

RESEARCH NOTE

# Revisiting the modes of China's revisionism: a comment on Natalizia and Termine

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## Abstract

Gabriele Natalizia and Lorenzo Termine lay out an innovative framework to analyze the trajectory of the current foreign policy of the People's Republic of China. As it stands, it suffers from serious conceptual ambiguities and generates a set of categories that is too large to guide empirical research. After revision, however, the framework that Natalizia and Termine propose can be deployed to elucidate Beijing's behavior in various parts of the world, most notably the Persian Gulf.

**Keywords:** China; foreign policy; incremental revisionism; Persian Gulf

## Introduction

Broad consensus exists among Western scholars of contemporary international politics that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is now a revisionist great power. Nevertheless, as Natalizia and Termine (2021) cogently argue, simply asserting that the PRC displays a revisionist posture towards the world says nothing useful about the types of policies Beijing pursues. Some revisionist states take steps to overturn the existing order at one bold stroke, most often by exercising military force; others push for incremental alterations in the structures, institutions and procedures that comprise the status quo, usually through sustained persuasion and positive inducements (Gilpin, 1981). Alternatively, revisionist states can be differentiated according to whether they envisage fundamental change in the global arena as a whole, or instead in some particular geographical region (see also Pisciotta, 2020; Natalizia and Termine, 2021: 87).

Natalizia and Termine (2021: 88–89) add to these conventional distinctions five analytically separate issue-areas, which together characterize 'the mode of Chinese revisionist strategy' at any given moment. The first concerns whether the PRC builds up its armed forces so as to match the size and composition of the militaries of rival states, or instead takes steps to surpass the capabilities of its primary antagonists. The second concerns whether it refrains from initiating 'aggressive' or 'hostile' action against others, or instead launches belligerent confrontations. The third concerns Beijing's 'attitude towards the arrangements for regional security', that is, whether it accepts existing multilateral organizations and works to reconfigure or dismantle them from the inside, or instead rejects such organizations and tries to destroy them from outside.

Fourth, a revisionist state like the PRC could either forge strategic partnerships with other states that share its disposition towards the existing international order, or instead try to effect structural transformation by acting alone. In other words, a revisionist power might implement either a multilateralist or a unilateralist foreign policy. And fifth, Beijing's revisionism could either reassert pre-existing claims over disputed territory, or instead make unprecedented demands that serve 'to alter the distribution of lands and seas and expand its sphere of influence' (Natalizia and



Figure 1. Proposed Types of Revisionist Strategy.

Termine, 2021: 89). Taken as a whole, this cluster of seven variables generates 128 possible types of revisionist strategy, as illustrated in Figure 1.

### Revisiting the Natalizia–Termine analytical framework

Four conceptual difficulties make the analytical framework proposed by Natalizia and Termine less compelling than it could be. First, there is considerable ambiguity regarding the distinction between global and regional revisionism. One might well infer from the text that revisionist states aspire to change the existing order in both of these domains, and that the distinction delineates two different modes of revisionist action: revolutionary versus incremental. In the brief case studies of the PRC and Showa Japan, Natalizia and Termine (2021: 91–92 and 94–95) equate global revisionism with a revolutionary strategy, whereas regional revisionism is associated with an incremental strategy (see also Schweller, 2015: 8–9; Pisciotta, 2020: 90–92).

On reflection, however, one might expect that all states will actively manage their immediate vicinity in ways that keep current and future vulnerabilities to a minimum. So what marks a revisionist power is the extent to which it pursues change-inducing policies outside its home region. Furthermore, it is conceivable that a revisionist state would pursue a revolutionary strategy in both global and regional affairs, or an incremental strategy in both global and regional affairs, or a revolutionary strategy in global affairs and an incremental strategy in regional affairs, or an incremental strategy in global affairs and a revolutionary strategy in regional affairs. Clarifying the precise relationship between global and regional revisionism, along with disentangling the connections between global revisionism versus regional revisionism on one hand and revolutionary versus incremental revisionism on the other, seems like an essential next step.

Second, it is not clear what kind of strategic partnerships revisionist states will undertake. Natalizia and Termine (2021: 88) hypothesize that it matters whether or not a revisionist power aligns itself with ‘other ‘sovereign states’ for the increase of their [sic] own strength’. Yet the two case studies only mention alignments with other revisionist states (Natalizia and Termine, 2021: 91–92 and 94). It is not surprising to learn that Japan sided with Germany and Italy during the 1930s, or that the PRC today maintains a quasi-alliance with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. In both situations, though, the appearance of a bloc of revisionist states prompted status quo-oriented states to mobilize to defend the existing order, and the anti-revisionist coalition ended up preventing the revisionists from transforming the system. So it is conceivable that joining forces with one or more status quo-oriented states would

prove to be not only a more astute strategy but also a more effective one for a revisionist power to adopt. Any power capable of carrying out such a subtle maneuver would most probably pose a severe danger to the status quo.

Third, there could be greater clarity concerning the best indicator for the kind of military build-up that characterizes revisionist states. At the outset, Natalizia and Termine (2021: 88) assert that ‘a revisionist power is expected to pursue a more [evenly?] distributed military balance’. The accompanying table amends that wording to pronounce that revolutionary revisionist states undertake ‘a higher growth rate of military expenditures than the status quo powers’, whereas incremental revisionist states implement ‘growth rates of military expenditures similar [to] or smaller than the status quo powers’ (Natalizia and Termine, 2021: 90). Moreover, the PRC case study intimates that Beijing’s apparent inability to produce state-of-the-art weapons systems is every bit as significant as trends in total military spending (Natalizia and Termine, 2021: 93).

Fourth, any framework that generates 128 analytically distinct types of revisionist behavior is unlikely to prove useful as a guide for empirical research. There will almost certainly end up being too many empty boxes, and the categories that do contain cases will have too few features in common to provide grounds for meaningful comparisons (see also Liu, 2021). Despite Natalizia and Termine’s (2021: 89) effort to justify the juxtaposition of the PRC against early 20th-century Japan, for instance, these two cases end up resting in broadly the same area of their matrix, thereby blunting the contrast between them. Some reworking of the proposed typology looks necessary.

Therefore, *pace* Natalizia and Termine, we suggest setting aside the distinction between revolutionary and incremental revisionism. It is hard to come up with an actual instance of a paradigmatic revolutionary revisionist state, which at a single stroke has launched ‘a direct and multi-dimensional confrontation with status quo powers’ (Natalizia and Termine, 2021: 88). Napoleonic France, Fascist Italy and National Socialist Germany comprise the usual suspects (Davidson, 2006; Pisciotta, 2020: 91), despite extensive bodies of scholarship that bring into question this interpretation of the initial dispositions and early foreign policies of these three protagonists. Even Natalizia and Termine (2021: 89 footnote 7) focus on Japan prior to the fateful December 1941 attack on the United States of America’s (USA) Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor; they thus make an admirable decision to concentrate on the sizable, but poorly understood, pool of incremental revisionists.

More hesitantly, we suggest ignoring the distinction between global and regional revisionism. Rather than highlighting the revisionist power’s immediate vicinity, however, we urge careful examination of its behavior outside the geographical area in which it happens to be located. It seems probable that revisionist and non-revisionist states will implement almost identical security policies with regard to the zones adjacent to their borders – although it is possible that subsequent research will prove this presumption to be empirically incorrect. What is apt to illuminate more clearly the contours of a revisionist power’s ambitions and priorities are the ways in which it interacts with states and multilateral institutions located at a distance, which pose less danger to its physical security in the short run (Jervis, 1978; Pisciotta, 2020: 90–92).

Concentrating on a revisionist power’s behavior outside its immediate vicinity makes its posture towards territorial disputes largely irrelevant. Even the most influential states in the contemporary world have relinquished all claim to lands located far away from their borders. And no state has raised an unprecedented demand for control over distant territory since the collapse of the European empires in the aftermath of the Second World War.

With greater reluctance, we suggest omitting whether or not the revisionist power initiates aggressive or belligerent action. The folk theorem that revisionist states resort to war with greater alacrity and greater frequency than non-revisionist states has become hard to sustain (Cooley *et al.*, 2019). More important, statistical databases can tell us whether or not a revisionist state exercises military force first, but they shed little light on the motivations that lie behind preventive

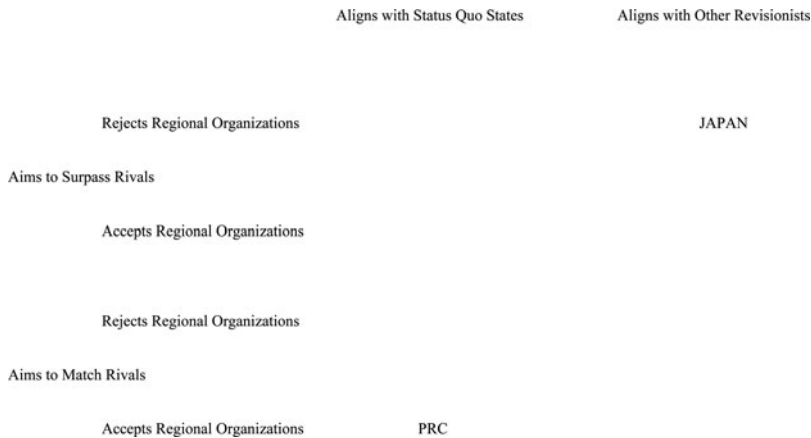


Figure 2. Amended Types of (Incremental) Revisionist Strategy.

or pre-emptive bellicosity (Glaser, 1997). Since the purpose of this research program is to explicate the behavioral manifestations of revisionism, using the number of militarized interstate incidents that a state initiates in order to determine divergent types of revisionist behavior comes close to circular reasoning.

Given these considerations, Figure 2 offers an amended Natalizia–Termine typology of revisionist strategies. This reconfigured classification scheme generates eight analytically distinct modes of (incremental) revisionist state behavior – still a relatively large number given the pool of prospective cases, but not so large as to be unmanageable. More important, the new matrix sharpens the contrast between today’s PRC and Showa Japan, thereby helping to substantiate the main conceptual argument that Natalizia and Termine advance.

### Current PRC activism in the Persian Gulf

One important region beyond its immediate vicinity in which the PRC has become increasingly active over the past decade is the Persian Gulf. Prior to the popular uprisings that swept across the Middle East and North Africa starting in the winter of 2010–11, Beijing’s diplomatic involvement in this part of the world was minimal and sporadic, and its military presence non-existent (Calabrese, 1992–93; Bin Huwaidin, 2003; Olimat, 2012; Fulton, 2019). President Xi Jinping’s promulgation of the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative in the autumn of 2013 presaged heightened attention to the Gulf and its environs (Zhang, 2018; Benabdallah, 2019), as did the negotiations that began in early 2014 concerning the construction of a staging facility for the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) at Djibouti on the southwestern shore of the Red Sea (Styan, 2020; Cabestan, 2020; Doshi, 2021: 205–207).

Xi undertook an official visit to Riyadh in January 2016, during the course of which the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was accorded the closest bilateral alignment that Beijing currently offers – a comprehensive strategic partnership (Struever, 2017; Sun, 2020). Seven months later, Saudi Minister of Defense and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman Al Sa’ud traveled to Beijing at the head of a sizable delegation of senior government officials. The trip resulted in the formation of a Higher Joint Committee charged with supervising a wide range of projects in infrastructure, trade and investment (Duan and Aldamer, 2022: 122); it also generated unprecedented collaborative arrangements that brought elite units of the Saudi armed forces to China for bilateral anti-terrorism exercises.

February 2017 saw a PLAN task force call at the Saudi port of Dammam as part of a familiarization tour of the Arab coast of the Gulf (Associated Press, 2017). Saudi Arabia’s King Salman

bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa’ud journeyed to Beijing a month later; among the agreements signed during this visit was a contract with China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation to produce CH-4 Rainbow (Caihong) unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) inside the kingdom (Fulton, 2019: 103–104). Two months after that, the PLAN’s OBOR Task Force stopped at Dammam during the course of a six-month tour of twenty countries situated along the initiative’s extensive maritime network.

Various PRC-Saudi joint ventures in infrastructure and technological development got underway during 2017–18. Most prominent were ones in satellite communications and space exploration, along with projects related to electronic security (Fulton, 2020: 524; Duan and Aldamer, 2022: 122). In July 2019, the Saudi ministry of defense signed a memorandum of understanding with the PRC’s Equipment Development Commission that gave the kingdom’s armed forces direct access to the newly completed Bei Dou-2 Navigation Satellite System (Fulton, 2020: 15). Four months later, Saudi warships and special forces carried out joint maneuvers in the Red Sea with the PLAN and People’s Liberation Army Marine Corps (Middle East Monitor, 2019). Reports appeared concurrently that the PRC was supplying the equipment and expertise necessary for the Saudi military to manufacture ballistic missiles (Cohen, 2021). By the end of 2021, Saudi Arabia had also taken steps to acquire the PRC-built HQ-17AE air defense system, as a supplement to – if not a replacement for – USA-supplied Patriot anti-missile batteries (Yellinek, 2022).

Meanwhile, the PRC strengthened ties to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Xi arrived in Tehran immediately after departing Riyadh in January 2016, and conferred on Iran the status of comprehensive strategic partner. The conferral accompanied the announcement of a cluster of prospective economic projects, almost all of which remained dormant in subsequent years (Shariatinia and Azizi, 2017; Garlick and Havlova, 2021a, 2021b). With regard to security matters, Beijing and Tehran had already held joint naval exercises in September 2014 (Yetiv and Oskarsson, 2018: 76), and had drawn up a bilateral agreement concerning intelligence sharing and the monitoring of sea lanes in November 2015. By the autumn of 2016 the two governments were discussing the possibility of Iran’s acquiring PRC-made fighter-bombers (Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2018: 132–134). November 2016 brought news that they had set up ‘a joint commission between the general staffs to enable closer coordination in all areas of military relations’ (SWP, 2022: 25). Warships of the Iranian navy and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) joined the PLAN for anti-piracy exercises near the Strait of Hormuz in June 2017, even as the two countries’ air forces explored ways to enhance tactical collaboration (Heller, 2019).

Momentum picked up during the late summer of 2019, when Iranian Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif drafted a revised security pact and journeyed to Beijing to present it to the PRC for approval (Scita, 2022). The 25-year agreement reportedly called for closer co-operation to address internal and external threats, most notably ones associated with ‘the fight against terrorism’ (Greer and Batmanghelidj, 2021: 15). It also envisaged combined military exercises on a routine basis, and in December 2019 Iranian warships carried out large-scale maneuvers with PLAN and Russian naval units in the northwestern corner of the Indian Ocean. Tehran underscored the convergence of strategic interests underlying these exercises by assigning them the evocative code name ‘Marine Security Belt’ (Haider, 2020). At the same time, PRC companies worked with the IRGC to construct two factories to produce the refined aluminum powder that was required for Iran’s ballistic missile program (SWP, 2022: 27).

July 2020 brought the release of the text of the bilateral security pact. Its wording hinted that the PRC’s armed forces might be permitted to operate on Iranian territory to protect Chinese investments, and also be allowed to set up a staging facility on Kish Island adjacent to the Strait of Hormuz (Esfandiary, 2021). These intimations set off a firestorm of popular protest inside the Islamic Republic, and compelled the two governments to go back to the bargaining table. When the final version of the agreement was signed in March 2021, its terms were not publicly disclosed, although Zarif insisted that Beijing had been granted no special access to Iranian

territory or facilities. Six months after the signing, Iran was finally invited to become a member of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization. The PRC's minister of defense arrived in Tehran in April 2022 and announced plans 'to expand bilateral co-operation in joint military drills, exchange of strategies, training issues and other common fields between the two countries' armed forces' (Fazeli, 2022).

PRC connections with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) coalesced more gradually than did its links with Saudi Arabia, albeit more firmly than those with Iran. Economic and security ties were established as early as 1989–90, and a bilateral security agreement was drawn up in August 2009. PLAN warships assigned to the multinational anti-piracy campaign in the Gulf of Aden called at Abu Dhabi in March 2010, and Beijing accorded the UAE the status of strategic partner in January 2012 (Fulton, 2019: 152–154). March 2014 saw the return of a PLAN flotilla to Abu Dhabi, and a December 2015 trip to Beijing by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayid Al Nahyan resulted in a memorandum of understanding that laid the foundation for collaborative projects in satellite development and space research (Fulton, 2019: 159). The PLAN task force that toured the Arab coast of the Gulf during January–February 2017 made its first stop at Abu Dhabi, and the PRC's minister of defense told the visiting UAE defense minister three months later that Beijing 'hopes to work with the UAE to take the opportunity of the Belt and Road initiative to deepen mutually beneficial cooperation and realize win-win development' (Huang, 2017).

It was not until July 2018, however, that the PRC recognized the UAE as a comprehensive strategic partner. The boost in status set the stage for a cluster of agreements regarding military training and technology transfer, as well as more intense discussions concerning collaboration in matters of internal and external security. USA intelligence agencies released evidence in the spring of 2021 that a new container facility, which was being constructed by PRC companies at Port Khalifah just north of Abu Dhabi city, was being transformed into a staging facility for PLAN warships; work on the military components of the project came to a halt after Washington warned that they put in jeopardy the sale of US-built F-35 fighter-bombers and MQ-9B Reaper UAVs to the Emirati air force (Lubold and Strobel, 2021). Reports nonetheless surfaced during the summer that the PRC and UAE were carrying on a variety of collaborative intelligence operations, including the surveillance, interrogation and detention of Uighur activists. In the face of mounting opprobrium from USA officials, the UAE in December 2021 abruptly terminated negotiations over the procurement of F-35s, and contracted two months later to purchase PRC-built L-15 attack aircraft instead (Reynolds, 2022).

It is therefore clear that Beijing has abandoned its long-standing reticence and emerged as an active player in the economic, diplomatic and security affairs of the Gulf. To what extent the PRC has also adopted a revisionist strategy is a disputed question among regional specialists. A comprehensive collection of essays concerning the impact of the OBOR initiative on the Middle East asserts that 'the current People's Republic of China leadership under Xi Jinping [cannot] be portrayed at present as actively seeking to undermine American hegemony in the region. To the contrary, there is a strong Sino-American convergence of interests in the Middle East that might possibly alleviate other tensions between the US and China in the future' (Ehteshami and Horesh, 2017: 3; see also Summers, 2017: 34). Ehteshami (2017: 206) concludes the collection by observing that 'assumptions about China's hegemonic drive are premature. China has 'socialized' to the prevailing international system and even if it harbors the ambition of changing the international order to its own advantage it can only do so through what [Zbigniew] Brzezinski notes as 'the cautious spread of Chinese influence'. In a similar vein, Calabrese (2018: 21) reports that 'China has given few indications that it is determined to directly challenge US predominance in the region. This is for good reason. China indirectly benefits from the role the United States plays as security guarantor, without incurring risks or expense' (see also Yetiv and Oskarsson, 2018; Wu, 2021; Fulton, 2022). Khanmohammadi and Sun (2022: 8–9) likewise claim that Beijing's ties with Tehran are driven by three non-transformational motives: incorporating Iran



into the OBOR network; 'giv[ing] the Iranian leadership the confidence it needs to stand up to the US and force the Biden government to ...revive the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which had restricted Iran's nuclear research program from July 2015 to May 2018]'; and ensuring the PRC's continued 'access to cheap, high-discounted Iranian oil'.

Other Gulf specialists discern a more strongly revisionist motivation behind recent PRC activism. Niblock (2020: 482) avers that 'it should not be concluded that China's global strategy fits comfortably into the existing world order'; on the contrary, Beijing's policy towards the Gulf reflects its 'wider aim of rebalancing the global political and economic orders', which will result in 'a lessening of the Western economic, political and strategic engagement in the Middle East, with a complementary intensification of Middle Eastern engagement with China's alternate order' (Niblock, 2020: 504). Esfandiary and Tabatabai (2018: 14) concur: 'Powerful states seeking a larger global role, China, Russia, and Iran all chafe against an international order they had no hand in creating and which they believe does not reflect their interests. Individually, and in varying combinations, each rejects the universality of Western liberal principles while pressing for alternative economic, political, and security institutions and arrangements'. Bin Huwaidin (2022) observes that 'China wants to use its relationship with Iran to give itself leverage against the United States on important issues such as' ... resisting US domination of the international system'. And more generally, Ghiselli and Giuffrida (2020: 10) claim that Beijing's current strategy in the Middle East 'is aimed at contributing to the transformation of the regional order from unipolar, that is to say controlled by the US, to multipolar'.

Natalizia and Termine's innovative conceptual framework offers a way to transcend such blanket assessments concerning PRC strategy with respect to the Gulf. Empirical research that makes rigorous use of the typology they propose can enhance our understanding of Beijing's current activism in at least two ways. First, it will enable us to chart the trajectory of PRC behavior towards the region more precisely, and to determine the moments at which shifts in a more (or a less) revisionist direction occur. Second, it will allow us to investigate which particular aspects of the PRC's incremental revisionism provoke the most antagonistic response from protectors of the existing order.

### Charting shifts in PRC behavior

Beijing's strategy towards the Gulf appears at first glance to have shifted in a markedly revisionist direction. Heightened activism over the past decade raises the prospect that the PRC has at last set out to challenge the USA's long-standing predominance in regional affairs, by forging partnerships with local actors determined to reconfigure the existing order. Nevertheless, a preliminary application of the Natalizia–Termine framework casts considerable doubt on this widely held interpretation, and reminds us that a more energetic foreign policy does not necessarily signal a firmly revisionist motivation.

Current PRC military activities in the Gulf consist of arms deliveries, naval deployments, joint exercises and the construction of staging facilities. The crucial question regarding each aspect of PRC behavior is whether Beijing is engaged in matching the capabilities of other external powers, most notably the USA, or is instead taking steps to surpass its primary antagonists. So far, the weapons systems that the PRC has delivered to Saudi Arabia, Iran and the UAE resemble armaments that these three states have already acquired from other suppliers, including UAVs, fighter-bombers and anti-aircraft batteries. One exception to the rule – the equipment and expertise required for Saudi Arabia to manufacture ballistic missiles – represents an extension of Beijing's earlier transfer of medium-range missiles to Riyadh, which reportedly had Washington's approval, rather than the introduction of an entirely new class of weaponry into the region.

PLAN operations to the Gulf similarly mirror – on a considerably smaller scale – the activities of other foreign maritime forces. The kinds of warships involved in these deployments pose no

serious challenge to the larger and better-armed vessels that constitute the American naval presence in the region. And unlike the United States Navy, the PLAN exhibits a sporadic rather than a sustained presence inside the Strait of Hormuz. Joint maneuvers with Iran have started to take place on a more regular basis, but they remain limited in size and scope. More important, the PLAN's rudimentary staging facilities at Djibouti and Abu Dhabi pale in comparison to the massive naval, air and ground bases that have been built and maintained by the USA. There is consequently no indication that Beijing is taking steps aimed at surpassing the military capabilities of its primary rival in this corner of the world.

PRC engagement with regional organizations in the Gulf displays an equally non-transformative attitude. The groundwork for Beijing's current involvement in Middle Eastern affairs was laid in 2004 with the establishment of the China-Arab Co-operation Forum, a collaborative venture with the oldest multilateral institution in the region, the Arab League. The January 2016 policy paper that marks the start of intense PRC activism explicitly states that 'We support a bigger role for the Arab League in ... regional and international affairs' (Wang and Zhao, 2022: 2), and subsequent years have brought 'increased exchanges between senior officials of the Arab League ... and China, and the continuous emergence of issues related to China on the agenda of the Council of [the] Arab League' (Wang and Zhao, 2022: 15). At the same time, exploratory discussions concerning the creation of an inter-regional free trade area have transpired under the auspices of the Gulf Co-operation Council (Puig and Yee, 2017). Beijing has thus made a concerted effort to couch its recent initiatives in the context of existing regional organizations, rather than espousing novel institutional arrangements.

Finally, Beijing tends to align more closely with Gulf states that have exhibited an interest in preserving the existing regional order, while keeping at arm's length states that have expressed a determination to carry out structural transformation. Fulton (2019: 14) notes that 'China's decision to only sell drones to countries such as Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE implies that it supports status quo powers. It has not sold advanced systems to non-state actors or revisionist states such as Iran'. By the same token, Al-Tamimi (2019: 29) reports that 'most Chinese military manufacturers are unwilling to provide technology transfers to Iranian companies', whereas they have shared productive techniques with Saudi and Emirati enterprises.

These preliminary observations suggest that the PRC's turn towards more active involvement in the Gulf reflects no more than a modestly (incremental) revisionist strategy. Further and more detailed explorations of the various components of Beijing's behavior will be necessary in order to demarcate the moments at which significant changes in a more revisionist direction have taken place, and whether or not such turning-points have clustered closely enough across issue-areas to constitute a co-ordinated shift in grand strategy.

### Consequences of PRC behavior

Even more consequential than the question of the extent to which current PRC strategy in the Gulf should be characterized as revisionist is the question of whether Beijing's behavior is likely to provoke countermeasures on the part of other states. Defenders of the existing regional order will only mobilize to resist the initiatives that have been undertaken by the PRC if these initiatives pose a serious threat to themselves and their allies. By disaggregating PRC activities along the lines that Natalizia and Termine propose, empirical research will be able to discern the degree to which each component of Beijing's incremental revisionism can be expected to prompt the USA, or the Gulf states themselves, to take steps to protect the status quo.

So long as PRC military operations continue to match, rather than surpass, the regional capabilities of the USA and other status quo-oriented states, there is little likelihood that they will provoke antagonistic responses. Over the past few years, however, policy-makers in Washington have expressed an interest in reducing American involvement in the Middle East and concentrating more heavily on developments in East Asia. This sentiment has so far



accompanied no real diminution of the USA's military presence in the Gulf; but if and when the American naval and air forces that have been stationed there since 2003 do get redeployed eastward, and should the PLAN persist in augmenting its activities in the area around the Arabian peninsula, then Beijing's relative weight in the region will start to overtake that of the USA. The conflict dynamics that accompany this sort of power transition have been the subject of extensive inquiry.

Policy-makers in Washington have historically paid minimal attention to the Arab League and the Gulf Co-operation Council, and have focused their energies instead on bilateral relations with the states of the Gulf. Now that Beijing has opted to channel many of its initiatives through the agencies of these regional organizations, it will be worth investigating the ways in which the USA responds. Will American officials consider the resuscitation of the long-dormant Arab League to constitute a challenge to the existing order? Do PRC initiatives that entail collaboration with multilateral organizations prompt different kinds of countermeasures on Washington's part than policies that engage the Gulf states on an individual basis?

Finally, what impact does the PRC's choice of regional partners have on the behavior of the USA? For the most part, Beijing has acted in accordance with the severe restrictions that the United Nations Security Council has imposed on Iran (Zhao, 2014). Keeping the Islamic Republic at arm's length may well have ameliorated American fears and militated against the implementation of hostile responses to PRC initiatives in the region. At the same time, Beijing's coldness towards Tehran has reassured the Arab Gulf states and boosted their willingness to co-operate with the PRC. It remains to be seen to what extent the strengthening of diplomatic and military relations between the PRC and Iran will provoke more antagonistic policies not only from the USA but also from the member-states of the Gulf Co-operation Council.

## Conclusion

Gabriele Natalizia and Lorenzo Termine offer a promising way forward concerning important controversies surrounding the foreign policy of the People's Republic of China. The analytical framework that they propose entails an instructive typology of revisionist strategy, tailor-made to improve our understanding of Beijing's recent activities. Nevertheless, it suffers from several conceptual ambiguities and generates a set of discrete categories that is too large to serve as a useful basis for empirical research. By paring down the number of variables and sharpening the definitions of the components of (incremental) revisionism that supply the greatest leverage, it becomes easier and more productive to apply the Natalizia–Termine framework to analyze crucial aspects of PRC behavior not only in the Persian Gulf but in other regions of the world as well.

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