

CSCC Podcast Ep. 24: “China’s Rise and IR Theory – Yan Xuetong”

Introduction:

Welcome back to the podcast of the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for the Study of Contemporary China. I’m your host, Neysun Mahboubi, and in today’s episode you’ll hear my conversation, on the topic of “China’s Rise and IR Theory”, with Yan Xuetong, Dean of the Institute for International Relations at Tsinghua University, in Beijing, and one of China’s leading experts on that country’s foreign policy, national security, and relations with the United States.

In the lead-up to the US presidential election that was just concluded, no foreign policy topic garnered more attention in the United States than our country’s relationship, across a wide range of issues, with China—and by all indications, this is likely to remain the case for the foreseeable future, under President Biden. A key premise to these (often heated) deliberations is the basic reality of China’s rise, over the past few decades, as an economic, technological, military, and strategic power and rival. Grappling with a fuller realization of this development has lately consumed not just the American community of professional “China watchers”, but also, it’s fair to say, the American foreign policy community more broadly.

These are themes we’ve hit upon in prior episodes of this podcast, and we’ll come back to them from various angles in future episodes too—including the next three episodes, with Mark Sidel, Amy Gadsden, and Edward Wong, respectively. And, as many of you listeners will know, the subject of the “Future of U.S.-China Relations” is the focus of a major project that we have launched at the Center for the Study of Contemporary China this year, which particularly features “next generation” U.S. scholars and analysts of China—many of whom will appear on this podcast as well, to further discuss the policy recommendations they have developed through our project.

But how does China’s rise, and its ever more complex and fraught relationship with the United States, look from a domestic *Chinese* perspective? For greater insight into this important question, which is sometimes overlooked in our American debates, I was fortunate to speak with Professor Yan Xuetong when he visited the University of Pennsylvania in April of last year, to speak at the Penn Wharton China summit. I’m thrilled to finally share our conversation with you now, at a time when the future direction of U.S.-China relations is top of mind for so many of us, in both countries.

Professor Yan holds a unique standing amongst Chinese scholars of international relations, and his perspective has long been a distinctive one. Trained at the University of California, Berkeley under Kenneth Waltz, one of the giants of modern IR theory, Yan Xuetong went on to spend almost 20 years at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, the premier government-connected research institute on international affairs in China, before he joined Tsinghua University in 2000. Over the years, he has sometimes been described as a “liberal hawk”—an imperfect shorthand which points toward two major aspects of his thinking: First, that as the post-Cold War order faces the reality of China’s rise, China itself should more openly assert its power and moral authority on the world stage. And, second, but no less critical to his views, that China can succeed in playing a more influential role globally *only* if it can demonstrate that it practices what he calls “humane authority”—characterized by fairness, justice, and civility—in its governance at home.

From these two pillars of Professor Yan’s general outlook there flow a number of related claims and perspectives which merit attention—and which you’ll hear us address in some depth. These include

his particular (and sometimes idiosyncratic) views on when the current downturn in U.S.-China relations actually began; how best to manage competition between the two powers in the years ahead; and what are the choices now before third-party countries, caught between the U.S. and China. With an eye to the internal Chinese discourse within which he is embedded, we also discussed Professor Yan's trademark emphasis on the need for China to cultivate some kinds of alliance relationships; his deep skepticism of the value of ideological conflict (which is informed by his sharp critiques of not only American but also Chinese exceptionalism); and his insistence on real and ongoing *domestic* reform as the essential predicate for China to advance its foreign policy.

A focal point for our conversation was Professor Yan's then just-published book, with Princeton University Press, on "Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers", in which he elaborates on the views I've just mentioned, with specific reference to the question of what explains how a rising state may be able to surpass a dominant state in a given world order. Our discussion of how Professor Yan answers that question, in his book, led us into the weeds of various IR theories—and, eventually, to his particular endorsement and framing of "moral realism", a theoretical framework which he understands to highlight *political leadership* as its key explanatory variable. Now, in the immediate wake of a momentous presidential election here in the United States, that offered the choice between starkly contrasting versions of political leadership, it seems especially fitting to share with you this exposition of Professor Yan's argument for how much national leadership matters—over and above any other determining factors—in shaping international configurations.

Of course, it's too early to predict how President Biden's administration will impact the global order, or even just the course of U.S.-China relations, in the years ahead. But the change in U.S. leadership certainly will provide an instructive case-study for evaluating Professor Yan's theory—including in its dimension which prioritizes a leader's moral responsibility towards the country he or she governs. When it comes to U.S.-China relations, what is most clear right now is that they are in bad shape, perhaps the worst they have been since the normalization of diplomatic relations some 40 years ago. When Professor Yan and I spoke in April of last year, the broad outlines of this downturn in relations were already quite clear—and even if a few details may have changed since then, the general trend has been a consistent one, only accelerated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. How much of all this is has been a function of structural factors, and how much the product of particular leadership choices? That's the kind of question that Professor Yan's theory speaks to, and one that the change in leadership on the U.S. side, at least, will give us more ability to answer.

So, let's delve into it then. At a time when his ideas could not possibly be more relevant and worthy of consideration, if not necessarily agreement, here is my conversation with Professor Yan Xuetong.