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**Publication Date**

2025-03-21

Peer reviewed

■ **IGCC ESSAY**

# East and West in International Relations Theory

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March 2025

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### Suggested Citation

Lake, David A. 2025. *East and West in International Relations Theory*. IGCC Essay. [escholarship.org/uc/item/02z6c30v](https://escholarship.org/uc/item/02z6c30v)

In light of the growing geopolitical competition between the United States and China, scholars on both sides of the Pacific are engaged in efforts to theorize the relationship between the two superpowers and articulate their differences. Western international relations (IR) theory has long been hegemonic and, frankly, has not changed much when applied to the rise of China. In the most simple “realist” version of [Western theory](#), one could easily replace Athens and Sparta, Britain and Germany, and the United States and Soviet Union with the United States and China—and nothing much would change.<sup>1</sup> It is axiomatic that great powers struggle for power and competition is inevitable. The United States should prepare for a Cold War, and maybe worse. This view has certainly taken hold in policy circles in the United States, with the Trump-Biden-Trump administrations plunging into a new Cold War with Beijing.

In my visits to China, I have found Chinese academics as well read in the canons of Western IR theory as any U.S. graduate student. In the last several decades, there have been new efforts to develop a Chinese school of IR as an alternative to Western theory. It is only recently that these efforts have begun to receive attention in Western academia with the publication of major works in English (principally Yan 2011; 2019; Qin 2018) and the rise of English-language peer-reviewed Chinese journals like the [Chinese Journal of International Politics](#).<sup>2</sup>

It’s time to start taking the Chinese school seriously and it has important implications for how we think about great power competition.

Western IR theory—that is, scholarly works produced in English by academics in North America and Europe—is very heterogeneous; divided by paradigm, levels of analysis, and methods. Chinese IR theory also contains many competing strains, and there is little reason to expect it to be more homogenous than its Western counterpart. As an introduction to the literature, there are now a couple of very good review essays available to Western readers (see Choi 2023; Xiong, Peterson, and Braumoeller 2024). At the risk of essentializing differences and creating a binary where multiple continua exist, there does appear to be a deep philosophical difference about human nature and society in Western and Chinese IR theory that has not been brought to the fore. This difference is worth highlighting both for scholars and policymakers.

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<sup>1</sup> For particularly clear examples, see Mearsheimer (2001) and Allison (2017).

<sup>2</sup> Full disclosure: I have published two articles and serve on the editorial board of CJIP.

## Western IR Theory: Self-Interest and Mediating Institutions

Western IR begins from Enlightenment thought in which humans are understood as venal and opportunistic egoists.<sup>3</sup> Individuals are self-interested and cunning. In some conditions, as in purely competitive economic markets, self-interest can produce socially optimal outcomes. Foundational to Enlightenment philosophy and a classic example of self-interest producing beneficial outcomes is Adam Smith's "invisible hand" (Smith 1994). In the pursuit of profit, competition between many small producers drives excess profits to zero and provides consumers with desired goods at the lowest sustainable prices. Similarly, under some (fairly strict) conditions, competition between political candidates will yield policies desired by the median voter, maximizing satisfaction for society as a whole and support for the government. But in other circumstances, self-interest creates market failures through collective action problems, overexploitation of common-pool resources, moral hazard, and a dozen other problems identified by economists and political scientists.<sup>4</sup> Exhausting fisheries by overexploitation and climate change driven by countries emitting too much carbon are tragic but clear examples.

Most important in Enlightenment thought, however, is that concentrations of economic or political power are understood as dangerous and to be safeguarded against through institutions. Since humans are self-interested, they will attempt to bend market or political power in their favor. This avarice must be constrained, it follows, by institutions that diffuse power. As but one example, the U.S. Constitution, written at the height of the Enlightenment, was intentionally designed to divide power between the federal and state governments and in the former between the legislature (itself divided into two houses), the executive, and the judiciary. As James Madison wrote in *Federalist No. 51*, "ambition must be made to counteract ambition." Power was diffused by design.

In similar ways, an international balance of power, whether similar to a competitive market (Waltz 1979) or an institution (Kaplan 1957), is understood as a mechanism for preventing domination by any one country. Likewise, multilateralism is a basic tenet of Western-created international institutions. By giving voice to members, multilateralism disperses power—even if formal votes are unequal. This is part of the "liberal" vision for world politics (Ikenberry 2020). In all, individuals—and collectives of individuals—cannot be trusted and must be checked and balanced by other individuals (and collectives) within institutions that fragment power. Deeply suspicious of any who will act in their

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<sup>3</sup> Enlightenment philosophy is itself rooted in Judeo-Christian, Greek, and Roman philosophies. I credit Enlightenment thought here as it emphasizes the diffusion of power central to Western political theory.

<sup>4</sup> These "political market" failures and institutional-legal solutions are usefully discussed in Wittman (2006).

self-interest, it follows that both society and especially its leaders must be governed by the rule of law.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States suddenly found itself thrust into the historically anomalous position of unipolarity, becoming a sole superpower without the constraints of a peer competitor or balancing coalition. This provoked two broad responses from Western IR theorists. On the one hand, “realists” argued unipolarity could not last precisely because a balance of power would naturally return, much as nature abhors a vacuum (Layne 2006), or because the United States would be unable to resist the messianic urge to remake the world in its liberal image, which would provoke a nationalist backlash (Mearsheimer 2018). On the other hand, “liberals” predicted that checked and balanced at home and embedded in multilateral institutions abroad, the United States would finally be able realize the international order envisioned by President Woodrow Wilson (Ikenberry 2020). By providing peace and prosperity, the leadership of the United States would be legitimated and accepted by others, similar to what happened in Western Europe and Japan after World War II.

This debate over theory was still raging when President Donald Trump was reelected on a rising tide of populist nationalism. A unilateralist who sees little value in alliances, and a sovereigntist who wants to free his administration and perhaps the country from the fetters of multilateralism, Trump aims to blow apart the constraints imposed on the United States by what remains of the liberal international order. The nationalist backlash predicted by the realists has arisen from within rather than without, with Europe still trying to make sense of the second Trump administration and the United States that reelected him. Whether the “new Wilsonianism” anticipated by the liberals might have succeeded has been rendered moot by Trump’s renewed “America First” agenda. We are now in a world in which hard power and unilateral advantage appear to reign supreme, witnessed most clearly in Trump’s threats and use of tariffs to extract concessions from other countries.

## Chinese IR Theory: Moral Leadership and Hierarchy

By contrast, Chinese IR theory is grounded in Confucian thought, an older tradition and, at least to Western thinkers, a more complex approach.<sup>5</sup> Here, the basic unit of analysis is the relationship between two or more people governed by a paternalistic leader, or, in the case of a country, a society governed by a benevolent emperor. If the perfectly competitive market or balance of power is the key metaphor for Western IR, the family

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<sup>5</sup> Confucian thought has not been static. Just as Enlightenment thought has long roots, Confucian philosophy has been amended and reinterpreted over time.

as a hierarchical unit lead by a father or elder is the point of departure for Chinese IR (Qin 2018). The glue that holds society together for both ruler and followers, in turn, is shared cultural values and social norms.<sup>6</sup> Authority follows from ethical power and the Mandate of Heaven, which can be understood as virtue. In this view, moral leaders guide relationships to produce mutual benefits for all. The success of the relationship legitimates leaders and reinforces the hierarchy.

Recognizing that not all leaders will be naturally moral, it is assumed that virtue can be learned, and it is the duty of society and especially a Mandarin class to instill morals in the leader (Yan 2011). Social solidarity is achieved not by legal constraint, as in the West, but by moral suasion—the key mechanism of politics. In this tradition, the ideal political system is hierarchical with a strong moral or virtuous leader at the top. It is a vision of concentrated but moral power that is very different than the egoism and required diffusion of power central to Western theory.

Seen through the lens of Chinese history, social and political hierarchy, a system led by a moral ruler is the natural and ideal state of stable political systems. This concept extends to the idea of Chinese empire—a hierarchy is needed to prevent competition between states leading to war and human suffering. Where Western theory aspires to checks and balances, Chinese thought seeks virtuous rulers who can rule at home and abroad.

Following from this view of politics, Chinese theory makes a critical distinction between hierarchy and hegemony—strange to Western and especially American ears—in which the former is good and the latter is bad. For Western IR, especially liberals, hegemony can be benevolent if appropriately bound by checks and balances. Hegemony can facilitate cooperation and, through the benefits it provides, become institutionalized (Keohane 1984). In Chinese thought, while hierarchy is desirable, hegemony is to be resisted as it implies rule by an *immoral* leader who does not act in the interests of the community—an accusation frequently directed at the United States. Both hierarchy and hegemony have the same power structure but carry very different meanings depending on the nature and virtue of the leader.

In China's view, the United States is a hegemonic state operating in immoral ways, especially after the Cold War under the condition of unipolarity. By championing democracy and human rights, it unjustly interferes with China's sovereign rights to choose its own regime. By adopting more protectionist policies that restrict China's exports and mercantilist policies that prohibit U.S. exports of advanced technologies, the United States is holding back China's rise and development. In China's view, the

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<sup>6</sup> This helps explain why many Chinese theories overlap with Western constructivist approaches.

United States is not exercising its leadership for the good of all but in its self-interest and to its own advantage. This view that the United States is acting hegemonically appears to drive President Xi Jinping's quest for a China-centered international order—one which would presumably be a more moral order. Yet, as always but especially from a Western perspective, virtue lies in the eye of the beholder.

## The Need for General Theory and Dialogue

These summaries are clearly simplifications, almost caricatures, of sophisticated philosophical traditions. Western theory is not entirely devoid of moral considerations. Even the Founding Fathers who drafted the U.S. Constitution recognized, as did John Adams, that “we have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality.” Eastern theory certainly is attentive to balances of power. Both Western and Chinese IR theory have clear Westphalian roots in which sovereignty is vested in states as the ultimate actors in world politics. Indeed, to the extent that China's vision of world order has a core value, it is the principle of non-intervention that lies at the heart of Westphalian notions of sovereignty. These commonalities may provide a foundation for much needed dialogue between East and West.

Yet, the differences between Western Enlightenment and Eastern Confucian thought remain a barrier to mutual understanding, especially if unrecognized and unacknowledged. Where Western theorists assume that everyone—leaders included—are venal and self-interested, Chinese theorists allow for the possibility and may, in fact, *expect* leaders to be virtuous and moral. Where the West wants to diffuse power, Eastern theorists see concentrated power as natural and ideally beneficial. These different philosophical foundations lead to “worst-case” scenarios in the West, in which it is assumed President Xi has some diabolical plan to undermine the United States and promote narrow Chinese interests, while in the East there is widespread disappointment with the perceived immorality of U.S. hegemony. This gap in understanding is only exacerbated by the America First policies of the current Trump administration, which appears to have dropped any pretense of moral leadership and is adopting a more nationalist, mercantilist, and even imperialist foreign policy.

Rudyard Kipling once wrote that “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,” often taken to mean that two cultures can never understand one another. Yet, two lines later he essentially recants, writing “but there is neither East nor West, border, nor breed, nor birth.” The latter is correct.



Ultimately, there cannot be a Western and a Chinese school of IR theory. IR is the study of how different countries interact with one another, including the different philosophies through which countries interpret one another's actions and motivations. Western theory as presently constituted misses much of China's understanding of the world, including what it means to act morally. Chinese theory does not capture well how Western states understand their own choices in world politics. There is more than a bit of hubris on both sides that "their" theory of IR is the correct or universal one.

Recognizing the limits of different theories and the different philosophical traditions underlying Western and Eastern approaches is a necessary first step towards building a more general theory of IR. Collaborative efforts between IR theorists should be encouraged—only then can a more truly universal theory be developed and points of contention identified and potentially addressed. Starting in 1957, at the height of the Cold War, nuclear scientists (and others) met outside official channels to discuss the threat of nuclear war, proliferation, and arms control. The meetings did much to educate both sides not only about deterrence—which the United States and Soviet Union initially saw in very different terms—but also about the motives and capabilities of both sides. The United States and China should encourage similar intellectual dialogues not only on technical issues but between IR theorists as well. Despite the tensions between the two superpowers today, dialogue between Western and Eastern theorists is necessary. The failure to engage each other's philosophical traditions and develop an integrated theory risks a downward spiral of further misunderstanding.

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