

# RISE OF CHINA: GROWING STRATEGIC COMPETITION BETWEEN THE US AND CHINA

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## **Abstract**

*The emergence of China as a great power is indubitably one of the greatest perplexities in the international arena since the cold war era. Similarly, it poses challenges to the strategic position of the US. The economic and technological height of China has now become a big question mark for the US hegemony. The US has adopted some essential policies and actions like the B3W initiative and Strategic Competition Act of 2021, which label China a strategic competitor in multiple areas, including economics, technology, and military security. Such actions and policies by the US generate growing strategic competition between Beijing and Washington. However, the Chinese political elite has reservations that the US wants to curb the expansion of Chinese influence. This paper, therefore, analyses how strategic competition between China and the US increases with the rise of China, particularly after China's BRI, and how China poses a challenge or an opportunity for the US. This paper employs the Power-transition theory as an analytical framework to investigate the power transition debated among policymakers in the US and China.*

**Keywords:** China, United States, Power Transition Theory, Great Powers, Foreign Policy.

## **Introduction**

**T**he way of thinking and looking at multiple matters with various angles and handling them rationally and skilfully make any nation great, prosperous and peaceful. Likewise, Chinese policies, actions, and initiatives, such as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), portray China as becoming a dominant power of the world. After decades of isolation and devotion to economic development, the country has reimbursed to the world stage. The rise of China changes the patterns of economy, the balance of power, and politics worldwide.<sup>1</sup> China's growth is widely considered a significant challenge to the US dominant position in the global system. China has a persistent economic and military rise with a relative decline of the US power. It has developed a national economy more exceptional than the US.

Moreover, China is the only player in the present global structure that challenges US status as a potential superpower. Many scholars consider that China

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could substitute the US as the largest economy in the world by 2030.<sup>2</sup> The National Intelligence Council report on Global Trends-2025 describes that "although the US is likely to remain the single most powerful actor, the US relative strength will decline and its leverage will become more constrained."<sup>3</sup> The strategic competition between the US and China has developed a critical model during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where Washington feels uncertainties for its dominant position by the increasing influence of Beijing.

This great power competition between the two opponents could create a new geoeconomic world order because global powers in the international system try to balance their status and struggling to strengthen it.<sup>4</sup> There are shreds of evidence that former US President Donald Trump sympathized with military dominance; notably, he promoted individual values and interests.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, President Trump adopted the policy against China as a strategic competitor. The present US President, Joe Biden, has announced his policy on similar lines, including the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative. On the other hand, President Xi Jinping focuses on a world order vision of Chinese provenance, in which dominance is both a means and goal. The current trends are fuelling insecurities and instability in economic, political, technological, and ideological dimensions.

China's growing power has raised concerns in the US about losing its superpower status. Washington has been trying to contain Beijing's entrance into the global trading system for a long time. Meanwhile, the US is integrating China's neighbours and bringing them into an alliance system against China. The US is making collective defence strategies against China for delegitimizing and countering its power. In contrast, China contests the US position and economic benefits that have been acquired by the US being a dominant power. Therefore, China wants to construct politically, economically, and technologically predominant influence to win and build a tolerant sphere of influence. Resultantly, it would affect the dominant status of the US in global affairs.

Both Washington and Beijing have encountered a strategic competition where each country behaves according to its policies, strategies, and actions. Although means and mods of policies, rivalries, conflicts, and wars have been changed and modified, states are stuck in competition in various fields, such as manufacturing, health, investments, science and technology, cyberspace, military modernization, and economy.<sup>6</sup> Strategic competition between the US and China in multiple fields also increases the quest for power in global affairs. Therefore, many calculations have been made regarding strategic rivalry between Washington and Beijing. For example, both countries' strategic competition could lead them towards conflict, or they are rational enough to solve their differences through negotiations rather than opting for a violent way of eliminating disagreements.

In this regard, both nations have adopted and applied their strategic policies to operate in the international system. In the quest for power and influence, sometimes states make strict policies and take severe actions to implement them that

causes problems for other countries and involves themselves in competition and rivalry with the opponent states. US policies to compete and counter China, such as the Strategic Competition Act-2021 that labelled China a strategic competitor<sup>7</sup> and the B3W initiative<sup>8</sup> have received strong reactions from the Chinese government.

## **Power Transition Theory**

Power transition theory being a predominant school of thought in contemporary international relations postulates that powerful states secure their positions over others by providing an international order. A. F. K. Organski, in his book, "World Politics" framed power transition theory and predicted the possible consequences of China's upswing and its impact on the international order and security.<sup>9</sup> Power shifts have dangerous implications for the constancy of the global system.<sup>10</sup> Historically, dominant powers could not agree with the leadership and those disagreements disturbed the order of the international system. Resultantly, it has now become a subject of lively debate in Washington as well as in Beijing. These discussions have been broadcasting publicly in recent years. However, power transition is generally problematic because of its controversial explanatory value.<sup>11</sup> The power transition theory framework consists of various elements such as explanations, obscure prescriptions, and predictions.<sup>12</sup>

Power transfer influences both the US and China as "the logic of the power-transition theory naturally raises the concern that China's recent rapid growth portends more turmoil for the international system and the danger of heightened discord even a military collision between Beijing and Washington."<sup>13</sup> Interpretative framework sensitizes to the risks of a transfer of power, and this interpretation condenses individual than regional or local conflicts into a global hegemonic competition. Therefore, the theory has identified problems in three broader areas: challenger's satisfaction, international or regional power structures, and preventive wars from the defender.<sup>14</sup>

According to Graham Allison, "never nations rise quickly in the international rankings in all dimensions of power."<sup>15</sup> He further stated that "nearly in the 15 cases since 1500, where a rising power has emerged to challenge a ruling power, war has ensued."<sup>16</sup> To declare war on any powerful state would be considered unfavourable for China because its gradual and persistent rise is created for peaceful coexistence with other states. John Mearsheimer exemplifies the line that China's rise continues to grow and "China, like all previous potential hegemons, [will] be strongly inclined to become a real hegemon."<sup>17</sup> The big powers are rarely satisfied with the current power distribution; therefore, great powers are often tempted, and it must be in their favour if the change occurs.

Conflicts that exist at the individual, regional or local level have a chance of transfer into global hegemonic disputes as per the transfer of power. Therefore, limited conflicts tend to become of greater political importance. To the extent that

Chinese politics nourishes and strengthens the transition structure in the US, it can potentially develop into a kind of self-fulfilling forecast. In the strategic debate, the US being a dominant state has been utilizing its assets for protecting its dominance and influence to contain the rise of China. China's rise can reformulate in terms of a debate on the relevance of history to understand contemporary politics.

### **Status Competition**

China's rise affects international politics, economic interdependence, alliance relationship, and international institutions. The Sino-US clash is a global and regional status competition developing a bipolar structure in the international system. The US-Soviet relations were more hostile, particularly after WW II, because of the ideological differences. The end of WW II brought the bipolar world order where the Soviet Union was sustaining and spreading its influence. Moreover, the US and the USSR did not equally distribute power resources. In 1969, the Soviet Union had the uppermost share of the global economy and had 14.3 percent of global GDP. It also had significant military power during the Cold War era. Therefore, bipolarity is assumed as the dissemination of power among states in the international system. However, unlike the US and the Soviet Union, competition between Washington and Beijing seems more related to the economy than ideological.<sup>18</sup>

In this regard, both the US and China are exchanging harsh behaviour and competing in multiple world regions to increase their influence. Their strategic competition is considered for the supremacy of the world. They are engaged in various fields and regions range from Asia-Pacific, South and East China Seas, Korea-Pacific region, Middle East, and Africa to military build-up and technology. The Trump administration acknowledged this competition, and China was considered as the strategic competitor.<sup>19</sup>

### **Ideological Dominations**

One might speculate from the US perspective that rivalry for influence and position would be milder, and the US dominant status would seem less hostile if China had been a liberal democratic country. It is how power-politics competition interlinks with ideological system bitterness. Contrasting the case of East-West hostility, it is not the main reason for Sino-US rivalry. As per the Soviet ideology, permanent coexistence with the US-led capitalist system was not possible, and supposedly, the inevitable worldwide victory of communism guaranteed the USSR security. This component is absent in the clash between the US and China. China's view is more nationalist than internationalist. The US-based reports about the human rights situation in China are undoubtedly a cause of irritation in US-China relations.

The rise of China is not supposed as an international challenge because there is apparent hope that China would be a liberalized state; moreover, China is not an ideological competitor of the US. According to the Chinese perspective, the logical

dimension is becoming more prominent because Western ideas of freedom of expression and liberal democracy loom ideology. The US administration is convenient because conflict with China is not just ideological. It is also regarding the economy and rearranging the global structure. China also wants nothing less than rearranging the world order. However, it has ignored that China does not have a coherent ideology with an international dimension and that the politics of Beijing does not aim to establish clientele systems with the same ideological orientation as the Soviet Union had.

By the 1980s, China had emerged from its isolationism and, to a large extent, from the domination of ideology. The economy and pragmatism gained a preferential position. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has introduced its development model that focuses on emerging and developing countries. Similarly, it may be attractive for many countries. However, China's economic victory is due to specific situations, such as an abundant workforce and a large domestic market. China supports several governments and provides technical assistance and equipment. Though it does not portray that Beijing fights against democracy and applies a strategy of undermining the system of democracy. It can be expected that the system conflict will come to the fore on the US side, a conflict between liberal democracy and digital authoritarianism.

## **Security Dilemma**

The Chinese government explains that the rise of China does not pose a threat to US security. It has remained a peaceful and non-violent nation.<sup>20</sup> However, Beijing and Washington are military rivals, and their competition is not for status only. The reason is the complex nature of their strategic rivalry. China's maritime periphery is threatened, and the US perspective is that Beijing wants to create a high-class domain that affects East Asia. The US free access to oceans clashes with the Chinese endeavour to establish a security zone countering the US interference in the South China Sea. The geopolitical conflict over the South China Sea is also having a close link with the nuclear aspect. China is escalating to protect nuclear-armed submarines to ensure the second-strike capability against the US. The US is also concerned about the progressive modernization of the Chinese nuclear arsenal.<sup>21</sup> In the early 2000s, the security and political aspects of enmity between the US and China became more focused. The National Security Strategy-2002 had more focus on modernizing the Chinese military. Initially, the chief concern was that China would later or sooner become the US ally in the neighbourhood; Japan and South Korea could be intimidated.

The progressively stressed ideological differences intensify the sensitivity of threats even if the ideological clash is not the essential stratum of the conflict; thus, increase the security quandary between Beijing and Washington. The East-West clash once occurred, the Sino-US conflict cannot be reduced. However, measures to boost their security, whether through armaments, territorial enlargement, or associations,

can decrease other nations' security; consequently, leading to power and armament competition. William Wohlforth stated that "the existing distribution of capabilities generates incentives for cooperation."<sup>22</sup> States can lessen their security problems, complexities, and mistrust through mutual pellucidity, cooperation, and confidence-building measures.<sup>23</sup>

At the foreign policy level, the fundamental 'dilemma of interpretation' ascends when intents and competencies of others are assessed, whether they are defensive or have offensive objectives. The 'dilemma of reaction' arises when politicians and planners interpret the behaviour of another nation in a specific way and decide whether to strengthen their defence for deterrence or send out calming signals. If one side develops its military capabilities due to the wrong assumption about the aggressive intention of the opponent, it can trigger a spiral of solidifying hostility. However, if a state mistakenly considers the other side's intentions and capabilities non-aggressive, it may expose itself to danger. The US has not acknowledged a common nuclear vulnerability towards China as the foundation of the strategic association. It shows a lack of US decision-making, and it wants to defend its allies and interests in Asia. After the cold war era, the Chinese nuclear doctrine of the first use of atomic weapons rational has been altered as China has rejected the first use of its nuclear weapons and is opting for a minimum deterrence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>24</sup>

China comprehends the official self-image as a long-degraded power that will occupy its decent central place afterward the century of degradation. Accordingly, as most of the history of China shows, it has remained a peaceful, non-aggressive, and spacious country. The US also understands the sensitivity of the security dilemma. The US, as a liberal democracy, does not posture a menace to other countries. Washington and Beijing guarantee international peace, stability, respect, and prosperity. It is in the interests of both and all the countries and business communities throughout the world. The interaction between defensive, peaceful self-image and tendency to attest to offensive, aggressive intentions can trigger a conflict spiral. China has caught up technologically and is even a leader in some areas, such as significant computing and manufacturing. The preservation or restoration of technological governance is, therefore, has excellent military importance.

## **Regional Dimension**

The US-China conflict is prominent in the western Pacific, particularly in the South China Sea, because of interests and threat perceptions on both sides. In maritime Asia, their relationship is antagonistic and saturated with military threats. On the US side, there is a widespread perception that China is in the process of establishing a high-class maritime sphere of influence in the South China Sea. Accordingly, China is mounting its military capabilities to counteract the US capacity for intervention on its periphery and enhances military power in the East Asian region and elsewhere. One of the significant fears as an outcome of China's vital economic role is that the country could use asymmetrical monetary associations to influence the

security policy positioning of other countries. As a result, China has an increasing role in Asian financial and security affairs.<sup>25</sup> China could try to undermine the alliance relationship between the Asia-Pacific countries, and the US induces these countries to lean against China. According to Evelyn Goh, Vietnam has no strategic partnership with China, providing more pre-emptive balancing against China.<sup>26</sup> The US intends to develop an alliance with Vietnam balancing the rise of China. Likewise, Japan, Russia, India, and the US are predictable; they can strengthen Vietnam's diplomatic and political position. The US presence has been increasing in the South China Sea, and the geopolitical fight over the South China Sea is intertwined with the nuclear dimension.<sup>27</sup>

In the Chinese discourse, self-perception prevails that it does not want to displace external players from the area. Instead, it is committed to open regionalism. However, the conduct of China in the South China Sea, namely the determined assertion of problems, traditionally originated territorial entitlements, and the establishment of armed settlements on artificial islands can be seen as a sign that China is moving to a policy of marginalization.<sup>28</sup> In the South China Sea, China's claims to some islands, elevations, and rocky reefs protruding from the tide collide with Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. On the other hand, China claims its sovereignty in the Nine-Dash Line area, which makes up most of the South China Sea and overlaps with the exclusive economic zones of the four states and Indonesia.<sup>29</sup> China also interprets the Convention on the Law of the Sea because countries have the right to control and forbid military actions of other nations in their exclusive economic zone, which reaches up to 200 nm of the coast. At the same time, the US strongly rejects this view and increases its influence through supporting and cooperating with South China Sea nations.

## **Technological Dominance**

The competition between the US and China has a pronounced technological dimension. China is a relatively growing power in advanced military technologies which effectively facilitate its military.<sup>30</sup> The Chinese leadership is focusing on investing skills and abilities in advanced technology, with an intent to get supremacy in interrelated areas, such as ICT and AI. The progress and development in these fields will support China in becoming a dominant global power.<sup>31</sup> From Beijing's perspective, the preceding pre-eminence of the West has safeguarded its worldwide supremacy in the digital field.

US administration under President Donald Trump technologically competed with China and blocked extra technology exports to Beijing.<sup>32</sup> Huawei is one of China's most essential technology corporations as it relies profoundly on US technologies.<sup>33</sup> A US task force identified Chinese industrial and trade policy as one of the five macro factors that endanger the industrial foundations of the US and its ability to innovate, the prerequisites for military domination. There seemed disagreement in the Trump administration about US goals with the economic pressure on China, especially trade



sanctions. There were different ideas as some of them wanted to restructure China's economy, whereas others advocated compromises to make the Chinese economy more open to US investment, exports, and services.

China puts significant and growing efforts into supplying materials and technologies, including exclusive metals containing rare earth resources. It is the only source or primary supplier for a series of critical energetic materials in ammunition and missiles. It has ambitious plans to implement 'Made in China-2025'. While former President Donald Trump clearly stated that the 'Made in China-2025' plan deceitfully underprivileged US companies; therefore, the US proposed tariffs to hamper it.<sup>34</sup> Still, its structural problems are overlooked, which lead to financial risks. Made in China-2025 was accepted in May 2015 by the State Council, the highest state body. It is a top-down strategy and the first step in the process of innovation.<sup>35</sup>

The actions and practices of China, such as intellectual property and technology transmission, are intimidating the US economy in services and high-tech sectors. In 1979, when the US and China engaged in a bilateral trade contract, the US started importing low-cost and labour-intensive products. Today, around one-third of its imports from China are related to products using advanced technologies. The growing significance of Beijing towards Washington has caused job losses in the US, the magnitude of which is controversial. The current US administration feels that China's mounting worldwide commercial and political occurrence is at the cost of the US. Therefore, it uses enticements and compression to dissuade other countries from growing their financial dealings with China. As the movement contradicts the Chinese group, Huawei demonstrates the international antagonism for power closely linked with the technological aspect of the US-China rivalry. It is regarding hegemony in the digital age where both nations are in severe competition. According to Schaffer, "Trade is ineffective as a political weapon. Depriving China – or any other non-democratic country – of normal trade status will not effectively change its domestic and foreign policies."<sup>36</sup> Despite the fewer cooperative innovation environments imposed by the US technology ban and sanctions, this action has not deterred China from chasing superior technology.

## **Opportunity for the US and China**

The strategic competition and difference of opinion over a specific issue between the US and China could be handled and eliminated through multiple strategies based on mutual trust, cooperation, collaboration, and understanding. It is high time for both nations to invest and use their abilities, skills, and art in innovation and technology instead of making it useless to involve irrational and destructive things. In this regard, China has been working and applying its skills and abilities in economic, technological, scientific, and military fields. Moreover, China's peaceful development is compatible with the related concept of strategic opportunity, which can observe as a unique opportunity to pursue its development. On September 11, 2001, before a change in China's top position, a tragic event took place in the US, which



shaped the international campaign against terrorism and significantly affected Sino-US relations. Chinese also learned lessons from the reality of the Cold War, when the USSR was exhausted from competing with a stronger rival. Therefore, the Chinese believe that there is no alternative but to maintain and develop friendly relations with the US.

Since 2003, the concept of China's peaceful rise has become a part of the government and academic rhetoric. The Trump administration fought political and ideological wars with China aggressively, and the relationship between the two countries redesigned itself in the wake of the 'America First' slogan. US administration views the relationship with China in the sense of a 'zero-sum logic'.<sup>37</sup> The impression that both sides could take advantage of strengthening relationships appears to be far from it. That is why it broke with the previous baseline of US-China policy until then; the objective of US strategy was to integrate China more thoroughly into the global structure, ideally as a constructive actor in a concert of powers under the US leadership.

Earlier US administrations anticipated the probability of geopolitical conflict and its risks, including military confrontation. Preservation of the US military supremacy and expansion of security relations with countries in the Asia-Pacific region were central rudiments of the China policy that applied until Trump, which combined cooperation and risk protection. Risk hedging has been playing a growing role since the mid-2000s. The US reacted to China's rapid economic rise, the modernization of its military, and the beginning of its global expansion. The rebalancing under President Obama was a clear appearance of US fortitude to remain an Asia-Pacific power and did not admit China's regional supremacy. That meant strengthening the association structure in the Asia-Pacific region, increasing dealings with countries there, such as India and Vietnam, more engagement in regional organizations, and solid economic integration employing the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

### **The Dynamism of Power Politics in Asia**

The dynamism of power politics in Asia, and increasingly worldwide, triggered by China's rise is the chief geopolitical cataclysm with which the US has tormented for some time. In their quest for raw materials, markets, and military bases, such states tend to expand their activities, creating a clash with other powers, even if they are not pursuing a hostile, revisionist, or risk-taking foreign policy. China has expanded its activities to numerous countries, particularly BRI. China is strengthening its ability through connectivity projects to protect the investments made and the sea and land connections. There is hardly any political incentive to put China's political, economic, and security threats into perspective. However, building trade routes can also increase tensions between China and the US.

The US-China conflict is based on a regional but also increasingly global status competition. The rise of China's power has raised concerns within the US. This

mixture of status competition and ideological difference gives the conflict its unique character because antagonists see themselves as defensive and peaceful. Since China and the US are potential military counterparts and not just status rivals and system antagonists, the relationship can be comprehended as a complex strategic rivalry. The policy of denying China's access to US technology also includes tightening US export controls. In this regard, US President, Joe Biden, has involved European allies through the B3W initiative to counter and compete with China and its BRI.

After the Cold War, many Chinese analysts believed that economic power in international relations divided between the US, Europe, and Japan, besides nuclear powers, such as the US and Russia. However, others rightly thought that the US could become the world's only superpower. Recognition of US hegemony and the US as China's leading provider of capital, technology, and markets mean Beijing cannot afford severe conflicts with Washington. However, if Beijing wants to succeed in its modernization efforts, it must have close relations with the US. Therefore, a dispute with the US would jeopardize the stability that Beijing needs for its development. Still, it would affect Asia as a whole, and individual Asian states would have to decide whether to join the US or China. Therefore, many Chinese strategists believe that if the US does not threaten China's vital interests, Beijing will adopt a peaceful and cooperative strategy with the US and focus on its developments.

## Conclusion

The rise of China in the existing international system postulates severe concerns about the strategic position of the US in the world. Although, China emphasizes that its rise will not lead to global disruption and new conflicts, which is the basis of the foreign policy concept of China's peaceful rise. On the political level, the rediscovered economic power of China has made it a great financier of the world through its massive foreign direct investments. This strategy has allowed Beijing to build a dense network of friendships across the globe. The emergence of China in the post-Cold War period brought variations in the theories of international relations concerning the sources of power and influence in international politics.

Moreover, international relations and theories of international relations help to access the behaviour of states and make predictions, such as power transition theory. It has the foundation to dissatisfy challengers. Similarly, idealists argue that the Chinese challenge, particularly by demonstrating how ideational processes simultaneous growth of China's soft power, fit into a broader struggle for world supremacy. Against the expectation that an emerging power will inevitably question the existing international order, the 'great power competition' narrative propagated by the US. Washington views China as a consistently revisionist power that strives for regional and long-term global hegemony in the world. China, in the long-term, could be a big hurdle into the associated security, economic privileges, and the global leadership of the US. This competition for influence mingles with an ideological antagonism that has become the focus of attention on the US side. An important

reason for this is that the systemic conflict unfolds a force that mobilizes domestic politics in the power-politics competition. The current US administration believes that China's growing global economic and political presence is disturbing American ideals. Therefore, Washington has demonstrated its capacity to use incentives and pressure to dissuade other countries from expanding their economic relations with China; resultantly, it may offer them more beneficial, prosperous, significant initiatives like B3W.

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