

International Relations theorists constantly argue on which theory is most relevant to the current international landscape, the most ardent debate being between followers of the two main theories, realism and liberalism. I would argue that the English School theory is most relevant and versatile in the perreniously changing international political climate; it advances a broadly liberal agenda whilst remaining cognizant of realist realities such as the international states system (*Daddow, 2017, 116*).The distinctive elements of the English school are its methodological pluralism, its focus on historicism, and its interlinking of three key concepts: international system, international society and world society (*Buzan, 2001, 471*). The greatest debate within English School scholars is between the pluralist and the solidarist view, which I will further explain throughout this essay. Its complex nature is what leads me to believe that it would be pertinent to today's dynamic global political landscape. One of the most relevant events in international relations at the moment is China's great increase in power, both military and economic, which challenges the status quo of American hegemony to which we have become accustomed over 50 years. It is reshaping the international political climate and balance of power. This essay wil thus look at both pluralist and solidarist English School theory through the lens of China's political rise and assess its applicability, proving that it is in fact relevant to events in contemporary world politics.

The English School is most known for its tripartite distincton amongst the three concepts of international society, international system and world society, with its focus being on the first of the three (*Little, 1995, 11*). This methodological pluralism makes it distinctive among other theories, as it advances three competing paradigms and takes all into account in analysis. The international society concept is focused on identity among states, a concept that emphasizes that states can create order even in an anarchic athmosphere through rules, norms

and institutions (*Bull, 1979*). The international system maintains its realist definition, focusing on power politics and international anarchy, while the world society is more reliant on normative political theory, with individuals, non-state organizations and ultimately the global population as a whole as the focus of global societal identities and arrangements (*Buzan, 2001, 475*). This essay will concentrate on China in relation to the international society, as this concept is most representative of the theory. The international society underpins that states may form structures such as organizations and communities within the framework of rules, and the English School is particularly interested in the genesis and progress of institutions in international relations and the role of rules, institutions being defined as long-term practices between states that allow for the development of set norms and principles (*Linklater and Suganami, 2006, 43-80*). Some aspects of the English School theory can be vague and redundant though, i.e. its focus on historicism, which I find to be an obvious and necessary condition that any International Relations theory should display. This essay will not cover the broader issue of historicism, as it is self evident and assumed that every event should be contextualized within the international dynamics of its historical period. It will however focus on the divide within the English School between pluralists and solidarists, which is the most ardent debate and contested argument of the English School theory. Pluralists suppose that sovereignty implies the cultivation of political differences within the international society, while solidarists embrace the sharing of rules and cultural norms between states of the system, making them less applicable to regional relations outside of the political West (*Ba, 2014, 123*). Solidarists also focus on the universality of human rights, democracy, and personal liberties, which will be an issue when looking at China as part of the international society (*Zhang, 2011, 780*). It is not easy for the English School, or for the other Western IR theories to escape ethnocentrism or cultural bias in their perceptions

of non-Western countries (*Zhang, 2011, 784*), which is why China's rise is a pertinent case study in assessing its wider applicability to today's world politics.

China's rise is, perhaps, the single most important economic and political phenomenon of the twenty-first century. It has implications for global security, for international development, for global governance, and for human rights, among other things (*Grosse et al., 2021, 4*). China has a twin identity as a great power and a developing country. The second largest economy in the world with citizens of relatively low income. The second largest military budget but no overseas bases and limited power projection capability. China's paradoxical elements generate contrary expectations globally and domestically (*Foot, 2013, 6*). The discrepancies between China's domestic and external audiences strongly influence its policymaking, making it difficult to respond to international pressures in a way that would be construed as entirely appropriate by the West (*Foot, 2013, 151*). Due to domestic pressures, China is reluctant to take on international responsibilities unrelated to its own domestic goals, thus being criticized by the West for not contributing more to global governance. Its authoritarian regime and issues regarding human rights are also points of concern for the West, as they are seen as clear transgressions from the norms that they have deemed applicable to the international society. China's presence in institutions like the UN Human Rights Council has thus been considered as discrediting and out of place by solidarist English School scholars (*Dunne, 2007, 283*). China's leadership has an evident desire to be perceived by others as a peaceful non-treathtaking country and a responsible great power, as it is involved in United Nations Peacekeeping, it signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and accepted of the UN charter as an authoritative text (*Foot and Walter, 2011, 291*). China's concerns about its international image have prompted it to abide by many of the international rules and norms, accepting that the UN is

not a competitor for great power, but the institutional framework that it should draw on, especially as a matter of legal principle regarding the use of force (*Sterling-Folker, 2006, 320*). Even though the West is currently dominating the creation of international norms, Beijing expects the existing international order to evolve, ambiguously suggesting “new type of major power relations”, thus focusing on protecting the elements of international society which are most useful to itself, such as the United Nations Security Council (*Goh, 2019, 625*). In pursuit of defining an international discourse that excludes the West, it has also initiated the creation of organizations that bring together non-Western powers, most notably BRICS. China puts itself forward as a voice for the developing world which has continuously had its rights denied by Western colonialism, seeing the Western concern with human rights not focused on increasing justice but rather on hindering the redistribution of power and wealth between states, and thus an intentional obstacle in its rise to power (*Foot et al., 2009, 226*).

China’s economic success of the last decades is based on the Communist Party of China abandoning central planning and introducing capitalism instead. This has led to China’s increasingly confident behaviour on the international level, at least militarily: its disputation of the border lines in the Himalaya, its increasingly visible armed presence in the South China Sea, its avowed priority to fully incorporate Hong Kong and Taiwan to the communist regime, all of these actions can be considered as unabiding by the Western values of the international society it has joined (*Roland, 2021, 2*). Looking at the pluralist view of the English School, China could be considered part of the international society, as it is a member of most international organizations and abides by its laws and rules, while still maintaining its national identity and cultural norms on a domestic level. Solidarists, however, could argue that its creation of regionally focused organizations that exclude the West, such

as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and its Belt and Road Initiative, are clear indicators of the fact that China is not looking to be a part of the existing international society, but rather to increase its economic power to the point of being able to maleate it to fit its own conceptions of what international regulations should entail. The biggest concern to Western institutions however is its competition with the US on international economic and military influence. China has, however, most actively contested the US-led hegemonic order in the institutional domain, which solidifies its efforts to reassure neighbors about its peaceful rise. Initially, China leveraged the ASEAN Regional Forum's multilateral institutional setting to censure American alliances in Asia, stigmatizing them as reflecting an outdated Cold War mentality and thus pushing multipolarity as an alternative to hegemony (*Goh, 2017, 631*). China's challenge to American leadership is on one side excessive, due to the fact that it has profited so much from the current hegemonic order and owes much of its economic success to the US, but on the other side insufficient, if its end goal is to in fact dispute Western primacy and change the current balance of power (*Goh, 2017, 617*). China seems to be tentatively laying the groundwork to becoming the new hegemon, but is still acting tentatively and focusing on its domestic goals. Until its regional issues are resolved, i.e. Taiwan, South China Sea, et al., China is unlikely to directly challenge the American-led status quo any further. However, US' involvement in Asia's regional politics is still a great issue to China, and one that it hasn't been able to move past using the institutional setting. US' perception of an international intervientionist society clashes with China's domestic views of non-interventionism, China seeing the continuous American presence in its vecinity as hostile and threatening (*Xiang, 2014, 11*).

Having shown these aspects of China's rise, the case for the pluralist view strenghtens, while the one for the solidarist case is being invalidated. China's inclusion in the

vast majority of international society organisms, even in those that it doesn't necessarily do justice to (i.e. UN HRC), proves that it is part of the international society. Still, as demonstrated above, China strongly maintains its internal views and norms and does not compromise more than it absolutely has to in its interactions with Western organisms. Such a situation would not be possible in the international society as defined by solidarists, as any transgression from Western rules would immediately exclude China. Having looked at China's involvement in international organisms, economic and military expansion, and its dispute with the US, China definitely is a member of international society in the pluralist view, albeit not the most involved or the most peaceful. In terms of further research on the subject, it would be useful to analyze the way Chinese foreign investment in emerging third world economies competes with that offered by the US, and apply the English School lens when discerning if that contributes to or hinders from its compliance to international society norms. An aspect that should've been discussed in more depth is China's creation of regionally focused economic structures (i.e. Belt and Road Initiative), however the word count did not allow for deeper analysis.

In conclusion, the pluralist side of the English School makes it a valid and applicable theory regarding China's contemporary rise, whereas the solidarist side can be easily invalidated by China's flourishing presence in the international society. Although a solidarist case could be made in order to define China as not fully integrated in international society, the pluralist view of the English School provides the perfect lens to accurately explain how China is able to have such influence in the context Western-led and -created institutions. If a pluralist model of English School theory weren't available for the analysis of contemporary world politics, mainstream IR theory would either focus on China's desire for great power (realism) or China's altruistic involvement in international institutions and globalisation

(liberalism). English School theory has proven that its position as a middleground is most helpful in reconciling the two points of view and creating a substantive analytical perspective that moderates China's domestic ambitions through its adherence to most of the rules that the international society has put forth.

Bibliography

Ba, A.D. (2014). Outside-in and inside-out: political ideology, the English School and East Asia. *Contesting International Society in East Asia*, pp.119–143. doi:10.1017/cbo9781139939447.007.

Bull, H. (1979). *The anarchial society : a study of order in world politics*. London: Macmillan Press.

Buzan, B. (2001). The English School: An Underexploited Resource in IR. *Review of International Studies*, [online] 27(3), pp.471–488. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20097749>.

Daddow, O.J. (2017). *International relations theory : the essentials*. Los Angeles ; London ; New Delhi Etc.: Sage.

Dunne, T. (2007). ‘The Rules of the Game are Changing’: Fundamental Human Rights in Crisis After 9/11. *International Politics*, 44(2-3), pp.269–286. doi:10.1057/palgrave.ip.8800188.

Foot, R. (2013). *China Across the Divide: The Domestic and Global in Politics and Society*. Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199919864.001.0001.

Foot, R., Gaddis, J.L. and Hurrell, A. (2009). *Order and justice in international relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Foot, R. and Walter, A. (2011). *China, the United States, and Global Order*. Cambridge University Press.

Goh, E. (2019). Contesting Hegemonic Order: China in East Asia. *Security Studies*, 28(3), pp.614–644. doi:10.1080/09636412.2019.1604989.

Grosse, R., Gamso, J. and Nelson, R.C. (2021). China’s Rise, World Order, and the Implications for International Business. *Management International Review*, 61. doi:10.1007/s11575-020-00433-8.

Linklater, A. and Suganami, H. (2006). *The English School of International Relations: A Contemporary Reassessment*. 1st ed. Cambridge University Press.

Little, R. (1995). Neorealism and the English School: *European Journal of International Relations*, [online] 1(1), pp.9–34. doi:10.1177/1354066195001001002.

Roland, G. (2021). China's rise and its implications for International Relations and Northeast Asia. *Asia and the Global Economy*, 1(2), pp.1–9. doi:10.1016/j.aglobe.2021.100016.

Sterling-Folker, J. (2006). *Making sense of international relations theory*. Boulder, Colo. ; London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Xiang, L. (2014). *The Sino-American security dilemma in Asia: a Chinese perspective*. [online] JSTOR. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep22263.5> [Accessed 8 Oct. 2022].

Zhang, X. (2011). China in the conception of international society: the English School's engagements with China. *Review of International Studies*, [online] 37(2), pp.763–786. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23024619> [Accessed 17 May 2020].