When Theories Become Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

In modern international relations, structural realism is a dominant guiding theoretical framework, particularly among American scholars. As described by one of its leading proponents, John J. Mearsheimer, “The structure of the international system forces states which seek only to be secure nonetheless to act aggressively toward each other.” They “have little choice but to pursue power and to seek to dominate the other states in the system.”[1] For Feng Zhang and Richard Ned Lebow, this creates a real problem, particularly as it relates to *Taming the Sino-American Rivalry*, their 2020 book, which should be read by anyone wishing to rebalance their perspectives on the matter, if only marginally.

When a theory becomes so widely accepted, it creates commonly shared expectations that actors will behave according to that theory’s predictions, resulting in self-fulfilling prophecies. Structural realism’s shared idea has led to the widely discussed “Thucydides trap,” whereby structural realities cause rising powers (China) to challenge incumbent powers (the United States), resulting in inevitable conflict. Zhang and Lebow convincingly review the historical evidence and find little support for Thucydides traps. If anything, rising powers have actively avoided aggravating established powers, preferring rather to provoke conflict with smaller, weaker states that offer cheaper wins. There is an exhaustive list of causes for World War I that goes beyond the rise of Germany, and more importantly, World War I is just a sample size of one.

Regardless, faith in structural realism has become the driving factor behind the commitment to deterrence to check inevitable state aggression. Deterrence also creates expanding commitments that depend on maintaining credibility, resulting in overextension and unnecessary conflict.

The key problem is that “modern-day realists who start with power and infer foreign policy goals from it conduct their analysis the wrong way around” (p. 30). What really matters is state interests. Consistent with prospect theory, states, like people, are motivated more by the prevention of loss than by the prospect of gains, meaning that threats rather than opportunities tend to drive
state interests. What is needed then is a better approach to understanding the interests of states that goes beyond structural realism.

The starting point for Zhang and Lebow is strategic empathy—understanding conflict from another state’s point of view and interests by considering how one’s own actions could be perceived as threats by others. They deserve credit for their effort in chapters 2 and 3 in describing recent American and Chinese mutual diplomatic and political mistakes. The central points of contention are misguided Chinese perceptions of American intentions to encircle China and misguided American perceptions of Chinese intentions to drive it out of Asia.

Zhang and Lebow are not without their biases, however, as most of the blame for current tensions is placed squarely on the American pursuit of global “liberal hegemony,” and there is some truth to that argument on which they elaborate. Yet they spend just one short paragraph on geo-economic tactics (e.g., cyber theft, hacking, lack of intellectual property rights protection, and own-market protectionism) and barely mention accusations of China’s human rights violations. Zhang and Lebow concentrate on strategic military issues (e.g., Air Defense Identification Zones [ADIZ], aerial surveillance, and South China Sea tensions), which is fine as a choice of focus for a book. Yet economic and human rights issues cannot be ignored in a book with the title *Taming the Sino-American Rivalry*, especially when these issues motivate most political rhetoric. I doubt Donald Trump would have attracted as many voters to the polls in 2016 had he run a principled campaign against China’s island-building practices.

Zhang and Lebow attempt to offer an alternative to structural realism focused on “reassurance” and diplomacy. Reassurance requires mutual credible signals that intentions are defensive or peaceful. This requires concessions and accommodation, and they offer several historical examples where this approach was successful. Yet Zhang and Lebow fail to appreciate how risky it is to be the first mover to play cooperatively in an iterative game. A state must first correctly perceive that the competitor’s intentions are in fact limited and defensive. Zhang and Lebow admit that the concession offered normally must be costly to be credible, what they term an “irrevocable commitment” (p. 121). Once states make such commitments and concessions, the perceptions of the competitor change, creating incentives to demand further concessions. Failed concessions to a competitor are generally very politically costly.

Ultimately for Zhang and Lebow it is effective diplomacy that has the power to resolve conflicts. Their argument is that “diplomacy is important in its own right” and that “agency matters,” not just structure (pp. 166, 160). Certainly, diplomacy and individual personalities matter, but the examples they offer do more to reinforce the balance of power interpretations that Zheng and Lebow oppose. They repeatedly cite the relationship between Presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev as the case study in point that successfully ended the Cold War.

Reagan and Gorbachev’s good relationship mattered but so did the Soviet Union’s inevitable collapse as oil prices fell and security expenditures became unsustainable, necessitating Soviet concessions and diplomacy. Now that power has rebalanced, how are current US-Russian relations? Conversely, General Secretary Xi Jinping and President Trump hit it off in Mar-a-Lago in April 2017, but their relationship was insufficient to overcome the structural geo-economic and political realities that continue to plague the US-China relationship.

Zhang and Lebow’s primary hypothesis is that “there is no fundamental conflict of interest between the two nations” (p. 3). I’m not so sure. But framing certainly matters. Besides structural realism, the previous and current administration’s definition of the US relationship with China as “Great Power/Strategic Competition” reinforces a
conflictual mindset, becoming self-fulfilling. Zhang and Lebow succeed in moving readers at least a bit in the direction of strategic reframing. If the overly pessimistic assumptions of structural realism can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, then why not a theory based on “cautious optimism,” provided we can believe it (p. 193)?

Notes


[2]. As a particularly relevant historical example, the Truman administration unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate a settlement of the Chinese civil war through a mission led by George C. Marshall (December 1945–January 1947). The US was willing to accept a power-sharing agreement rather than fully oppose the Chinese Communists while providing the Nationalists with two billion dollars in foreign assistance. When the Communists ultimately prevailed in 1949, it was called “the loss of China,” was largely responsible for the rise of McCarthyism, and was politically very costly for the Truman administration.

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