The new ‘Pacific Century’ and the rise of China: an international relations perspective

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The re-emergence of the ‘Pacific Century’, or ‘Asia-Pacific Century’, discourse centred on the rise of Chinese power raises important questions in the discipline of international relations (IR). These questions relate to the conceptualisation of the Pacific Century discourse, its application to the contemporary empirical case, and its relationship and amenability to IR theories. In order to address these questions, the article subjects the concept of a ‘Pacific Century’ to critical analysis through the synergy of three pertinent ‘debates’. First, it creates a novel analytical framework to define and codify the parameters of the Pacific Century debate; a discourse that has until now remained diffuse and inchoate. Second, it engages with the present ‘great debate’ in IR between the traditional/rationalist and critical/reflectivist approaches, applying them in juxtaposition to the notion of a ‘new’ Pacific Century, led by China. Thirdly, then, the article speaks to the ‘rising China’ debate, which currently captivates commentators both in academic and policy-making circles. The article explores how the ‘Pacific Century’ concept is a compound of both ideational and material factors: it is at once both a political/ideological project and a reified intellectual frame of reference. Through this multidimensional analysis, the article aims to shape the re-emerging debate on the Pacific Century, affirm the enduring value of the term, and demonstrate the efficacy of IR theories in deconstructing conceptual problems.

Introduction

The concept of a ‘Pacific Century’ has plainly re-entered the discourse of international politics, after a brief hiatus following the Asian financial crisis of 1997–8. Now, according to Prime Minster Kevin Rudd, we are (again) poised to enter a new epoch of Pacific power and prosperity. The prime minister identifies that ‘[t]he 21st century will be the Asia-Pacific century . . . so we need to make sure that in the decades ahead we are fully engaged with the region’ (Larkin 2008). The notion is not confined to rhetoric, as it also forms the centrepiece of...
the 2009 Australia Defence White Paper, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030* (Department of Defence 2009). This revival of the ‘Pacific Century’ concept in its current guise, with the ‘Asia-’ prefix attached, is underwritten by a concern over the implications of the rise of China, and Asia in general, as outlined in the works of scholars and public intellectuals such as Bill Emmott (2009), Parag Khanna (2008), and Kishore Mahbubani (2008a, 2008b). The consensus is, in the words of a recent Australian Strategic Policy Institute report, that ‘the global centre of gravity continues to shift from the transatlantic region to the transpacific’ (Lyon and Leah 2008: 41). Canberra surely recognises the advantages to be wrought from its engagement with China and the other major Asia-Pacific powers. To this purpose, Rudd has enunciated a vision for regional economic and security integration, aiming to establish an ‘Asia-Pacific Community’ by 2020.1 Yet, despite his leading efforts to revive the Pacific Century discourse by coining the new term ‘Asia-Pacific Century’ as its latest descriptor, Rudd is not its progenitor, nor is the concept by any means confined to Australia, as we shall see. The invocation of the concept also presents a number of problematic questions as to its definition, remit, and implications, which this article seeks to examine.

**Background**

Notions of a ‘Pacific Century’, along with its close cognates ‘Pacific Age’, ‘Pacific Era’, ‘Asian Century’, and, now, ‘Asia-Pacific Century’, have a long historical pedigree.2 The term arguably has its genesis in the expansion of the European spice trade in the Asia-Pacific from around the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but it was on the eve of the twentieth century that the concept began to gain real traction in international politics (for uses of these terms, see Davenport 2006; Korhonen 1996; Mahbubani 2008a; Moon 2006). Writing in the 1890s, a Japanese diplomat, Inagaki Manjirō (1890), advanced the belief that the coming twentieth century would herald the dawning of a ‘Pacific Age’ (later recast in Western discourse as ‘Pacific Century’). Inagaki may not have seen his vision of a ‘Pacific Century’ realised in his lifetime, but the concept would reach maturity toward the end of that century, and Japan would be firmly associated with it.

It was in the late 1980s that ‘the concept of the Pacific Century ... reached its zenith’, according to Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walter (1999: 245). At this time, the Japanese economic miracle, which had begun in the 1960s, spread to the ‘Asian tigers’ of Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong. With Japan at the pinnacle of its commercial ascendancy, touted as ‘number one’ in Erza Vogel’s best-seller, the region of East Asia experienced phenomenal economic growth, combined with increasing domestic stability and democratisation (Johnson 1982; Kim 1999; Vogel 1979). Moreover, American trade with the Pacific world overtook its transatlantic commerce for the first time in the 1980s. Convincing arguments were made that the Pacific Basin was increasingly
becoming the locus of future world development, and pundits again began to
Politicians, financiers, and academics embraced the ‘confident prediction from
within the region that the Pacific Century will be the defining feature of the post-
Cold War world’ (Bell 1996). Indeed, the concept became something of an
intoxicant. Foot and Walter observe how ‘[t]he first half of the 1990s were the
blossoming of the “Pacific Dream” when the terms future, prosperity and Asia-
Pacific became almost synonymous’ (cited in Dorsch 2006: 110).

The dream became a nightmare when the devaluation of the Thai baht
triggered the Asian financial crisis of 1997–8, plunging most of the region into
dire financial straits. The prevailing mood of confidence ‘was pricked and then
deflated by the devastating economic crisis’, and all talk of the Pacific Century
and its counterparts quickly evaporated (Dupont 2007: 2). However, as the
affected countries recovered with astonishing rapidity (some laggards such as
Indonesia excepted), the concept began to gradually re-emerge.

The ‘new’ Pacific Century

Now, the ‘Pacific Century’ concept is back. But this time around the role of
vanguard has shifted from a lacklustre-performing Japan to a dynamic China,
with Beijing providing the impetus to restart the region’s stalled economies. In
this iteration of the ‘new’ Pacific Century it is China that is ‘number one’ (Vogel
2004). The ascension of the People’s Republic of China—a country with
theoretically unlimited potential—paves the way for a renewed Pacific Century
(if not a ‘Chinese Century’). With the recovery of the ‘tigers’ through banking-
sector reform, and the emergence of the ‘new tigers’ of Malaysia, Vietnam,
Indonesia, and Thailand, flanking the Chinese giant—not to mention ‘rising
India’—it is thus a propitious moment to reconsider whether the ‘Pacific
Century’ concept may again be applicable to portray the geopolitical and geo-
economic dynamics of the region.

In identifying a resurgence of the ‘Pacific Century’ label, this article seeks to
address a number of issues regarding its conceptualisation and application in
international relations (IR): What exactly is the Pacific Century? What are its
conceptual and empirical dimensions and applications? And how does it relate to
the key theories and concerns of IR? Firstly, the article aims to construct a sound
analytical framework to codify our understanding of the ‘Pacific Century’
concept. Although a number of writers, such as Dennis Florig (2001) and
Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walter (1999), have approached the concept, on the
whole IR scholars have not systematically or conceptually interrogated
it—certainly not in recent years. This deficiency will be addressed here. In the
second section of the article, this framework is applied to outline the parameters
of a ‘new’ Chinese-led Pacific Century, before subjecting this contemporary case
to further analysis by employing the traditional and critical perspectives of IR in
an effort to tease out its significance, dynamics, and implications. Although the core focus of the second section is China, the other important Asian actors (India, Korea, and Japan) are also considered in lesser detail. The article concludes that a new, Chinese-led Pacific Century looks very different when viewed from the various competing perspectives of IR.

As such, the enquiry benefits from operating at the nexus of three pertinent and intersecting ‘debates’:

- the debate surrounding the ‘Pacific Century’ concept itself;
- the ‘rationalism versus reflectivism’ debate (known as the ‘third great IR debate’); and
- the ‘rising China’ debate.

Through a synthesis of these debates we can achieve a mature and sophisticated appraisal of the ‘Pacific Century’ concept in its most recent guise, informed by the spectrum of IR theories and dealing with perhaps the most pressing issue of contemporary regional politics: the rise of China (see Figure 1).

PART I: Conceptualising the ‘Pacific Century’: an analytical framework

This section is dedicated to a comprehensive discussion of the first of our three debates as it relates to the definition and parameters of the ‘Pacific Century’

![Figure 1. Three debates.](image-url)
concept itself. Offering a precise formulation of the ‘Pacific Century’ concept raises a number of problematic questions. Like so many others in the realm of the social sciences, it may be considered an ‘essentially contested concept’. Precision is impeded not only by its abstract nature, but by the many variations in its labelling and usage (mentioned above). In order to probe deeper into its symbolism and offer a clearer definition of what it might entail, three parameters must be examined in order to render the concept meaningful, prior to its application to the China case study in the following section. These are: *ideological* (an ‘idea’); *temporal* (a ‘time’); and *spatial* (a ‘place’).

An ‘idea’

The notion of Pacific Century—whether its exponents explicitly recognise it or not—is above all an *ideological* construct. Although it may technically be employed in an objective, descriptive sense, the term ‘Pacific Century’ (or its iterations) is almost invariably advanced as a political project. It speaks to a vision of inexorable progress toward a teleological ‘end state’. In this sense, it is a classic example of a ‘speech act’. As Ole Wæver describes it: ‘the utterance itself is the act ... By saying the words something is done’ or brought into existence (Buzan et al. 1998: 26). Whenever the concept has been invoked, it has taken on slightly different connotations, depending upon its interlocutor. Yet, the core thesis, the alleged objective and material foundation for the political project and the resultant speech act, has remained essentially the same. Briefly stated, this is that a paradigm shift has occurred, is occurring, or will occur in international politics in which ‘the economic, political, and cultural center of the world will move from the Atlantic to the Pacific’ (Korhonen 1996: 64). Pekka Korhonen argues that:

> In terms of basic concepts, very little has changed since the days of Seeley [a British contemporary] and Inagaki. Now as then, within the Pacific age rhetoric, economically orientated dynamic nations head together toward a glorious century, where everything is measured in grandiose oceanic terms (ibid.).

The stimuli behind each invocation of the concept have varied. For example, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Inagaki and Seeley wrote, the discourse centred upon imperialist competition for the region’s resources and strategically located ports (the ‘scramble for Asia’). In its contemporary manifestation, it revolves around the stellar economic performance of the major Asian states: first Japan, then the Asian tigers, and now *China* (and India). The dynamism of the Asian ‘economic miracles’ has often been twinned with the alleged superiority of Confucian and state-developmental social models found in Asia (for an overview, see Mahbubani 1998; Yew 2000). This opened a corresponding discourse on the role of ‘Asian values’ (or the
‘Asian way’), famously ignited by the premiers of Malaysia and Singapore, Mahathir bin Mohamad and Lee Kwan Yew. They argue that Asian culture and society is proving superior to the liberal-democratic Western model, and herein lies the root of Asia’s recent success (Subramaniam 2000). This discourse has been muted since the Asian financial crisis revealed some of its failings.

Also, embedded in the concept is a mixture of ‘threat’ and ‘opportunity’. In the first instance, if the Pacific world is in ascent, then it follows that the Atlantic (‘Western’) world must be in decline, and therefore menaced by the rise of Asia. Mahbubani (2008b) argues that the impact of Asia’s rise on world order will depend upon the West’s response to its loss of dominance and its willingness to gracefully concede its hegemonic position. The worst-case scenario would involve war between the current hegemon, the United States, and the rising power challenger, China (formerly Japan) (Friedman and LeBard 1991; Galen Carpenter 2006). On the other hand, the Pacific Century has been viewed as an opportunity for mutual prosperity and cooperation. Amitav Acharya sees occasions for trans-Pacific collaboration and integration. He makes the case that ‘the “Asian Way” is diffusing across the Pacific Rim evolving into the “Asia-Pacific Way”’ (cited in Evans 2000: 159). Though much of the thesis hinges on mutually beneficial economic progress, Borthwick (1998): 525) identifies that ‘in recent years political obstacles to cooperation have diminished, giving rise to “regionalist” perspectives in national capitals throughout Pacific Asia’. The development of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and other trans-Pacific institutions substantiates this claim.

One thing is certain: unless the rise of Asia is disrupted, it will bring about a major transformation both in the Asia-Pacific and the global international system. Seema Desai (2006a) gives an indication of the scale of this development, claiming that ‘[t]he ascent of the Asian giants parallels historical episodes, such as the Industrial Revolution, or Meiji Restoration in Japan, in terms of the scope for disruption and impact on the global economic and political order’. Indeed, Brad Glosserman (2009) argues that ‘[a]ccording to conventional wisdom, the global economic crisis is accelerating the transfer of power and influence from the West to Asia’. This will have stark repercussions for the whole Westphalian-based international system as it stands today.

A ‘time’

Secondly, one must consider the temporal question. The first hurdle is semantic. The ‘Pacific Century’ concept is largely ‘epochal’, in that it identifies with ‘the date of an occurrence that starts something going in a new direction’ (a point in time) (Jones and Wilson 1995: 599). Rudd’s 2008 assertion that the country stands at ‘the dawn of our Pacific Century’ exemplifies this pattern (Rudd 2008). Once this epoch is under way, it becomes an ‘era’: ‘a time during which
what started as an epoch continues, building steam, gaining momentum, becoming established' (Jones and Wilson 1995: 599). Thus, Stephen Smith (2008), the Minister for Foreign Affairs, in an address on Australia–India relations, declared that ‘you are reminded every day that the 21st century is indeed the Asia-Pacific Century’. Thirdly, once the Pacific Century era is over, it would then be identified as a (historical) ‘period’; think, for example, of the ‘interwar period’ or the ‘Tudor period’. Lastly, the concept is also cyclical, often re-emerging at important centurial markers, in a fin-de-siècle atmosphere. Thus, the concept appears in many temporal guises.

Determining when the Pacific Century began, or will begin, is therefore a tricky proposition: What time ‘period’ is most appropriate to assign to the Pacific Century? Since the notion inextricably binds itself to a ‘century’ as the operative time span, one is charged with assigning a clear-cut 100-year period to fit the ideological conception. Although, as mentioned earlier, there are several potential historical periods contending for the label ‘Pacific Century’, dating back to Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan’s ingress into the Pacific Ocean in 1521, or the activities of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) from the end of the sixteenth century, the vast majority of the discourse is based upon the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Frank Gibney, writing in 1992, identified the end of the twentieth century as marking the beginning of the Pacific Century. He presented a strong case, contending that the period of sequential Japanese, Korean, and Chinese economic modernisations from the 1960s to the 1990s, plus the rise of other newly industrialising economies such as Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, and Hong Kong, was ushering in the Pacific Century. In this respect, the epoch of economic take-off in the 1980s ‘primed the pump’ for the materialising twenty-first-century Pacific era. Mark Borthwick (1998: 1) declaims that ‘the next century may bear the sobriquet of the great ocean, but it will be the product of the century that is now passing’. Other scholars identify the start of the twentieth century as the catalyst, the beginning point for the ‘rise of the East’ and the corresponding ‘descent of the West’ (Ferguson 2007). Korhonen (1996: 49) posits that ‘[t]he Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 changed with one stroke the strategic landscape of the Pacific and the atmosphere of discussion’. At the very time when Oswald Spengler was brooding over the ‘decline of the West’, Theodore Roosevelt claimed that ‘[t]he Pacific Era, destined to be the greatest of all, is just at its dawn’ (Spengler 1922: 1). Whether one looks to the start or the end of the twentieth century for the commencement of a Pacific epoch, Borthwick (1998: 1) concludes: ‘Used most frequently with reference to the future, the term more accurately reflects the past’.

Yet, there are further conceptual caveats to be considered. Korhonen (1996: 43) asserts that ‘[t]ime is measured in terms of centuries. Progress, on the scale of civilisations, cannot be discerned with shorter time periods’. Yet, from a critical perspective it is not essential to be bound by centurial mileposts. The notion of a Pacific Century as literally a 100-year bloc permits us to determine
a start point in 1980, for example, but, without a perspective from 2080, it is impossible to be anything more than conjectural. Following a less constrained interpretation, it does not even have to equal precisely 100 years. Consider, for example, the so-called ‘Hundred’ Years War (1337–1453) in European history, or Eric Hobsbawm’s (1994) *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* in terms of academic composition. Viewed from a non-Western, specifically Chinese perspective, the operative module of time was not ‘centuries’ at all, until they adopted it as a measurement of time or *shiji* in the twentieth century.³ The Chinese thought in terms of imperial dynasties from the Xia (2200–1750BC) to the Qing (1644–1911), as did the Japanese. Finally, the ancient Greeks made a conceptual distinction between two forms of time. While *chronos* simply appertains to the quantitative measurement of chronological or sequential time, *kairos* is employed to capture an opportunite or ‘supreme moment’—an epoch in which something qualitatively distinctive transpires. According to Eric White (1987: 13), *kairos* refers to ‘a passing instant when an opening appears which must be driven through with force if success is to be achieved’. This conforms well with the ideological visions of the Pacific Century enumerated above.

Yet, there is one last constituency one must take into account—those sceptics who believe a ‘Pacific Century’ is not being experienced at all. Chris Dixon and David Drakakis-Smith (1995: 75) contend that ‘[i]n most cases assertions that the “Pacific Century” has either arrived or is imminent have been largely unsupported’ (see also Kraar 1999). Writing in 1999, Foot and Walter (1999: 269) declared that ‘the Pacific century has not arrived and is not likely any time soon’ (see also Hick 2005).

A ‘place’

The last parameter to be considered is *spatial*. The vision must be bound to a definite region. What comprises the ‘Pacific region’? This may be self-evident to a geographer, but there is surprisingly little consensus on how the region is politically demarcated, replicating the difficulties faced in defining ‘Europe’, for example. Dixon and Drakakis-Smith (1995: 75) argue that ‘regional definitions are notoriously difficult to establish’. This is compounded by the diverse geographical descriptors applied to this particular region. The terms ‘Asia-Pacific’ and ‘Pacific Rim’ appear to be the most popular appellations for classifying the region (but the correlative ‘Pacific Asia’ and ‘Pacific Basin’ are also encountered). However, ‘they are seldom clearly defined and all too often used as interchangeable’ (ibid.). This is problematic, since without clear definitions it is difficult to specify the exact referent under study.

The term preferred by many IR scholars, including this one—‘Asia-Pacific’—tends to signify all the states of the Western seaboard of the Pacific Ocean, plus the Indian subcontinent (‘South Asia’) and the United States. For
Barry Desker (2008: 56), ‘[i]t includes the countries located on and within the edges of the Pacific Ocean, as well as India, which is beginning to play an important role in the politics of the region’. In other words, the Asia-Pacific includes all the APEC members, plus India. The remainder of the American continent and the smaller island groupings of the South Pacific figure only in the most marginal capacity, if at all. The term ‘Pacific Rim’, once popular, appears to be falling out of use. This designation would not include any state that does not border on the Pacific Ocean and would reinstate the importance of the Pacific islands and Latin America, while excluding India and land-locked Asia. In both cases, however, the exact boundaries for territorial inclusion/exclusion and delimitation are often blurred.

Why specify a ‘region’ as a referent for inquiry? Under the interdisciplinary rubric of ‘area studies’, geographical regions of the world are increasingly viewed as coherent ‘units of analysis’ in their own right (see, for example, Beeson 2007; Dent 2008; Farrell et al. 2005; Frost 2008; Kuijper 2008; Pempel 2005; Soderbaum and Shaw 2003). Rodrigo Tavares (2008: 107) argues that ‘[i]mportant aspects of international politics tend to be regional rather than fully global or exclusively national’. The tendency toward ‘regionalism’ is thus becoming widespread in IR. Take the ‘regional security complex’ concept developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), for example. This exemplifies the recognition that regions and subregions demonstrate distinct transnational (and transregional) interaction patterns, through the movement of people, goods, and knowledge; known as ‘globalisation’ (or perhaps ‘regionalisation’, in this case). Fernand Braudel’s (1972) Mediterranean world is one such (historical) example, and one that finds a parallel in the Pacific region. The legacy of trading networks and ethno-political divisions established by the Western colonial powers since the Vasco da Gama epoch is still present in certain regional affinities and animosities.

Again, from a critical perspective, precise geographical demarcations may not be strictly necessary to operationalise the concept, since Björn Hettne argues, after all, that there are no ‘natural’ regions: definitions of a ‘region’ vary according to the problem or question under investigation. Moreover, it is widely accepted that it is how political actors perceive and interpret the idea of region and notions of ‘regionness’ that is critical: all regions are socially constructed and hence politically contested (Hettne 2005: 544).

Moreover, Arif Dirlik (1995: 135) alerts us to the fact that ‘[d]efinitions of the Pacific are part of the very struggle over the Pacific they seek to describe’. This demonstrates that regions are social constructs designed to serve some ideological or otherwise political purpose. Rudd’s conception of the ‘Asia-Pacific Century/Community’ is no different, in that it defines the region according to Canberra’s preference to act as a ‘middle-power’ bridge between
East Asia and the Anglo-Saxon powers of the Pacific, namely the United States and Oceania. Thus, he declares that ‘[f]or the first time in the settled history of this continent, we find ourselves in the region that will be at the centre of global affairs’ (cited in Colebatch 2008). This provides the necessary spatial arena on which to project the political visions of the Asia-Pacific Century/Community. Thus, it ‘maps political; desire onto geography’ (Poole 2006: 27).

Summary

This section shows us that the concept of an imminent Pacific Century has always been deployed in a certain historical, political, and cultural milieu. It is an ideational and largely subjective term: it is coined by some party for some scheme, recalling Robert Cox’s (1986: 207) maxim that ‘theory is always for someone and for some purpose’; that is, there is ‘no view from nowhere’. Unlike the monikers ‘American Century’, ‘Chinese Century’ and ‘Asian Century’, which are explicitly ethnocentric conceptions (and distinctly competitive attempts at ‘speech acts’), the ‘Pacific Century’ has the merit of being inclusive, and thus more universally acceptable. Note that the article employs the term ‘Pacific Century’ rather than ‘Asia-Pacific’ or ‘Chinese Century, in order to maintain continuity with its previous usage, but demonstrates throughout how the parameters of the concept in its most recent manifestation have changed accordingly.


This section first establishes the parameters of the author’s chosen ‘Pacific Century’ as an empirical referent for study, informed by the analytical framework presented above. This is followed first by an application of the ‘traditional’ (realist and pluralist) and then ‘critical’ schools of IR theory to the concept. We thus enter the second and third debates encompassed in the article: ‘rationalism versus constructivism’ and ‘rising China’, framed within the context of the first debate on the ‘Pacific Century’, outlined above.

Recognising that certain concepts can be tractable—even contestable—is one thing, yet in order to proceed with a cogent and sustainable argument, one must take a position. In order to lend some coherency to the following analysis, I have decided to set the following parameters and priorities. First, the thesis expounded and case study to be interrogated here are the idea of a Chinese-led Pacific Century. Parag Khanna (2008: 257) asserts that ‘[t]he Pacific era will be led by China—and no one else’. Even as far back as 1809, Emperor Napoleon predicted: ‘Quand la Chine s’œuvlera, le monde entier tremblera’ (‘When China awakes, the whole world will tremble’) (Peyrefitte 1980). The tremors are now unmistakable. Policy makers are alive to China’s growing potential and the ‘rise of China’ debate has gathered huge momentum in the field of IR (see, for
example, Kang 2007; Overholt 1993; Sutter 2005). Kenneth Lieberthal, Director of the China Institute of the University of Michigan, says of the Chinese: ‘I think they believe that the 21st century is China’s century’ (cited in Elliott 2007: 34). A recent article, ‘The Chinese Century’, in Time (2007) indicates that this notion has now also entered the popular consciousness. This vision therefore portends the coming of *pax sinica*, spreading across Asia and beyond, into the Pacific world.

Second, in designating a time frame for this Pacific Century, I have opted for the chronological period 1949–2050 in a compromise between the historians, ideologues, and futurologists, and in accord with the notion of a *kairos*, extrapolated above. My rationale for selecting this time frame is as follows. The epoch opens with Mao Zedong proclaiming to the masses gathered in Tiananmen Square that ‘China has stood up’. The People’s Liberation Army’s victory in the Chinese Civil War (1945–9) represented the unification of the mainland under a strong state, with the Communists declaring this a moment of ‘national salvation’ (*geming jinguo*) (Weng 2000: 100). The government of the following decades, for all its imperfections, created an integrity and cohesion to the Chinese polity that laid the foundations for the economic ‘take-off’ under Deng Xiaoping to the booming China of today. The denouement of China’s Pacific era will occur by the mid twenty-first century, appropriately the centennial of the end of the ‘century of humiliation’ (1840s–1940s), where China was subject to quasi-colonisation by the Western powers. The year 2050, by some estimates, also represents the point when the Chinese economy will overtake the US economy, with all the implications that entails (Fengming 2006). In the teleological rhetoric of the Communists, this will represent the realisation of *gaige xingguo* (‘national prosperity’) for the Chinese people. Since the period straddles the recent past, the present, and looks toward the future, it is highly amenable to IR theories and presents much material for consideration.

Evidently, the organising idea of this Pacific Century places the People’s Republic of China at the core of the following analysis, since in Borthwick’s view (1998: 546), it is ‘China’s resurgence … that poses the central questions for the coming Pacific Century’ (emphasis added). There is strong justification for this. The People’s Republic of China is now an economic powerhouse fundamental to the wider notion of Asian resurgence as it is embodied in the Pacific Century vision. However, this is not to suggest that the unfolding Pacific Century era is in any way confined *exclusively* to the so-called ‘Middle Kingdom’. David Kang declares that ‘the Rest of Asia is increasingly tied up with China’s rise’ (cited in Pan 2006). For example, it is estimated that when the economies of Japan and Korea are added to the Chinese, the three together will account for 50 percent of the world’s gross domestic product by 2050 (Desai 2006). Nor should we overlook India as a major player in the dawning Pacific Century, defined broadly. Seema Desai (2006) affirms that ‘India has the potential to raise its US dollar income per capita in 2050 to 35 times current levels’. Though China occupies centre stage (especially for realists), readers
should be alert to the major roles also played by Japan, South Korea, and India, though space restrictions here preclude their detailed discussion.

**Traditional versus critical interpretations of China’s new Pacific Century**

With the analytical framework derived from the first conceptual debate having established the parameters of the new Chinese-led Pacific Century, we now arrive at the intersection of the second and third debates in this article, within this context. The article now interrogates the China case from a variety of IR perspectives. The nature and prospects of the Pacific Century look rather different depending on which school of IR one consults. This section first considers how the ‘traditional’ IR approaches of realism and pluralism view the concept before turning to the alternative conceptions offered by ‘critical’ theorists (here incorporating elements of constructivism, postmodernism, Marxism, and feminism) (see, for example, Waever 1996). All these perspectives concentrate on different aspects and offer contrasting scenarios for the unfolding Pacific Century, thus illustrating in their application the key characteristics of the ‘great debate’ between the traditional/rationalist and critical/reflectivist traditions of the IR discipline. Although the first section treads some familiar ground on the ‘rising China’ case, it is important to consider the traditional perspectives in order to recognise the ‘mainstream’ debate on rising China, and to set the context for the reflectivist critique that follows.

*‘Traditional’ perspectives: realism and pluralism*

The **realist** image of the new Pacific Century places a strong emphasis on rising Chinese power and offers a somewhat pessimistic outlook for the future. This is not surprising given its introspective philosophical foundations, based upon the writings of Thucydides, Niccolo Machiavelli, and Thomas Hobbes, all of whom concentrated upon the more negative traits of human and state behaviour (Hobbes 1958; Machiavelli 1981; Thucydides 1972). Realist analysis prioritises issues of ‘high politics’—military security, state diplomacy, and great power rivalry. Above all, it is concerned with shifts in the international ‘balance of power’ (Walt 1987; Waltz 1979). With respect to the Pacific region, analysts identify that a structural shift is under way, in which China will eventually equal, if not exceed, the aggregate power of the United States, thus ‘threatening’ the current hegemon (Galen Carpenter 2006). Offensive realists, such as John Mearsheimer (2003), highlight the propensity for states to maximise their power. It is well known that the achievement of ‘comprehensive national power’ (*zonge guoli*) is an important facet of Beijing’s grand strategy to realise its Chinese Century (Pillsbury 2000). These factors will result in a ‘security dilemma’—a condition of exacerbated mistrust between the United States and its allies and a newly powerful People’s Republic of China. Realist balance of
power theory predicts that this will spur the formation of competing alliance blocs. Indeed, it could be argued that this dynamic is already taking shape, as seen from the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 1996 and the inauguration of a tighter US–Japanese–Australian trilateral relationship in 2006 (Wilkins 2007, 2010).

From the realist viewpoint, there are two possible consequences of this trend. The contest for superiority could remain ‘cold’, like the stand-off between the United States and the USSR from 1947–91. This would still likely involve another regional, if not global, arms race. As China’s economy grows, it is devoting increasing resources to its defence budget in order to achieve a ‘Revolution in Military Affairs with Chinese Characteristics’ (Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China 2004). The acquisition of advanced arms from Russia and the recent demonstration of anti-satellite weapon capabilities are indicative of China’s increasing ‘hard’ power. Whether mutual nuclear deterrence between China and its rivals will keep competition stable and non-violent remains to be seen. Other realist commentators believe that China’s rise is occurring in a climate of instability, and that simmering conflicts could lead to a ‘hot’ (that is, ‘shooting’) war. Aaron Friedberg (1994; based on John Mearsheimer’s thesis) has sought to draw parallels between Asia’s ‘future’ and Europe’s ‘past’, especially the period of international tension prior to 1914. In this scenario, regional flashpoints, such as the Taiwan Strait, the Spratly Islands, or even North Korea, could act as the spark that lights the powder keg of general war, reminiscent of the 1914 assassination in Sarajevo. Thus, Samuel Huntington concludes that ‘Asia has replaced Europe as the principal area of instability and political conflict’ (cited in Martin 2006: 59).

In both the ‘cold’ and ‘hot’ rivalry scenarios, a key challenge is how to incorporate the reawakening Chinese ‘giant’ into the existing regional and international order. Again, historical parallels with Europe have been drawn, particularly the problem of assimilating a powerful and united Germany into the European system from 1871 onwards. As Desker (2008: 57) notes: ‘The rise of great powers and the challenge they pose to existing hegemons have been marked by violence throughout history’. The Chinese Communist Party is also mindful of the failed Japanese bid to realise its concept of *Hakkō Ichibu* (‘four corners of the world under one [Japanese] roof’) through military force and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere project during the 1930s–1940s. Beijing is acutely aware of these analogies and its declared foreign policy of *Zhongguo heping jueqi* means ‘peaceful rise’. Realist sceptics naturally assume this to be thinly disguised realpolitik that conceals future hegemonic ambitions. They note that, based upon the writings of Sun Zi, the Chinese are past masters in the art of strategic deception (Clavell 1981; Sawyer 2007). It will be remembered that Deng Xiaoping once exhorted the country to ‘hide its ambitions and disguise its claws’ (*taoguang yanghui*) (Xinhua, 2007).
Pluralists of all persuasions alight on the prospects for regional peace and prosperity and are less transfixed by the spectre of Chinese pre-eminence than the realists.\(^9\) Pluralism takes the writings of John Locke (1979) and Immanuel Kant (2005) (among others) as its philosophical points of reference. Rather than concentrating on the relative benefits to be gained by individual state competition, they are more transnational in approach, focusing on the absolute benefits that may be enjoyed by all through enhanced regional cooperation. This also includes a consensus on the need to move beyond state-centric military conceptions of security to incorporate economic, environmental, and human concerns onto the regional security agenda.\(^10\) There are several overlapping ‘liberal’, ‘institutionalist’, and ‘idealist’ props to the overall vision of the pluralists with regard to the Pacific Century.

First, liberals identify that due to the process of globalisation—especially its economic dimension—a condition of ‘complex interdependence’ now exists between Asia-Pacific nations. Robert Manning and Paula Stern argue:

The widespread hope is that the compelling force of geo-economics and information age flows of capital, information, and people is creating a new calculus and redefining interests in the Pacific in a way that will offer new possibilities for cooperation (Manning and Stern 1994: 93).

The close interconnection between economics and security will ensure both a prosperous and peaceful coming Pacific Century. Since all the developed or developing states in the regions are dependent upon one another for trade, investment, and markets, any state contemplating an initiation of military conflict will be inhibited by the economic damage it would inflict upon itself. Peace will therefore obtain. China is playing a crucial role in this respect. Beijing’s Zhongguo heping jueqi foreign policy and the principles of its ‘new security concept’ are illustrative of this thinking (Li and Wei 1997). According to Esther Pan (2006): ‘The policy asserts that China can thrive economically in a peaceful environment and also serve as a catalyst for global peace.’ Indeed, a closer look at China’s notion of ‘comprehensive national power’ reveals the importance that Beijing ascribes to elements of ‘soft’ power, such as language, culture, and the role of the Chinese diaspora, rather than the military power potential that captivates realists (Kolantzick 2008). One of the key props of this ‘charm offensive’ is the government establishment of Confucius Institutes attached to university campuses across the region, including Australia’s most prestigious institutions. The People’s Republic of China has therefore styled itself as foremost among the proponents of a pluralist order in the Asia Pacific seeking a ‘harmonious world’ (hexie shijie).

Second, reinforcing this impetus toward cooperation, institutionalists draw attention to the capacity of international and multilateral organisations to govern the region and overcome or resolve disputes between states. Institutions such as APEC and ASEAN, with all its variants, are key components of regional
governance. According to Mark Berger and Douglas Borer (1997: 1): ‘APEC is emerging as a key institutional nexus of liberal ... visions of the Pacific Century.’ These institutions serve as a strong foundation upon which an increasingly comprehensive and effective ‘security community’ may be built in the future. Kevin Rudd (2007) observes: ‘Whether therefore, the Pacific Century will in fact be pacific will depend on ... the robustness of the region’s as yet fragile institutional architecture.’ This lies at the heart of his vision to create a regional economic and security community by 2020. However, even the brightest optimist would concede the idea of a unified and peaceful ‘Pacific Community’ still has a long way to go due to the uneven economic and political development of the region. ‘Trade, investment and a Pacific coastline do not necessarily make for a broader sense of community’, according to Manning and Stern (1994: 80).

Finally, reinforcing the institutionalist position, idealists contend that the wider spread of democracy and ongoing democratic reform in the region will result in a sustainable, even ‘perpetual’, peace in the future. Based upon the assumption that democracies do not fight each other, the more democratic the region becomes, the more conflict between states will diminish toward a zero point (Brown 1996). Although the regimes of Myanmar and North Korea do little to inspire optimism on this front, the successful transformation of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan along democratic lines sets a positive precedent, one it is hoped that China in particular will emulate. Hung-mao Tien and Tun-jen Cheng (2000: 15) identify that: ‘In this region ... the Kantian “Pacific Community” among liberal states has yet to emerge.’ Since the 1989 Tiananmen episode, China-watchers avidly search for signs of democratic progress or regression. Managing an increasingly liberal and pluralist society based on economic progress but lacking real democratic participation will be perhaps the key challenge Beijing will have to contend with if it is to achieve its Pacific Century. At present, the Communist Party leadership have identified this eventuality as the ‘threat of peaceful evolution’ (heping yanbian), to be guarded against (Ong 2001).

‘Critical’ perspectives: constructivism/postmodernism, Marxism and feminism

There is little consensus on the exact definition and composition of critical theories in IR. Many traditionalists would also question their validity and desirability as IR perspectives, and this ‘inter-paradigm’ debate—the dispute between the traditional or ‘rationalist’ approaches and the critical or ‘reflectivist’ approaches to IR—forms the ‘third great debate’ in the discipline. Although the critical theorists/reflectivists vary widely in their ontological assumptions, priorities, and methodologies, they are broadly united in their critique of the traditional perspectives above. There is no dedicated critical literature appertaining to either the Pacific Century or
rising China debates, but this article will now demonstrate that these approaches can be readily and profitably applied. Given the enormous diversity and complexity of critical approaches, some simplification is necessary. Aspects of social constructivism (extending to postmodernism), Marxism (including post-colonialism), and feminism are applied here.

First, social constructivists argue that reality is created and perpetuated by social practice and the meaning given to this practice. They encourage us to reflect upon received wisdom to understand its embedded contexts and multiple interpretations. Postmodernists go much further to argue that we should deconstruct all discourse to uncover the hidden ‘regimes of power’ behind it. From a constructivist standpoint, the nature of China’s rise is expressed in subjective assessments by realists and liberals. They both examine the same ‘objective’ facts and arrive at completely different interpretations. Why, for instance, as realists argue, should a more powerful and better-armed China pose a threat to regional security, while the vastly more destructive power of the American and Russian arsenals are taken for granted? Ron Huisken (2009: 7) queries, for example, the Australia Defence White Paper’s ‘unmistakably alarmist assessment of what China is about to do to order and stability in East Asia’. Moreover, Kang (2003) implies that this whole approach is unproductive and suggests that the traditionalists have misinterpreted China’s intentions and their likely impact. Rather, he points out that the hierarchical and stratified ‘tribute system’ led by China in East Asia which existed prior to its destruction by the Western colonial powers in the nineteenth century was remarkably stable and peaceful. This creates a precedent for the harmonious regional order Beijing claims to be seeking.

Postmodernists call into question all discourse as it appertains to IR analysis. For example, who has the power to brand North Korea a ‘rogue state’ or Falun Gong a ‘terrorist group’, and what are the motivations for such labelling? Passive acceptance of this discourse implies complicity with certain agendas and the foreclosing of other possibilities. The final two critical perspectives further illustrate these points. Above all, it is worth reflecting on the nature of the concept ‘Pacific Century’ as being bound to certain perceptions or agendas, as posited earlier. There exists no tangible physical entity called the ‘Pacific Century’ that is amenable to analysis in the ‘positivist’ sense of the natural sciences. Rather, it is a ‘social construction’ that implies certain accepted understandings and their replication. We must therefore recognise that the whole notion as conceived by the traditional schools is embedded in a distinct analytical context—‘dominant currents in Western social science thought contributed to its propagation and reception’ (Foot and Walter 1999: 268).

With this in mind, let us explore some further examples and contradictions appertaining to the Pacific Century/China debates. The first section of this article detailed how the twentieth-century debate on the Pacific Century centred on the expansion of the Pacific Rim economies and the potential challenge to American pre-eminence posed by Japan in the 1980s. The present terms of
discourse are contested. While I have employed the term ‘Pacific Century’ as an umbrella term on account of its greater familiarity to the reader, there are two other iterations currently offering contending versions on the theme. First are the proponents of an ‘Asian Century’, championed by Mahbubani and others, who seek to cast the coming Pacific Century as an exclusively Asian achievement. They wish to omit the United States and Oceania from this vision, both in ideational and material terms (for example, exclusion from regional organisations). This stands at odds with the new Australia-championed vision of the ‘Asia-Pacific Century’, in which the United States and Oceanic powers are firmly embedded, both in the vision and in the regional institutional architecture (see above, pp. 389–90). The enunciation of an ‘Asia-Pacific Century’ not only has the virtue of extending the project to India but, in deference to the former variation, also accords Asia a greater measure of recognition and respect.

It is interesting to note on closer inspection how this more inclusive, communitarian vision of an ‘Asia-Pacific Century/Community’ has paradoxically taken on a realist bent. It would appear that the Australian Defence White Paper wittingly or unwittingly seeks to ‘securitise’ or even ‘militarise’ the Asia-Pacific Century, as evinced by Canberra’s planned military build-up, which occurs in correlation with Beijing’s military modernisation. Thus, despite its phatic overtones, the Pacific Century is something one needs to be prepared for, or to defend against. On the other hand, liberal versions of Chinese soft-power-based peace in the region may be overstated. ‘Peaceful rise/development’, ‘new security concept’ and ‘harmonious world’ are, after all, prime examples of speech acts designed to set the terms of discourse in Beijing’s terms. Despite such charm offensives as the 2008 Olympics, China’s authoritarian government attracts few admirers, nor does it possess any ideology that holds widespread appeal.

Thirdly, Marxist theorists focus on the economic and class injustices that qualify some of the reports of glowing prosperity integral to the Pacific Century vision. Increasing diffusion of the capitalist ‘world system’ across the Asia-Pacific is creating divisions between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ (Wallerstein 2004). The fruits of the Pacific Century have yet to be enjoyed by all the region’s states, and even huge sections within these states themselves. China is a case in point. The accumulating prosperity of the urban coastal belt of China, the gaige xingguo of Chinese ideologues, is not reaching the vast swath of the interior rural heartland. According to a recent government survey, 200 million Chinese subsist on less than US$1 a day, the standard indicator of poverty. Rural inhabitants on average earn less than a third of their urban counterparts and suffer from correspondingly low levels of education and mortality, a situation exacerbated by widespread corruption (National Bureau of Statistics, cited in Telegraph 2006). The resultant mass internal migrations and the rural protest movements that are developing have the potential to derail the Chinese Century if the Communist Party fails to address them adequately, according to
Susan Shirk (2007). History points toward social upheaval or revolution when rising economic, social, or political expectations remain unfulfilled—for example, in the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917. Indeed, the very legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party government itself may depend not only on uninterrupted economic growth, but also a more egalitarian distribution of its fruits.

In the broader perspective of class iniquity, what advanced countries like Japan or the United States consider ‘cheap labour’—such as factory workers in China—looks more like ‘labour exploitation’ to others, even neocolonial profiteering. Therefore, closely tied to questions of poverty and exploitation is a refocusing, first championed by Ken Booth (2005), on notions of ‘human security’. Booth contends that the military-economic security concerns of the traditionalists fail to reflect the security of the individual—the right to dignity, health, education, civil rights, and protection from persecution. This view therefore accords the priority to a Pacific Century for all, based on social ‘justice’.

Finally, the feminist approach to the Pacific Century in IR draws attention to the continued gender inequalities in countries of the Asia-Pacific. The condition of ‘structural violence’—the physical and emotional abuse that many women still continue to suffer in the region—is sometimes allied to their ‘second-class citizen’ status and lack of educational or economic opportunity in certain countries (Tickner 1992). In the first instance, female infanticide (often through ‘selective abortions’) in China (and India) is not only morally abhorrent but is resulting in a major demographic gender imbalance. In the second respect, women in China still experience discrimination and limits to their career advancement, especially in more patriarchal rural areas. Li Xiaoyun of China Agricultural University records that ‘gender inequality still commonly exists in almost all social aspects including political power, education, health, employment and assets possession’ (Xinhua 2005). This dynamic is not confined to Chinese society, but is also marked in highly advanced nations such as Japan with its so-called ‘rice paper ceiling’ for women. As a result, feminists would argue that the Pacific Century mainly represents yet another male-dominated project in which injustices against women are not addressed.

Conclusions
The first section of this article sought to gain purchase on the ‘Pacific Century’ concept through the creation of an originally designed analytical framework to define and structure our understanding of its multiple meanings and uses. The second section, in applying this framework to the case study of a new Chinese-led Pacific Century in tandem with traditional and critical IR approaches, demonstrates the efficacy of the framework and the rich explanatory power brought to the table by the competing IR schools. Through the synergy of the
‘Pacific Century’, ‘rising China’ and ‘third great IR’ debates, an elaborate and nuanced analysis may be brought to bear on this multifaceted subject.

In particular, the first section showed that the Pacific Century is a sophisticated and tractable concept. By drawing together the disparate strands of the Pacific Century debate and schematising them into a dedicated analytical framework, a more coherent understanding can be achieved. By structuring the concept according to its ideological, temporal, and spatial parameters, it reveals the coexistence and tensions between the term ‘Pacific Century’ as a political (or ‘normative’) enterprise and an intellectual (or ‘objective’) frame of reference. The concept has been employed to capture the Zeitgeist of a perceived epoch-making experience. Its exact dimensions will be determined largely by whichever state is in the ‘driving seat’ of the Pacific Century at that given time, whether it be Japan and the United States in the past, or Asia/China in the present. Regardless of its occasional repackaging as ‘Asian’ or ‘Asia-Pacific’ Century, the basic premise reoccurs. It is important that we not lose sight of this much maligned term as a result of its diminution after the temporary setback of the Asian financial crash of 1997/1998 and current global financial crisis. As Korhonen (1996: 69) notes: ‘When more difficult times have arrived, the vision has always disappeared from discussion.’ Nevertheless, the longevity of the concept is assured. In the 1850s, William H. Seward, future US Secretary of State, was credited with prophesying that ‘the Pacific Ocean, its shores, its islands, and adjacent territories will become the chief theater of human events and activities in the world’s great hereafter’ (cited in Korhonen 1996: 45–6).

Whatever the time span, the general trend toward a Pacific Century (or its Chines, Asian, or Asia-Pacific variants) still obtains. As Arnold Toynbee (1948: 55) observed: ‘civilisation is a movement, and not a condition, a voyage, not a harbour’.

The second section of the article, after applying the analytical framework to depict a new Chinese-led Pacific Century, investigated the utility of competing IR approaches toward interpreting its significance and likely trajectories. The analysis has shown that due to its ideological roots, it is the pluralist approach that is most compatible with the teleological aspects of the ‘Pacific Century’ concept, focusing optimistically on institutional cooperation and the economic prosperity. This, of course, presupposes that economic advancement is not disrupted, and current indictors on this score are not positive, in light of the global recession. Desker (2008: 60) points out that ‘the worst case scenario is where China’s economy collapses, its political situation implodes, and it embraces a military adventurism that wreaks havoc on the regional order’. Thus, the liberal vision succumbs to realist predictions. Realists, of course, argue in any case that a Chinese-led Pacific Century will incubate great power rivalry and potential regional conflict. For them, ‘[t]he Pacific century may turn out to be far from peaceful’ (The Economist 1995).

The critical approaches in some ways see this peace/conflict dyad as a false dichotomy. Constructivist and postmodernist approaches question the...
embedded meanings of a Pacific Century, its implicit agendas, and reveal the contest for control of the conceptual discourse evident in competing rhetorical labels. Thus, the contending Pacific, Asia-Pacific, Asian, and Chinese Century ‘speech acts’ all hold differing emphases and different connotations. Marxists and feminists argue for a reconstitution of any traditionalist liberal or power-based order, and its transformation into a more just and inclusive one. From this standpoint, the Pacific Century would therefore incorporate those excluded or underprivileged in the traditional approaches—the economically disadvantaged and women.

Notes

1. The term ‘Pacific Century’ has often been accompanied by the term ‘Pacific Community’, though the two are not synonymous. For debate on the separate issues of ‘Asia-Pacific Civilisation’ and ‘Asia-Pacific Community’, see Manning and Stern (1994) and Yamazaki (1996).

2. These variations on the theme each involve nuances in how the thesis is organised and advanced, but I have decided here to employ the term ‘Pacific Century’ both as a departure point from which to frame the debate and to act as a permissible umbrella term to broadly encompass the differentiations above (see Dirlik 1995).

3. Thanks to Edward Melillo for the introduction of this term.

4. A term identified in Buzan (1991) to facilitate security analysis of particular regions or ‘subregions’. This is further elaborated in Adib-Moghaddam (2006) and Buzan and Wæver (2003).

5. For a popular overview, see Shenkar (2005); for IR analysis, see Scott (2008); and for a historical overview, see Spence and Chin (1996). India, though potentially a major player, does not at present have the capacity to lead the Pacific Century due to a number of serious structural weaknesses. Moreover, it is only debatably part of the ‘Asia-Pacific’ region.

6. The basic tenets of the varying IR schools will be familiar to those working in the field (see Baylis and Smith 2005; Steans and Pettiford 2005).

7. Space precludes a detailed separation of all of the variants of the realist school. For ‘classical’ realism, see Wight (1978); for its neo-realist variant, see Buzan et al. (1993).


9. ‘Pluralism’ is an umbrella term for several related branches of thought in IR, including liberalism, neo-liberalism, intuitionalism, idealism and the ‘English School’. All are affiliated with an overall liberal ‘world view’ (see, as starting points, Keohane and Nye 1977; Moravcsik 1997).

10. For an introduction to ‘soft security’ and the ‘broad’ security agenda, see Buzan (1991).

11. There exists a dense network of regional organisations with varying memberships. For a conceptual overview, see Acharya (2007) and Aggarwal and Morrison (1998).

12. The previous great debates of IR centred on ‘realism versus idealism’ and ‘traditionalism versus behaviouralism’ (see Steans and Pettiford 2005: 182–3).

13. It is impossible to even begin unravelling the debate here (see Roach 2007; Weber 2004).

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