concerned with states' decisions to procure arms, form alliances, or make agreements [58]." I argue, however, that a state's intentions can vary even within these spheres of activity, such as security, and in many cases, the issue cannot be dissected cleanly into economic or security, like One Belt, One Road.

Understanding that intentions may vary also means that analysts should not generalize from one issue area to another. Johnston provides these two examples: while China was aggressive toward Taiwan in the 2000s, few would say this behavior represented China's approach to international institutions, major bilateral and multilateral relations, or international norms at the time. Additionally, we should not take "the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq [as] reflect[ing] the emergence of a wholly 'revisionist' and unilateralist United States [38]."

While I agree with the sentiment, for a country's security and interests, some issue areas are more important than others. China may not be revisionist in any other areas besides sovereignty and the US's role in Asia — but these are also the most important issue areas for the US, and thus claiming China is mostly a status quo power is not reassuring. The research on intentions reveals several issue areas in which scholars and decision-makers alike more heavily weigh the impact of Chinese intentions. Specifically, experts concern themselves with Chinese intentions toward international institutions, including economic and technology regimes [29, 44]; desire for regional or global hegemony (also presented as its position on the role of the US and whether its military has global ambitions); influence over other countries' domestic politics in a way that makes the world more autocratic; and sovereignty, in particular, the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Taiwan.

Uncertainty Does Not Make Intentions Completely Unknowable

The fifth proposition addresses a debate in the literature about uncertainty and intentions. There is widespread agreement that intentions can never be known with 100% certainty, but disagreement over how much certainty can ever be gained. Offensive realists like John Mearsheimer argue that states can never truly know others' intentions [51]; Sebastian Rosato goes one step further to say they are unknowable. Either way, offensive realism posits that states respond to uncertainty about intentions by maximizing power — in practice, then, we can be completely certain at the very least about their process intentions [51]. Defensive realists say uncertainty about whether a state plans to use military force to fulfill its intentions can be overcome if offensive and defensive weapons are distinguishable and the offense-defense balance favors defense [30]. Rationalists argue that structural realists of both camps "underestimate the ability of states to form reasonable beliefs about each other's intentions [43]," and that under certain conditions states can communicate intentions through costly signals on both military and nonmilitary matters. Alexander Wendt, of the constructivist tradition, finds that even though states never know another's intentions with 100% certainty, through repeated interactions states "can often assign reasonably confident probabilities to inferences about what others want [69]."

To add to the complications, intentions can change. Structural realists say the possibility of peaceful intentions changing creates uncertainty [15]. Increases in material capabilities might drive expansionist intentions [50]. Liberal institutionalists and constructivists point to other factors that can shape intentions besides the balance of power. Liberals say democratic governance, economic interdependence through international trade, and membership in international institutions are forces

that can shape intentions. Constructivists argue that international institutions socialize states to shared norms [59].

The existing research motivates the fifth proposition about a theory of intentions: current intentions are knowable to a great degree. Future intentions are less knowable, as states have yet to formulate them — but how the pursuit of current intentions unfolds largely shapes future intentions.¹³ Because states have a deliberate plan in place in pursuit of specific objectives, theoretically states can decipher current intentions. They may still be a degree of uncertainty, but available information can considerably reduce the possibilities and establish where the uncertainty lies, providing context for decision-makers. Moreover, there may be process intentions or outcome intentions currently creating an unfavorable strategic environment that requires a response, regardless of how those intentions may evolve in the future.¹⁴

Knowing current intentions also provides information about future intentions. First, current intentions may be the same as future intentions. Bureaucratic and political inertia make continuity the norm [44]. Moreover, rising powers most likely have accounted for projections of future power when devising current outcome intentions and phasing process intentions. If a rising power does change its intentions, the direction and nature of change will be based on which aspect of current intentions produced results, negative consequences, and whether there are socially and politically viable alternatives [44]. Regardless, policymakers are in a better position to note a change in intentions if there is a clearer starting point in the identification of current intentions. For example, if a rising power fulfills its current intentions, particular attention should be given to a subsequent internal reassessment of the next phase of outcome intentions.

Conclusion

The current treatment of intentions in international relations is not granular enough to allow for a deeper understanding of what China wants, how it plans to achieve it, and what the implications will be for the US and the US-led world order. Scholars need to differentiate between what China wants (outcome intentions) and how it plans to achieve those goals (process intentions). Future studies need to move away from blanket categorizations to allow intentions to vary across and within issue areas, and they need to recognize that what types of behavior are “good” or “bad” are often in the eye of the beholder. Taking these steps will allow for more granular detail in not only China's prioritization of its objectives.

Beyond adhering to the five propositions listed in the review, these issues bring up the main recommendation: the study of China must be deeply data-driven. The

¹³ Sebastian Rosato defines these as follows: current intentions about “a state's present plan of action; future intentions are “the plans it will have after it rethinks its present plans.” Rosato, Sebastian. 2014. The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers. *Quarterly Journal: International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 3: 53.

¹⁴ This is in contrast to Sebastian Rosato's view those observable indicators allow for marginal reductions in uncertainty about intentions at best. Rosato, Sebastian. 2014. The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers. *Quarterly Journal: International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 3: 51.

first stop along that route are authoritative Chinese sources — and making these sources more widely available. There are some new initiatives that are making inroads in this area, such as CSIS’s Interpret China. But unlike quantitative scholars that make their datasets publicly available, China specialists hoard their Chinese language collections. This hoarding makes it difficult to evaluate each other’s work, but also creates redundancies in our efforts to understand such a complex, opaque, and closed-off country. Second, simplified views of revisionism have led some to stop at the surface of Chinese behavior and activities. For example, books and articles all refer to the same cases to say China is trying to coopt international institutions — its leadership roles in the UN and in Interpol, its attempts to change human rights norms through the UN Human Rights Commission, or its setting standards in the International Telecommunication Union. But there are almost two hundred international institutions — what is China doing in the rest of them? All too often scholars and think tanks stop at the newsworthy examples instead of painting a comprehensive picture of how China is building and exercising power.

Considering intentions more deeply is also important because policymakers are taking their cues about China’s intentions from scholars. Both the Trump administration’s National Security Strategy and the Biden administration’s Interim National Security Guidance call China revisionist [5, 64].¹⁵ In 2018, Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner, now both top-level Biden officials, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* of the myths that created poor policy in the 1990s and 2000s — that China would liberalize, be constrained by international institutions, and be deterred by US military might.

But the view that China is revisionist/bad and the US is status quo/good risks creating a new series of assumptions that hamper good policy. To name a few: 1) countries benefit from US leadership, so if Washington is willing to lead, China does not stand a chance; 2) coordination with US allies and partners is enough to counter China; 3) countries agree that the US is a better partner than China [18]. But the world is 80% developing countries, minority democratic regimes, and as Chinese scholars point out, the US does not have a perfect track record of abiding by international rules and norms. The narrative that China is a dangerous revisionist power may not motivate many states to take the actions the US sees to its benefit. Instead, the US should focus on competing with China by issue area and not only focus on what China is doing (and how to undermine its effectiveness) but also think innovatively about how Washington can win over partners and build new types of power itself. The bottom line is that great power competition is not about US-China relations, but rather the relationship these two countries have with the rest of the

¹⁵ “A central continuity in history is the contest for power. The present is no different. Three main sets of challengers—the revisionist powers of China and Russia, the rogue states of Iran and North Korea, and transnational threat organizations, particularly jihadist terrorist groups—are actively competing against the United States and our allies and partners.” See Trump, Donald J. 2017. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, D.C.: The White House. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>. The Biden administration never uses the word “revisionist”; instead, it calls China “more assertive” or “increasingly assertive” (three times). See Biden, Joseph R. 2021. *Interim National Security Strategy Guidance*. Washington, D.C.: The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

world. The initial conceptual framework provided in this review essay, then, is an important launching pad from which policymakers can further answer these important questions.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author has no conflicts of interest associated with this research.

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