

THE EVOLUTION OF THE SINO-AMERICAN NEXUS, WITH A VIEW FROM WASHINGTON: FROM HOSTILITY TO SMART APPEASEMENT AND BACK

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Abstract: Considering the recent series of events and intensified diplomatic and economic relations, many experts envisage a new Cold War between the two superpowers of the twenty-first century. Although the Chinese-American relationship over the last half-century has experienced some great moments, it has mostly been characterised by less amicable or even hostile attitudes, as well as economically volatile competition. The pragmatic realist approach and diplomatic appeasement of the 1970s and 1980s served mutual interests for the two countries against their common foe, the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, concerning their political values and visions, the democratic US and the Marxist-Maoist People's Republic of China have proven to be two irreconcilable political and social experiments, worlds apart from each other's spheres and paradigms. Within the context of the drastically altered global political milieu of the new millennium, the two great powers have manoeuvred themselves into heated confrontational positions over the last decade, not even excluding the possibility of a severe clash of interests in the future.

Keywords: China, USA, competition, new Cold War, appeasement, hegemony

Introduction

History teaches us that great powers usually cannot stand alone for a long time on the stage of international theatre, especially superpowers like ancient Rome, the medieval Mongol empire, or the vast British Empire. For the last hundred years, the United States has been performing as the agenda-setting actor of global affairs, possessing historically unprecedented economic and political influence as well as power projection abilities in the world.

Great powers tend to ascend to their zenith and gradually reach the maximum of their power projection capacities within a few decades or over a century. In the next phase, they inevitably eagerly try to hold their positions against the newly emerging challengers, attempting to hinder and mitigate their foreseeable decline by all means (Kennedy, 1988). If they neglect any aspect of their power resources, e.g. their economic, cultural, or military capacities, they will certainly be doomed to fail and be ousted from the top of the world. Within the nexus of the superpower United States and the emerging new rival power China, we could recently witness a phase of great power muscle testing, which primarily manifested in economic and political competition for determining the global agenda and the trade routes of the world during the second half of the twenty-first century.

This paper provides a concise retrospective insight into the most important features and evolution of the controversial bilateral relations between the US and the People's Republic of China, starting from the 1970s Cold War-era great diplomacy of *Asia First* policies, as the American foreign political strategy focus aligned with the changing priorities. The second part of the study provides a brief analysis of the nature of the contemporary bilateral relations between the old-new adversaries on the world stage. This is also labelled by some analysts and policy-makers (Weinstein, 2019) as a revisited, twenty-first century new Cold War competition between the rising, expansionist, communist China, and the established power of the West, evidently personified by its leading power, the United States. The great doyen of American diplomacy Henry Kissinger, also assessed the tense relationship between the two great powers as “being in the foothill of a new Cold War” (Bloomberg, 2021).

Many experts of international relations claim that the explicit criteria of a new Cold War scenario are mostly missing from this great power rivalry. However, the concerning relationship controversial as it may be, the eligible component factors validating the often-quoted Cold War condition tend to alter rather promptly and unpredictably. One of the most vocal critical views of the frequently revisited Cold War theory has been expressed by Columbia University professor Thomas Christensen (2021), who argues that there are no prevailing conditions for applying this belligerent terminology in bilateral relations defined predominantly by economic rivalry.

Nevertheless, the option of disengagement and evolving into a hot conflict or the outburst of an *impromptu* military escalation cannot be completely excluded from this scenario. Obviously, the tasks of military and political strategists involve the analysis and elaboration of all-case scenarios, while policy and decision-makers assume the responsibility of taking these factors into consideration before making a decision.

This study focuses on how the American elite perceives China, employing a predominantly American or Western vantage point and intellectual stance. The study, therefore, does not analyse the stages of bilateral relations equally and systematically, instead it highlights the motives that may be crucial for understanding the current Sino-US relationship.

History teaches us that win-win situations or benign conflict resolutions are quite rare in the context of fierce great power competition, although the frequently cited ancient Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu wittily suggests that “the supreme excellence and greatest victory is the one fought and won without a battle” (Sun Tzu, 2007, p.22). Transferred into a twentieth and twenty-first-century global political context, many experts argue that the mutual interest of the two great adversaries would in practice manifest in the recognition of *smart appeasement* in their relations (Harris, 2021, pp.129-135). From this standpoint, the tactical calculations and risk assessments of loss and win in case of a potential military confrontation between the two great powers tend to render a more prudent, cautious approach in coping with their clash of interests.

Nevertheless, taking their capacities into consideration, both countries have the ability and eagerness for a milder as well as a more volatile stand-off. The outcome relies both on economic and political factors as well as

less rational factors, such as hurt feelings, especially when considering the growing Chinese nationalistic pride, supplemented with the idealistic zeal for global hegemony.

The Beginning of Appeasement

The 1970s, with its anti-Soviet containment, deterrence, détente strategies, MAD-doctrine¹, and Domino-theory², undoubtedly proved to share different global scenarios and political conditions. The shocking political and military trauma and domestic social drama of the Vietnam war truly overshadowed the legitimacy and *raison d'être* of the American grand strategy aiming to contain and roll back Soviet-style communism in Southeast Asia, fearing its covert penetration into Indonesia or even reaching its key strategic ally, Australia. As Robert McNamara, the influential Secretary of Defense of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, asserts in his memoir, the American strategy was basically correct in Indochina, although the tactics, methods, and communications were completely wrong and counterproductive.

Furthermore, American strategists and policymakers like McNamara came to the disillusioning recognition that they cannot win a war or conflict without the support of the people they were supposed to be championing, i.e. the great majority of the Vietnamese people. The US also lost the psychological and communication war on the home front, in the living rooms of the American homes, and most significantly, on university campuses and in newsrooms. The tide of events turned even more gloomy when millions of Americans had to witness the dramatic pictures of the fall of Saigon on 5 April, 1975, followed by the fall of Laos and Cambodia less than two weeks later. Although it may seem of secondary importance in terms of political history, it is worth mentioning that the communist Chinese regime also supported the communist red armies of North Vietnam with a significant amount of military and financial aid in their desperate fight against the United States and the South Vietnamese forces (Bush, 2021). However, as a strange twist in history, soon after the end of the Vietnam War, the formerly reliable ideological allies turned against each other on geostrategic terms. This occurred when communist Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh started to overstretch his political and military dominance, neglecting and breaching Chinese interests in the region, as well as overtly favouring the Soviet Union.

The quite short, less than two-month military conflict in February 1979 along the Chinese-North Vietnamese border aimed to teach the dissenting Vietnamese a lesson, although it had a surprisingly twisted and sour end for the Chinese (Eszterhai 2014, p.26). The blitz-war was initiated by freshly rehabilitated Chinese Communist Party leader and supreme leader Deng Xiaoping, right after he had returned from his first visit to the White House in January 1979. Deng also broadly shared the anti-Soviet and anti-Vietnamese feelings of Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's influential national security advisor and *de facto* foreign policymaker. Carter, on the other hand, opposed the Chinese-Vietnamese military confrontation. Both Deng and Brzezinski had in mind the same medium-term goal: to push back Soviet influence from Indochina and come to terms with each other for the sake of tighter economic and political cooperation. Nonetheless, the underperformance of the Chinese troops in the last real war of modern China in the last half century proved to be a great lesson and experience for Deng Xiaoping's new reform-communist Chinese government, who realized the fragility and serious handicaps of their military, economic, as well as political power projection capacities. Although many American military analysts recognize the stunning pace of development of the Chinese military, especially accomplished during the last two decades (Burns 2021), it is important to note, particularly when discussing (and often unintentionally overestimating) the military might and combat experiences of the PRC, that it has not been involved in any real large-scale military conflict since the Vietnamese fiasco of 1979 (Stacks, 2021).

The various national development projects heralding the new socialist market-driven economy of China or the new way of Reform and Opening Up stemmed from the bitter experience of Premier Deng and his reformist comrades, who defined and paved the way for a new, efficient, and prosperous China into the twenty-first century. However, on the global chessboard (Brzezinski, 1998, p. 229) the new anti-Soviet Chinese geopolitical and economic strategy harmonized with the anti-Soviet American national interests and enjoyed considerable bipartisan support from the American grand strategists in Washington, including influential personalities such as Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Brent Scowcroft, and George H.W. Bush. The latter, serving as the successful and popular chief of the US liaison office in Beijing between September 1974 and December 1975, gained a significant understanding

and experience of the Chinese world, which benefitted him greatly in his future position as CIA Director, Vice President, and President of the United States (Bush, 1987, pp. 140- 145).

Shaping the secretive great power diplomacy of the US towards communist China had been initiated in the turbulent years of the late 1960s and 1970s, during the Nixon and Ford administrations, primarily characterised by Kissinger and General Brent Scowcroft's activity and series of secret visits to China (Kissinger, 1994, p. 722). Acting on classic realistic pragmatic terms in foreign relations, Kissinger and Scowcroft successfully managed to find their way to Chinese Prime Minister Zhou-Enlai and Deputy Foreign Minister Qiao Guanghua to develop an amicable relationship with the Chinese, further undermining the gloomy Chinese-Soviet relationship.

This new special bilateral approach resulted in the signing of the famous *Shanghai Communiqué* in 1972, a diplomatic breakthrough and overture in the Sino-American relations. It partly reshaped the petrified bipolar world order, and more importantly, it legitimized the Maoist People's Republic of China on the world stage, which the Communist Party leader had really wished to achieve. Some influential left-wing American intellectuals, such as Yale professor R. Lippmann, also alarmed Kissinger as well as many conservative realists when they claimed that two similar totalitarian ideologies (namely Soviet Marxist-Stalinist universalism and the American concept of exceptionalism and mission in the world) had been clashing over Indochina, aligning with the strategic dimension of the famous 'triangular diplomacy' heralded by Henry Kissinger and President Nixon (Hanhimaki, 2003). Furthermore, along with this pretext and idea-driven theory, the war, as well as the prevailing Domino-theory, could be considered utterly unjustified and illegitimate as the sheer manifestation of oppressive imperial overstretching from all parties involved.

The foreign policy of the American administrations in the 1970s was characterised by realistic pragmatic features and followed the geopolitical guidelines formulated by Kissinger and Brzezinski, which primarily aimed to strengthen American political dominance in the Far East with the help of a reformist China against the Soviets. This

diplomacy of overture and smart appeasement with China served both domestic and foreign political aims. This diplomacy could as well have been derived from Kissinger's Westphalian historic conceptuality and strategy: to cordialize prudently with the foe of your most ardent enemy and promote the balance of power equilibrium for the sake of preserving lasting peace (Kissinger, 2014, p. 313).

The thaw, gradually improving relations with China, also enabled the United States to fully counterbalance the Soviet expansionism proclaimed through the Brezhnev doctrine, which dated back to the spring of 1968, the historic moment of Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia. The Chinese reaffirmed Chairman Mao's policy on non-violent and non-expansionist China from 1969, which openly declared a protective sphere of interest over North Korea and the Taiwan, a sensitive spot for China, which regards it as a domestic political issue, also became a possible clashing point in the trilateral relations between China, Taiwan, and the US, which we can still witness decades later, today.

Nevertheless, from an American perspective, this rather isolationist Chinese attitude and the idea of a benevolent and benign regional great power only proved to be valid for the given moment and did not turn into a long-term trajectory for the future. This was reflected in Mao's famous note to a bewildered President Nixon during his first visit to China in February 1972, "the smaller issue is the question of Taiwan, the big one is about the whole world!" (Kissinger, p. 725).

As a true ideological test, Deng's opening and market reforms were spectacularly challenged and put on trial during the great student demonstrations of Beijing in June 1989.

China and the US After the Cold War

President George H.W. Bush, the victor of the Cold War and the beneficiary of the unfolding 'New World Order' driven by American hegemony, regarded communist China more or less the same way as the pragmatic realist Kissinger. Following the events of Tiananmen Square, the American conservative administration preferred having an amicable but predictable communist China as a foreign partner to a vast, chaotic country with an unpredictable course and intentions. Kissinger considered universal

human rights practically incomprehensible and alien in the context of third-world countries like China, non-viable in great power diplomatic relations. An attitude and realization that seems to be valid even today after so many failed projects of democratizing and Westernizing second and third-world countries or exporting liberal democratic ideas abroad during the last half-century.³

China, following the Deng path of controlled market capitalism led by the Communist Party, chose to gain influence through economic power and intended to avoid ideological clashes and competition with the West, particularly with the United States. Taken from a Western attitude, China, along the guidelines of Deng Xiaoping's strategy and under the leadership of his successor reformist leaders, such as Jian Zemin and Hu Jintao (1991-2012) during the decades around the turn of the millennium, aimed to construct a prosperous and harmonious society. Moreover, in terms of foreign relations, China eagerly shifted towards a more participatory and global attitude, joining all the major international bodies, organizations, and treaties it had denounced for decades, such as the UN and its specialized agencies, IMF, the World Bank, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Asian Pacific Cooperation Forum (APEC), and the ASEAN Regional Forum.

During the American administrations of Presidents Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, the American foreign policy towards the 'new China' envisaged by Deng and his successors preserved the pragmatic, realist, and generally amicable attitude that alternated between the 'China First' or 'China First' and/or 'Asia First' strategic approaches towards the region (Shambaugh, 2019, p.86).

Beside the dramatic Tiananmen Square drama of 1991, some dubious incidents significantly overshadowed the bilateral relations, like the Taiwan Strait military incidents in 1995-96, the notorious Belgrade Chinese embassy bombing in 1999, or the US Air Force EP-3 surveillance-jet crisis over Hainan Island in May 2000. In this period Joseph Nye, Deputy Secretary for International Security Affairs and William Perry, Secretary of Defense in the Clinton administration suggested implementing a US strategy shift towards Asia First from the China-centric policy shared by former President G.H.W. Bush, a great proponent of Chinese appeasement.

In any case, China under Jiang Zemin played a role in the reestablishment of full-scale diplomatic ties between the US and communist Vietnam two decades after the dramatic fall of Saigon. A few years later, China also joined the American 'global war on terrorism' program and President George W. Bush's rather Manichean 'with us or against us' foreign policy doctrine following the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the US. This resulted in probably the most fruitful and constructive cooperation between the two countries in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Within the context of amicable bilateral relations with the US, the issue of cultural, religious, and civilizational appropriation has not really been part of any official Chinese political strategy or agenda, although the CCP's Central Committee has had some rather interesting confidential initiatives for its members.⁴

The Xi Era: the 'Revisionist' China of New Capabilities and Old-new Ambitions

Starting from the Obama administrations, China has become a scapegoat for the escalating tensions in the Far East (regarding North Korea and the South China Sea), as well as for the enormous American trade deficit and staggering unemployment figures (Xuetong, 2010, p. 278).

The rather volatile, even hostile American political attitude towards China started in November 2010, following the global financial crises of 2008-2009, which had affected the US badly and highlighted the significance of trade and global interdependency. During the 2010 Seoul summit, President Obama demanded clear actions from President Hu Jintao concerning North Korea and more importantly regarding the unbalanced bilateral trade relations and sovereign Chinese economic policies (Landler, 2012). With President Donald J. Trump's rise onto the zenith of the political arena in Washington, this deliberately non-amicable stance by a previously seemingly friendly United States escalated into an open and harsh technological and trade war with China. This short study does not have the space to examine whether the American viewpoint and economic assessment was realistic and authentic concerning the unfavourable trade and political relations with China, but the economic figures have overshadowed all other factors in bilateral relations.

In 2012 the new era and the new century elevated Xi Jinping to the top of the Chinese Communist Party, which also heralded a new phase in an assertive and defiant Chinese national strategy. China under President Xi has become the biggest and most dire challenger of American economic and political dominance in the world in recent years. By sharing newly developed military capabilities, skills, and economic power according to a Chinese version of the Monroe-doctrine (Holmes, 2012), China is asserting revisionist ambitions within its safety perimeter, which includes a vast region bordered by Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The exclusive protection zone or territorial waters of the South China Sea is similar to the United States' claim for the Caribbean against its rival European great powers in the early nineteenth century. In the Western and primarily American interpretation, Xi Jinping's deliberately assertive and prudently expansionist idea considers China the new-old centre of the world, as it used to be before the West had risen to world dominance between the eighteenth century and the dawn of the twenty-first century (Ferguson, 2012, pp. 344 - 346).

Based on its enormous national financial reserves, which has risen to a soaring USD 4 trillion, as well as its export powerhouse economy, President Xi Jinping's China is not rejecting the notion of revisionism any more, as his predecessors' China had cautiously tended to do. Nevertheless, contradicting the liberal optimism and idealistic expectations emphasized by scholars like Francis Fukuyama at the end of the Cold War, more market capitalism, population welfare, and impressive technologic developments have not resulted in more democracy and freedom in China. These developments have instead resulted in more political assertiveness and room for manoeuvring on the part of the Communist Party elite, who exercise efficient comprehensive control over society by applying the latest technology solutions in artificial intelligence, through the social credit system, and cyber security tools.

Based on its much-appreciated and envied economic parameters and budgetary conditions, China has become a truly global player in the twenty-first century, which cannot be neglected any more at the large table of global affairs. The extremely ambitious and financially unparalleled international trade project called One Belt One Road, or lately The Belt and Road Initiative, was launched in 2013, with the aim of expressing and projecting Chinese trade interests and infrastructural

development projects around the world, involving more than 90 partner states (CFR, 2021). Many Americans agree with the blunt assessment of French political philosopher Bernard-Henry Lévy (Lévy, 2021), who claims that the more the vast Chinese economic projects gain room in the world, especially in underdeveloped Africa, South East Asia, and Central Eastern Europe, the more the West (and primarily the US) and its civilizational impact and sphere of interest may be forced into retreat from these regions, which might result in dire consequences and a radical paradigm shift in the world (Garrett, 2017).

Along with the unprecedented economic boom and global trade expansion, the People's Liberation Army, the dedicated security guardian of Chinese trade routes and economic interests, has carried out the largest navy development program in the world since World War II, to become the largest navy in the Indo-Pacific region, with its more than 350 modern military vessels symbolically outnumbering the deployable battle force of the US Navy (ChinaPower, 2021). Hence, China's deterrence factor and power projection ambition both in trade and military terms has become crystal clear for everyone in the region.

Significantly, this concept theoretically denounces colonization or the forced global penetration of the Chinese model, as unlike that which the British Empire, the American neoconservatives, Wilsonian idealists, or the expansionist Marxist ideologues had pursued with missionary zeal in previous centuries. After the return of Hong Kong and Macao to China by the end of the twentieth century, the only missing mosaic to completing the much-desired national reunification process is evidently Taiwan. Many strategists claim that reunification with Taiwan, either coerced politically or forced explicitly by an invasion, might take place within the next five years (Oswald, 2021). This could also be triggered by the soaring Chinese national pride and emotional engagement against the Taiwanese 'renegade' Chinese republic. The only possible concern, particularly for a large-scale military escalation, comes from the famous Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, a tight security agreement between Taiwan and the US against a possible external threat.

Since the turn of the millennium, a significant change in perception has taken shape among both Democratic and Republican decision-makers, sharing the assumption that China has grown far too big, thus

threatening global trade and even the political hegemony of the United States. As a result, it is much advised to roll it back or hinder its further strengthening for the sake of the America. Several political and security analysts have extensively examined the very tense Chinese-American relations and open trade war, which took on new dimensions during the Trump administration, including intensified punitive American actions against China.

According to the timeline of diplomatic actions initiated from Washington D.C., the American State Department, following the guidelines of President Trump and especially Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, shifted from a seemingly amicable pro-trade attitude towards a more confrontational and anti-Chinese (as well as pro-Taiwanese) stance starting in 2017 and culminating in 2019-2020, the year of the Covid-19 pandemic, which also emerged from China (Ebrahimian, 2021). President Trump's phone conversation with Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen in December 2016 presumably also contributed to the significant anti-Chinese strategic approach undertaken both by President Trump and key members of his administration, which was reflected in the national security and defence strategy documents the United States issued during the following year. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo became the most ardent and vocal critic of China and the Chinese Communist Party leader's alleged eagerness for world dominance against the West (Westcott, 2019).

Moreover, the ensuing new Democratic administration led by President Joe Biden does not seem to be shifting away from the rather hostile attitude and volatile strategic approach towards China, either, judging by the latest rather heated, mutually reproachful, and strikingly non-amicable clash of public arguments at the Chinese-American summit in Anchorage, Alaska in March 2021 (Taiwan RA, 2021). The topics that defined the acrimonious discussions among the high-ranking delegation leaders of the two great powers revolved around the recurring issues of unfair trade tariffs, the bilateral trade imbalance disproportionately favouring China, the intense anti-American cybercriminal activities mostly originating from Chinese sources, and the extensive industrial and even cultural espionage activities related to Chinese big tech companies, college students, academic researchers, and even some staff members of the large network of Confucius Institutes located in the US. Not surprisingly, the most heated

spat between the delegations burst out around the controversial issue of large-scale human rights abuses and the persecution of religious groups (Chinese Christians) and ethnic minority groups (Muslim Uyghurs) in China. A few weeks before the tense Chinese-American Alaska summit, former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, when stepping down from his office in January 2021, also quite harshly condemned the ill-treatment of the Uyghurs by the oppressive Chinese authorities as modern era genocide (Borger, 2021).

It has become obvious that China defiantly rejects the Western (American) universalist idea of human rights, as well as the value-based paradigm and policy-making. According to the Chinese view defined by Xi Jinping, the People's Republic of China has its own well-defined values and core national interests, which may seem antithetic or incongruent, but from this vantage point are nonetheless inferior to the ones shared by the United States or any other country in the world. From this stance, the rivalry of great powers seems to be inevitable, which also supports the validity of neorealism in international relations, as highlighted by John Mearsheimer (2021) in his latest Foreign Affairs article.

Conclusions

As it has been shown above, ever since the 1970s, the US pragmatic realistic Chinese appeasement policy has contributed significantly to the success and implementation of Deng Xiaoping's reform policies, relying on mutual anti-Soviet sentiments and geostrategic interests. Moreover, soon after the decade-long unipolar moment of the US after the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, the steadily developing reform communist China gradually turned from a formerly neglected, secondary regional power into a real great power with ambitious goals. The PRC, led by the outstandingly assertive Xi Jinping since 2012, has become a world-class economic, financial, and political power, as well as a security threat for anyone daring to breach Chinese national interests, including their formerly covert political pseudo-ally and trade partner, the United States. As President Xi quite clearly asserted at the latest ASEAN summit in November, China does not seek hegemony over the South China Sea, nor does it coerce and exclude its smaller neighbours from its waters, it merely claims exclusive sovereign territorial status as a sort of 'first among equals' (Reuters, 2021). China also wants to avoid a volatile superpower

competition or the undesired scenario of a new Cold War with the United States. However, accomplishing its national strategies does not lack the possibility for confrontation.

During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, we could witness the clash of various near-future scenarios and perspectives regarding the Chinese-American rivalry and fight for global dominance. According to a common pessimistic-realistic Western outlook, China will soon take over leadership from the US as the biggest and bulkiest economy in the world, following more than a century of American hegemony. This trajectory and highly revered status does not imply political or military hegemony, or even an agenda-setting capacity in global affairs, although it does assume being unavoidable in most international issues. The new American administrations, particularly heralded by the rather volatile anti-Chinese sentiments of President Trump (although also with the similarly affirmative and less amicable President Biden), have shared different strategic approaches and political and economic mindsets regarding the undisputable American primacy in the twenty-first century as well.

On the other hand, beside its steadily growing economic output, the People's Republic of China seems to be lacking the necessary soft power skills to dominate and set the agenda of global affairs, having neither the extensive network of reliable allies nor, more importantly, the cultural and linguistic power tools to share its visions, ideas, and interests with the world. The Chinese cultural soft power, represented by the global network of thousands of Confucius Institutes around the world as part of the Chinese national strategy of 'going global' since 2004 (Brookings, 2021), cannot compare to the extensive web of allies, organizations, and scholarships woven by the US, not to mention the absolute world dominance of the English language and American popular culture.

In hindsight, it is clear that Deng Xiaoping's initiative and strategy of turning a mostly agrarian and rather poor, underdeveloped China into a technological and economic giant, without the ideological implications and political inheritance of the West, has proven to be a successful and productive strategy for China. The failures and disillusionment in the Central and East European countries of the former Soviet bloc that occurred from reluctantly imitating the West have not haunted China at all (Hrasztev & Holmes, 2019).

China seems to be following a similar pattern to Japan's forced national modernization project at the beginning of the twentieth century (Veblen, 1915, pp.23-38), efficiently pursuing a kind of 'state-controlled imitation method' without intellectual inclusion. This kind of national approach implies a strategy of utilizing cutting-edge Western industrial manufacturing skills and scientific and technological innovations, but it strictly avoids adopting any core element of the Western ideologies or ethics that might challenge the dominance of the ruling Communist Party. This issue of political philosophy tends to be of utmost importance within the nexus between China and the world and will likely be scrutinized further in the future.

Many disillusioned liberal as well as conservative analysts and politicians seem to share the popular theorem of American decline theory, reaffirming the mostly unjustified speculative assumption that even though the United States managed to win the Cold War against the Soviet Union, it will inevitably lose the competition against the rising Far Eastern giant power in the twenty-first century (Doshi 2021). This may result in reshaped new power structures and alliances in the second half of the century. In light of the above-mentioned conclusions, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's recent recognition of the incongruent value rift between an 'authoritarian communist China' and Western allies (2021) seems to be particularly belated, although the focus of NATO is not in the Far East.

The new Chinese paradigms and strategies reveal a broadly shared view of the ambitious Chinese national goal that just like the twentieth century belonged to America, the next one will certainly be heralded by the re-emerging superpower of China. This is seen as a historical redemption for the humiliations and minority status brought on by the Western great powers ever since the nineteenth century (Bader, 2016, p. 28).

However, many liberal (institutionalist) American political strategists, most notably Ryan Hass, Director of Chinese Affairs at President Obama's National Security Council, claim that China is not as seriously challenging and powerful as its growing economic and navy power would suggest. The United States should not seek to destroy or humiliate China, as they did with the Soviet Union in the Cold War, instead it should integrate it and advocate its diplomatic goals and trade ambitions within the

institutionalized global structures dominated by the West. Ultimately both parties must avoid any cause for the escalation of a high-level economic and political conflict into a direct military confrontation.

Nevertheless, as the classic wisdom of *realpolitik* and power perception implies, one important, if not the most important, power factor in interstate relations is trade and financial resources, both in the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries. Thus, many Washington foreign trade pundits admit rather bitterly that Americans have simply wished to build good business positions and cherished profitable relations within the vast Chinese economy ever since the 1980s without doing anything else. The American intentions and strategic plans had not included contributing to a rapidly booming Chinese economy for the sake of American interests, involving the unwanted and unpleasant outcome of facilitating the emergence of their own volatile competitor not only in economy but in world politics and even military dimensions. The covert American strategy of turning China, a tertiary regional power into a booming economy as well as a reliable but meek partner, as it had happened in the case of a defeated Japan, has neither met the American expectations, nor did it follow the roadmap outlined by the US State Department. (Kissinger, 2014, p. 381).

In contrast with the American assumptions and failed strategic objectives, China is pursuing its own national strategic pragmatic guidelines, defined by the omnipresent political power centre of the Chinese Communist Party, embodied at present by President Xi Jinping. The era of the smile diplomacy of a superficial friendship with the United States (Xuetong, 2010, p. 282) has been evidently over for several years, and the Sino-American relationship seems to be more about overt opposition than cooperation. In the new, rather multi-polar post-postmodern world order, the United States seems to be preserving its primacy and perceptible dominance, although China is clearly not following the terms and conditions of the Western world order, pursuing its own strategic objectives as a non-secondary global sovereign power.

All in all, the current nexus of the two great powers seems to be defined by controversial volatile trade actions and hostile political rhetoric, from where various scenarios (constructive as well as rather gloomy ones) may unfold, depending on the political will and the mid-term strategic objectives of the opposing parties.

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Endnotes

- 1 Mutually Assured Destruction, the idea that the ‘first striker dies second’ in the unlikely case of a total thermonuclear war. The term was coined by Donald Brennan, a strategist scholar of the Hudson Institute in 1962.
- 2 Declared by President Eisenhower in April 1954, following a decisive battle lost by the French troops against the Vietnamese revolutionary army at Diem Bien Phu. It claims that the loss of the Indochina states like ‘dominos’ against the spread of communism would have unfathomable consequences for the free world.
- 3 George Kennan’s view is worth mentioning here, who was a famous American diplomat to Moscow and an expert on the Soviet world and expansionist Marxist ideology, who considered China a less aggressive successor great power to the Soviet Union, being much more potent, goal-oriented, diligent, and shrewd than the Stalinist empire (Kennan, 1947). Following the Sino-Soviet rift of 1967, Kennan invalidated his anti-Soviet containment strategy in Asia, although he asserted that an American ‘defensive perimeter’ must be guaranteed around a fragile South Korea, Japan, and Philippines. It was not aimed against the ‘non-expansionist’ China but against the Soviet Union and the rather unpredictable North Korea (Bader, 2017, p. 17) .
- 4 CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin’s intellectual sympathy towards Protestant Christian denominations and work ethics is quite interesting. After his retirement in November 2002, he quite surprisingly mentioned that

if he had had the power, he would have adopted Protestantism as a state religion in China, it being the most beneficial spiritual product of the West beside Marxism. In the spirit of this rather curious and open intellectual proposition, the next party leader and Chinese President, Hu Jintao even organized academic briefings for the Politburo members of the Central Committee in 2007 on the importance and influence of Christianity on social equilibrium and economic productivity. However, as the level of state persecutions of various religious groups in China has been intensifying, these revolutionary and reactionary ideas have most likely remained mere intellectual experiments on the part of some members of the party elite, and the rather anti-religious national policy defined by the atheistic Marxist-Maoist doctrine has not changed much in recent decades.