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**From Cooperation to Competition: Evolution of U.S. political strategy  
towards China across the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations  
and its implications for international order and global stability**

Prof. Gregory Alegi

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SUPERVISOR

Prof. Silvia Menegazzi

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CO-SUPERVISOR

Ester Matrigiani

655082

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CANDIDATE

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## INTRODUCTION

*Let China sleep  
for when she wakes  
she will shake the world.*

-Napoleon Bonaparte

This warning, attributed to Napoleon more than two centuries ago, appears increasingly prophetic. The long-dormant “Sleeping Dragon” has now awakened, and its growing strength is reshaping the foundations of international politics.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the definitive rise of the United States of America as the global hegemon, inheriting the mantle of power from a war-torn Europe after World War II and paving the way for a period of relative stability and global order guaranteed by its supremacy. This guiding doctrine sought to deter enemies and reassure friends; to open and encourage the free movement of goods, capital, people and ideas; to uphold the defence of liberty, democracy and the rule of law. It was this global leadership that produced NATO and other alliances and helped to rebuild the international order. The contribution of the U.S. was vital to the Allies, but it also came with costs. In exchange for economic aid and security guarantees, Washington consolidated its sphere of influence over Western Europe, turning it into a privileged area of American strategic and economic interest, if not a *de facto* dependency.

However, the 21<sup>st</sup> century tells a different narrative, as history proved to be extremely generous with China.

After the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, the cohesion of the communist bloc was significantly weakened. Washington seized this opportunity by extending an olive branch to China, seeking to start a partnership with an emerging actor. Beijing took advantage of this historical opening, shifting from the periphery of the bipolar confrontation to a gradual integration with the Western camp. This opening was later consolidated through China’s domestic reforms and its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, which granted access to Western markets and accelerated its economic rise.

In recent decades, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has quietly risen to global prominence, and it has progressively established itself as an economic, technological, and military force capable of challenging U.S. supremacy and reshaping the balance of power at the international level. This shift has directly affected U.S. foreign policy, forcing Washington to confront a strategic dilemma: whether

to cooperate with China in addressing shared global challenges or to contain its rise to preserve American leadership in the international system. The perception of China as a “strategic rival” has developed gradually but consistently, reflected not only in policy choices but also in the rhetoric employed by successive U.S. administrations.

This thesis aims to investigate the central research question: *How is the perception of China as a strategic rival reflected in the policies and rhetoric of U.S. administrations, and what are the implications for global stability?*

In this framework, the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations are analysed, to understand the continuities, ruptures and implications that the different presidencies have adopted from 2008 to 2024 toward China. Each approach brings distinct priorities, rhetoric, and strategies and understanding how they have framed China helps explain shifts in trade, security and diplomacy. By tracing the evolution, it becomes clear where U.S. administrations have diverged, or remained consistent, highlighting the nature of rivalry beyond individual leaders.

This evolution extends beyond bilateral relations between the United States and China, as it also shapes the stability of the international order and the future configuration of the global system: changes in the American policy toward Beijing and vice versa influence not only the two countries but also alliances, international institutions, and the global economy. Trade tensions, technological rivalries, security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, and multilateral alliances are all critical elements that determine the degree of stability or conflict in the contemporary world. Essentially, understanding the evolution of U.S. leaderships toward China is crucial because their choices resonate far beyond bilateral ties, shaping the trajectory of the entire international system. After more than thirty years, Washington is experiencing, once again, the re-emergence of a bipolar world order, with “socialism with Chinese characteristics” gradually taking the place once occupied by the Soviet Union in the ideological and strategic confrontation with the U.S.

To address this question, the research adopts a comparative and chronological methodology, using primary sources, such as official speeches, policy documents and strategic guidelines, with secondary academic articles and analyses published by prominent think tanks. This approach helps to clarify how the U.S. strategy changed in response to a rising China. The chapters are therefore organized in a chronological order, allowing the reader to follow the progression of this development over time.

The first chapter reconstructs the historical and strategic evolution of China’s role, providing a strong background for Sino-American relations. It begins with their first ideological confrontation during the Cold War, encompassing the “Lost China debate” and moving to the Chinese opening in 1970s

and the subsequent normalization of relations with the West. It examines how China has grown under the reforms of Deng Xiaoping, culminating with its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, transforming the country from an economic partner to a potential competitor to the U.S.-led order.

The second chapter delves into the Obama years, marked by the global financial crises of 2008-09 and China's growing international influence. Obama's position emphasized diplomatic and economic cooperation, with the expectation that Beijing could be a partner on global issues such as climate change or nuclear non-proliferation. However, limits and tensions soon emerged particularly over trade and cybersecurity. The administration started to implement a strategy in the Chinese sphere of influence in Asia through the Pivot to Asia strategy, strengthening regional alliances (Japan, South Korea, ASEAN and Australia) and promoting multilateral agreements such as the TPP. The chapter highlights the early signs of strain between Beijing and Washington.

Drawing on the previous outcomes, the third chapter begins with the analysis of the Trump era, dominated by a nationalistic sentiment, based on the slogan "America First". The confrontational posture and the political discourse framed China as a systemic rival. This translated into the launch of a trade war, technological confrontations and efforts to restructure global supply chains to reduce dependence on China. Security concerns played a central role, particularly regarding the militarization of the South China Sea and the protection of intellectual property. However, the situation changed with the COVID-19 crisis, that intensified hostilities and worsened the national economic situation. These confrontational sentiments marked one of the darkest moments in the history of the United States.

The attack on the U.S. Capitol in 2021 opens the fourth chapter, showing what Biden inherited from the previous administration. He chose to maintain continuity with Trump's strategic posture while adopting a different diplomatic style. Domestically, his priority was rebuilding after the pandemic and addressing political polarization; internationally, China remained the primary external challenge. The perception of Beijing as a "systemic rival" consolidated, leading the new president to revive multilateralism (rejoining the Paris Agreement, the WHO and revitalizing NATO) and to strengthen Indo-Pacific alliances through initiatives such as Quad and AUKUS, alongside partnerships with Japan, Philippines and India. Particular attention was devoted to countering China's military posture in the South China Sea and around Taiwan through Freedom of Navigation Operations and joint military exercises.

After this long review of American politics, the fifth chapter offers an insight into Chinese politics and society. It analyses the centralization of power under Xi Jinping, his vision of the Chinese Dream

and the China's global outreach through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the plan Made in China 2025. Moreover, it focuses on Chinese projections in the Global South, with investments encompassing Africa and Latin America that have become instruments of soft power and geopolitical leverage. At the same time, it addresses the contradictions of this model, including accusation of "debt-trap diplomacy", neocolonialism and exploitation. Finally, the chapter reflects on the uncertainties surrounding the post-Xi era, questioning succession, internal stability and long-term implication for global governance.

Through the five chapters, the thesis seeks to demonstrate that beyond rhetorical and stylistic differences, strategies of cooperation and containment, there exists a surprising degree of continuity in U.S. policy: China is increasingly viewed not as a partner to integrate but as a competitor to manage. Symmetrically, Beijing has embraced a more assertive role, combining internal centralization with global ambitions, under the continuous, and at times stifling, control of the Communist Party.

Eventually, the conclusion tries to delineate possible scenarios in which Sino-American relations may either strengthen through cooperation or deteriorate through competition, leaving the debate open: the central question is not whether China is rising, but whether the United States can adapt to a world in which it is no longer the sole superpower.

# CHAPTER 1

## The historical and strategic role of China as a systemic challenger

### 1.1 The beginning of Sino-American relations

Before the People's Republic of China emerged as a strategic rival to the United States, the two countries already had relations characterized by alternating phases of commercial interest, cultural exchange and geopolitical uncertainty.

The first contact between the United States and China occurred in 1784, with the arrival of the *Empress of China*, the first American merchant ship to enter Chinese waters, which sailed towards the port of Canton (now known as the port of Guangzhou), located in the southern part of the region, which had long been the main hub for trade with Western nations. That year marked the entry of the United States into the profitable Chinese trade of tea, porcelain and silk. Chinese travellers also arrived in the U.S.: in 1785, three Chinese sailors landed in Baltimore, Maryland, although they disappeared from records after landing. Chinese culture and history first appeared in the United States in 1839, when a merchant from Philadelphia brought back an extensive collection of Chinese artworks<sup>1</sup>.

To fully understand the interactions between the United States and China, it is necessary to consider China's historical evolution.

The Opium War of 1839 marked the beginning of the well-known "Century of Humiliation", the period between 1839 and 1949 during which the nation lost large portions of territory to foreign powers<sup>2</sup>. Under the Qing dynasty, trade relations were established with the United Kingdom, which imported huge quantities of opium to balance its trade with Chinese tea. However, this caused a serious social and health crisis. When the government tried to stop this traffic, destroying tons of opium in the port of Canton, Britain responded by deploying its naval forces, leading to the outbreak of war.

The conflict ended with the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, the first of what the Chinese call the "unequal treaties"<sup>3</sup>: under its terms, China was forced to cede Hong Kong to the British, to open five ports,

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Mission China, *History of the U.S. and China*, official website of the U.S. Embassy in China.

<sup>2</sup> Erin Monroe, "U.S.-China Relations: A Brief Historical Perspective", *U.S.-China Policy Foundation*, August 2008.

<sup>3</sup> The Chinese Unequal Treaties are a series of treaties against China, imposed by the Western and Japanese powers from the middle of the nineteenth century until the early twentieth century, during the late Qing Dynasty. These treaties are

Canton (Guangzhou), Amoy (Xiamen), Fuzhou, Ningbo e Shanghai, for western trade and to pay heavy compensation. The United States, observing China's forced opening to Western trade, seized the opportunity to secure the same advantages. This marked the beginning of formal relations between the two countries, solidified by the signing of the Treaty of Wangxia. Among its clauses, the United States was granted with the most-favoured nation status and commercial access to the same ports as the British. As Article II states:

Citizens of the United States resorting to China for the purposes of commerce will pay the duties of import and export prescribed by the Tariff which is fixed by and made a part of this Treaty. They shall in no case be subject to other or higher duties than are or shall be required of the people of any other nation whatever... And if additional advantages or privileges of whatever description be conceded hereafter by China to any other nation, the United States and the citizens thereof shall be entitled thereupon to a complete, equal, and impartial participation in the same.<sup>4</sup>

Alongside these commercial ambitions, the U.S. became deeply involved with China through cultural and ideological channels. American missionaries, educators and philanthropists played a central role in China's urban centres, reinforcing the vision of a civilizational partner: a nation rich in traditions but in need of moral and institutional modernization according to Western liberal ideals. This missionary idealism generated a peculiar form of American paternalism: respectful of the Chinese cultural heritage but convinced of the need to reshape it in accordance with the American values.

However, within China, perceptions of the United States were markedly different. In 1847, Chinese workers, commonly referred to as "coolies"<sup>5</sup>, arrived for the first time in Cuba to work on sugar plantations. Shortly thereafter, many crossed into the United States, drawn by the promise of fortune in the California gold mines. Initially, the Chinese were received with enthusiasm. In the summer of 1850, the citizens of San Francisco held a welcoming ceremony: a small group of Chinese immigrants gathered in Portsmouth Square and received as gifts books, Bibles and religious pamphlets translated in Chinese<sup>6</sup>. However, as the number of Chinese immigrants increased, the initial curiosity in the mining districts gradually turned into hostility.

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called "unequal" because they were signed at gunpoint or in the aftermath of a military defeat, often characterized by highly unfavourable terms for China, illegally undermining its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

<sup>4</sup> Also known as the "Treaty of peace, amity, and commerce, between the United States of America and the Chinese Empire", July 3, 1844.

<sup>5</sup> The term *coolies* referred to manual labourers from Asia, working under harshly exploitative conditions for very low wages. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the early 20<sup>th</sup>, this term acquired foundational status particularly during and post-Gold Rush in California (starting 1848) and the building of the Transcontinental Railroad in the 1860s.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Luo, "America Was Eager for Chinese Immigrants. What Happened? In the Gold-Rush Era, Ceremonial Greetings Swiftly Gave Way to Bigotry and Violence", *The New Yorker*, August 23, 2021.

Mr. Henry A.P. Cleveland, the United States Consul in San Francisco, reported in his routine letter to State Department communication to Anson Brown that in 1852, 18,434 Chinese arrived in the United States, representing the peak of Chinese immigration at that time. Between 1848 and 1868, approximately 104,705 men and 3,766 Chinese women arrived, for a total of 108,471 individuals. These numbers fuelled the perception among Americans that the Chinese were an inferior race compared to the Caucasian majority, paving the way for the “Yellow Peril”, a form of discrimination towards Chinese people<sup>7</sup>.

The opposition culminated with an act approved by Congress, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882<sup>8</sup>, which imposed the suspension of all immigration flows from China for ten years. The law was extended with the ratification of the Geary Act<sup>9</sup>, ten years later, which not only required all Chinese immigrants and American citizens of Chinese origin to always carry a residence permit, but also stripped them of most legal protection<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, local-level discrimination policies began to rise, forcing the Chinese population into increasingly segregated communities. These urban areas would eventually become known as *Chinatowns*<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs, Accompanying the Annual Message of the President to the Third Session of the Fortieth Congress*, vol. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1868), doc. 277, “Mr. Cleveland to Mr. Brown, San Francisco, July 27, 1868”.

<sup>8</sup> Officially titled “An act to execute certain treaty stipulations relating to Chinese”. National Archives, Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), *Milestone Documents*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Chinese residents were denied the right to testify in court and were not entitled to bail in habeas corpus proceedings. The law was challenged but ultimately upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Fong Yue Ting v. United States*, 149 U.S. 698 (1893).

<sup>11</sup> Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil, “How 1800s Racism Birthed Chinatown, Japantown and Other Ethnic Enclaves”, *NBC News*, May 13, 2019.



*Figure 1: A Chinese butcher and grocery store, San Francisco, California, circa 1885.<sup>12</sup>*

China was significantly weakened by the First Sino-Japanese War, fought between 1894 and 1895. The Qing Dynasty clashed with Japan over control of Korea but suffered a decisive defeat, worsening its position in the region. Under the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki<sup>13</sup>, Japan obtained further concessions<sup>14</sup> from China and subsequently, thanks to the most-favoured-nation clause, the United States secured more rights, emerging also as a competitor to Japan in southeastern China.

As more nations started to assert dominance over China, the U.S. Secretary of State John Milton Hay introduced the idea of the Open Door Policy in 1899<sup>15</sup>. This policy advocated equal trade access to Chinese markets for all powers, and, at the same time, preserve the territorial integrity of the country. This idea, devised by Alfred Hoppisley and William Rockhill, strengthened the image of the United States as a champion of fairness in international trade.

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<sup>12</sup> Getty Images, *Historic photos of SF Chinatown before the 1906 earthquake*.

<sup>13</sup> Treaty of Peace between the Empire of Japan and the Empire of China, Shimonoseki, April 17, 1895.

<sup>14</sup> Following the April 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki, under which the Qing Empire ceded Taiwan to Japan, indigenous Taiwanese leaders declared the short-lived Republic of Formosa in May 1895 as a hopeless gesture of Japanese resistance. Japan responded with a military invasion of the island, conquering it by force. This marked the beginning of fifty years of Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan, up until the end of World War II in 1945.

<sup>15</sup> John Milton Hay, the American Secretary of State, articulated the Open-Door Policy in two diplomatic messages referred to as the "Open Door Notes." The first, issued on September 6, 1899, asked major powers (Britain, Germany, France, Russia, Japan, and Italy) to maintain equal commercial opportunities in their respective spheres of influence in China. The second, dispatched on July 3, 1900, restated these precepts during the Boxer Rebellion, focusing on the need to continue support for Chinese territorial integrity and access to trade.

See: U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "1899–1913 – The Open Door Policy", *Milestone Documents*.

At the beginning of the 20th century, signs of growing unrest towards foreign dominations began to emerge in China. With the Boxer Rebellion, anti-foreign and anti-Christian sentiments gained momentum, expressed in their motto “Support the Qing, destroy the stranger”. In 1900, the uprising was suppressed by the military force of foreign powers, including the United States. Weakened by repeated military defeats, republican movements began to rise. One of the most prominent figures was Sun Yat-sen, whose ideas were the foundation of secret societies as the Tongmenghui. Its members planned a revolt against the government buildings. The uprising received great support from the Chinese suburbs and within a short time, many provinces declared their independence from the imperial regime. On January 1, 1912, Sun Yat-sen was proclaimed provisional President of the Republic of China (ROC), officially establishing the Kuomintang (National People’s Party). Just over a month later, on February 12, 1912, Emperor Puyi abdicated the throne, marking the end of more than 2,000 years of Chinese imperial dominion.



*Figure 2: Sun Yat-sen in the middle with the Cabinet of the provisional government taken on February 5, 1912.*

The 1911 Revolution brought an end to the Qing dynasty and ushered in the Republican era in China, but the country remained a pushover in the face of pressure from Western powers.

With the outbreak of World War I, China began to play a more active role in international affairs. Although it remained neutral for early years of the conflict, in 1915, the country was pressured by

Japan into accepting the Twenty-One Demands<sup>16</sup>, which granted Japan significant territorial and economic privileges in China, including in Shandong, a former German concession that Japan had seized in 1914. In 1917, China declared war on Germany, hoping to reclaim sovereignty over the Shandong Peninsula at the end of the WWI. However, in 1919, the Treaty of Versailles transferred the former German rights in Shandong to Japan rather than returning them to China. This decision triggered mass protests across the country, culminating in the May Fourth Movement. It was more than a mere protest: it represented the beginning of a new phase in the Chinese history, thanks to which anarchist and communist ideologies spread, laying the foundations for the creation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), officially founded in 1921.

The CCP, based on the Marxist-Leninist conception, immediately positioned itself in opposition to the nationalist party of the Kuomintang, leading then to the Chinese Civil War in 1927, in which the KMT received support from the United States.

Meanwhile, hostilities with Japan continued, reaching the peak in 1937, with the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. The KMT and the CCP formed a united front against the Japanese invasion, which was marked by extreme brutality, as was seen in the Nanjing Massacre. The United States and other powers, shocked by the events, provided economic support to China and restricted trade with Japan. The group of American pilots, known as the Flying Tigers<sup>17</sup>, provided air assistance to Chinese troops between 1941-1942, while the U.S. imposed an oil embargo on Japan<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> The Japanese requests included five groups of secret demands: groups One and Two were designed to confirm Japan's dominant position in Shandong, southern Manchuria and eastern Inner Mongolia; group Three would acknowledge Japan's special interests in an industrial complex in central China and group Four forbade China from giving any further coastal or island concessions to foreign powers except for Japan. The most outrageous was Group Five, which required China to leave Japanese advisors who could take effective control of Chinese government, economy, and military. *See*: Yanzhong Huang, "China, Japan, and the Twenty-One Demands," *Asia Unbound* (blog), Council on Foreign Relations, January 21, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Officially known as the American Volunteer Group (AVG), they were formed in 1941 under the leadership of Claire Lee Chennault, a retired U.S. Army Air Corps officer, who had been advising the Chinese Air Force. He proposed the idea of recruiting American pilots to support China, which was fighting against Japanese invasion. With the approval of President F.D. Roosevelt and under secret agreement, over 300 American volunteers were recruited.

<sup>18</sup> James Doubek, "The Flying Tigers: How a Group of Americans Ended Up Fighting for China in WWII", *NPR*, December 19, 2012.



*Figure 3: A Chinese soldier guarding a line of Curtiss P-40K fighters of the 23rd Fighter Group, successor to the American Volunteer Group (AVG), stationed in Kunming, China, likely in late 1942<sup>19</sup>.*

Thanks to this collaboration, in 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act<sup>20</sup>, a measure that rejected the previous Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, allowing, after 60 years, a quota (albeit limited) of Chinese immigration (only 105 people per year). Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941, the United States formally entered war, and the Sino- Japanese conflict was absorbed into the broader global war.

After the surrender of Japan in 1945, the civil dispute between the Kuomintang, led by Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong, resumed.

### **1.1.1 Chiang Kai-shek, the “Lost China” debate and the anti-communist alignment**

Following the fall of the Qing dynasty, Sun Yat-sen established the Republic of China (ROC), with its capital in Nanjing. However, his government was unable to effectively control the territory, which in many parts of the country was in the hands of local leaders, also known as “warlords” (1916-28). This was a period marked by powerful rulers who divided the country into a puzzle of regions and

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<sup>19</sup> National Archives, *Prelude to War: The Flying Tigers, A People at War*.

<sup>20</sup> Also named the Magnuson Act, it was proposed by U.S. Representative (later Senator) Warren G. Magnuson.

spheres of interest, each controlled by military commanders with their own army. In those twelve years, almost 160 wars were fought, the period therefore being known as that of warlordism<sup>21</sup>.

Following the death of KMT leader Sun Yat-sen in 1925, the leadership passed into the hands of Chiang Kai-shek. Once Chiang had consolidated power and subdued many of the warlords, he turned his attention to the growing Communist movement. By the early 1930s, the Communist Party, reinforced by the consent gained in the rural areas, managed to take control of some areas in the south of the country, especially the region of Jiangxi<sup>22</sup>. The CCP had developed its own idea of Marxism that emphasized the role of the agricultural sector as the revolutionary root and not factory proletariat.

Chiang Kai-shek launched five encirclement campaigns between 1930 and 1934 to destroy communist strongholds, relying on the regular army and conventional military tactics. The Fifth Encirclement Campaign was particularly devastating, nearly resulting in the annihilation of the Red Army. The communists were forced to retreat, and, under the command of Mao Zedong, they began the Long March in 1934, a retreat that took them 9,000 km to the northwest. This lasted about a year and served to save the core of the party, further strengthening Mao's authority.

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<sup>21</sup> Roberts, J. A. G. "Warlordism in China", *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 45/46 (1989): pp. 26–33.

<sup>22</sup> The region of Jiangxi was pivotal in the early period of the Chinese Communist Party, serving as the base for the Jiangxi Soviet, a communist base area during the Chinese Civil War. The CCP established its government, the Chinese Soviet Republic, in Ruijin, which became known as the "Red Capital".



Figure 4: Itinerary of the Long March. The Communist troops crossed 18 mountains ranges and 24 rivers to reach the northwestern province of Shaanxi<sup>23</sup>.

With the Second Sino-Japanese War, the two parties were forced to merge to form the United Front, a fragile alliance between nationalists and communists, in which the Kuomintang retained official control of the government and regular army, while the CCP intensified guerrilla activities in Japanese-occupied areas, increasing its influence in the countryside. However, this collaboration was always very tense and based on a precarious balance. While the nationalist forces were weakened by the advance of the Japanese, the CCP gained ground thanks to the support of unoccupied rural areas in China. The CCP's guerrilla attacks against the Japanese made the communists perceived as a more effective option and by the end of the war the party enjoyed widespread support across the Chinese countryside.

When the United States intervened on China's behalf during World War II, primarily through economic aids, the Japanese were definitively defeated. Although the government of China was still in the hands of Chiang, the communists controlled large portions of territory in the north, having strengthened their influence during these years. Mediation's efforts between the two factions were

<sup>23</sup> Areas with an X were regions overrun by the Kuomintang during the Fourth Encirclement Campaign, while the light red areas show the Communist enclaves.

attempted by the Truman administration but eventually failed. In March 1946 the civil war resumed: once again, the United States provided support to Chiang's regime but chose then not to become directly involved in the renewed conflict.

The communists, concentrated in the region of Manchuria, received also the assistance from the Soviet Red Army, with whom they had collaborated in the past. The People's Liberation Army soon managed to conquer all of Manchuria's territory and in the following two years, it launched a series of offensives, weakening the forces of Chiang Kai-shek. On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong entered Beijing and officially proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Chiang retreated to the island of Taiwan with his remaining forces, continuing to claim legitimacy under the name Republic of China. Despite the defeat of the Kuomintang, the U.S. continued to recognize it as the only legitimate Chinese government. However, the fall of mainland China to the communists was perceived in Washington as a major strategic and ideological defeat.

On the United States side, the situation deteriorated further with the onset of the Cold War. The conflict with the Soviet Union had raised tensions in the country, where many citizens feared that communist spies had infiltrated the government, threatening national security. This period of heightened paranoia became known as the Red Scare. A central figure of these years was the Republican senator, Joseph McCarthy. His ruthless and ferocious rhetoric gave rise to McCarthyism, a wave of anti-communist hysteria in which anyone suspected of having ties with the Soviet Union or China was viewed as a potential threat to national security.

McCarthy, along with republicans' colleagues Richard Nixon and Barry Goldwater<sup>24</sup>, used the anti-Communist crusade as an instrument of pressure, contesting the Truman administration's strategy to prevent China from falling to the communists. This gave rise to the provocative question "Who lost China?" that it does not ask literally "who lost" China but that someone in the U.S. allowed or caused the fall of China into the hands of the communists<sup>25</sup>.

On one hand, the Republicans and McCarthyists accused the Democratic Party of having abandoned Chiang Kai-shek and of harbouring pro-communist diplomats who, in their view, had underestimated Mao Zedong and facilitated the CCP victory. A second version regards a more realistic approach, based on the idea that the Kuomintang was self-destructed: no one has "lost" China because the United

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph McCarthy, Richard Nixon and Barry Goldwater held a strong anti-communist position during the post-war era. Although Nixon initially supported McCarthy ideologically, he gradually separated himself from him after 1954 for tactical reasons. In contrast, Barry Goldwater was one of the few Republican senators who continued to back McCarthy, voting against his censure in the Senate.

<sup>25</sup> Amanda Bryan, "Who Lost China?", *Teaching American History*, December 14, 2021.

States has never "owned" it. The central point of this hypothesis was that Chaing Kai-shek's regime was corrupt, inefficient and lacking popular support, which would lead eventually to the emergence of communists<sup>26</sup>.

To counter Republican criticism, the Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, attempted to oversee the publication of a very detailed report on U.S. policy towards China. With a total of 1,054 pages<sup>27</sup>, it was published in 1949 "The United States relations with China, with special reference to the period 1944-49", also known as the China White Paper. The report aimed to explain to the public opinion why the communists were able to dominate China. An extract is given below:

The unfortunate but inescapable fact is that the ominous result of the civil war in China was beyond the control of the government of the United States. Nothing that this country did or could have done, within the reasonable limits of its capabilities, could have changed that result; nothing that was left undone by this country has contributed to it. It was the product of internal Chinese forces, forces which this country tried to influence but could not....<sup>28</sup>

### **1.1.2 Nixon's opening and normalization**

The hysteria provoked by communism was further intensified by international events. On June 25, 1950, the North Korean army invaded South Korea: the UN and the U.S. intervened in defence of the latter, and when the South Korean troops approached the border with China, the PRC intervened in support of North Korea, alongside the Soviet Union. This development further exacerbated the American resentment towards the communists. The war ended in a stalemate with the armistice of 1953, without a formal peace treaty.

Another unresolved issue remained the Taiwan Strait crisis. In 1950, President Truman had declared that the United States would no longer intervene in disputes between the PRC and the ROC. However, with the outbreak of war in South Korea, priorities changed, and Truman ordered the U.S. Seventh Fleet to patrol Taiwan to deter a possible Chinese attack. This move aimed to protect the island from a potential conflict and to prevent a further expansion of communism.

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<sup>26</sup> Eastman, Lloyd E. "Who Lost China? Chiang Kai-Shek Testifies", *The China Quarterly*, no. 88 (1981): p. 658.

<sup>27</sup> The 1949 China White Paper is divided into two main sections: an appendix of roughly 642 pages that contains original documents like treaties, official statements, correspondence, and diplomatic communications, and a narrative section of about 412 pages that describes the political and historical background of U.S.-China relations. Early American policy toward China, Nationalist-Communist ties, important diplomatic missions, the Chinese Civil War, military situations, and economic assistance are only a few of the subjects covered in the story.

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Department of State, *United States Relations with China, with Special Reference to the Period 1944-1949* Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949, xvi.

U.S. deterrence was successful and after the armistice of 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower lifted the naval blockade. However, the conflict continued, extending the hostilities to the islands of Jinmen and Mazu, strategically located near the mainland. Chiang Kai-shek decided to dispatch nationalist troops to defend the territories, but they were attacked and bombed by the CCP. The United States, which maintained its alliance with the KMT, threatened China with a nuclear retaliation, which ultimately pushed the PRC to negotiate. In 1955, Washington passed the Formosa Resolution, authorizing U.S., if necessary, to defend Taiwan and its surrounding islands. In this context, the Eisenhower Administration contemplated several possibilities to stop the conflict: from using nuclear weapons against the PRC to persuading Chiang Kai-shek to cede the islands. Prior to the need for any of these alternatives, Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai declared his intention to engage in negotiations with the United States during the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung in April 1955<sup>29</sup> <sup>30</sup>.

This decision stemmed also from the deterioration of the relationship between China and the Soviet Union. Ideological and strategic disagreements between Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev created a significant shift, signalling the emergence of distinct communist point of views. Until then, the U.S. had seen Chinese and Russian communism as a single threat, but the Sino-Soviet division allowed a rapprochement between the U.S. and China. This marked the beginning of a new period of relations between China and the United States from 1965. The Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965<sup>31</sup>, the so-called Hart-Celler Act, which abolished quotas based on national origin.

The real openness, however, stemmed from a completely spontaneous gesture. In 1971, the World Table Tennis Championship was held in Nagoya, Japan. Glenn Cowan, a member of the U.S. team, got on the Chinese team bus by mistake after training. Initially there was a moment of embarrassment, but Zhuang Zedong, a player of the Chinese team, broke the silence, smiling and giving him a silk portrait of a China landscape as a sign of friendship<sup>32</sup>. The episode was reported by the international press and welcomed by Mao Zedong, who approved the official invitation of the American team to visit China. This is the background to the episode that has entered folklore as Ping- Pong diplomacy.

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<sup>29</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, “The Taiwan Straits Crises: 1954–55 and 1958”, *Milestones Documents*.

<sup>30</sup> 29 Afro-Asian nations gathered in Indonesia in April 1955 for the Bandung Conference, which aimed to promote cooperation among the participating countries. In this context, Zhou Enlai, the People's Republic of China's Foreign Minister, helped to calm down tensions during the First Taiwan Strait Crisis by publicly announcing China's willingness to begin talks with the United States. *See*: U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, “1953–1960 – The Taiwan Straits Crises: 1954–55 and 1958”, *Milestone Documents*.

<sup>31</sup> Immigration and Nationality Act, Pub. L. No. 89-236, 79 Stat. 911 (1965).

<sup>32</sup> Ruth Eckstein. “Ping Pong Diplomacy: A View from behind the Scenes.” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 2, no. 3 (1993), p.330.

As Henry Kissinger recounts in his book, *On China*, it was during a night in 1971, under the influence of sleeping pills, that Mao ordered his nurse to contact the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with a clear directive: “Invite the American team to visit China”. When the nurse, surprised, asked whether his words still counted after taking sleeping pills, Mao replied: “Yes it counts, every word counts. Act promptly, or it would be too late”<sup>33</sup>.

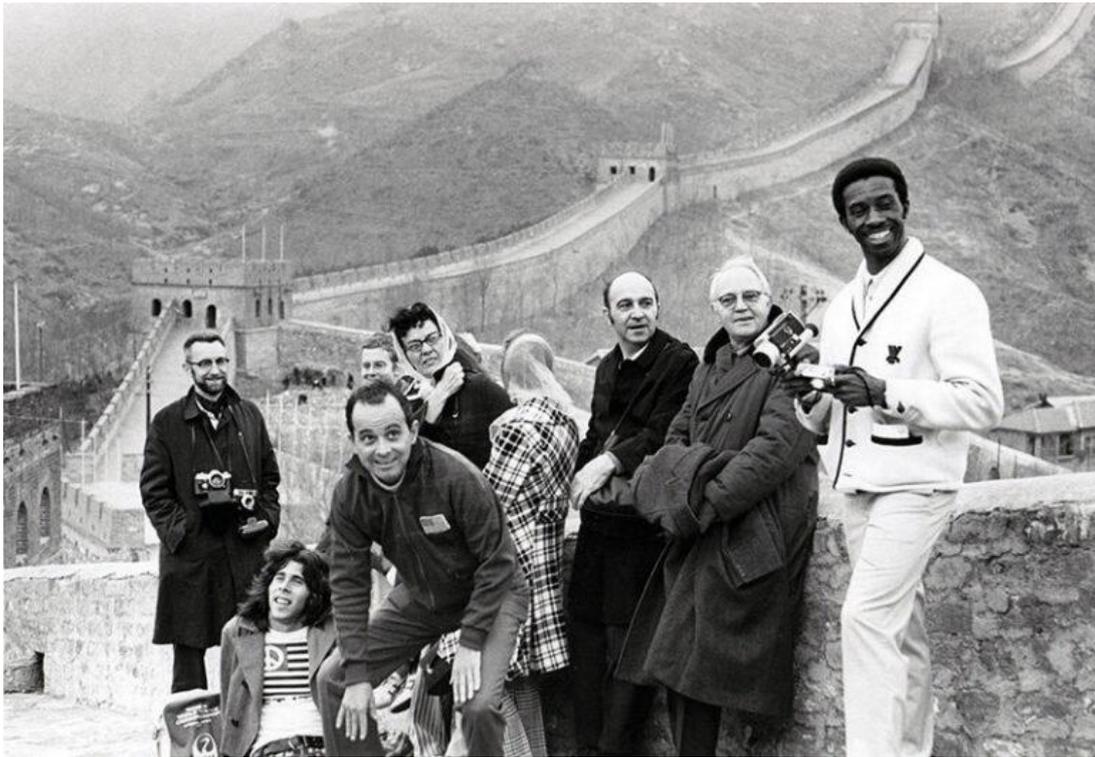


Figure 5: The American table tennis team visits the Great Wall, 1971, Beijing. Photograph by Norman Webster<sup>34</sup>.

It was Henry Kissinger himself who, in July 1971, undertook a covert diplomatic mission to Beijing, disguised as a routine fact-finding trip to Asia on behalf of the President. After public stop in Saigon, Bangkok, and New Delhi, Kissinger feigned illness in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, allowing his team to disappear for forty-eight hours. They were flown to Beijing to meet with top Chinese officials, including the premier Zhou Enlai. In Washington, only the President and Colonel Alexander Haig, Kissinger’s top aide, knew the true destination. It was clear that the purpose of the visit was to explore the possibility of a diplomatic rapprochement between the two countries that had been ideologically and politically opposed since the founding of the People’s Republic of China<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup>Henry Kissinger, *On China*, New York, Penguin Press, 2011, p. 224.

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Mission China, *History of the U.S. and China*.

<sup>35</sup> Kissinger, *On China*, p. 229.

Seven months after the secret visit, on February 21, 1972, Mao Zedong and Richard Nixon met in Beijing, breaking 25 years of isolation, restoring diplomatic relations and marking a strategic realignment in the context of the Cold War<sup>36</sup>.

During the meeting, Nixon maintained a reverential attitude, aiming to create a diplomatic space to facilitate the development and pursuit of their respective national interests. This attempt at rapprochement culminated with the Sino-American Joint Communiqué<sup>37</sup>, in which it was reported that the two leaders had a serious and frank exchange of views on Sino-U.S. relations. On the one hand, the Chinese delegation reiterated the importance of the independence of individual countries, sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. Implicitly, it was an attempt to contain an "imperialist" America, claiming the need to rebuild an international order that was able to include alternative political models that did not dominate the countries considered as developing. In turn, the United States reaffirmed the concept of a just and secure peace, one that would allow peaceful coexistence and competition of different ideologies without conflict.

Despite the ideological divide, one major point of consensus emerged: both nations pledged not to seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region, establishing a mutual understanding that would shape the regional balance of power in the decades to follow. Nixon's visit to China was one of the few occasions where a state visit brought about a seminal change in international affairs. The re-entry of China into the global diplomatic game, and the increased strategic options for the United States, gave a new vitality and flexibility to the international system<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> Francesca Maremonti, "La diplomazia del pingpong", *Fondazione Feltrinelli*, 30 maggio 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (Normalization Communiqué), January 1, 1979, American Institute in Taiwan.

<sup>38</sup> Kissinger, *On China*, p. 262.

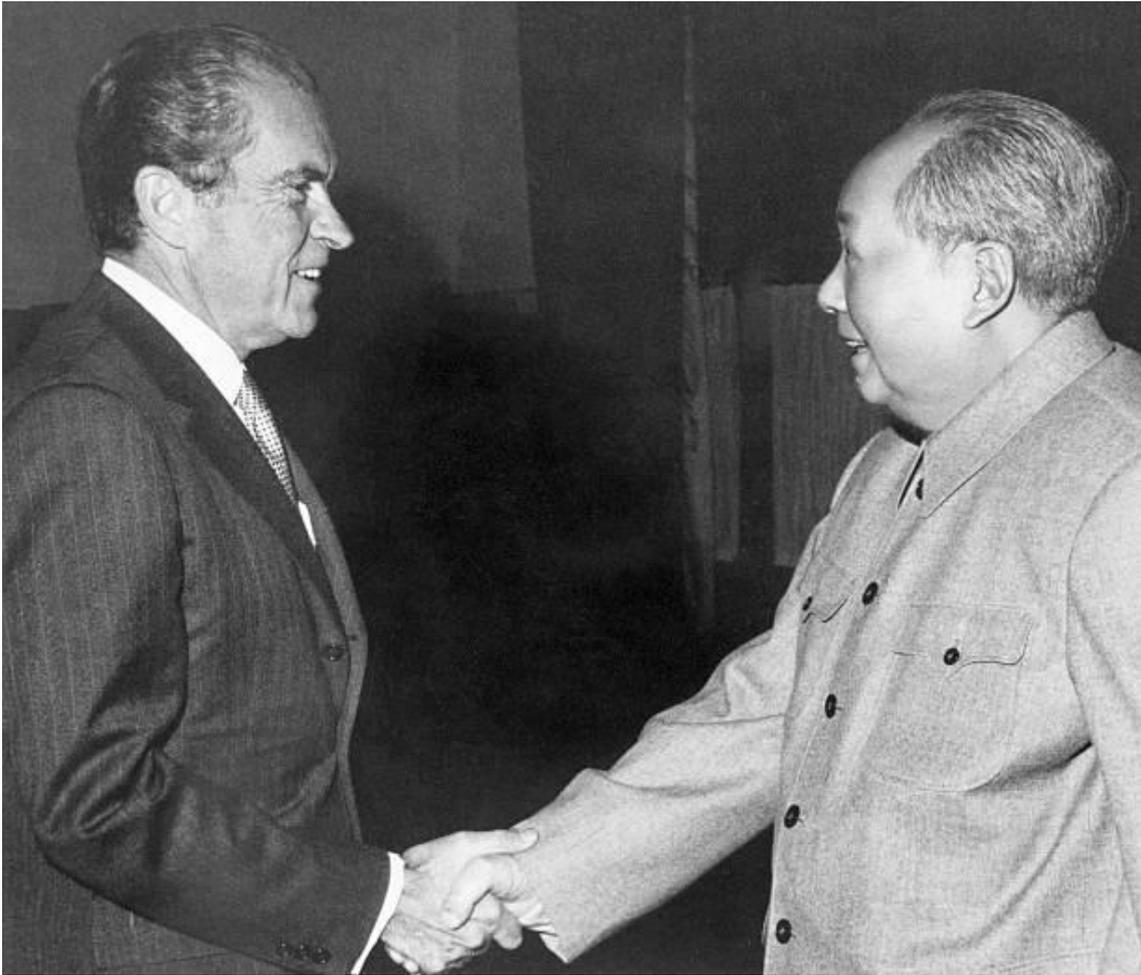


Figure 6: The historical handshaking between Mao Zedong and Richard Nixon during the visit in Beijing in 1972<sup>39</sup>.

## 1.2 Economic growth and global projection

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in October 1949, the Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong, found itself governing a country devastated not only by civil war but also by the long Japanese occupation. Its economy, based mainly on agriculture, was fragmented, while the industrial sector was poorly developed. This led the government to concentrate on both spheres. Through agrarian reform, land previously owned by landlords was confiscated and distributed to the poorest peasants. This policy not only improved rural living conditions but also strengthened CCP control in the countryside. At the same time, the Party implemented a process of industrialization and nationalization of large urban enterprises such as those in energy or transport, considered strategic sectors for the country<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "Rapprochement with China, 1972", *Milestones Documents*.

<sup>40</sup> Xiaodong Zhu, "Understanding China's Growth: Past, Present, and Future," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 26, no. 4 (Fall 2012), p. 109.

In 1953, China launched its First Five-Year Plan. Chinese leaders took inspiration from the Soviet model to create a system of five-year development plans to set economic priorities and targets. The aim of the first plan was to develop mainly heavy industry based on steel, coal and cement, to lay the foundations for a modern economy. The state assumed the total control over planning, establishing production and investment goals.

Meanwhile, in the agricultural sector, there was a gradual collectivization process. Peasants were encouraged to join cooperatives, with the goal of abolishing private property, recalling the communist motto “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need”. This was the same model adopted by the USSR in the late 1920s and early 1930s, where the collectivization of agriculture was intended to proceed hand in hand with the economical industrialization.

In 1958, Mao launched the Second Five-Year Plan, the so-called “Great Leap Forward”, an attempt to accelerate the modernization of the People’s Republic of China, which aimed to change the country’s society and economy. Like many of Mao’s undertakings, the Great Leap Forward combined aspects of economic policy, ideological fervour and foreign policy. For Mao, these were not distinct fields of endeavour but interrelated strands of the grand project of the Chinese revolution<sup>41</sup>.

The ambition was enormous: the programme aimed for rapid industrialization and an exponential increase in agricultural production, relying heavily on mass mobilization. The core of this project were the People’s Communes, rural collectives in which an average of 5,000 families were to live in self-sufficiency, with their own crops, their own educational and social ecosystem, and businesses. Each commune should have had small furnaces and blast furnaces for steel production, as planned by the government. However, the lack of coordination with the central authorities, insufficient technical expertise in the management of hydraulic works, and the underestimation of the cultural role of China’s ancestral cultural heritage in shaping social relations, led China into a terrible famine that caused the death of approximately 45 million people<sup>42</sup>.

Following this catastrophic outcome, Mao was sidelined, and other Party leaders, including the future leader Deng Xiaoping, led a phase of moderation. The communes were restructured, and farmers were permitted to manage small private plots of land. The economy began to grow again, and, for the first time, there was a limited, albeit temporary, shift toward policies less ideological and more pragmatic in fostering economic development.

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<sup>41</sup> Kissinger, *On China*, p. 182.

<sup>42</sup> Andrea Muratore, “La storia del Grande balzo e dell’utopia comunista di Mao”, *InsideOver*, 14 November 2021.

Worried about losing the control of the Party, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966, a political campaign aimed at purging society from alleged bourgeois and counterrevolutionary elements. In August, during a meeting of the Communist Party's Central Committee, he issued a call to young people to rebel against the "Four Olds": old ways of thinking, old cultures, old habits and old traditions. He was inviting the young generation to fight for a political and economic system grounded in Maoist orthodoxy. Those who opposed his vision were accused of being enemies of the Party. Among the targets, there were mainly professors accused of slowing down the revolutionary process. Mao was able to achieve a decisive victory, aided by the support of the National Liberation Army, responsible for grave atrocities. This period left the country in turmoil, with social fractures and economic weaknesses.

It was only after Mao's death in 1978 that China began a radical turn. Through the guidelines adopted by the new leader, Deng Xiaoping, there was a gradual transition to a market-oriented economy and opened more significantly to the West<sup>43</sup>. As Deng famously put it: "Black cat, white cat, what does it matter what colour the cat is, as long as it catches mice?"<sup>44</sup>.

Deng Xiaoping's economic revolution began in December 1978, following his historic visit to Singapore. At that time, the small city-state of Southeast Asia was experiencing a rapid growth, driven by pro-market policies implemented by the Lee family. As Lee Kwan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore from 1959 to 1990, reported in a 2005 interview for *Der Spiegel*<sup>45</sup>, Deng Xiaoping was astonished by the scale of the city's economic progress. As a result, Singapore became the primary model of inspiration for the Chinese government's economic reform.

Beginning in 1979, China opened to foreign investments, which contributed to its economic growth within a few years. The central government introduced price and property incentives for farmers, allowing them to sell part of their crops on the open market. In addition, the government established four Special Economic Zones (Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou and Xiamen), strategically located close to Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. These zones offered a favourable tax regime and low wages to attract capital and businesses. Economic control over enterprises was decentralized, transferred to

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<sup>43</sup> Naughton, Barry. "Deng Xiaoping: The Economist", *The China Quarterly*, no. 135 (1993), p. 510.

<sup>44</sup> The "cat theory", used by Deng Xiaoping, represents a pragmatic approach to economic policy, which emphasize effectiveness over ideological purity. This idea became a guiding principle for China's economic reforms, especially after Deng's Southern Tour in 1992, during which he promoted the compatibility of market mechanisms within a socialist system.

<sup>45</sup> As Lee explained "I think that visit shocked him because he expected three backward cities. Instead, he saw three modern cities, and he knew that communism -- the politics of the iron rice bowl -- did not work. So, at the end of December, he announced his open-door policy".

Hans Hoyng and Andreas Lorenz, "SPIEGEL Interview with Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew: 'It's Stupid to Be Afraid'", *Der Spiegel*, August 8, 2005.

provincial or local governments, which were allowed to operate according to free market principles rather than centralized state planning. This new opening allowed Chinese cities to expand and attract investment from abroad: the removal of trade barriers encouraged greater competition. During his time in office, Deng engaged in diplomacy with some Western leaders, including a landmark visit to the United States in 1979 to meet the President Jimmy Carter.



*Figure 7: US President Jimmy Carter and Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in Washington DC, United States on January 1, 1979<sup>46</sup>.*

From 1978 to 1992, Deng Xiaoping opened to capitalism while maintaining the totalitarian communist system in a new "socialism with Chinese characteristics"<sup>47</sup>. He had no intention of dismantling the communist regime but only to integrate China's economy into the global system. Like Mao, he was deeply concerned with the country's stability and supported harsh repression. It was his decision to open fire on protesters in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.

In essence: capitalism, yes; freedom and democracy, no.

This shift was also reflected in China's international relations. During this period, China adopted several internal laws to align its system with those of other countries. In October 1971, the People's Republic of China was readmitted as one of the five members of the UN Security Council from which

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<sup>46</sup> Getty Images, J. Carter and Deng Xiaoping in Washington, United States, January 1, 1979.

<sup>47</sup> Shortly after Mao Zedong's death, this expression was coined to underline the unique aspects of a Leninist political structure moving away from a Stalinist economic paradigm. However, in the decades after the collapse of the communist bloc, Socialism with Chinese Characteristics has most frequently been used to defend China's departure from the liberal standards of the wealthiest countries in the world, even though its initial purpose was to explain CPC departures from orthodox Marxism.

it had been excluded following the Communist victory in 1949. By 1977, China was a member of 21 international organizations<sup>48</sup>. Under Deng's era, China also joined pivotal financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Intellectual Property Organization and the Asian Development Bank. After the global outcry over the Tiananmen Square massacre, China sought to rebuild its reputation by further embracing multilateralism and integration with global institutions. It acceded to the 1992 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1998<sup>49</sup>.

The real turning point for China came in the year 2000. For some time, the country was trying to join the World Trade Organization<sup>50</sup>, since it would have allowed its access to new trading partners, obtaining more advantageous tariffs. This would ensure a seat at the international table in an increasingly globalised world. At the same time, the United States was pushing for Beijing to join a liberal-democratic order and move away from the communist model. Clinton supported the accession of China for two reasons. Firstly, by joining the organization, China would have to reduce tariffs, guaranteeing intellectual property rights, in respect of the clauses provided by the organization. Secondly, its accession would, according to the U.S., have curbed the communist government, accelerating also a transition towards a market-oriented economy. Following China's formal application to the WTO in November 1995, the country became an official member on December 11, 2001<sup>51</sup>.

However, the U.S. ambition proved largely unsuccessful, both politically and economically. The Chinese government never gave up on the communist ideologies that had influenced it for over fifty years and has never conformed to democratic principles as the United States had hoped. On the contrary, its economic progress only served to legitimize the authority of the Chinese Communist Party. Economically, the country's openness and reform attracted huge amounts of foreign direct investment (FDI). China's entry into the WTO solidified its growth path. While GDP growth was already robust prior to 2001 (approximately 8–9%), it accelerated in the subsequent years (9–10%), with China accounting for about 24% of worldwide growth. The expansion of trade, evidenced by exports increasing from 4.6% to 23.3% of GDP and imports rising from 6% to 20.7%, alongside a boost in foreign direct investment (around 1% of GDP in the early 2000s, though rising significantly

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<sup>48</sup> "China's Approach to Global Governance", *Council on Foreign Relations*.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> "What Happened When China Joined the WTO?", *Council on Foreign Relations*, last updated February 6, 2025.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

in absolute terms), underscores the impact of the WTO on China's incorporation into the global economic landscape<sup>52</sup>.

### **1.3 The American perception of China: from ally to competitor**

Thanks to Nixon, relations between the U.S. and China had been steadily revived since 1979, albeit with some setbacks. There were many points still to be reviewed with Beijing, but the need for economic and trade agreements with Washington was steadily growing. However, it was between the late 90s and early 2000s that frictions between the two nations began to appear. The main causes that started to show this fracture can be found in three key contexts: the crisis on the Taiwan Strait, the violation of human rights following the massacre of Tiananmen Square and the increase in the Chinese military budget.

Among the most discussed topics was certainly the geostrategic situation of Taiwan. Since the Kuomintang relocated to Formosa, the Republic of China had followed a totally different path from that of the People's Republic of China, controlled by the Communist Party. The United States, which initially only recognized the Republic of China, received support from Taiwan during the Cold War, turning the island into a stronghold of anti-communism and allowing it to join the United Nations. However, when the U.S. started to engage in diplomatic relations with Beijing, after the open policy adopted by Deng Xiaoping, Washington maintained unofficial ties with Taipei through the Taiwan Relations Act<sup>53</sup>, which provided support for the defence of the island<sup>54</sup>. With this shift, Taiwan became marginalized even in the United Nations, while China, on the other hand, inherited not only a seat in the Assembly but also in the Security Council and was followed by the progressive normalization of relations between Washington and Beijing.

At its 26th session in October 1971, the UN General Assembly adopted the Resolution n. 2758 that:

...decide to restore all rights of the People's Republic of China and to recognize its government representatives as the only legitimate representatives of China at the United Nations, and to expel immediately the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek from their illegal posts at the United Nations and in all related organizations.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Eswar Prasad, ed. *China's Growth and Integration into the World Economy: Prospects and Challenges*. Occasional Paper 232. Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2004.

<sup>53</sup> U.S. Congress, Taiwan Relations Act, Public Law 96-8, 96th Cong., 1st sess., April 10, 1979.

<sup>54</sup> Ida Deregibus, "La questione di Taiwan tra Cina e Usa," *Istituto Analisi Relazioni Internazionali (IARI)*, February 5, 2025.

<sup>55</sup> United Nations General Assembly, Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations, 26th sess., 1971.

This resolution resolved once and for all the political, legal and procedural issues surrounding Chinese representation in the UN and applied to the entire country, including Taiwan, considering it part of China. It also made clear that China has only one seat at the UN, ruling out concepts of ‘two Chinas’ or ‘one China, one Taiwan’<sup>56</sup>.

When Nixon and Mao signed the Shanghai Communiqué, it confirmed the U.S. choice to recognize that for the Chinese people on both sides of the strait “there is only one China and that Taiwan is part of China”. Under the presidency of Carter, diplomatic relations between Washington and Beijing stayed consistent throughout the administration, breaking formal ties with Taipei<sup>57</sup>.

On paper, this suggested that Taiwan was under Chinese control, but U.S. actions were somewhat ambiguous. Indeed, the Taiwan Relations Act allows the sale of weapons to Taiwan for self-defence and committed the U.S. to “resist any use of force or other forms of coercion that would endanger the security, social or economic system of the people of Taiwan”. In 1982, the Reagan’s administration reinforced this position by providing the Six Assurances to Taipei, which partly contradicted what had been promised simultaneously to Beijing. These were aimed to reassure the island of continued U.S. support and were issued in response to the American negotiations with China about reducing arms sales to Taiwan. Among the guarantees are that no deadline will be set for the cessation of military deliveries, Beijing will not be consulted prior to the transfer of weapons, and Taiwan would not be under any pressure to engage in negotiations with the PRC.

Meanwhile, Chinese military demonstrations in the Taiwan Strait began, prompting responses from the U.S. The crisis emerged after the U.S. granted a tourist visa to the President of the Republic of China, Lee Teng-hui, in May 1995, interpreted by Beijing as a sign of defiance and weakening for its “One China” policy. In response, China mobilized military forces and organized large-scale military exercises, launching missiles in the waters near Taiwan. The United States responded with the deployment of two battle groups with aircraft carriers USS Independence and USS Nimitz at the closest point to Taiwanese waters. This gesture alienated the Chinese but cooled the relations between Beijing and Washington.

Another point of contention in the Sino-American relations was the human rights issue. This arose following the Tiananmen Square massacre, in which not only the U.S. but also other western countries

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<sup>56</sup> “Libro bianco: La questione di Taiwan e la riunificazione della Cina nella nuova era”, *Centro Studi Eurasia e Mediterraneo (CeSEM)*, August 12, 2022.

<sup>57</sup> As it is reported in the Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the PRC: “the United States recognizes the Government of the People’s Republic of China as the only legal government of China but, in this context, will maintain cultural, commercial and other unofficial relations with Taiwan”.

temporarily interrupted diplomatic and military relations with China. Students had long occupied the square in Beijing, demanding more political freedoms and democratic reforms. After weeks of occupation, the Chinese government ordered the military to open fire on demonstrators, resulting in the deaths of thousands.

Later, President George H.W. Bush condemned the actions at Tiananmen Square and suspended sales of military equipment as well as high-level exchanges with Chinese officials. Many members of Congress and international leaders supported broader economic sanctions, some of which were implemented. The most-favoured-nation clause was also called into question: American public opinion considered unacceptable to offer economic advantages to a government which had repressed peaceful demonstrations<sup>58</sup>.

However, the Bush administration adopted a more reserved approach behind the scenes. He decided to send secretly the counsellor Brent Scowcroft to Beijing in July 1989 to reassure the Chinese on the American desire to continue cooperation. Bush was therefore able to maintain relations with China, even though he faced domestic criticism and international pressure<sup>59</sup>.

Finally, one of the events that led to increased tensions between the United States and China in the late 1990s and early 2000s was the rise in Chinese military spending. During this period, the Chinese government took further steps to adapt the defence industry to market logic. It promoted the introduction of western-style management techniques, placed greater emphasis on quality checks, and strengthened the army's control over the weapons procurement and program management. Considerable efforts were also made to rationalise the colossal military-industrial complex, reduce excess personnel and improve production.

Thus, the United States began to take notice of the steady rise in China's military budget. However, one of the things that concerned Washington was the lack of transparency for the Chinese military spending numbers. Even today, despite the government publicly announces its military budget through annual reports by the Ministry of Defence, its figures differ considerably from the estimates of external analysts<sup>60</sup>.

The Chinese military, officially known as the People's Liberation Army (PLA), underwent a major transformation beginning in 1990. This massive change was driven by the will of the military and

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<sup>58</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "Tiananmen Square, 1989" *Milestone Documents*.

<sup>59</sup> Maureen Dowd, "2 U.S. Officials Went to Beijing Secretly in July", *New York Times*, December 19, 1989.

<sup>60</sup> Chen, Sean, and John Feffer. "China's military spending: soft rise or hard threat?" *Asian Perspective* 33, no. 4 (2009), p. 48.

political leaders focused on modernizing the armed forces, driven by the evolution of the military scenario. Contemporary conflicts were moving to new strategic domains, such as maritime and aerospace, leading to a change of vision on China's behalf, no longer reliant just on the land army, as it has done for decades. Therefore, a more balanced military force and a more centralized and integrated command structure was needed. In 1990, China's president, Jiang Zemin, called on the military to demonstrate greater professional competence, to observe an efficient work ethic and maintain a more rigorous discipline. In the following years, until the beginning of 2000, the PLA saw a considerable downsizing, reducing the overall military staff.

Between 1998 and 2005, numerous documents were published that highlighted the potential threat posed by the Chinese army. The RAND Corporation, a well-known American think tank, in a report published in 1999, had already mentioned the growth of the Chinese army as a possible challenge to U.S. national defence<sup>61</sup>. This issue was considered particularly serious for four reasons: the possession of nuclear weapons by China, the PLA's ability to diversify its investments across several military domains, the size of the army itself and the Chinese geographical configuration that made it difficult any potential U.S. military intervention.

Based on these concerns, the United States began to create ad hoc commissions, charged with the task of analysing and reporting international security issues for possible threats from China. One of the most prominent was the bipartisan U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC). Established in 2000, it has had, since its creation, the task of analysing the impact of economic and trade relations with China on the U.S. national security, studying also the Chinese military capabilities in relation to other major powers.

Notably, from its very first report, the Commission highlighted China's military expenditure, estimating that it had expanded by more than a third between 2000 and 2002<sup>62</sup>. The report underscored Beijing's willingness to include in its defence spending advanced military technologies. Although Chinese officials claimed that the spending increase was largely driven by economic growth and development, they also acknowledged the military advantages such investments would bring. By 2002, China did not yet have the capabilities to pose a direct military threat to the United States, but it had already launched a 10 to 15 years plan aimed at building a modern and strategically competitive defence sector.

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<sup>61</sup> Zalmay Khalilzad et al., "The United States and a Rising China: Strategic and Military Implications", *RAND Corporation*, 1999.

<sup>62</sup> U.S.-China Security Review Commission, *The National Security Implications of the Economic Relationship Between the United States and China: Report to Congress Pursuant to Public Law 106-398*, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, July 2002.

The U.S. Department of Defence, through a section of the National Defence Authorization Act, has been compiling an annual report since 2000 to analyse China's military and defence strategies<sup>63</sup>. The document submitted to Congress emphasized that China's main goal was to become a strong, modernized and rich nation. Regarding the army, the document reported that Beijing was reducing the size of its armed forces aimed at restructuring the PLA. At the same time, military academies would take on a more important role in professional development, with the aim of creating a well-educated and technologically qualified force.

Official data show that between 1998 and 2007, China's military spending increased by an average of 15.9% per year, while overall government spending grew by 18.4%<sup>64</sup>. During the 2007 Asia tour of Vice President Dick Cheney, he declared that Chinese military spending was not in line with the strategy of "peaceful rise". China justified this situation by saying that the expenditure is intended for better training and higher salaries for soldiers, to "protect national security and territorial integrity"<sup>65</sup>.

In 2007, China publicly declared that military spending would amount to \$44.94 billion. However, according to estimates by the Pentagon, this amount represents about a third of the actual military expenditure, if we consider only the expenditure on equipment. China has been steadily increasing its military spending for over a decade, trying to catch up with the other great powers. But the 2007 figure has attracted the attention of the international community because it represents the most significant leap in recent years. In response, Jiang Enzhu, Chairman of the Committee for Foreign Affairs of the National People's Assembly, declared that China's military spending does not pose a threat to other nations and that the funds would be invested just in the "defensive operations"<sup>66</sup>.

The contrast is now clear. Tensions over issues such as the Taiwan Strait case, human rights and military spending have sharpened U.S.-China relations and complicated trade, economic and cultural relations. At the end of the nineties and the beginning of the new millennium, the differences between Washington and Beijing could no longer be ignored. While in the 1970s the logic of openness and cooperation prevailed, the early 21<sup>st</sup> century gave rise to a new narrative: that of two powers heading toward deeper structural and ideological rivalry.

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<sup>63</sup> National Defence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000, Pub. L. No. 106-65, 113 Stat. 512 (1999).

<sup>64</sup> Edward Cody, "China boosts military spending", *Washington Post*, March 5, 2007.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> "1949-2025: U.S.- China Relations", *Council on Foreign Relations*

## CHAPTER 2

### The Obama administration (2009-2017): cooperation and containment

#### 2.1 From U.S. vulnerability to China's rise

*America will remain the anchor of strong alliances in every corner of the globe. And we will renew those institutions that extend our capacity to manage crisis abroad...*

*We will support democracy from Asia to Africa, from the Americas to the Middle East, because our interests and our conscience compel us to act on behalf of those who long for freedom.*

Barack H. Obama-Inaugural Address  
January 13, 2013.  
Washington D.C.

With these words, Barack Obama began his second term as the 44th President of the United States of America.

The onset of the Obama administration in 2009 coincided with a period of notable change in the global geopolitical landscape. The U.S., weakened by the 2008 financial crisis, was dealing with a rising economic fragility and an increasingly multipolar world characterized by the strengthening of China's global influence. In this situation, overseeing the Sino-U.S. relationship was a key strategic hurdle for the new administration. In the early months, Obama's aim was to create a diplomatic and strategic "safety net" with Beijing to prevent the recurring downturns in bilateral relations seen under the previous U.S. administrations, especially in 1981, 1989, 1993, and 2001, which were frequently associated with diplomatic crises or political changes<sup>67</sup>. These periodic declines had indeed jeopardized the potential for collaboration on essential global matters, ranging from international security to worldwide trade and combating climate change.

After criticizing President Jimmy Carter for abandoning the Republic of China, Ronald Reagan took office in 1981. He intended to restore an official relationship with Taiwan and sell to the island advanced fighter aircraft. Reagan's position was part of the Republican broader criticism of the Carter

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<sup>67</sup> Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), p.21.

administration, that also targeted the legacy of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, who had engineered the breakthrough with China. The outcome, as previously mentioned, was a joint communiqué concluded on August 17, 1982, in which the United States pledged that its arms sales to Taiwan would not exceed in quality or quantity the level of those supplied in recent years and that it would phase out such sales over time, leading to “final resolution”<sup>68</sup>.

The following presidential change took place in 1989, a year that had a negative impact on relations between the United States and China. For the remainder of the Bush administration, ties remained extremely strained due to the June 4 Tiananmen massacre. The principle of China's Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status was attacked, U.S. sanctions were imposed, and international collaboration was severely curtailed. Under the Clinton presidency the relations remained frozen for another couple of years. On May 28, 1993, he issued the Executive Order 12850<sup>69</sup>, which made the renewal of China's MFN trading status conditional on improvements in its human rights practices. There were several conditions that the PRC needed to respect: the U.S. Secretary of State was required to assess China's progress in key areas, such as the release of the political prisoners and freedom of expression. As reported in Section 1:

The Secretary of State (Secretary) shall make a recommendation to the President to extend or not to extend MFN status to China for the 12-month period beginning July 3, 1994<sup>70</sup>.

Without sufficient progress, the U.S. reserved the right to revoke or limit the MFN clause. However, the administration soon faced growing pressure from the business community and strategic policymakers, who argued that linking trade to human rights was counterproductive. They believed that engagement and economic integration would be more effective in encouraging reform in China. In 1994, Clinton reversed his position and decoupled human rights from trade, announcing the renewal of MFN status without conditions. This decision raised also some critiques from the 2000 candidate George W. Bush, who condemned the Clinton administration for considering China a “strategic partner”, while he labelled the country a “strategic competitor”.

Upon taking office, the Bush administration was divided among senior officials over the Chinese situation. Traditional engagers, like the Secretary of State Colin Powell and U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, sought continuity in relations. On the other side, a group based in the Office of the

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<sup>68</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's*, pp. 18-21.

<sup>69</sup> U.S. President. *Executive Order 12850: Conditions for Renewal of Most-Favored-Nation Status for the People's Republic of China in 1994*. May 28, 1993. Federal Register 58, no. 103 (June 1, 1993).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

Vice President and the senior leadership of the Defense Department, sought to give policy toward China a new and harder stance. This internal division came to the forefront in April 2001, after a Chinese pilot died in a collision between a U.S. EP-3 surveillance aircraft and a Chinese fighter jet, 70 nautical miles southeast of China's Hainan Island, in the airspace above China's claimed 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone<sup>71</sup>. Chinese authorities detained the American crew for eleven days, until the handover of a letter from the U.S. government to the Chinese Foreign Minister, stating that the U.S. was "very sorry for the incident"<sup>72</sup>.

Tensions lasted until September 11, when the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon radically changed the administration's priorities and the war on terrorism became its centrepiece. In the post-9/11 world, there was no room for other enemies or a rift with China.

The lessons of the 1980, 1992, and 2000 presidential campaigns were clear: in each case, an opposition candidate had condemned his predecessor's policy toward China, promising to take a harder line. However, once in office, the president was forced to abandon that promise and revert to the previous administration's approach, damaging U.S. interests and credibility.

The Obama administration was determined to avoid these mistakes. Instead, it sought to demonstrate that it intended to place greater emphasis on U.S. relations with Asia, while avoiding the politicization of China as a campaign issue. As an initial step, one of the first phone calls President Obama made to a foreign leader was to the Chinese President, Hu Jintao, with the aim to rapidly build a more and constructive engagement with Beijing than had existed in the past. Both countries were addressing severe issues, but in 2009, the U.S. had to deal with the need to spur economic recovery from the financial meltdown and deep global recession of the last six months of the Bush Administration.

The global financial crisis had a devastating effect on the world economy. Not only did it raise doubts about the fundamentals and sustainability of the existing global financial system, but it also erased the euphoria that came with the strong growth posted by most economies in 2007 and early 2008. The credit crisis resulted from a period of excessive borrowing, excessive lending, and excessive investment incentivized by a series of significant economic and regulatory factors. The United States found itself in the middle of the storm, facing one of the most critical moments for the global economy since the Great Depression of 1929. The crisis originated following the collapse of the housing bubble, fuelled by years of credit expansion, particularly through the widespread issuance of subprime

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<sup>71</sup> Eric Donnelly, "The United States–China EP-3 Incident: Legality and 'Realpolitik,'" *Journal of Conflict & Security Law* 9, no. 1 (2004), p.25.

<sup>72</sup> "US Says Sorry, China to Free Crew." *The Guardian*, April 11, 2001.

mortgages to borrowers with low creditworthiness. The highly deregulated U.S. financial system thus became deeply exposed to a growing volume of toxic assets, whose sudden devaluation triggered a spiral of panic and distrust among banks, investors, and markets<sup>73</sup>.

The turning point came in September 2008, with the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, one of the country's leading investment banks, which unleashed a wave of global instability, freezing credit markets and accelerating the spread of the crisis to Europe and emerging economies<sup>74</sup>. Only one month later, on October 11, 2008, the International Monetary and Financial Committee (IMFC) of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) issued a formal joint statement to express a unified position on the state of the global economy, policy priorities and multilateral strategies to be implemented<sup>75</sup>. These included: the official support for the measures adopted by the G7 the day before to stabilize the global financial crisis; an official mandate for the IMF to take a leading role in coordinating the international response, and a call for global cooperation. As it was also reported, the members must:

Take decisive action and use all available tools to support systemically important financial institutions and prevent their failure<sup>76</sup>.

In response, the Republican administration led by President George W. Bush adopted a series of extraordinary measures to prevent the collapse of the financial system. Among these, there was the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act<sup>77</sup> (EESA), passed on October 3, 2008, one of the bailout measures taken by Congress. The most significant action was the approval of the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP)<sup>78</sup> that sought to restore liquidity to credit markets by authorizing the Secretary of the Treasury to purchase up to \$700 billion in mortgage-backed securities and other troubled assets from the country's financial institutions. TARP authorized the Treasury Secretary to "purchase, and to make and fund commitments to purchase, troubled assets from any financial institution, on such terms and conditions as are determined by the secretary".

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<sup>73</sup> Arner, Douglas W. "The Global Credit Crisis of 2008: Causes and Consequences." *The International Lawyer* 43, no. 1 (2009), p.92.

<sup>74</sup> Ivi, p.96

<sup>75</sup> International Monetary Fund. "Communique of the International Monetary and Financial Committee of the Board of Governors of the International Monetary Fund." Press Release No. 08/240, October 11, 2008.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> U.S. Congress. *Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008*, Public Law 110–343, 110th Cong. (October 3, 2008).

<sup>78</sup> Although Congress initially authorized \$700 billion for TARP in October 2008, that amount was later reduced to \$475 billion by the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act (Dodd-Frank Act). Beyond this limitation, the Act introduced broad financial reforms aimed at increasing oversight, reducing systemic risk, and protecting consumers. Key provisions included the creation of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), enhanced regulation of large financial institutions, new transparency rules for derivatives trading, and the Volcker Rule, which restricted speculative trading by commercial banks.

See: *Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act*, Public Law 111–203, 124 Stat. 1376 (2010),

At the same time, the federal government intervened to support several failing institutions, including the semi-public mortgage agencies Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac and the insurance giant AIG, carrying out partial nationalizations to prevent systemic failure<sup>79</sup>. The Federal Reserve, under Chairman Ben Bernanke, contributed by sharply cutting interest rates and implementing unconventional monetary policies to support system liquidity.

At the international level, the Bush administration promoted stronger multilateral cooperation, enhancing the role of the G20 as a key forum for coordinating global economic policies<sup>80</sup>. However, while it laid the groundwork for systemic crisis management, it oversaw only the initial phase of the emergency, leaving to the incoming Obama administration the task of addressing the deeper economic and social consequences of the recession. In this sense, the Bush administration's response was crucial in stabilizing financial markets, but it marked only the beginning of a broader redefinition of the state's role in the economy that would unfold in the years to come.

The Chinese economy was affected by the global economic and financial crisis in a very different way compared to other major economic powers. The distinction relied primarily in the transmission channel: it did not come through the financial system, but through the real economy, particularly its export-oriented industries. The global crisis caused a dramatic fall in China's foreign trade and foreign direct investment inflows, including higher unemployment rates and strong price fluctuations. Foreign-invested enterprises (FIEs) and State-owned enterprises (SOEs) were affected more than domestic private enterprises, and China's processing trade suffered more than its ordinary trade. The Chinese government responded quickly to tackle the adverse effects of the crisis through a sizeable stimulus package<sup>81</sup>.

Compared to the banking systems of developed countries, Chinese banks generally have very little exposure to risks on international financial markets: China's strict restrictions on capital inflows and outflows limit the ability of individual Chinese citizens and firms to invest their savings overseas. Most Chinese investment flows are controlled by government entities such as State-owned banks, the China National Investment Corporation and SOEs. These entities maintained relatively conservative

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<sup>79</sup> Arner, *The Global Credit Crisis of 2008: Causes and Consequences*, p.113

<sup>80</sup> On November 15, 2008, following two days of meetings in Washington D.C., the leaders of the G20 released their Declaration of the Summit on Financial Markets and the World Economy. In this declaration, the G20 discussed the causes of the crisis, committed to supporting an open global economy, and defined a range of actions to be taken to reform financial regulation to avoid future crisis.

See: Group of Twenty (G20), *Declaration of the Summit on Financial Markets and the World Economy*, November 15, 2008.

<sup>81</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *The Financial and Economic Crisis of 2008–2009 and Developing Countries* (New York and Geneva: United Nations, 2010), p. 119.

investment strategies on international financial markets. As a result, the Chinese financial institutions have suffered small losses in the global financial turmoil. The biggest loss reported was by the Bank of China, totalling about \$2 billion due to the subprime crisis. These figures are very small compared to losses of about \$4.1 trillion incurred by international banks.

To cope with the negative impacts, the Chinese government took swift action. In November 2008, it announced a 4 trillion renminbi (RMB) (approximately \$586 billion) fiscal stimulus package for 2009 and 2010, equivalent to 13.3% of China's nominal GDP in 2008<sup>82</sup>. The largest share of the stimulus package (37.5%) was allocated to the development of transport infrastructure, and the second largest share, about 25%, to post-earthquake reconstruction of Wenchuan County in Sichuan Province. These expansionary policies had positive effects on the country's exports and macroeconomic stability. China's GDP growth rates were 9% in 2008 and 8.7% in 2009, the highest among the major economies of the world<sup>83</sup>.

The 2008-2009 global financial crisis represented a pivotal moment in the Sino- American relations. It highlighted the interdependence between the two economies: neither country could afford the collapse of the other and cooperation became a necessity rather than a choice.

With the new presidency, China and the U.S. committed to expanding their bilateral diplomacy. Previously, under the Bush administration, Beijing and Washington had already started the so-called Strategic Economic Dialogues (SED), established in 2006<sup>84</sup>. However, considering the global crisis and the necessity of renewed policies, Presidents Hu and Obama gave the Strategic Economic Dialogue a new broader name, the U.S.–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED). While the original SED was mainly directed towards trade and exchange rates issues, the S&ED combined both economic and strategic/diplomatic issues, such as security concerns and human rights. As President Obama remarked during his speech on July 27, 2009:

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<sup>82</sup> The package covered the following areas: (i) development of public transport infrastructure (including railways, subways, highways, airports and ports); (ii) post-earthquake reconstruction in Sichuan Province; (iii) creation of affordable public housing in urban areas; (iv) development of rural infrastructure (including irrigation, drinking water, electricity and transport); (v) environmental projects; (vi) technology development and innovation; (vii) health care and social security; and (viii) education. *See*: UNCTAD, *The Financial and Economic Crisis*, p.133.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> George W. Bush, *Statement on the Creation of the United States–China Strategic Economic Dialogue*, September 20, 2006, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 42, no. 38 (2006).

George W. Bush stated, "I am pleased to welcome the creation of the Strategic Economic Dialogue between the United States and China...The economies of the United States and China have been engines of global growth. We must ensure that citizens of both countries benefit equitably from our growing economic relationship and that we work together to address economic challenges and opportunities".

The relationship between the United States and China will shape the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which makes it as important as any bilateral relationship in the world. That really must underpin our partnership. That is the responsibility that together we bear<sup>85</sup>.

The idea behind this new form of cooperation was the creation of the G2, a bilateral forum between the United States and China, the two global superpowers, which would coordinate their policies on crucial global issues. The underlying message was that if Washington wanted to respond to China's economic rise, it should encourage Beijing to become a responsible actor in the global economic system and seek to establish a genuine partnership with Beijing to jointly lead the global economic order.

However, China never fully supported the idea of a G2. Premier Wen Jiabao was concerned that accepting this model would mean taking on too much global responsibility. On the other side, China has always supported a more multipolar international order, based on institutions like the G20 or the UN. Throughout the 2000s, China sought to downplay any perception of being a threat to U.S. leadership. Accepting the G2 concept risked reinforcing the "China challenge" narrative and could have intensified the geopolitical tensions. Consequently, Jiabao rejected the American proposal, stating that "China is still a developing country... The world should be governed by all countries, not just two."<sup>86</sup> The idea of G2 rose a dilemma: on the one hand, it seemed an attempt at equal cooperation with Beijing, but on the other, it could be interpreted as a U.S. strategy to preserve a bilateral hegemony, excluding other actors such as the European Union, India or other emerging economies from the decision-making process.

On the eve of the first Strategic and Economic Dialogue in July 2009, Secretaries Hillary Clinton and Timothy Geithner underscored the U.S. intention to align with China, as a strategy of global engagement, saying "few global problems can be solved by the U.S. or China alone. And few can be solved without the U.S. and China together"<sup>87</sup>. Nevertheless, Premier Jiabao took a more cautious stance during the Sino-European Union summit in Prague in May 2009, saying "it is totally ungrounded and wrong to talk about the dominance of two countries in international affairs"<sup>88</sup>.

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<sup>85</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the U.S./China Strategic and Economic Dialogue," *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, July 27, 2009.

<sup>86</sup> Xinhua. "Wen: China Disagrees to So-Called G2." *China Daily*, November 18, 2009.

<sup>87</sup> Geoffrey Garrett, "The Financial Crisis, Chimerica and Global Governance," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 77 (2013), p.76.

<sup>88</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. *Speech by Premier Wen Jiabao at the Press Conference with EU Leaders*. May 21, 2009.

The 2007-2008 financial crisis, which originated in the United States, swept across the international markets. However, due to the relative independence of China's financial system, coupled with its sustained high economic growth and substantial foreign exchange reserves, it appeared more stable during the crisis. This characteristic, added with China's extraordinarily successful hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, marked a peak in the international prestige of the People's Republic of China. In this context, concepts of *Chimerica*<sup>89</sup>, the G-2, and China-U.S. co-governance emerged. In the middle of a global crisis, the world looked for solutions, and China was regarded as one of the few actors powerful enough to offer support<sup>90</sup>.

## 2.2 Economic and diplomatic cooperation with China

The general perception in Asia in 2009 was that the United States had become distracted by the global war on terrorism and had been economically weakened by the 2007-2008 financial crisis. Indeed, Asian commentators complained that even when President Bush and the Secretary of State attended major conferences or met with Asian leaders, they seemed to care mainly about terrorism and little about the economic issues in Asian countries. The Bush administration also attempted to change the focus of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, which is explicitly dedicated to economic growth and coordination, to include substantial discussion of terrorism-related issues<sup>91</sup>.

To this end, Obama telephoned Hu Jintao within days after the inauguration and engaged in frequent face-to-face meetings at every opportunity provided by the G20 and G8 conferences, the UN General Assembly, APEC gatherings, and reciprocal visits to each other's capitals. Even if their first direct encounter took place at the G20 meeting in London in April 2009, Obama was determined to show more dedication to the Asian counterpart<sup>92</sup>.

In November 2009, the president embarked on his first visit to Asia, visiting Japan, Singapore, China, and South Korea. Unlike many of his recent predecessors, Obama had never visited China. There was a wide range of issues on the agenda to discuss with the Chinese president, but in their meeting, Obama framed these matters in a broader context of desired cooperation between the United States and China<sup>93</sup>.

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<sup>89</sup> The term "Chimerica" was coined in 2007 by historian Niall Ferguson and economist Moritz Schularick to describe the symbiotic economic relationship between the United States and China. See: Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick, *The End of Chimerica*, Harvard Business School Working Paper No. 10-037 (2009).

<sup>90</sup> Hongda Fan, "From G2 to Cold War 2.0: The Changing US Attitude Toward China," *The Diplomat*, October 12, 2024.

<sup>91</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, p.2

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, p.54

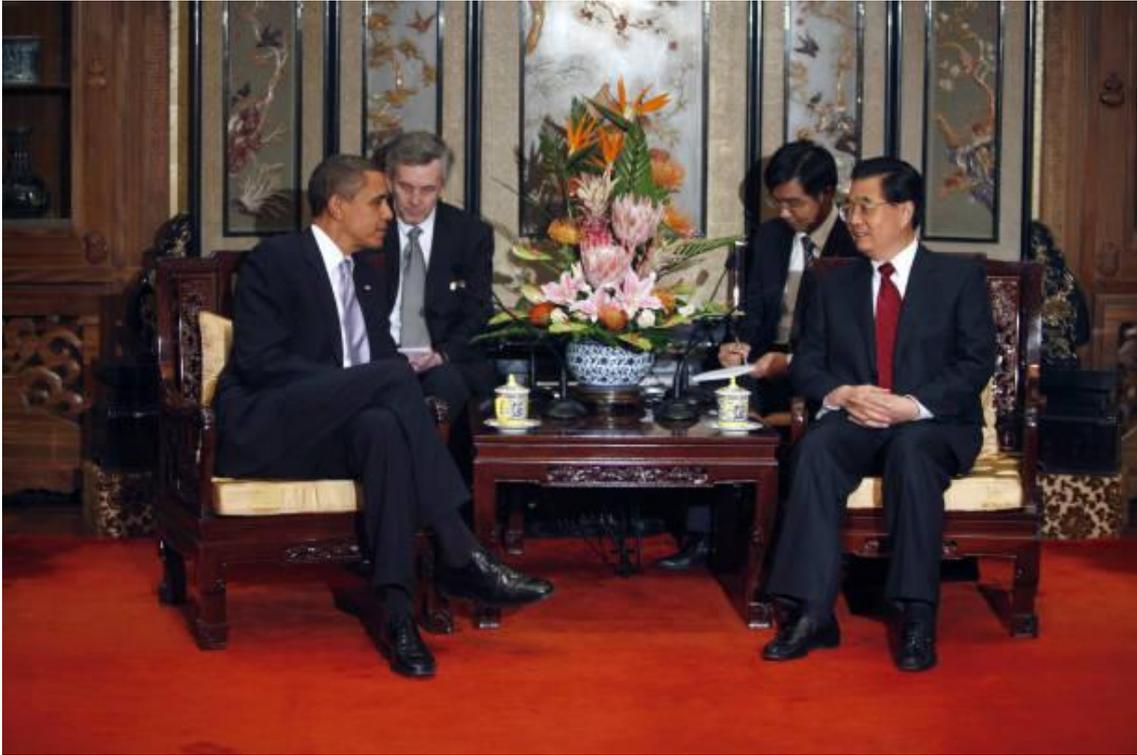


Figure 8: U.S. President Barack Obama speaks with Chinese President Hu Jintao after his arrival at the Diaoyutai state guest house in Beijing on November 16, 2009<sup>94</sup>.

Within the Obama administration, there was a belief that China should not be seen as an inevitable adversary, but rather as a potential partner. Washington understood that there were competitive elements in its relationship, dealing with economic as well as security areas, but it believed that the cooperative elements should take precedence. The new administration did not seek the containment of China, as was the case with the Soviet Union, but on the contrary, it welcomed a strong, prosperous, and successful China that would have a prominent role in the global arena. Obama met Hu Jintao four times in his first year in office, agreed to the establishment of a broad strategic and economic dialogue, and approved a joint statement stressing the emerging partnership<sup>95</sup>.

One of the key issues was climate change. China surpassed the United States as the leading emitter of greenhouse gases in the world in 2006, driven by its explosive growth and energy consumption<sup>96</sup>.

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<sup>94</sup> Elizabeth Dalziel, *US President Barack Obama Speaks with Chinese President Hu Jintao*, November 16, 2009, Diaoyutai State Guest House, Beijing. AFP via Getty Images.

<sup>95</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, p.69

<sup>96</sup> China surpassed the United States in *annual* carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions in 2006, according to data from the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency. This marked the first time another country overtook the U.S. in CO<sub>2</sub> output, due to China's rapid economic growth and heavy reliance on coal. While this milestone refers specifically to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from fossil fuel combustion and cement production, China's total greenhouse gas emissions, including methane and other gases, also became the world's highest in the years following. CO<sub>2</sub> remains the dominant component of greenhouse gases. See: "China Overtakes US as Top CO<sub>2</sub> Emitter – Dutch Agency," *Reuters*, August 9, 2007.

However, the U.S. and Europe were still responsible for most of the so-called legacy emissions (those emitted earlier and still in the earth's atmosphere).

The first major international treaty for the reduction of gas emissions was the Kyoto Protocol, adopted in 1997 and entered into force in 2005, that set legally binding targets. However, it only applied to developed countries, as it is listed in Annex I of the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), exempting developing nations like China and India, based on the principle "common but differentiated responsibilities" (CBDR)<sup>97</sup>. At the beginning, the United States signed but never ratified the Protocol and President Bush formally withdrew from it in 2001<sup>98</sup>.

Another opportunity came under the Obama administration thanks to the COP15; the Copenhagen Climate Conference held in December 2009. In this case both developed and developing countries, especially China, India and Brazil were part of the negotiations and committed to action. It was the first time major developing nations agreed to internationally communicate their climate actions, a move that was a turning point in global climate diplomacy. However, the discussions were chaotic, and talks stalled over several matters. At the end of the conference no consensus was reached, and delegates feared a complete failure.

However, President Obama, on December 18, met the head of the Chinese delegation, Premier Wen Jiabao, as well as South African President Jacob Zuma, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. This informal meeting did not involve the Western European powers, which led some nations, namely, France and Germany, to diplomatic frustration. Obama sat down with the group and helped to negotiate basic terms of what would eventually become the Copenhagen Accord, in which they underlined the importance of climate change and emphasized their strong political will to combat it<sup>99</sup>.

This episode highlighted the flexible approach to diplomacy that would characterize the U.S.-China relations on other critical issues, and, thanks to Obama's cajoling, the Chinese came to recognize the

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<sup>97</sup> The CBDR principle was formally established in 1992 by the UNFCCC, during the Rio Earth Summit. As article 3, paragraph 1 of the Convention states: "The Parties should protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations [...] on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities". See: United Nations, *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*, FCCC/INFORMAL/84, 1992.

<sup>98</sup> The Senate, in 1997, passed the Byrd-Hagel Resolution opposing any agreement that did not include binding obligations for developing countries or that could harm the U.S. economy. Shortly after, in March 2001, the Bush administration officially announced that the United States would not ratify the Protocol, citing as main reasons the exemption granted to developing countries, which created competitive imbalances, and the potential negative impacts on the national economy.

<sup>99</sup> United Nations, *Conference of the Parties, Fifteenth Session, Draft Decision -/CP.15: Proposal by the President — Copenhagen Accord*, FCCC/CP/2009/L.7, December 18, 2009.

truth of his argument: that the two nations needed to work together to avoid being blamed for failure. This helped boost U.S. credibility in addressing future issues with comparable gaps in objectives.

The second challenge that Washington and Beijing tried to address was nuclear proliferation, particularly concerning Iran and North Korea.

The United States has a long history with Iran's nuclear program that dates to 1957, when the nation was ruled by the Shah and had a close relationship with U.S. As a sign of cooperation with Washington, Tehran decided to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)<sup>100</sup> in 1968, and, in 1974, it passed the Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), approving the inspection of the country's nuclear facilities by IAEA authorities<sup>101</sup>. However, after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Tehran advanced its uranium enrichment efforts, conducting research on plutonium reprocessing.

This led to growing concerns in Washington, further increased after the finding of a Russian - Iranian 1992 nuclear agreement, aimed to provide Iran with sensitive nuclear technologies. At the same time, China had become a principal supplier for Tehran, and in the 1990s, it agreed to provide it with research reactors, laser enrichment equipment and an industrial scale uranium conversion facility (UCF). Beijing, eventually, yielded to U.S. pressure, and agreed to sever their nuclear cooperation with Iran in 1997 in return for a "123" nuclear cooperation agreement<sup>102</sup> with the United States. Many of the projects promised by the Chinese, such as the two large reactors, were never delivered, but the Chinese-initiated UCF at Isfahan was sufficiently complete for the Iranians to finish the work themselves<sup>103</sup>.

Tehran didn't stop its nuclear projects and with the assistance of Abdul Qadeer Khan network, it was able to pursue the P-1 and the more advanced P-2 centrifuges, as well as important technical improvements. The project continued in the following years and by 2003, Iran had installed 100 -

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<sup>100</sup> The Treaty represents the only binding commitment in a multilateral treaty to the goal of disarmament by the nuclear-weapon States. Opened for signature in 1968, the Treaty entered into force in 1970. On 11 May 1995, the Treaty was extended indefinitely. *See: Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)*, signed July 1, 1968, entered into force March 5, 1970, United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs.

<sup>101</sup> Under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT), nuclear-weapon states are required to conclude Comprehensive Safeguards Agreements (CSAs) with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). These agreements authorize the IAEA to monitor and verify that nuclear material and activities within the state are used only for peaceful purposes. Verification measures include inspections, surveillance, and environmental sampling. *See: International Atomic Energy Agency, Safeguards Agreements.*

<sup>102</sup> Section 123 of the U.S. Atomic Energy Act (AEA) of 1954 outlines the process for major nuclear cooperation between the United States and other countries. To enter into such an agreement with the United States, that country must commit to nine non- proliferation criteria. *See: U.S. Atomic Energy Act of 1954, 42 U.S.C. § 2153.*

<sup>103</sup> Robert J. Reardon, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Past, Present, and Future," in *Containing Iran: Strategies for Addressing the Iranian Nuclear Challenge* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012).

centrifuge cascade at Natanz, as reported during the visit of the IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei in February 2003<sup>104</sup>.

While the United States requested an immediate referral of Iran to the UN Security Council (UNSC), the United Kingdom, France, and Germany (the “E-3”) opted for a diplomatic approach. The foreign ministers of France, Germany and the United Kingdom met in Tehran with Dr. Rohani, and Iran agreed to cooperate with the IAEA, to sign and implement the IAEA Additional Protocol (signed in December 2003), and to suspend enrichment and reprocessing related activities. A second agreement was concluded in Paris, in November 2004, between Iran and the E- 3 with the support of the High Representative of the European Union. The Paris Agreement launched a negotiating process to reach a “long-term arrangement” between Iran and the E3/EU, including cooperation in three areas: political and security issues, economy and technology, and nuclear-related problems. In March 2005, the United States agreed to support the E-3 initiative, with the promise that if negotiations with Iran were to fail, the Europeans would support the referral to the Security Council<sup>105</sup>.

The E-3 offered Iran economic incentives, civil nuclear assistance, and security assurances in exchange for the complete halt of enrichment. Iran rejected these proposals, insisting on its right to develop a peaceful nuclear program. Failing to reach a negotiated settlement with the E-3, and with its presidential elections approaching, Iran announced its intention to restart enrichment activities in 2005 and began producing UF<sub>6</sub> at Isfahan immediately after the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The new leader stopped voluntary cooperation with the IAEA, leading the Board of Governors to refer the issue to the UN Security Council<sup>106</sup>.

Between 2006 and 2008, the P5+1 group (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) attempted to negotiate with Iran by offering economic incentives in exchange for the suspension of its uranium enrichment program. In this context, the United States softened its stance, accepting the possibility of a limited enrichment capability in the future, if Iran first proved the peaceful nature of its program.

In 2006 with Russia and China opposing harsh sanctions in the UN Security Council, the United States agreed to offer a new package of positive inducements to Iran in the framework of the P5+1. However, at the same time, the UNSC adopted the first Resolution, UNSC 1696<sup>107</sup>, followed by

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<sup>104</sup> IAEA, GOV/2003/40, June 6, 2003; IAEA, GOV/2004/83, November 15, 2004, pp. 7–9.

<sup>105</sup> François Carrel-Billiard and Christine Wing, *IPI on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty*, Institute for Peace and International Security (IPI), April 30, 2010, p. 34.

<sup>106</sup> Reardon, *Iran's Nuclear Program: Past, Present, and Future*, p.16.

<sup>107</sup> United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1696*, S/RES/1696, July 31, 2006.

others, Resolutions 1737<sup>108</sup> and 1747<sup>109</sup>, which introduced limited sanctions, banned certain forms of nuclear cooperation, and imposed financial restrictions. The consensus was reached through diplomatic compromise: China and Russia, eventually, did not block the approval to maintain the Security Council unity and keep diplomatic channel open. However, Iran responded by intensifying its nuclear activities and limiting access to IAEA inspectors.

By 2007, Iran began industrial-scale enrichment. Another European attempt at compromise (“freeze-for-freeze”) was interrupted by both the U.S. and Iranian President Ahmadinejad. Tensions escalated after the release of the 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE)<sup>110</sup>, which concluded that Iran had halted its military nuclear program in 2003, reducing the perceived urgency for new sanctions. As it is reported:

We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program; we also assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons. We judge with high confidence that the halt, and Tehran’s announcement of its decision to suspend its declared uranium enrichment program and sign an Additional Protocol to its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Safeguards Agreement, was directed primarily in response to increasing international scrutiny and pressure resulting from exposure of Iran’s previously undeclared nuclear work<sup>111</sup>.

The Obama administration started to pursue an engagement strategy with Iran, even if Washington did not take the military option off the table. Indeed, it reiterated the Bush administration’s position that the United States would not accept a nuclear armed Iran<sup>112</sup>.

China has been reluctant to support meaningful sanctions against Iran, due to the relations that Beijing and Tehran have on China’s energy needs and Iran’s abundant resources, including other businesses agreement related to arms sales and defence cooperation. Iran has become heavily reliant on China economically, diplomatically, and, to some extent, militarily, and it provides the PRC with a unique

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<sup>108</sup> United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1737*, S/RES/1737, December 23, 2006.

<sup>109</sup> United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1747*, S/RES/1747, March 24, 2007.

<sup>110</sup> National Intelligence Council, *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities*, National Intelligence Estimate, November 2007.

<sup>111</sup> National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) are the Intelligence Community’s (IC) authoritative written judgments on national security issues. NIEs usually provide information on the current state of play but are primarily “estimative”: they make judgments about the likely course of future events and identify the implications for US policy. Indeed, they use probabilistic language, such as high, moderate or low, to reflect the likelihood of an event.

<sup>112</sup> Reardon, *Iran’s Nuclear Program: Past, Present, and Future*, p. 21

opportunity to expand its influence in the Middle East<sup>113</sup>. However, China decided to stop nuclear support to Iran in 1997 as part of an effort to improve relations with the United States<sup>114</sup>.

Obama knew that if he wanted to be successful negotiating with Iran, he also had to include the Chinese part, not only as a permanent member of the UNSC, but also as Iran's largest trading partner. During the meeting of the UN General Assembly in September 2009, President Obama reminded President Hu Jintao that Iran's nuclear program was unacceptable, calling on China and the other members of the UN Security Council to deliver a clear and united message to Tehran. Obama emphasized the need for pressure, while Hu supported more flexibility and direct communication between the United States and Iran<sup>115</sup>.

In April 2010, Hu announced his participation at the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, where he engaged in a private meeting with Obama for two hours. During the meeting, they secured an agreement to collaborate on a resolution that would punish Iran without penalizing Chinese companies engaged in normal commerce in the country. This led to the approval of the UNSC Resolution 1929<sup>116</sup> on June 9, 2010, with which the Chinese had accomplished the principal objective sought by the Obama administration regarding Iran: supporting U.S. sanctions, freezing new energy investments and participating positively in negotiations with Iran undertaken the P5 + 1 nations<sup>117</sup>. Even if China continued its economic engagement with Iran, particularly in the energy sector, in some cases it slowed investment or sought waivers from U.S. sanctions.

The second issue the Obama administration urgently needed to address with Chinese collaboration was the nuclear proliferation by another actor, North Korea. Upon taking office, Washington knew that its biggest challenge in East Asia was to devise a strategy for dealing with a nuclear North Korea. The North's nuclear weapons program had also been a major concern with the three previous administrations. After several decades of cooperation between U.S. and North Korea, culminating in the ratification of the Non- Proliferation Treaty in 1985, relations started to cool down in 2001, when Pyongyang admitted to running a secret uranium- enrichment program to power nuclear weapons, in violation of the Treaty. Moreover, in January 2003, North Korea withdrew from the NPT after disrupting IAEA monitoring instruments and expelling inspectors. Its nuclear proliferation in the

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<sup>113</sup> For example, from 1985 to 1996, China provided Iran with several types of critical nuclear technology and machinery and helped to acquire others, assisted Iran in uranium exploration and mining, and helped Iran master the uses of lasers for uranium enrichment

<sup>114</sup> Harold, Scott, and Alireza Nader. "China and Iran: Economic, Political and Military Relations." In *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations*, RAND Corporation, 2012.

<sup>115</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, p.21

<sup>116</sup> United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1929 (2010)*, S/RES/1929 (2010), June 9, 2010.

<sup>117</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, p.119

Peninsula concerned the regional nations like China, but also U.S. partners like Japan or South Korea<sup>118</sup>.

After its withdrawal, to ease the relations between South and North Korea, Russia, China, Japan and United States launched, in 2003, multilateral negotiations, the so-called Six Party Talks. In September 2005, the parties issued a joint statement in which North Korea agreed to a staged elimination of “all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs” and to return “at an early date” to the NPT and to IAEA safeguards. In response, the United States agreed to work toward normalized relations with North Korea, provide it with security assurances, and take the lead in providing heavy fuel oil to satisfy North Korea's energy needs. However, in the immediate wake of the 2005 joint statement, Washington froze North Korean accounts in a bank in Macau, Banco Delta Asia, believing it was a primary means for North Korean international proliferation activity and money laundering. This prompted North Korea to carry out its first nuclear test in October 2006 and test a long-range missile in July<sup>119</sup>, provoking irritation by China as well as anger from the U.S. These actions prompted the UN Security Council to issue unanimous condemnations and trade sanctions. Following a resumption of talks in 2007, North Korea consented to close and destroy the nuclear site at Yongbyon in exchange for eventual diplomatic recognition and financial assistance from the United States.

Although his government inherited this framework, when President Obama entered office in 2009, they had doubts about North Korea's commitment to denuclearization. Washington wanted to revive the Six Party Talks, adopting a policy of “strategic patience”, maintaining sanctions and refusing to make concessions without clear evidence of North Korea’s commitment to denuclearization. The conflicting behaviours adopted by North Korea, including tests in 2009 and 2013, led the United Nations Security Council to adopt a multitude of resolutions, such as Resolution 1874 in 2009<sup>120</sup>. Among its provisions were an embargo on arms exports and a nearly total embargo on arms imports, sanctions against financial transactions that would aid North Korea's programs for weapons of mass destruction (WMD), a procedure for inspecting ships that might be carrying North Korean arms, and restrictions on companies doing business with North Korea arms industry. Although Obama’s strategy avoided escalation, it froze diplomacy. The lack of engagement led to a period of stalemate, during which North Korea continued with its military programs.

Even if China had a long-lasting economic relationship with North Korea, Beijing agreed in adopting a harder position, making a political shift against Pyongyang in 2010, from diplomatic support to

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<sup>118</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. *North Korean Nuclear Negotiations: 1985–2024*.

<sup>119</sup> Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, p.27

<sup>120</sup> United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1874 (2009)*, S/RES/1874 (2009), July 12, 2009.

punishment, resulting eventually in unilateral sanctions on North Korea's missile and nuclear testing program in 2017. As was the case with Iran, despite China's close ties with North Korea through relations and trade, it adopted an approach aligned with U.S. policies and supported it in the votes held within the Security Council. This demonstrated Beijing's strong interest in maintaining a lasting dialogue with Washington.

### **2.3 The "Pivot to Asia" strategy**

As outlined in his policies, Obama's posture toward Asian affairs has evolved over the course of his administration. Obama was the first president to focus on the Indo-Pacific area, convinced that George W. Bush's administration paid too little attention to this region. Washington's efforts accelerated in 2010, when China's Asia policy became more assertive and during 2011, when the United States military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan significantly decreased. Moreover, some domestic dynamics provoked a shift in Obama's agenda.

In the earliest days, the approach toward Asia was mainly shaped by two prominent figures: the Deputy Secretary of State James B. Steinberg and the senior director for East Asia on the National Security Council, Jeffrey Bader. They were able to develop a highly effective cooperation that helped to consolidate the White House's leadership on China policy, as well as broader Asian regional strategies. From late 2009 onward, a different approach was used by the State Department, led by some officials within the Pentagon. This shift marked a harder line toward China and reflected a growing willingness to caution regional partners about Beijing's expanding capabilities and influence<sup>121</sup>.

The strategy implemented by the U.S. was called the Pivot to Asia (later renamed "Rebalance to Asia") and was first introduced in Hillary Clinton's speech at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii, on November 10, 2011. It was part of a major address on U.S. policy in the Asia-Pacific region, held during the APEC, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. The Secretary of State outlined the long-term strategy adopted in this region, based on strengthening regional institutions like East Asia Summit, APEC and ASEAN to address shared challenges. The speech also addressed the complex U.S.-China relationship, emphasizing the need for dialogue, particularly on sensitive issues like maritime security and nuclear non-proliferation. It was evident how the equilibrium was changing toward this region, and as the Secretary of State said<sup>122</sup>:

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<sup>121</sup> Kenneth G. Lieberthal, "The American Pivot to Asia," *Brookings Institution*, December 21, 2011.

<sup>122</sup> U.S. Department of State, "*Remarks by Secretary Clinton: America's Pacific Century*", Hillary Rodham Clinton, East-West Center, Honolulu, HI, November 10, 2011.

It is becoming increasingly clear that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world's strategic and economic centre of gravity will be the Asia Pacific...

The second major impetus given to the Pivot to Asia project occurred in January 2012, when the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) released its new strategic guidance, titled *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*<sup>123</sup>. This document formalized what President Barack Obama had already stated in his November 17 speech to the Australian Parliament:

U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities. Accordingly, while the U.S. military will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region<sup>124</sup>.

The document emphasized the importance of strengthening the existing alliances with Asian countries, as well as extending the cooperation with emerging partners in the region. China's rise as a regional power could impact U.S. economic and security interests and for this reason the American presence will require a balance of military presence and capability. While the U.S. seeks a cooperative relationship with China, it emphasizes the need for greater transparency in China's strategic intentions to avoid regional tensions.

One of the first policies used by the United States to reaffirm its influence in the Indo-Pacific arena was the strengthening of historical alliances and the building of new strategic partnerships. These accords had both military and security purposes, and as cooperation was further reinforced through engagement with key regional forums, including ASEAN and APEC.

ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, is an intergovernmental regional organization, created in 1967 by five countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. It was later joined by other five nations, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, bringing the total to ten member states. Dialogue relationships between ASEAN and the U.S. started in 1977 and have progressively improved since. The economic cooperation is stipulated under the Trade and Investment Framework Arrangement (TIFA)<sup>125</sup> and the Expanded Economic Engagement (E3)<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, January 2012.

<sup>124</sup> The White House, "Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament", *Office of the Press Secretary*, November 17, 2011.

<sup>125</sup> TIFAs are non-binding agreements concluded between the United States and other countries that aim to create a forum to discuss and resolve trade and investment issues, promote economic cooperation, and lay the groundwork for future trade agreements. *See*: Office of the United States Trade Representative, *Trade and Investment Framework Arrangement between the United States of America and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations*.

<sup>126</sup> U.S. Department of State, *The U.S.-ASEAN Expanded Economic Engagement (E3) Initiative*, Office of the Spokesperson, Washington, DC, October 9, 2013.

Initiative. The TIFA serves mainly as a mechanism to strengthen the ASEAN-U.S. economic ties, as a primary platform for dialogue. Meanwhile, the E3 initiative was welcomed during the ASEAN-U.S. Leaders meeting in November 2012, to promote closer cooperation: it is aimed to promote concrete cooperation through the implementation of specific projects.

The United States has deep-seated interests in Southeast Asia, such as maritime security, the promotion of democracy and human rights, the encouragement of liberal trade and investment regimes, counterterrorism, combating of illegal trafficking of narcotics and human trafficking, and many others. Moreover, some strategic choke points, such as the Strait of Malacca, represents one of the most important shipping routes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans through which 80% of the oil to Northeast Asia and one third of the world's traded goods are transported<sup>127</sup>.

ASEAN countries are collectively the United States' fourth-largest trading partner, with GDP growth that has exceeded the global average every year for the past 15 years. By 2015, trade in goods between the U.S. and ASEAN had reached over \$226 billion, marking a 5% expansion from the previous year. Over the course of the Obama years, trade in goods increased by 55% compared to 2009 levels, demonstrating substantial growth in bilateral economic engagement. The increasing relationship has had tangible effects on employment in the U.S. with more than 500,000 American jobs supported by trade in goods and services with ASEAN countries<sup>128</sup>.

Following the success of ASEAN's series of post-ministerial conferences launched in the mid-1980s, twenty-one economies in the Pacific Rim decided to establish the APEC, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, that promotes free trade through the region<sup>129</sup>. United States, being one of the founding members, was deeply committed to it and President Obama was able to deepen the collaboration with APEC member countries, reflecting a broader "Pivot to Asia" foreign policy strategy. He emphasized multilateralism, considered a pivotal feature for trade and commercial relationships. Moreover, in this context, one of the administration's hallmark initiatives was the promotion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP): this plan did not originate in the U.S., but by Brunei, Chile, New Zealand and Singapore. However, the Bush administration decided to join the negotiation only in the last year of his presidency, giving his successor the responsibility of further expanding it. APEC Summits served as crucial platforms for building consensus and advancing its principles of labour rights, environmental protection and maritime security.

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<sup>127</sup> Nguyen, Hang. "The Obama Administration and Southeast Asia: Dynamics of a New Engagement." *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 29, no. 1/2 (2016), p.44.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Because of its emphasis on trade and economic matters, APEC refers to its members as "economies" rather than states.

The relations between U.S. and Indo-Pacific countries were strengthened by single agreements made during the years. One major success was the improvement in the relations with Vietnam. Beginning in 2010, the two nations expanded their cooperation, establishing a Comprehensive Partnership in 2013, outlining nine broad areas of cooperation including the promotion and the respect for human rights<sup>130</sup>. This milestone was regarded as a turning point, considering their historical contrasts. During the 2016 Obama's presidential visit, he announced the complete lifting of the U.S. embargo on sales of lethal weapons to Vietnam<sup>131</sup>.

In parallel, Obama was able to deepen the cooperation with Singapore. Since 2013, four U.S. Littoral Combat Ships were deployed in Singapore's ports, while the 2015 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement<sup>132</sup>, allowing rotational deployment of U.S. ships and aircraft for missions such as maritime patrol and humanitarian assistance<sup>133</sup>. Lastly, Washington reaffirmed its long-standing alliance with Manila by signing the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement in April 2014. This partnership allowed U.S. forces to access five military bases across the Philippines, enabling rotational deployments of American troops, aircraft, and naval assets. This would signify an increased military presence in the Indo-Pacific, serving as a deterrent amid rising tensions in the South China Sea<sup>134</sup>.

New military agreements were achieved also with Australia, Japan and South Korea as part of Obama's publicly stated strategy of shifting the American military's long-term focus toward the Pacific.

In November 2011, following the meeting between President Obama and the Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, it was established the Marine Rotational Force-Darwin (MRF-D), aimed at strengthening military cooperation and enhancing regional security. The first rotation took place in 2012 and consisted of temporary exercises lasting approximately six months of joint training with the Australian Defence Force. These rotations were designed to improve interoperability, to increase readiness in the region and to strengthen the cooperation between the two Pacific countries. As PM Gillard said: "It is a new agreement to expand the existing collaboration between the Australian Defence Force and the U.S. Marine Corps and the U.S. Air Force."<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> The White House, *Joint Statement by President Barack Obama of the United States of America and President Truong Tan Sang of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam*, Office of the Press Secretary, July 25, 2013.

<sup>131</sup> *BBC News*, "Obama Lifts US Embargo on Lethal Arms Sales to Vietnam," May 23, 2016.

<sup>132</sup> EDCAs are agreements established between countries, designed to deepen and expand their collaboration in specific areas, often related to defence, trade or security.

<sup>133</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Carter, Singapore Defense Minister Sign Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement," December 7, 2015.

<sup>134</sup> Nguyen, Hang. "The Obama Administration and Southeast Asia: Dynamics of a New Engagement." *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 29, no. 1/2 (2016): pp. 46-47.

<sup>135</sup> ABC News, "Gillard, Obama Detail US Troop Deployment," November 16, 2011.

In Japan, the United States significantly enhanced its forward- deployed capabilities, including Patriot interceptors and X- band radar installations, as a response to the regional threats such as North Korea's missile program. At the same time, the U.S. sought to ease tensions with the Japanese public, especially in Okinawa, where local opposition to American bases has remained strong for decades. To address these concerns, Washington and Tokyo agreed to relocate approximately 7,000 U.S. Marines in Guam, trying to maintain regional deterrence and reducing the political and social strain on host communities in Japan<sup>136</sup>.

In South Korea, the U.S. has boosted its military presence, marking a change in the policy adopted with the previous presidency. George W. Bush withdrew 40% of U.S. troops from South Korea and reduced the scale and frequency of military exercises between the two countries. This reduction aimed to lessen the operational burden and adapt to changing strategic priorities after the Cold War. However, Obama was able to oversee the largest joint military exercises with South Korea since the Korean War, increasing the U.S. troop presence stationed near Seoul and along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). In addition to this reinforcement, the U.S. deployed the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system in South Korea, designed to intercept ballistic missiles. However, this move was perceived by China as a threat to its national security because the THAAD's powerful radar can monitor large portions of Chinese territory, alter the regional balance of power and lead to diplomatic tensions.

With all these initiatives, Obama aimed to secure U.S. economic leadership by shaping the rules of trade and investment and while during his administration he had welcomed China's rise, he also recognized growing assertiveness, especially in the South China Sea. Consequently, he tried to strengthen security ties with allies and partners to deter Chinese aggression. On the other side Beijing saw these policies as an attempt to marginalize China, as it was also excluded from the initial TPP negotiations. China decided to promote its own regional initiative during the ASEAN Summit in Phnom, Cambodia, in 2012, called the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which included ASEAN countries, China, Japan, South Korea and Australia. Although it was negotiated for eight years, it subsequently entered into force in 2020.

Simultaneously, the U.S.–China economic relationship became increasingly unbalanced. The U.S. trade deficit with China surged from \$273.1 billion in 2010 to \$295.2 billion in 2011, accounting for three-quarters of the overall U.S. trade deficit increase that year<sup>137</sup>. This widening gap fuelled

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<sup>136</sup> Carnes Lord and Andrew S. Erickson, "Bases for America's Asia-Pacific Rebalance (Part 2)," *The Diplomat*, May 6, 2014.

<sup>137</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Trade in Goods with China". Data referenced are from the years 2010 and 2011.

concerns in Washington over structural trade imbalances and unfair practices. In March 2012, tensions escalated further when the United States, the EU, and Japan brought a WTO complaint against China<sup>138</sup> for restricting exports of rare earth metals, using them as leverage to force companies that needed this material, considered fundamental for many high-tech and defines industries<sup>139</sup>. The U.S. and its allies argued that China's export quotas distorted global markets and forced companies to relocate production to China. Beijing dismissed the complaint as "rash and unfair," but the dispute revealed growing systemic frictions in the global trading system<sup>140</sup>.

However, the Pivot to Asia quickly showed its flaws, with the TPP being a primary example. The economic pillar of the Pivot was never ratified by the United States due too strong domestic opposition. Many Democrats, along with labour unions, feared it would cause job losses ad further deindustrialization, while Republicans criticized it as unfavourable to U.S. interests. This demonstrated that even if the administration emphasized the need to "write the rules" of regional economy, it lacked the political capital at home to secure the congressional approval. As a result, the credibility of Obama and the U.S. engagement in Asia were undermined.

These developments revealed a deeper transformation: China was no longer just an emerging economy, but a rising power willing to assert its interests and reshape global norms. This trajectory culminated with the most significant leadership turnover in decades as nearly 70% of the members of the country's major leadership bodies, the Politburo Standing Council, were replaced. Li Keqiang assumed the role of premier, while Xi Jinping replaced Hu Jintao as President, General Secretary of the Communist Party, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission.

Xi's rise marked a turning point, consolidating power domestically while advancing a vision of China as a proactive global actor. Under his leadership, Beijing would have pursued a more centralized, assertive, and strategic foreign policy, one that increasingly challenged the liberal order long upheld by the United States.

## **2.4 The limits of cooperation and the emergence of tensions**

The year 2013 marked a milestone in the world's history as a time of transition and a redefinition of global balances. In Washington, Barack Obama started his second presidential term, driven by a vision

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<sup>138</sup> World Trade Organization (WTO), *China — Measures Related to the Exportation of Rare Earths, Tungsten and Molybdenum* (DS431), Dispute Settlement.

<sup>139</sup> Elizabeth C. Economy, interview by Christopher Alessi, "Challenging China's Trade Practices," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 14, 2012.

<sup>140</sup> China accounts for about 97% of the world's output of the seventeen rare earth metals, which are crucial for global electronics production and the defence and renewable-energy industries. See: Reuters, "EU, US, Japan Launch Rare Earth WTO Case against China," *Reuters*, March 13, 2012.

aimed at consolidating the economic recovery and restoring the United States' role on the international stage, as he tried to do during his first term. At the same time, in Beijing, Xi Jinping officially assumed the presidency of the People's Republic of China, after the transition that occurred within the party in November 2012. His rise to power marked the beginning of a new phase for the People's Republic of China: more centralized, more assertive, with an increasing international influence and domestic policies characterized by growing control over society and institutions. It's emblematic that two major powers embarked on such different paths: on one side, democratic continuity with the past, while, on the other side, an emerging leadership determined to redefine China's role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Two leaders, two visions, at a fundamental moment for the world.

During the early months of Xi's leadership, he acquired the reputation of being a practical leader who focuses on people's everyday problems and is committed to eradicating the corruption that has long plagued the Communist Party. But the essence of his vision was his call for the great revival or "rejuvenation" of the Chinese nation: rejuvenation that evoked memories of the country as the Middle Kingdom, as a powerful nation dominated by great dynasties of emperors and commanding a naval fleet of more than three hundred ships, sailing throughout Asia to the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. However, there are those periods stuck in the Chinese people's minds, such as the Century of Humiliation (1849-1949), when China was occupied and invaded by foreign powers or those periods in the contemporary history which have marked their government such as the Great Leap Forward or the Tiananmen Square massacre.

During his visit to the "Road Toward Renewal" exhibition on November 29, 2012, Xi Jinping stressed the importance of national rejuvenation, saying:

Realizing the great renewal of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream for the Chinese nation in modern history...Everybody has one's own ideal and pursuit as well as one's own dream... history tells us that everybody has one's future and destiny closely connected to those of the country and nation<sup>141</sup>.

Xi found himself in governing a country that already have a stable position in the international geopolitical order. The era of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao (2002-2012) marked the beginning of a more concerted public diplomatic efforts: throughout their leadership they worked to ensure that China's rise would be peaceful, and this would benefit all its partners. At the same time, as the United States struggled to climb out of the economic recession, China was called to assume its place on the global stage as an actor capable of shaping international norms and institutions.

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<sup>141</sup> Xinhua, "'Chinese Dream' Resonates Online After Xi's Speech," *Global Times*, December 1, 2012.

Bilateral relations between Beijing and Washington began in a positive way during the second Obama administration. One of the most remarkable moments was the summit at Sunnylands, California, on June 7, 2013. This moment came to be known as the “shirt-sleeves summit”, an informal meeting between Xi and Obama that represented the maturity of the U.S.-China relationship. It was the perfect moment to let the world see how the two largest economies have become increasingly interdependent in addressing issues like maritime disputes or cybersecurity. Moreover, the potential emergence of a security dilemma in the military and security realms risks turning one of the world’s most important bilateral relationships into strategic rivalry<sup>142</sup>. On that occasion, Xi and Obama demonstrated their commitment to a new type of partnership with the respective countries, but shifting geopolitical dynamics soon began to undermine that promise.



Figure 9: President Obama and President Xi Jinping walk the grounds of the Sunnylands estate in Rancho Mirage, California<sup>143</sup>.

Shortly after the Sunnylands Summit, China and the United States decided to create the U.S.-China Cybersecurity Working Group, to increase cooperation and build greater understanding and transparency. The decision to create this new mechanism stemmed from the urgent need to ease the tensions and growing mistrust that had intensified since the early months of 2013. In April, both

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<sup>142</sup> Wang Dong, *The Xi-Obama Moment: A Post-Summit Assessment*, The National Bureau of Asian Research, October 21, 2013.

<sup>143</sup> "At U.S.-China Shirt-Sleeves Summit, Formalities and Suspicions Abound," *The New York Times*, June 9, 2013.

countries had signalled a willingness to reach a mutual understanding that could help resolve the mounting accusations of cyber espionage<sup>144</sup>.

The debate escalated earlier that year, particularly after a report<sup>145</sup> published in February by a U.S. cybersecurity firm, that accused a covert unit of the Chinese military army of orchestrating numerous cyberattacks against American targets. Around the same time, major U.S. newspapers, such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*<sup>146</sup>, reported to being victims of cyber intrusions allegedly originating from China. While Beijing consistently denied involvement and positioned itself instead as a victim of similar attacks associated with the United States, the issue had by then gained global visibility. In Washington, cybersecurity became a top national security concern, and other countries started to elevate the issue on their own strategic agendas as well<sup>147</sup>.

This fragile collaboration further deteriorated with several accusations over the course of 2013, declining ultimately in May 2014, when the U.S. Justice Department accused China of stealing sensitive information from some American enterprises. Five Chinese officials, Wang Dong, Sun Kailiang, Wen Xinyu, Huang Zhenyu and Gu Chunhui, were accused of aggravated theft and economic espionage for breaking into the systems of several U.S. companies<sup>148</sup>. The press conference held by the D.C. Attorney General Eric Holder, marked the first time the U.S. had ever indicted individual foreign agents for cyber intrusions<sup>149</sup>.

China denied the U.S. hacking allegations, saying that U.S., by this action, betrays the commitment to building a stable and reliable military-to-military relations and causes serious damage to mutual trust. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei stated that the government and military had never participated in any activity related to the cyber-theft of trade secrets and that, on the contrary, China had been a victim of U.S. spying<sup>150</sup>. As a result, China responded by suspending the official Cyber Working Group negotiations.

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<sup>144</sup> BBC, “US-China Cyber Security Working Group Meets,” July 9, 2013.

<sup>145</sup> In 2013, the cybersecurity firm Mandiant, based in California, said Chinese had launched cyber-attacks on 141 organisations across twenty industries. The targets involved a range of government departments, private companies, from the Pentagon to the New York Times. Mandiant linked these attacks to a military-affiliated group based in nondescript building on the outskirts of Shanghai.

<sup>146</sup> BBC, “New York Times Hit by Hackers from China,” January 31, 2013.

<sup>147</sup> Jonathan Kaiman, “China Reacts Furiously to US Cyber-Espionage Charges,” *The Guardian*, May 20, 2014.

<sup>148</sup> The five defendants were officers in Unit 61398 of the Third Department of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). See: U.S. Department of Justice, *U.S. Charges Five Chinese Military Hackers for Cyber Espionage Against U.S. Corporations and a Labor Organization for Commercial Advantage*, press release, May 19, 2014.

<sup>149</sup> Garrett M. Graff, “How the US Forced China to Quit Stealing—Using a Chinese Spy,” *Wired*, October 11, 2018.

<sup>150</sup> Associated Press, “China Demands Halt to 'Unscrupulous' US Cyber-Spying,” *The Guardian*, May 27, 2014.

In June 2015, U.S. authorities reported evidence that Chinese hackers were behind the major online breach of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM)<sup>151</sup>. Between 2014 and 2015, hackers allegedly connected to China's Ministry of State Security, were reported to have stolen highly sensitive personal data of approximately 22 million U.S. federal employees. These personal data, such as biometric recognition information, are crucial for background checks and security clearances. Numerous federal agents were exposed to blackmail or targeted attacks, prompting also the responsibilities for federal cybersecurity protections. Following the scandal, the OPM director resigned, and the United States initiated major reforms to strengthen its cybersecurity.

This case suggested a deeper analysis: while both sides accused each other of state-sponsored hacking and intellectual property theft, they have used cyber tools as part of their strategic competition. This reciprocal dynamic produced a spiral of mistrust: every accusation reinforced the perception of threat, which in turn justified other offensive actions. In this sense, neither side can be considered "innocent".

The tensions that arose in the final years of the Obama administration regarded also some territorial disputes, and particularly the South China Sea. The competition for influence and control over this strategic maritime region added a further layer of complexity to the already tense bilateral relationship. With the Pivot to Asia strategy, Obama aimed to expand the American influence towards this arena. However, China's militarization efforts were threatening these plans. The U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter called on China to halt its controversial land reclamation efforts in the South China Sea during the fourteenth annual Shangri-La Dialogue on Asian Security. The U.S. surveillance imagery showed that China positioned weaponry on one of the artificial islands in the disputed Spratly Islands area of the South China Sea, despite Beijing's claims that it was for civilian purposes<sup>152</sup>.

Whoever holds the control of these islands in the South China Sea has a strategic advantage between several Asian states. With a direct military presence in this water, it could be used to project power across the region and even threaten nearby countries. China is not the only country that has a military presence there, but the efforts that Beijing is placing is much greater.

The United States responded with the FONOPs, the Freedom of Navigation Operations deployed by U.S. Navy, that typically involve U.S. naval vessels within 12 nautical miles of maritime features claimed or controlled by China to assert that these waters remain part of the global commons. The Obama administration initiated these operations in 2015, with a notable example occurring in

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<sup>151</sup> Dominic Rushe and agencies, "OPM Hack: China Blamed for Massive Breach of US Government Data", *The Guardian*, June 5, 2015.

<sup>152</sup> Julian E. Barnes and Gordon Lubold, "U.S. Surveillance on Island in South China Sea Reveals Chinese Arms", *Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 2015.

October, when the USS Lassen, a guided-missile destroyer, sailed near Subi Reef, in one of its FONOPs. The United States does not take a position on sovereignty over these issues, but they are used mainly to reassure regional allies, such as Japan or the Philippines, about the commitment to maintain rules-based order in Asia-Pacific. China, on the other hand, contested the FONOPs, used as a provocation and violation of their territorial rights<sup>153</sup>.

The final years of the Obama administration were defined by growing frictions: unresolved disputes over emerging domains like cyberspace or the escalation of tensions in the South China Sea, created a deep rift between the two global powers, fuelling strategic mistrust and geopolitical rivalry. These dynamics did not end with Obama's presidency, but expanded further with the new president, marking a decisive shift in the spheres of influence of the U.S. and China.

On January 20, 2017, the world welcomed the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America, Donald Trump.

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<sup>153</sup> Michael J. Green, Gregory B. Poling, and Bonnie S. Glaser, "The U.S. Asserts Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 27, 2015.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Trump administration (2017-2021): nationalism and trade war

#### 3.1 The “America First” narrative

*Together, We Will Make America Strong Again.*

*We Will Make America Wealthy Again.*

*We Will Make America Proud Again.*

*We Will Make America Safe Again.*

*And, Yes, Together, We Will Make America Great Again.*

*Thank you, God Bless You, And God Bless America<sup>154</sup>.*

Donald J. Trump- Inaugural Address  
Friday, January 20, 2017.  
Washington D.C.

In his inaugural address on January 20, 2017, Donald Trump described what would become the focus of his political agenda: an economic and political nationalism centred exclusively on the United States of America. The speech remarked his populist rhetoric, considered a stark departure from the traditional oratory of his predecessors. Trump deliberately avoided references to great moments in American history, a customary feature of inaugural addresses that are used to evoke the continuity and historical greatness of the nation. Instead, he explicitly stated: “Now we are looking only to the future”.

This statement clearly signalled an ideological shift: for Trump, the past symbolized an era of decline, of compromises, full of failures by the political elite. His emphasis was instead placed on the “America First” slogan, the guiding principle in every decision, whether commercial, military, diplomatic, or domestic. In his speech, Trump did not address the entire nation but “the forgotten men and women of our country”, foreshadowing the polarizing approach that would characterize his entire term in office. Lastly, he remembered the importance of the nation for the entire world by saying: “We do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather to let it shine as an example for everyone to follow”.

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<sup>154</sup> Donald J. Trump, *Remarks of President Donald J. Trump – As Prepared for Delivery, Inaugural Address*, January 20, 2017, The White House.

Trump's inaugural address is already a clear statement of intent.

The global context entered a phase of transition. Trump's surprise electoral victory on November 8, 2016, against the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, sent shockwaves through the global establishment, leaving everyone to wonder what kind of leadership he would adopt. The famous phrase "Make America Great Again" became the slogan of his administration and since his first day in office, he started to issue executive orders.

Immigration, one of the most debated issues, became the cornerstone of his political agenda. The Republican Party strongly backed his call to construct an impenetrable wall spanning 2,000 miles along the U.S.-Mexico border. Using Executive Order 13767<sup>155</sup>, he directed the Secretary of Homeland Security to undertake "Planning, designing, and constructing a physical wall along the [U.S.] southern border", while issuing Executive Order 13768<sup>156</sup>, he requested to hire 10,000 additional immigration officers to identify and deport illegal aliens accused of crimes, calling on the Attorney General to take steps to deny federal funds to so-called "sanctuary jurisdictions"<sup>157</sup>. Following the implementation of the earlier measures, Trump has been warning that the U.S. policy of admitting refugees, especially from Muslim nations, presented a serious threat to the nation's security. Therefore, Executive Order 13769<sup>158</sup> established a "Travel Ban", suspending the Refugee Admissions Policy for 120 days and prohibiting people in Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen from entering the United States.

Yet, there was one pressing matter that demanded attention: the relationship with China.

Trump's positions on China were described in the books that he wrote over the years. In *The America We Deserve* he wrote: "I believe the day of the chess player is over. American foreign policy must be in the hands of a dealmaker"<sup>159</sup>. In this case he was referring to FDR and Nixon, whom he credited

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<sup>155</sup> Donald J. Trump, *Executive Order 13767—Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements*, January 25, 2017, The White House.

<sup>156</sup> Donald J. Trump, *Executive Order 13768—Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States*, January 25, 2017, The American Presidency Project.

<sup>157</sup> This term refers to cities, counties, or states in the United States that limit their cooperation with federal immigration authorities. Specifically, these jurisdictions choose not to hold individuals on behalf of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) without a judicial warrant, refusing to participate in identifying and deporting undocumented immigrants, especially those not convicted of serious crimes. Their stance is often justified by the need to maintain trust between local law enforcement and immigrant communities.

<sup>158</sup> Donald J. Trump, *Executive Order 13769—Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States*, January 27, 2017, The American Presidency Project.

<sup>159</sup> Donald J. Trump, *The America We Deserve*, quoted in Josh Rogin, *Chaos Under Heaven: Trump, Xi, and the Battle for the Twenty-First Century* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2021), p. 32.

for opening the relations with the People's Republic of China. In *How to Take on China*, he described the nation as “our [referred to the U.S.] biggest long-term challenge”<sup>160</sup>.

Beijing was expecting the victory of Hilary Clinton and even if the former Secretary of State had not exactly shied away from criticizing China, with her in the Oval Office at least China would have known what they were dealing with. With Trump, they needed to rebuild their network from the ground up...and quickly<sup>161</sup>.

Before taking the office, Trump had railed against China's economic and trade policies, blaming Beijing for stealing American jobs and outwitting the U.S. government on trade. But now, with the concrete possibility of shaping U.S. policy, he needed to be more careful about every single move.

A question that he did not take into consideration in one of the first friction that happened way before his inauguration at the White House. In the early days of December 2016, Trump took a congratulatory phone call from Taiwanese president Tsai Ing- wen, shocking the entire world. Beijing considered Taiwan as a renegade province and the multiple crises that have occurred in the past decades did not sort the situation out. For the CCP, Taiwan was a “core issue”, meaning that it was non-negotiable and off limits for other governments. Every minor action between Washington and Taipei was ground for a diplomatic protest. Advised by Steve Bannon, Chief Strategist and Senior Counsellor to the President, Trump decided to take the call. Even if it lasted a few minutes and contained not much of substance, it did not take long before the media reported it to be a provocation<sup>162</sup>.

Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and his Senior Advisor, was the official who had a direct line with Beijing<sup>163</sup>. After Trump's inauguration in January 2017, he intended to create a friendly relationship managed at the very top of both governments. His main goal was to organize a summit between Xi and Trump at Mar-a-Lago, considering it crucial to forge a personal bond and set the bilateral relationship for a stable course. If Kushner's father-in-law wanted a deal with China, this seemed to be a necessary step. However, Xi refused even to speak with Trump over the phone until the U.S. President fixed the problem that he had caused with the Taiwan call. Washington wanted a close relationship with Beijing, and the only viable way was through a deal.

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<sup>160</sup> Donald J. Trump, *How to Take on China*, quoted in Rogin, p.32.

<sup>161</sup> Josh Rogin, *Chaos Under Heaven*, p.48.

<sup>162</sup> Josh Rogin, *Chaos Under Heaven*, pp. 25-28.

<sup>163</sup>His family, through Kushner Companies, sought Chinese investments, including a deal with the Anbang Insurance Group, which is linked to the Chinese government, to finance the 666 Fifth Avenue property in New York. See: Vishaka George, “Kushner Family Stands to Get \$400 Million from a Chinese Firm in ‘Unusually Favorable’ Deal,” *Time*, March 14, 2017.

To do that, Trump promised Xi to honour the One-China policy, maintaining, however, America’s historical position of ambiguity, as to whether the United States agrees with Beijing on its claims regarding what it considers a renegade province. That removed the obstacle for the Mar-a-Lago summit<sup>164</sup>.

The summit was scheduled for April 7, 2017, and was going to be the biggest foreign policy test of Trump’s presidency. For many in Trump’s administration there was a single goal: to forge the beginning of a stable and constructive relationship between Trump and Xi. During the meeting the leaders also bonded over military actions. In an unexpected setting, over chocolate cake, Trump revealed to Xi that he was about to launch fifty-nine missiles at targets in Syria in retaliation for a gas attack by the Assad regime on Syrian rebels. Trump later said: “We had the most beautiful piece of chocolate cake that you have ever seen”, adding then: “and President Xi was enjoying it”<sup>165</sup>.



*Figure 10: U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping walk together at the Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida, April 17, 2017<sup>166</sup>.*

They had time to engage in some business too. They agreed to create the United States-China Comprehensive Economic Dialogue, which was Trump’s version of Hank Paulson’s Strategic Economic Dialogue negotiation over pivotal issues like trade policies, national security, cybersecurity, law enforcement and cultural issues. Overall, President Trump declared that they made

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<sup>164</sup> Josh Rogin, *Chaos Under Heaven*, p.61.

<sup>165</sup> Josh Rogin, *Chaos Under Heaven*, p.70.

<sup>166</sup> Source AFP Photo

“tremendous progress” in their relationship<sup>167</sup>, believing that “lots of very potentially bad problems will be going away”<sup>168</sup>. The leaders agreed to launch the 100-Day Action Plan aimed to address the discussed issues.

President Trump appointed his longtime business ally, Wilbur Ross, as the U.S. Commerce Secretary, to oversee the trade portion. The first success was delivered through a 10-part trade agreement announced in mid-May, considered an “herculean accomplishment”. The agreement regarded a wide range of products and services: China would allow imports of U.S. beef<sup>169</sup>, while the U.S. would allow the import of cooked poultry from China. Beijing would also permit foreign financial services companies to provide credit-rating services in China<sup>170</sup>.

The Department of Commerce said Washington had also agreed to recognise the importance of China’s Belt and Road initiative (BRI), an ambitious infrastructure campaign that some say has the potential to be the greatest development plan in history. Launched during President Obama’s administration in 2013, it coupled with the Made in China 2025 (MIC 2025) plan, formally announced only two years later. Previously known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR) Initiative, BRI represented the cornerstone of President Jinping’s foreign policy, and it was the vehicle through which China sought to increase connectivity with more than 100 countries and international organizations based on the historic Silk Road land and maritime routes. It aimed mainly to strengthen economic ties with the Global South spanning countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, as well as parts of Latin America<sup>171</sup>.

Similarly, the MIC 2025 is a ten-year, comprehensive industrial policy designed to transform China into an advanced global manufacturing leader. Like the 13<sup>th</sup> Five- Year Plan (2016-2020) and other state related programs, the Made in China 2025 plan sought to leverage the power of the Chinese state to promote high-tech industrial power and to upgrade Chinese industry<sup>172</sup>.

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<sup>167</sup> Davis, Bob, and Lingling Wei. *Superpower Showdown: How the Battle Between Trump and Xi Threatens a New Cold War*. New York: Harper Business, 2020, p.151.

<sup>168</sup> Donald J. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump After Meeting with President Xi of China”, April 7, 2017, *The White House Archives*.

<sup>169</sup> China had discussed the reopening of its beef market as early as 2006, after banning U.S. beef imports three years earlier amid concerns over mad cow disease.

<sup>170</sup> Tom Phillips, “US Hails China Trade Deal as Sign Relations Are 'Hitting a New High',” *The Guardian*, May 12, 2017.

<sup>171</sup> Terry Mobley, “The Belt and Road Initiative: Insights from China’s Backyard,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (2019), pp. 52–53.

<sup>172</sup> Bonnie S. Glaser, “Made in China 2025 and the Future of American Industry,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 2019.

These plans were a potential challenge to the technological and economic advantages that Western economies had built up over time. However, during the early months of his presidency, Trump appeared to disregard or pay little attention to these initiatives.

The collaboration inaugurated in Florida was implemented through the U.S.-China Comprehensive Economic Dialogue (CED) in July 2017. Despite the high expectation, the first session that took place in Washington was a failure. Months of preparation led by Treasury Secretary, Steven Mnuchin, had raised promises of progress on a few American issues such as the trade imbalances, market access, and structural reforms. However, when the two delegations met, they could not agree on meaningful solutions.

The meeting ended with the two parts cancelling the press conference and abandoning the project of producing a joint statement, a clear sign of growing tensions. While the U.S. Treasury attempted to put a positive spin on the outcome by noting that both sides had agreed on the importance of reducing the trade deficit, the substance was lacking. President Trump believed that China was not delivering the promises made during the April meeting with Xi under the 100-day action plan. Key commitments including lowering barriers for American companies, addressing industrial overcapacity and reining in forced technology transfers, had not been concluded. This alimented a feeling of frustration inside the U.S. government, believing that Beijing was using the CED just as a delaying tactic rather than engaging in serious negotiations.

By the end of summer 2017, the atmosphere was tense and the promised collaboration between the two superpowers had largely dissipated. Patience in the White House was running thin, and the most extremist advisors of the administration, such as Peter Navarro, Robert Lighthizer and Steve Bannon, were asking for more assertive positions on unfair trade practices and China's state-driven industrial ambitions. The diplomatic façade gave way to a more confrontational tone, and it became evident that dialogue alone would not be enough to address what Washington perceived as systemic challenges posed by Beijing.

The failed diplomacy and the growing frustration inside the White House began to lay the groundwork for more aggressive measures, opening investigations and drafting what would soon be a full-fledged trade offensive against China. As Trump promised during his electoral campaign, the slogan "America First" wasn't just talk, but it represented a new era of protectionism.

### **3.2 Escalation of tensions**

To modernize America's Asian alliances, the administrations of Bush and Obama have worked to strengthen the economic ties with the region. However, in the first days of the new administration,

Trump decided to wipe away all the efforts of his predecessors. The first casualty was the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

The regional agreement was seen mainly as a diplomatic effort instead of an economic tool to increase United States power in Asia and indeed it included provisions not directly related to trade, such as weak labour protection policies, provisions favouring pharmaceutical companies and expanded copyright laws<sup>173</sup>. According to Trump's point of view, the U.S. was not getting a fair share and other countries benefited at America's expense<sup>174</sup>. As it was also reported in the Policy Agenda for 2017 by the Office of the United States Trade Representative:

The overarching purpose of our trade policy – the guiding principle behind all our actions in this key area – will be to expand trade in a way that is freer and fairer for all Americans. Every action we take with respect to trade will be designed to increase our economic growth, promote job creation in the United States, promote reciprocity with our trading partners, strengthen our manufacturing base and our ability to defend ourselves, and expand our agricultural and services industry exports. As a general matter, we believe that these goals can be best accomplished by focusing on bilateral negotiations rather than multilateral negotiations – and by renegotiating and revising trade agreements when our goals are not being met<sup>175</sup>.

This reflected a broader political approach embraced by Trump, who preferred bilateral agreements over multilateral ones. He considered the trade policies as a zero-sum game, meaning that if someone wins, someone else loses, so splitting the outcome among multiple countries dilutes U.S. benefits. This perspective led his administration to consistently prioritize bilateral agreements with individual countries rather than engaging in multilateral deals.

When the agreement was ratified, Obama argued: “If we don't pass this agreement, if America doesn't write those rules, then countries like China will”<sup>176</sup>. He was right. The TPP represented a powerful global lever to isolate China, but after the withdrawal, it left the door open for Beijing to push its own brand of trade in a strategic area: it created an opening for China to rewrite the economic rules of the road at the expense of American workers.

Having considered this possibility, the Trump administration sought alternative tools to defend the American interests. One such tool was the reactivation of the Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974<sup>177</sup>,

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<sup>173</sup> Ben Popken, “Why Trump Killed TPP — And Why It Matters to You,” *NBC News*, January 23, 2017.

<sup>174</sup> Geoffrey Gertz, “What Will Trump's Embrace of Bilateralism Mean for America's Trade Partners?” *Brookings*, February 8, 2017.

<sup>175</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative, *The President's 2017 Trade Policy Agenda and 2016 Annual Report* (Washington, D.C.: Executive Office of the President, 2017), chap. 1, p.1.

<sup>176</sup> Andrew Glass, “Trump Scuttles Trans-Pacific Trade Pact, Jan. 23, 2017”, *Politico*, January 23, 2019.

<sup>177</sup> *Trade Act of 1974*, Pub. L. No. 93-618, § 301 (1974).

which delegates to the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) the authority to investigate and respond to unfair foreign trade practices that could harm domestic interests. Trump already talked about this measure during his electoral campaign in 2016. Under the law, if a 301 investigation proved the president's satisfaction that punitive actions (such as tariffs) were needed to protect the U.S. economy, then he could act unilaterally: no Congress, no negotiation, no problem.

On August 18, 2017, Robert Lighthizer, the U.S. Trade Representative, formally initiated an investigation against China under Section 301, announcing:

On Monday, President Trump instructed me to investigate Chinese laws, policies, and practices which may be harming American intellectual property rights, innovation, or technology development...After consulting with stakeholders and other government agencies, I have determined that these critical issues merit a thorough investigation. I notified the President that today I am beginning an investigation under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974<sup>178</sup>.

It was the beginning of the trade war.

### 3.3 The Trade War

Peter Navarro and Stephen Bannon were already convinced about the result of the investigation and therefore pushed for a rapid completion. However, Robert Lighthizer, a seasoned professional and trained lawyer, insisted on conducting the process with thoroughness. According to his point of view, it was essential to deliver to both the president and the American public a comprehensive and well-substantiated report that could provide an undeniable justification for implementing tariffs and trade measures<sup>179</sup>.

Robert Lighthizer collaborated with Matt Pottinger, the Senior Director for Asia at the National Security Council (NSC), to declassify intelligence and gather information from across the U.S. government, aimed to illustrate the full extent of China's unfair trade practices. The investigation took six months, and by March 2018, Lighthizer was ready to release his results.

The report, named *Findings of the Investigation into China's Acts, Policies, and Practices related to Technology Transfer, Intellectual Property, and Innovation under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974*<sup>180</sup>, showed that Chinese illicit practices, including the intellectual property theft, forced technology transfer and unfair subsidies, were robbing the U.S. economy of at least \$50 billion

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<sup>178</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative. *USTR Announces Initiation of Section 301 Investigation of China*. August 18, 2017.

<sup>179</sup> Josh Rogin, *Chaos Under Heaven*, p.87.

<sup>180</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative, "Findings of the Investigation into China's Acts, Policies, and Practices related to Technology Transfer, Intellectual Property, and Innovation under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974", March 22, 2018.

annually. The investigation's outcomes gave powerful leverage to Washington, calling for drastic countermeasures, comprising enhanced export controls, tariffs and broad bans on Chinese investment in U.S. companies<sup>181</sup>.

The first tranche accounted for 15% tariffs on \$50 billion worth of Chinese imports, focusing on industries that were essential for Xi's technology strategy, the Made in China 2025. The idea was to target technologies of the future, limiting the present economic impact. On April 3, the USTR released its list of 1,333 Chinese products, ranging from chemicals to jet parts, industrial equipment, machinery, communication satellites, aircraft parts, medical equipment, trucks, helicopters, nuclear equipment, rifles, guns, and artillery<sup>182</sup>.

China responded with its own \$50 billion tariffs on 128 U.S. imports, targeting agricultural products, such as soybeans, but also cars, oil and chemicals, aircraft, and industrial products. Moreover, China was prepared to announce another \$100 billion in tariffs as well if Trump followed through with his threat of imposing more tariffs<sup>183</sup>. Well, he did.

List 2 was published on August 23, 2018, and included 284 additional products, identified as benefiting from the unfair trade practices, supporting Beijing's industrial policy. As it has been done previously, the list was subjected to a formal public notice and comment process, allowing for adjustments based on U.S. companies or other interested parties. While several products were removed from the April list, especially those considered sensitive for U.S. industries, such as steel and aluminium goods, pharmaceuticals, and industrial tools, the second list was more focused on high tech industrial inputs, especially semiconductors and related electronic components.

List 3 was published on September 17, 2018, and contained 5,745 products worth \$200 billion. It included consumer goods, such as electronics, food, beverages and automotive material, which would affect both Chinese exporters and U.S. importers/consumers, increasing the economic costs of the trade war.

China immediately retaliated, continuing the tit-for-tat escalation and imposing tariffs on \$60 billion worth of U.S. goods. China's response was strategically designed to apply political pressure on the United States by targeting exports from swing states, those crucial for the U.S. elections, while

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<sup>181</sup> Josh Rogin, *Chaos Under Heaven*, pp.145-147.

<sup>182</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative, "Under Section 301 Action, USTR Releases Proposed Tariff List on Chinese Products", April 2018.

<sup>183</sup> Rasmus, Jack. "Trump's Deja Vu China Trade War." *World Review of Political Economy* 9, no. 3 (2018), pp. 356-357.

minimizing economic disruptions within its own borders. Beijing criticized the Trump administration’s moves as “trade bullying” and cautioned that tariffs could trigger global unrest<sup>184</sup>.

The differences in tariff and goods showed clearly that it was not just an economic concern. These instruments were pivotal in contrasting potential dangers for the national security. The emphasis on high-tech goods, such as semiconductors and electronic components, revealed the increasing U.S. preoccupation with Chinese technological supremacy.

The use of Section 301 was highly debated both nationally and internationally. While the investigation under the act illustrated genuine concerns over intellectual property theft and other illegal practices, the reliance on unilateral tariffs raised doubts about whether Section 301 was an evidence-based response to China’s practices or a politically driven tool aligned with Trump’s broader assertive rhetoric. In this sense, according to policymakers, Section 301 symbolized the internal contradiction of the “America First” approach.

### 3.3.1 The strategic dimension: technology and security

To counter the constantly growing capacity of the Chinese high-tech industries, the United States has used tools of economic statecraft. However, under this aspect, there is a second concern: national security, a matter directly connected to the development of technologies. While China has developed and implemented long-term national strategies for technological competitiveness, the U.S. approach has been far more reactive and disjointed. Thanks to plans like the Made in China 2025, the Belt and Road Initiative and China Standards 2035, the nation is no longer a nation of copying, but it is engaging in true innovation, and it represents a serious technological competitor in several key areas such as AI, quantum sciences, and biotechnology.

The Trump administration knew that it did not have similar plans. The government’s approach to technology was passive and inadequate for tackling the challenges ahead. It needed an overarching approach, a national strategy to guide its technology policy decisions to remind clearly to the rest of the world who maintains technological leadership. In the meantime, they responded with the fastest measures: tariffs<sup>185</sup>.

HTS Subheading	Product Description
8511.80.40	Voltage and voltage-current regulators with cut-out relays other than those designed for use on 6, 12 or 24 V systems

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Rasser, Martijn, and Megan Lamberth. “The Case for a National Technology Strategy.”, *Center for a New American Security*, 2021.

8511.90.20	Parts of voltage and voltage-current regulators with cut-out relays, designed for use on 6, 12 or 24 V systems
8511.90.40	Parts of voltage and voltage-current regulators with cut-out relays, other than those designed for use on 6, 12 or 24 V systems
8529.10.91	Other antennas and antenna reflectors of all kinds and parts, for use
8533.90.40	For the goods of subheading 8533.40 of ceramic or metallic materials, electrically or mechanically reactive to changes in temperature
8536.30.80	Electrical apparatus for protecting electrical circuits, for a voltage not exceeding 1,000 V, nesoi
8536.50.70	Certain specified electronic and electromechanical snap-action switches, for a voltage not exceeding 1,000 V
8536.70.00	Connectors for optical fibers, optical fiber bundles or cables
8537.10.30	Electric control panels, for a voltage not exceeding 1,000 V, assembled with outer housing or supports, for goods of 8421, 8422, 8450 or 8516
8541.10.00	Diodes, other than photosensitive or light-emitting diodes
8541.40.60	Diodes for semiconductor devices, other than light-emitting diodes, nesoi
8542.31.00	Electronic integrated circuits: processors and controllers
8542.32.00	Electronic integrated circuits: memories
8542.33.00	Electronic integrated circuits: amplifiers
8542.39.00	Electronic integrated circuits: other
8542.90.00	Parts of electronic integrated circuits and microassemblies
8543.70.45	Other electric synchros and transducers; defrosters and demisters with electric resistors for aircraft

*Table 1: Technological products sanctioned by tariffs<sup>186</sup>*

The items listed above have one thing in common: they are used to manufacture technological products and, in particular, semiconductors. These items are the backbone of the modern electronics that make up some of the world's most promising and revolutionary technologies. The semiconductor industry has also a strategic relevance from a national security perspective, as it is a vital input in the defence industry, especially as technology itself is becoming weaponized. China is simultaneously a competitor in key technologies, a supplier of product inputs, and a vital market for U.S. companies, which relied on revenue earned in China to fund their R&D spending. So, the first step was to impede China's progress in this industry.

<sup>186</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative. "USTR Finalizes Second Tranche of Tariffs on Chinese Products in Response to China's Unfair Trade Practices", August 7, 2018.

The second step consisted of targeting Chinese companies. John Bolton, the National Security Advisor, laid down a course of action that aimed to weaken China, planning to target China's leading technological company: Huawei Technologies Company. Washington suspected that the telecommunication company was a tool of the Chinese military to spy on the company's customers around the world, a charge that Huawei denied. To Beijing, Huawei was a crown jewel, the only company that was able to outcompete Western rivals and become a global technology leader. It was essential to China's ambition to dominate future technologies, especially the next-generation mobile communication: the 5G<sup>187</sup>.

Huawei relied heavily on U.S. semiconductors and other electronic components for its advanced technology. Putting the company on the U.S. Entity List, the so-called "blacklist", could strangle the Chinese firm. The Department of Commerce declared publicly that Huawei had engaged in activities "contrary to U.S. national security", including violating the U.S. sanctions against Iran<sup>188</sup>. The Trump administration, on May 15, 2019, by Executive order 13873<sup>189</sup>, declared a national emergency pursuant the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), to address the unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States constituted by the unrestricted acquisition and use of certain information and communications technology and services transactions. Senator Tom Cotton, a fierce Republican opponent of China, tweeted "@Huawei 5G, RIP"<sup>190</sup>.

Five days after the sanctions were issued, on May 20, Xi Jinping went on an inspection tour of the southeastern province of Jiangxi, visiting the rare earths mines, natural elements used in cars, jet fighters and other high technologies. The visit was meant to remind the United States of its dependence on China for these minerals. That was a watershed moment for both powers because it was crystal clear that the U.S. motive wasn't just about trade. It was both political and strategic: they wanted to keep China from becoming stronger<sup>191</sup>.

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<sup>187</sup> Bob Davis and Lingling Wei, *Superpower Showdown: How the Battle Between Trump and Xi Threatens a New Cold War* (New York: Harper Business, 2020), p.222.

<sup>188</sup> Huawei was accused of violating U.S. sanctions against Iran, specifically through its subsidiary Skycom, which illegally sold equipment and services to Iranian entities, circumventing restrictions imposed by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). Huawei is also accused of deceiving U.S. banks about these operations. The charges include bank fraud, money laundering and sanctions violations. *See*: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, "Chinese Telecommunications Conglomerate Huawei and Huawei CFO Wanzhou Meng Charged With Financial Fraud", January 28, 2019.

<sup>189</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Executive Order on Securing the Information and Communications Technology and Services Supply Chain", The White House, May 15, 2019.

<sup>190</sup> Davis and Wei, *Superpower Showdown*, p.30

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*.

### 3.3.2 Global decoupling and supply chains disruptions

The semiconductor case illustrates one of the most critical effects of geopolitical tensions: the use of tariffs and economic measures as tools of political coercion. Given the highly fragmented and transnational nature of the semiconductor supply chain, it became clear how geopolitical conflicts can severely disrupt production continuity, technological innovation, and even national and global security. Moreover, the main problem is that companies play a diverse set of roles, and many are highly specialized, but no single country can perform all roles domestically in the supply chain for all types of semiconductors required for a modern economy.

The Trump administration's tariff strategy encompassed billions of dollars' worth of Chinese goods. The justifications relied on protecting American industries, reducing the trade deficit and encouraging companies to return manufacturing operations to U.S. territory.

One of the strategies was to encourage the "reshoring", which meant brining the manufacturing process back home and it was partially successful. Some industries, particularly those involving advanced technologies, did increase their U.S. presence. Medical equipment manufacturing, semiconductor production, and critical minerals processing saw reshoring initiatives. However, there were some challenges in this production process, particularly related to the cost differential between U.S. and overseas production. Labor costs in the United States typically run three to five times higher than in many low-cost manufacturing countries such as China. Additionally, decades of offshore production have created extensive supply chain networks that proved difficult and expensive to replicate domestically.

Many companies also applied the "China plus one" as a diversification strategy. This approach involved maintaining some production in China, while developing additional manufacturing bases in other countries like Vietnam or India. This shift created new opportunities for regional manufacturing hubs. For example, Vietnam's imports to the U.S. grew 36% from 2018 to 2019, while China's imports decreased 13% over the same period. The main drivers in this case dealt with the lower labour costs and government policies that were highly favourable for the foreign direct investments<sup>192</sup>.

Manufacturers in the United States also considered bringing the production to "nearshore" countries, such as Mexico. As the U.S.-China escalated tensions, Mexican imports to the U.S. picked up considerable steam: manufacturers across a variety of industries increasingly view the country as a

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<sup>192</sup> Reshoring Institute, "The Complex Legacy of the 2018 Trump Tariffs on American Manufacturing", December 21, 2020.

haven to protect their production from future trade disputes. A growing number had already begun these shifting operations<sup>193</sup>.

This phenomenon shows an incredible controversy: Trump's tariffs increased production costs for U.S. companies that still relied on Chinese inputs. Therefore, they decided to shift sourcing elsewhere, but not necessarily back to United States. Moreover, this partial shift occurred in high-tech or some security-sensitive sectors, which suggests reshoring was less about broad industrial revival but mainly about geopolitical risk management.

The most substantial change in legislation was the approval of the Tax Cut and Jobs Act (TCJA)<sup>194</sup> in December 2017, which overhauled the federal tax code by reforming individual and business taxes. The proposal was unveiled by President Trump on April 26, 2017, during a press conference at the U.S. Department of Treasury, framing the plan as "the biggest tax cut in American history". The plan aimed at reducing the corporate tax rate, changing flow through taxation and increasing depreciations, making fundamental changes to taxing international income. Throughout the summer and fall of 2017, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and National Economic Council Director Gary Cohn promoted the tax reform across the country. They emphasized its expected benefits: boosting economic growth, increasing wages, attracting foreign direct investment, and driving the reshoring of U.S. companies that had long relied on offshore production<sup>195</sup>. Reducing the tax burden on manufacturers would have made America more competitive with other industrial nations' tax rates around the world<sup>196</sup>.

Despite the initial 15% corporate tax rate proposed in Congress, political negotiations led to a compromise of 21%. The TCJA entered into law at the end of 2017, marking the most significant overhaul of the U.S. tax code since the Reagan era. The reform also included provisions such as full expensing of capital investments, changes to the taxation of international income, and incentives for repatriating profits held abroad.

These favourable terms were part of a strategy to revitalize domestic manufacturing and reduce the reliance on foreign production chains. Their mixed results highlighted the challenge of balancing various economic objectives, from protecting domestic industries, to maintaining affordable consumer goods, and ensuring supply chain resilience.

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<sup>193</sup> A.T. Kearney, *U.S. Trade Policy and Reshoring: The Real Impact of America's New Trade Policies*, 2019.

<sup>194</sup> U.S. Congress. *An Act to Provide for Reconciliation Pursuant to Titles II and V of the Concurrent Resolution on the Budget for Fiscal Year 2018*, Pub. L. No. 115-97, 131 Stat. 2054 (2017).

<sup>195</sup> Legal Information Institute. "Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 (TCJA)." *Cornell Law School*.

<sup>196</sup> Reshoring Institute, "The Changing Trends of Reshoring in the United States", May 2025.

### 3.4 Re-evaluation of agreements and the COVID paradigm

A glimmer of hope emerged at the end of 2018 after the G20 summit in Buenos Aires, when President Donald Trump met his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping and agreed to halt new trade tariffs for 90 days to allow for talks. Washington agreed not to boost tariffs on \$200 billion of Chinese goods from 10% to 25% on January 1, giving Beijing 90 days for negotiations with the U.S.<sup>197</sup>. A statement issued by the White House reported that these negotiations should bring some “structural changes” on chronic problems, including the technological know-how, intellectual property rights and non-tariff barriers to entry for U.S. businesses<sup>198</sup>. However, it warned that, if at the end of this period, the parties were unable to reach an agreement, the 10% tariffs will be raised.

China agreed to purchase agricultural products from American farmers, after the reduction of Chinese imports of soybeans and other farm products, which had a severe and direct impact on U.S. Midwestern farmers where Trump has drawn much of his political support. China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi told reporters in Buenos Aires that the discussions over economic and trade issues were positive and constructive, since the two presidents were able to reach a consensus to halt the mutual imposition of new tariffs<sup>199</sup>.

Nevertheless, the outcomes of Trump's trade strategy diverged from expectations. Rather than narrowing the trade deficit, the U.S. set a record during Trump’s second year in office, as it was reported by The Wall Street Journal in an article published in January 2019<sup>200</sup>. The trade gap rose to \$419.2 billion in 2018, from a previous \$275 billion in 2017. The negotiations did not seem to work. Instead, imports from China increased during the last months of 2018, since companies sought to get ahead of Trump’s initial plan to raise duties on Chinese goods. As reported by Politico, the United States imported \$539.5 billion worth of goods from China in 2018, compared with \$505.5 billion in 2017. U.S. goods exports to China totalled \$120.3 billion in 2018, dropping from nearly \$130 billion in 2017<sup>201</sup>.

Then things started to change. Negotiations blew up after a trip by Lighthizer and Mnuchin to Beijing in May. As the Office of the United States Trade Representative reported:

Since the meeting on December 1, the United States and China have engaged in additional rounds of negotiation on these issues, including meetings in March, April, and May of 2019. In the most

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<sup>197</sup> *BBC News*, “US-China Trade War: Deal Agreed to Suspend New Trade Tariffs”, December 2, 2018.

<sup>198</sup> Executive Office of the President of the United States. *Joint Strategic Plan: United States Intellectual Property Enforcement Coordinator, 2020 to 2023*. Washington, D.C., 2020. Pp 6-7.

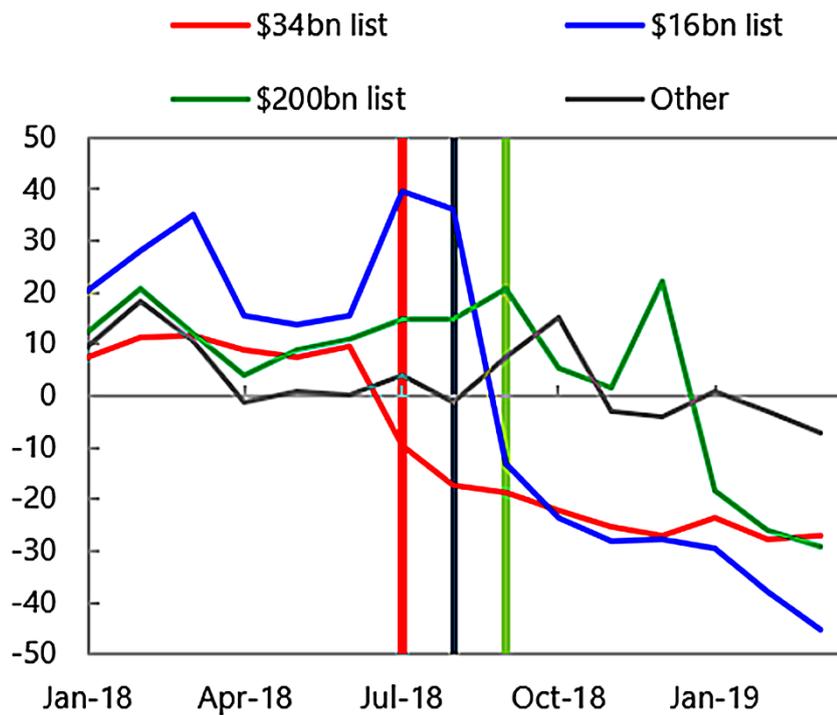
<sup>199</sup> Julian Borger, "Donald Trump and Xi Jinping Declare Trade Truce at G20" *The Guardian*, December 2, 2018.

<sup>200</sup> Wall Street Journal, “China’s Annual Trade Surplus With U.S. Hits Record Despite Trump’s Tariff Offensive”, January 13, 2019.

<sup>201</sup> Doug Palmer, “U.S. Trade Gap with China Reaches All-Time High under Trump”, *Politico*, March 6, 2019.

recent negotiations, China has chosen to retreat from specific commitments agreed to in earlier rounds. Considering the lack of progress in discussions with China, the President has directed the Trade Representative to increase the rate of additional duty to 25%<sup>202</sup>.

Tariff escalation resumed where it had left off in September 2018, continuing throughout the spring and summer, until the fall of 2019. The U.S. Trade Representative determined to increase the duty to 25% on May 9, 2019. In retaliation, China announced it would raise tariffs on \$60 billion worth of U.S. goods after the latest increase in American tariffs on its exports. China would impose tariffs on a total of 5,140 U.S. products from June 1, 2019. As Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang said: “China will never surrender to external pressure”<sup>203</sup>.



Graphic 1: U.S. imports from China have fallen significantly in all three groups of goods after tariffs were imposed<sup>204</sup>.

Trump’s tariff policies stopped once again on June 29, 2019. He tweeted a temporary truce after meeting with Xi Jinping at the G20 Summit in Osaka, Japan, even if it was short lived. Indeed, on August 1, Trump announced that new tariffs would go into effect starting from September

<sup>202</sup> Notice of Modification of Section 301 Action: China’s Acts, Policies, and Practices Related to Technology Transfer, Intellectual Property, and Innovation, Federal Register, May 9, 2019.

<sup>203</sup> Al Jazeera, “China to Increase Tariffs on \$60bn Worth of US Goods”, *Al Jazeera*, May 13, 2019.

<sup>204</sup> Sources: U.S. Department of Commerce and IMF calculations. Note: tariff-effective dates: July 2018, 25% on initial \$34 billion list; August 23, 2018, 25% on \$16 billion list; Sept. 2018, 10% on \$200 billion list, rising to 25% on May 10, 2019. See: Eugenio Cerutti, Gita Gopinath, and Adil Mohommed, “The Impact of US-China Trade Tensions”, *IMF Blog*, May 23, 2019.

1, 2019. On August 13, he gave the details about the new trade policies, expanded by two additional lists.

On September 1, 2019, the U.S. imposed a 15% tariff on \$112 billion worth of Chinese goods (List 4A), which affected consumers' products such as clothing, footwear and textiles<sup>205</sup>. Washington threatened also a second round of tariffs that would have been implemented on December 15, 2019, with a 15% tariff on \$160 billion worth of Chinese goods (List 4B), including cell phones, tablets and video game consoles<sup>206</sup>.

China responded without delay. Beijing threatened an October increase from 25% to 30% on the combined \$250 billion of imported products covered by Lists 1,2 and 3.

The implementation of the last round of tariff was then stopped on December 13, 2019, when the United States and China reached an agreement, named "Phase One" trade deal that requires several reforms and other changes to China's economic trade regime in the areas that were previously sanctioned under Section 301. Its 91 pages included chapters addressing intellectual property protection, technology transfer, trade in food and agricultural products, some new market access in China for financial services, exchange rates and transparency, and a government-to-government enforcement mechanism. The deal also promised to protect American companies' IP from being stolen, to eliminate the sales of Chinese counterfeit goods, and to allow American companies to operate in China without "pressure to transfer their technology" to the Chinese government<sup>207</sup>.

It was considered a breakthrough in the two-year trade war between the world's two largest economies. The deal relaxed some U.S. tariffs on Chinese imports, halving the September 1 tariffs from 15% to 7.5%, and committed China to purchase an additional \$200 billion worth of American goods, including agricultural products and cars over two years. As reported by Lighthizer:

President Trump has focused on concluding a Phase One agreement that achieves meaningful, fully enforceable structural changes and begins rebalancing the U.S.-China trade

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<sup>205</sup> "Trump's 15% Tariffs on \$112 Billion in Chinese Goods Take Effect", *CNBC*, September 1, 2019.

<sup>206</sup> Imports of consumer electronics and toys headlined List 4B. They spiked annually in October to arrive at warehouses in time for the December holidays. On August 13, the U.S. administration announced a delay of tariffs on List 4B products until December. Trump stated, "We're doing this for Christmas season, just in case some of the tariffs would have an impact on US customers." However, he continued to deny that any of his previous tariffs were affecting US consumers, with "so far, they've had virtually none. See: Chad P. Bown, "The US-China Trade War and Phase One Agreement," *Journal of Policy Modeling* 43, no. 4 (July-August 2021).

<sup>207</sup> "2020 Country Brief: China", *Third Way*, 2020.

relationship. This unprecedented agreement accomplishes those very significant goals and would not have been possible without the President's strong leadership<sup>208</sup>.

On January 15, 2020, U.S. President Donald Trump and China's Vice Premier Liu He signed the U.S.-China Phase One trade deal in Washington D.C., which was set to take effect from February 14, 2020<sup>209</sup>.

However, the promising outlook brought by the Phase One was soon overshadowed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. On January 29, President Trump announced a White House Coronavirus Task Force, headed by the Vice President Mike Pence. Just two days later, Washington banned all non-U.S. citizens who recently visited China from entering the United States<sup>210</sup>.

When the WHO announced in March the outbreak of COVID-19, it led the governments on both sides to blame each other for the pandemic. The Trump administration accused Beijing to have failed to identify, stop or warn about the virus early on, highlighting China's alleged "coverup" and subsequent disinformation campaign. The number of cases it has publicly reported didn't seem to be real from the U.S. side. Trump addressed his counterpart during a White House meeting by saying: "I wish they could have told us earlier about what was going on inside. We did not know about it until it started coming out publicly, but I wish they could have told us earlier about it because we could have come up with a solution"<sup>211</sup>.

China replied shortly after, accusing the U.S. to attempt to defame the Chinese government and find a scapegoat. Moreover, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lijian Zhao went even further, alleging that the coronavirus did not originate in China and may have been brought there by the U.S. Army. As reported by the CNN in an interview to Michael McCaul, the Texas Republican: "I think he (President Trump) does enjoy a relationship with President Xi. He wants the trade, you know, the trade deal to work. At the same time, he recognizes where this virus came from"<sup>212</sup>.

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<sup>208</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative, "United States and China Reach Phase One Trade Agreement," December 13, 2019.

<sup>209</sup> However, all the other sanctions remained in effect. The result was the U.S. Section 301 tariffs continued to cover an estimated \$335 billion, or 66% of Chinese imports, and Beijing's counter-tariffs were applied on \$90 billion, or 58% of its imports from the United States.

<sup>210</sup> *BBC News*, "Coronavirus: White House Plans to Disband Virus Task Force", May 6, 2020.

<sup>211</sup> Jason Hoffman and Joe Ruiz, "Trump on China: 'I Wish They'd Told Us Earlier' about Coronavirus," *CNN*, March 21, 2020.

<sup>212</sup> Zachary Cohen, Alex Marquardt, and Kylie Atwood, "Blame Game Escalates between US and China over Coronavirus Disinformation", *CNN*, March 25, 2020.

However, Trump couldn't manage the crisis. His administration was right to call the Chinese government out for its handling of the crisis, but the responsibility for the consistently mismanaged response from America's federal government fell on President Trump. They focused only on travel bans, without facing the shortages of personal protective equipment and ventilators needed to treat COVID-19 patients. Even in April 2020, the Administration failed to ramp up the necessary testing and contact tracing to identify and isolate cases. It left governors to decide on stay-at-home orders and other social distancing measures that research tells us have saved lives in the places where they have been implemented.

This comparative failure rose a question whether the U.S. could effectively criticize China for opacity when its own domestic failures undermined its international credibility. Indeed, on the one side, China's authoritarian system revealed the weaknesses connected with the manipulation of information and suppression of early warnings. However, on the other side, the United States exposed its vulnerability, hampered by delayed testing and disorganized responses across the nation. One common characteristic was that both governments sought to shift blame outward, yet their internal shortcomings undermined the credibility of their accusations.

Trade agreements, and especially the Phase One deal which were meant to ensure that IP theft and forced technology transfers would be curbed but did not seem to be respected due to China's attempt to steal information from researchers developing COVID-19 vaccines<sup>213</sup>.

Relations started to become even more strained. In a speech delivered on July 23, 2020, named "Communist China and Free World's Future", the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo signalled a shift in U.S. policy. He declared that the era of engagement with China was over and criticized the Chinese Communist Party for its actions, dealing with human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, economic coercion, theft of intellectual property rights and the aggressive moves in the East and South China Seas. The Secretary of State called on democracies worldwide to unite in defending liberty and confronting the CCP's global ambitions, warning that failing to act now could result in future generations living under Beijing's influence<sup>214</sup>.

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<sup>213</sup> *2020 Country Brief: China*

<sup>214</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Communist China and the Free World's Future", July 23, 2020.

The final months of Donald Trump's presidency were marked by escalating tensions with China. Diplomatic clashes grew more intense, not only due to the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also because of provocative statements made by officials from both governments.

In December 2020, the United States imposed new sanctions on senior members of the Chinese Communist Party, accusing them of human rights violations. At the same time, Trump signed additional executive orders to ban American investments in Chinese companies deemed linked to the People's Liberation Army.

Even in the final days of Trump's term, in January 2021, the administration continued its hardline approach. In response, Beijing struck back. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the outgoing administration as "delusional" and, just a few days later, China announced sanctions against twenty-eight former Trump administration officials, including Pompeo, Peter Navarro, and Robert O'Brien, banning them from entering China or engaging with Chinese entities.

By the end of Donald Trump's presidency, U.S.-China relations had reached a new low. Nevertheless, the Chinese leadership adopted a cautious approach, hoping that the incoming U.S. administration might open the door to a more stable and constructive diplomatic phase. Xi Jinping chose to keep communication channels open in anticipation of a potential reset in bilateral relations with the new presidency.

On January 20, 2021, the United States of America officially welcomed its 46<sup>th</sup> president, Joseph R. Biden Jr.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Biden administration (2021-2025): continuity and new diplomacy

#### 4.1 Healing a nation in 100 days: Biden's domestic challenges

*And together we will write an American story of hope,  
not fear. Of unity not division, of light not darkness. A story  
of decency and dignity, love and healing, greatness and goodness.  
May this be the story that guides us. The story that inspires us*<sup>215</sup>.

Joseph R. Biden Jr.- Inaugural Address  
Wednesday, January 20, 2021.  
Washington D.C.

Joe Biden's inaugural address took place during one of the darkest and most dramatic moments in recent American history. The country was not only grappling with a pandemic that continued to claim thousands of lives each day, but it was also reeling from the violent insurrection of January 6, which occurred during the congressional session to certify the presidential election<sup>216</sup>. On that day, supporters of Donald Trump gathered at the Ellipse in Washington, D.C., to hear the outgoing president's speech, called "Save America Rally", in which he repeated multiple times that the 2020 presidential election had been stolen, criticizing Vice President Mike Pence for not blocking the certification of Joe Biden's victory and encouraging the crowd with phrases such as: "If you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore"<sup>217</sup>.

As the former president spoke, the crowd outside the Capitol increased<sup>218</sup>. They began marching towards the police barriers and got past the officers. Inside the Capitol, Mr. Pence was continuing to

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<sup>215</sup> *BBC News*, "Full Transcript of Joe Biden's Inauguration Speech, 20 January 2021", January 20, 2021.

<sup>216</sup> On January 6, Congress meets in a joint session to count the electoral votes, thus completing the presidential election process. The session is presided over by the sitting Vice President, as President of the Senate, who count and announces the results of the Electoral College vote. The President of the Senate then declares which persons have been elected President and Vice President of the United States. But his functions are just ceremonial and does not allow for altering the outcome of the vote. If a member of both the House and the Senate jointly submit an objection to a state's electoral votes, the two chambers separate to debate and vote on the objection. Only if both chambers agree can the objection be sustained. See: "Electoral College Timeline of Events," *National Archives*.

<sup>217</sup> During the joint session of Congress on January 6, 2021, Vice President Mike Pence presided over the certification of the Electoral College votes, fulfilling a strictly ceremonial role as mandated by the Constitution. In the days leading up to the session, Donald Trump and some of his allies placed heavy pressure on Pence to reject the votes from certain states to overturn the election results. Pence refused, publicly stating that he had no constitutional authority to intervene in the process. Although he acted in accordance with the Constitution, his decision drew harsh criticism from Trump's base.

<sup>218</sup> *BBC News*, "Capitol Riots Timeline: What Happened on 6 January 2021?", August 2, 2023.

preside over the session. The protesters broke through the windows and pushed inside, opening the doors to let others in. Some wore hoods and helmets while others held cameras or Confederate Flags. This was the first time in U.S. history when the Confederate flag entered the Capitol building in an act of insurrection, evoking the dramatic moments of the Civil War.

Five people were killed in the chaos, including a police officer. The rioters, mostly radicalized Republican sympathizers, stormed the building, vandalizing its chambers and looting its offices. However, the most serious aspect was the response of the outgoing president: Donald Trump hesitated to condemn the attack, issuing a clear denunciation only hours later and reportedly under pressure from his advisors. Only after the first images of the riots devastating Capitol Hill, Trump tweeted to “remain peaceful”, while a few moments later, in another tweet he wrote:

I know you are in pain, I know you're hurt. We had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election, and everyone knows it, especially the other side. But you have to go home now... We love you; you are very special. We've seen what happens, you see the way others are treated that are so bad and so evil. I know you how you feel. But go home and go home in peace<sup>219</sup>.



*Figure 11: Kevin Seefried carries a Confederate battle flag on the second floor of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021<sup>220</sup>.*

The newly elected president, Joe Biden, tried to ease the tensions too. At 4:05 p.m. Joe Biden appeared on television from The Queen, a historic Wilmington theatre that has been transformed into his

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Holmes Lybrand, “Man Who Carried Confederate Flag in US Capitol and Son Found Guilty of Felonies”, *CNN*, June 15, 2022.

campaign media center. The president-elect was calmed and said: “At this hour, our democracy is under unprecedented assault, unlike anything we’ve seen in modern times... What we are seeing are a small number of extremists dedicated to lawlessness. This is no dissent. It’s disorder, it’s chaos. It borders on sedition. And it must end now”. Biden then continued recalling the responsibilities of a president and stated: “The words of a president matter, no matter how good or bad that president is. At their best the words of a president can inspire. At their worst, they can incite. Therefore, I call on President Trump to go on national television now to fulfil his oath and defend the Constitution and demand an end to this siege”<sup>221</sup>.

After the riot, Trump was accused of “inciting violence against the government of the United States” and he became the first American president to be impeached twice<sup>222</sup>. The United States House of Representatives initiated the first impeachment proceedings against Trump on December 18, 2019, charging him with abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. These charges stemmed from a phone call in which Trump allegedly pressured Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to investigate political rival Joe Biden and his son, using the withholding of military aid as leverage. The Senate subsequently acquitted Trump on February 5, 2020, as the required two-thirds majority for conviction was not reached.

The Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, declaring the previous week one of the darkest chapters in American history, implored colleagues to embrace “a constitutional remedy that will ensure that the republic will be safe from this man who is so resolutely determined to tear down the things that we hold dear and that hold us together.” Representative Maxine Waters of California added: “He is capable of starting a civil war”<sup>223</sup>.

On January 11, 2021, the House introduced House Resolution 24<sup>224</sup> to impeach President Trump for high crimes and misdemeanours. Two days later, the House impeached Trump by passing the resolution with 232 votes in favour and 197 against<sup>225</sup>. These included also ten Republicans, like the House’s No. 3 Republican, Liz Cheney of Wyoming, who joined Democrats to impeach Trump

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<sup>221</sup> Chris Whipple, *The Fight of His Life: Inside Joe Biden's White House* (New York: Scribner, 2023), p.44.

<sup>222</sup> Without providing any supporting proof, Trump claimed that Biden had stepped in as vice president to get a Ukrainian prosecutor fired to protect his son. In exchange for this “favour”, Trump was accused of conditioning nearly \$400 million in military aid to Ukraine, previously frozen by his administration. The charges stemmed from this attempt to leverage U.S. foreign policy and national security resources for personal political gain.

<sup>223</sup> Nicholas Fandos, “Trump Impeached for Inciting Insurrection”, *The New York Times*, January 13, 2021, updated April 22, 2021.

<sup>224</sup> H.Res.24, “Impeaching Donald John Trump, President of the United States, for High Crimes and Misdemeanours”, 117th Congress (2021–2022).

<sup>225</sup> Library of Congress, “Donald J. Trump”, *Federal Impeachment Research Guide*.

for “incitement of insurrection”. The second impeachment trial took place in the Senate from February 9 to 13, 2021<sup>226</sup>. But even in this case it fell short of the two-thirds majority required.

In Donald Trump’s cases, conviction was almost impossible from the start for political and institutional reasons. In the first impeachment, Republicans held 53 Senate seats: reaching 67 would have required many Republican votes against a president of their own party: unrealistic. In the second impeachment, the vote for conviction reached 57 (including 7 Republicans) but still lacked the needed number. In this context what played a fundamental role were the electoral incentives.

On the merits, in the first case the Republican majority in the Senate blocked new witnesses and new evidence, and he was acquitted. In the second case many Republicans relied on the contested claim that a former president cannot be convicted<sup>227</sup>. Again, acquittal. The two cases have been used as examples, since many policymakers described these proceedings as symbolic and demonstrative: the numbers for conviction weren’t there, but Congress chose to put on the record a constitutional red line before the American and international public. They said: “these behaviours are unacceptable; the institutions respond”. Rather than instruments of removal, they functioned as acts of censure and democratic memory, leaving a historical precedent and a deterrent message, even if without immediate practical consequences.<sup>228</sup>

One could argue that there was a certain degree of inconsistency in Washington’s stance. Trump’s administration criticized Beijing’s authoritarianism, but the January 6 insurrection was a mirror image of the United States itself: the U.S. democratic system showed its own structural vulnerabilities and its inability to contain an attack from within.

President Biden came into office also facing the worst public health crisis in more than a century. The U.S. needed an emergency response after nearly 400,000 Americans had died of COVID-19. The Biden administration recognized the importance of an emergency response. Thus, on his first full day in office, he released the first comprehensive *National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness*<sup>229</sup>, which focused on building a response to the virus. The strategy was based on several goals: restore trust among the American public, vaccinate the population, mitigate the

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> One question debated during the second impeachment was whether it was constitutionally permissible to impeach a president after he had left office, otherwise known as a “late impeachment”. On the first day of the trial the Senate voted in the affirmative on the question “whether Donald John Trump is subject to the jurisdiction of a court of impeachment for acts committed while President of the United States, notwithstanding the expiration of his term in that office”.

<sup>228</sup> Caroline Fredrickson and Alan Neff, “When Impeachment Fails”, *Brennan Center for Justice*, November 30, 2021,

<sup>229</sup> *National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness*. President Joseph R. Biden Jr. Washington, DC, The White House, January 2021.

spread of the pandemic, expand emergency relief, protect the most vulnerable and lead globally on pandemic preparedness and response.

The issue that required urgent action was the vaccine administration. Biden stood up the largest free vaccination program in American history, mobilizing 90,000 vaccination locations; setting up mass vaccinations sites, able to administer more than a combined 125,000 shots a day; deploying over 9,000 federal personnel to support vaccinations nationwide. As a result of these efforts over 270 million people had received at least one shot of a COVID-19 vaccine by May 2023. According to the Commonwealth Fund, from December 2020 through November 2022, the COVID-19 vaccination program in the U.S. prevented more than 18.5 million additional hospitalizations and 3.2 million additional deaths<sup>230</sup>.

Understanding that the pandemic had exacerbated severe and pervasive health and social inequalities in America, President Biden issued the Executive Order 13995<sup>231</sup> of January 21, 2021, titled *Ensuring an Equitable Pandemic Response and Recovery*, which included the establishment of the *COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force within the Department of Health and Human Services* (HHS)<sup>232</sup>.

These social policies were coupled with economic initiatives, such as the *American Rescue Plan*, signed on March 11, 2021, worth \$1.9 trillion<sup>233</sup>, designed to enable all Americans to respond and recover from the impact of COVID-19. Key features of the plan included \$1,400-per-person stimulus payments that sent money to about 90% of households, a \$300 federal boost to weekly jobless benefits, an expansion of the child tax credit of up to \$3,600 per child and \$350 billion in state and local aid, as well as billions of dollars for K-12 schools to help students return to the classroom<sup>234</sup>.

To assist small businesses hard-hit by the pandemic, the bill provided \$15 billion to the *Emergency Injury Disaster Loan Program*, which offered long-term, low-interest loans from the Small Business Administration. It also granted \$25 billion for a new grant program specifically for bars and restaurants. Eligible businesses would receive up to \$10 million and could use the money for a variety of expenses, including payroll, mortgage and rent, utilities and food and beverages.

The legislation agreed also to allocate \$14 billion for researching, developing, distributing and administering vaccines. It also put \$47.8 billion toward testing, contact tracing and mitigation,

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<sup>230</sup> Meagan C. Fitzpatrick, Seyed M. Moghadas, Abhishek Pandey, and Alison P. Galvani, “Two Years of U.S. COVID-19 Vaccines Have Prevented Millions of Hospitalizations and Deaths”, *The Commonwealth Fund*, December 13, 2022.

<sup>231</sup> Joseph R. Biden Jr., *Executive Order on Ensuring an Equitable Pandemic Response and Recovery*, January 21, 2021.

<sup>232</sup> *Report: The Biden-Harris Administration Roadmap for Pandemic Preparedness and Response*. Washington, DC, The White House, January 14, 2025.

<sup>233</sup> Kate Sullivan, “Biden Signs Historic \$1.9 Trillion Covid-19 Relief Law”, *CNN*, March 11, 2021.

<sup>234</sup> Office of Chairman Bernie Sanders, *The \$1.9 Trillion American Rescue Plan Act: 117th Congress, March 10, 2021: An Unprecedented Response to an Unprecedented Crisis*, United States Senate Committee on the Budget, 2021.

including investing in laboratory capacity. This was followed by the allocation of \$7.7 billion to hire 100,000 public health workers to support coronavirus response.

As President Biden stated: “This plan is historic”<sup>235</sup>.

The economic recovery was further expanded using the *Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act* (IIJA)<sup>236</sup>, passed in the House of Representatives on November 5, 2021, and signed into law in mid-November. This \$1.2 trillion package was aimed at rebuilding the nation’s infrastructure, modernizing key sectors of the economy, and addressing long-term challenges such as climate change, labour inequality, and technological competitiveness. The bill’s approval paved the way for billions of dollars in investment in research, development, and deployment of zero-carbon technologies and infrastructure, which are essential to achieving net-zero emissions. These investments aimed to reverse the trend in the fight against climate change, while also creating new jobs and opportunities for American communities. Together, these plans reflected a shift from crisis management to economic transformation. These comprehensive efforts marked a turning point in the U.S. pandemic response: Biden sought to steer the nation out of crisis and lay the foundation for long-term recovery and resilience.

However, while addressing domestic emergencies was a priority, he also inherited a deeply fractured international landscape. After stabilizing the situation at home, Biden had to face a completely different international order, re-engaging with global institutions and alliances. This clearly signalled a shift from the unilateralism of the previous presidency to a renewed commitment to multilateral cooperation.

#### **4.2 The new way for multilateralism**

Joe Biden’s presidency began with a blizzard of executive action. On Inauguration Day, he signed seventeen executive orders, while in his first two weeks, he issued forty-five executive actions, twenty-eight executive orders, ten presidential memoranda, and five proclamations<sup>237</sup>, more than any of his predecessors since Harry S. Truman. These government orders have also been a new way for the president to make good on promises to undo some of his predecessor’s most controversial policies. On his first day in office, Biden signed Executive Order 10142, named *Termination of Emergency with Respect to the Southern Border of the United States and Redirection of Funds Diverted to Border*

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<sup>235</sup> Tami Luhby and Katie Lobosco, “Here’s What’s in the Covid Relief Package,” *CNN*, March 10, 2021.

<sup>236</sup> *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act*, Pub. L. No. 117-58, 135 Stat. 429 (2021).

<sup>237</sup> Whipple, *The Fight of His Life: Inside Joe Biden's White House*, p.59.

*Wall Construction*, to halt funding for the construction of Trump's border wall with Mexico. The measure clearly remarked<sup>238</sup>:

Building a massive wall that spans the entire southern border is not a serious policy solution. It is a waste of money that diverts attention from genuine threats to our homeland security. My Administration is committed to ensuring that the United States has a comprehensive and humane immigration system that operates consistently with our Nation's values.

Moreover, Biden reversed one of the first anti-immigrant and anti-refugee policies put in place by Trump: the travel ban imposed on people from several Muslim-majority and African countries<sup>239</sup>. The so-called "Muslim ban" was the first measure adopted to categorize large swaths of non-citizens as dangerous because of their nationality, ethnicity or religion, but, as a result, many families were separated. Biden ended the discriminatory policy through Proclamation 10141, titled *Ending Discriminatory Bans on Entry to the United States*, revoking the previous measures<sup>240</sup>.

These domestic decisions were coupled with some international initiatives that Biden already promised during his electoral campaign: the recommitment of U.S. to multilateral agreements.

During his tenure, Donald Trump clearly criticized transatlantic relations, which were continually marked by frictions and disruptions. Some of the messes included Trump travelling to Brussels, Belgium, in May 2017 for the NATO Summit. It was his greatest opportunity to show his administration's support to the alliance, after calling it "obsolete" during the 2016 presidential campaign<sup>241</sup>. However, Trump shocked his own team by failing to support the idea of collective defence. For weeks his team, made of National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, Defense Secretary James Mattis, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had all approved the text for his speech. Trump was supposed to say: "We face many threats, but I stand here before you with a clear message: the

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<sup>238</sup> The construction was justified with a declaration of national emergency through Proclamation 9844 of February 2019 (Declaring a national Emergency Concerning the Southern Border of the United States). President Biden with the EO 10142, declared that: "the national emergency declared by Proclamation 9844, and continued on February 13, 2020 (85 *Fed. Reg.* 8715), and January 15, 2021, is terminated and that the authorities invoked in that proclamation will no longer be used to construct a wall at southern border." See: *Proclamation No. 10142*, "Termination of Emergency with Respect to the Southern Border of the United States and Redirection of Funds Diverted to Border Wall Construction", 86 *Fed. Reg.* 7225–7227 (January 27, 2021).

<sup>239</sup> Maegan Vazquez and Priscilla Alvarez, "Biden Revokes Trump-Era Executive Actions on Immigration, Monuments, Censorship", *CNN*, May 14, 2021.

<sup>240</sup> Proclamation 10141 not only revoked Executive Order 13780 of March 6, 2017 (Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States), but also: Proclamation 9645 of September 24, 2017 (Enhancing Vetting Capabilities and Processes for Detecting Attempted Entry Into the United States by Terrorists or Other Public-Safety Threats), Proclamation 9723 of April 10, 2018 (Maintaining Enhanced Vetting Capabilities and Processes for Detecting Attempted Entry Into the United States by Terrorists or Other Public-Safety Threats), and Proclamation 9983 of January 31, 2020 (Improving Enhanced Vetting Capabilities and Processes for Detecting Attempted Entry Into the United States by Terrorists or Other Public-Safety Threats). See: Joseph R. Biden, Jr., *Proclamation 10141—Ending Discriminatory Bans on Entry to the United States*, January 20, 2021, The American Presidency Project.

<sup>241</sup> Ashley Parker, "Donald Trump Says NATO is 'Obsolete,' UN is 'Political Game'", *The New York Times*, April 2, 2016.

U.S. commitment to the NATO alliance and to Article 5 is unwavering”<sup>242</sup>. But Trump never delivered that sentence, omitting it.

Trump spoke multiple times about countries who fall short of the NATO defence spending target and stated that the U.S. commitment to Article 5 would depend on the “fulfilment of the financial obligation”, particularly whether the country in question had met NATO’s 2% of gross domestic product for defence spending. Trump conveyed the message that European countries must spend more<sup>243</sup>.

Throughout his four-year term, Trump repeated his desire to withdraw from NATO, which sparked concerns not only in Europe, but also in Washington. Without the U.S., NATO would have been too vulnerable. This uncertainty raised fears, particularly among Eastern European members, of being left exposed to external aggression. A U.S. disengagement would have significantly weakened the Alliance’s strategic deterrence and could have jeopardized its unity and effectiveness. European leaders began calling for “strategic autonomy,” while Washington insiders warned that such a move would ultimately serve the interests of Vladimir Putin, whose objective of dividing Western democracies would be advanced by a fractured NATO.

Biden reversed Trump’s attitude towards the alliance, showing the commitment of U.S. stand side by side with the European countries. During the Munich Security Conference, held virtually on February 19, 2021, President Biden vowed to rebuild trust with European allies by working on challenges like arms control, COVID-19 and climate change. He turned the page from the Trump’s “America First” to his “America is back”. As he highlighted:

I speak today as President of the United States at the very start of my administration, and I’m sending a clear message to the world: America is back. The transatlantic alliance is back. And we are not looking backward; we are looking forward, together...The transatlantic alliance is a strong foundation on which our collective security and our shared prosperity are built. The partnership between Europe and the United States, in my view, is and must remain the cornerstone of all that we hope to accomplish in the 21st century, just as we did in the 20th century<sup>244</sup>.

During his speech, he didn’t clearly mention Donald Trump but addressed his term by saying: “I know the past few years have strained and tested our transatlantic relationship, but the United

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<sup>242</sup> Whipple, *The Fight of His Life: Inside Joe Biden's White House*, pp. 48-50.

<sup>243</sup> Fabrice Pothier and Alexander Vershbow, *NATO and Trump: The Case for a New Transatlantic Bargain* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security, 2017).

<sup>244</sup> Joseph R. Biden, “Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference”, *The White House*, February 19, 2021.

States is determined to re-engage with Europe, to consult with you, to earn back our position of trust and leadership”<sup>245</sup>.

A pivotal moment was marked by the Summit in Madrid on June 28-30, 2022, in which NATO leaders adopted a new strategic concept, rewriting their assessment of the threat environment in the light of Russia's war on Ukraine. NATO also overhauled its defence and deterrence posture and officially invited Finland and Sweden to join the Alliance, after their applications for memberships on 18 May, 2022<sup>246</sup>.

Also, on his first day in office, the U.S. rejoined the World Health Organization. Indeed, on July 6, 2020, the U.S. administration officially notified UN Secretary-General António Guterres of its intention to withdraw from WHO membership. Trump accused the WHO of helping the Chinese government to cover up the early days of the coronavirus in China, adopting a “China-centric” approach<sup>247</sup>. The position was highly contested for two reasons.

Firstly, the president didn’t have the legal authorization under the U.S. Constitution to submit such a letter without the approval of Congress. Fifty scholars and experts in global public health, U.S. constitutional law, international law and relations wrote to Congress in opposition to U.S. withdrawal from WHO, underscoring the lack of legal authority to withdraw without congressional participation and approval<sup>248</sup>.

Secondly, the move raised serious concerns over the potential consequences for global public health. The WHO plays a crucial role in coordinating international responses to health emergencies, facilitating scientific cooperation, and ensuring equitable access to medical resources. A U.S. withdrawal would have isolated the country from vital sources of epidemiological data, early-warning systems, and global supply chains, weakening its own capacity to respond to future pandemics.

To reverse his predecessor’s decision, Biden wrote to UN Secretary-General retracting Trump’s letter, a move that he promised also during his electoral campaign. Moreover, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and Biden’s chief medical advisor announced Biden’s willingness to issue a directive to join the COVAX<sup>249</sup>, the global vaccine initiative

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<sup>245</sup> Franco Ordoñez and Michele Kelemen, “Biden Takes His ‘America Is Back’ Message to the World in Munich Speech”, *NPR*, February 19, 2021.

<sup>246</sup> Sebastian Clapp, *Outcome of the Madrid NATO Summit, June 2022*, EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service, PE 733.604 (July 2022).

<sup>247</sup> Katie Rogers and Apoorva Mandavilli, “Trump Administration Signals Formal Withdrawal From W.H.O.”, *The New York Times*, July 7, 2020, updated September 22, 2021.

<sup>248</sup> Lawrence O. Gostin et al., “Letter to Congress on WHO Withdrawal from Public Health, Law and International Relations Leaders”, *Georgetown Law O’Neill Institute*, June 30, 2020.

<sup>249</sup> World Health Organization, *COVAX: Working for Global Equitable Access to COVID-19 Vaccines*.

co-led by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF from 2020 through 2023. During the COVID-19 pandemic, COVAX aimed to accelerate the development and manufacture of COVID-19 vaccines and to guarantee fair and equitable access for every country in the world<sup>250</sup>.

The international response to President Biden's decision to rejoin the World Health Organization was overwhelmingly positive. WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus publicly expressed his appreciation, stating that the return of the U.S. would "strengthen the global fight against the pandemic and other public health challenges". European allies praised the decision as a clear signal of renewed multilateral cooperation and a departure from the isolationist stance of the previous administration.

The last point which saw an important reversal was the Paris Agreement. On January 20, 2021, Biden had signed an executive order re-entering the U.S. into the landmark Paris Agreement<sup>251</sup>. The Accord sets ambitious climate targets, committing the U.S. to converting to clean energy consumption by 2035, reducing greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050. Under Trump's presidency, U.S. had suffered one of the major climate challenges of the nation: forest fires in the West were devouring entire towns, while severe storms and tornados had become a commonplace<sup>252</sup>. The U.S. had spent about \$100 billion recovering from 2020 natural disasters. The Paris Agreement negotiated by Kerry, as Obama's Secretary of State, aimed to limit the global temperature rise to less than 2.0 degrees Celsius (2.0°C) over preindustrial levels. In 2021 the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) sounded an alarm, declaring "code red for humanity"<sup>253</sup>.

Trump decided to step back, contending that the treaty would "undermine" the U.S. economy and moved to negotiate a new "fair" deal that would not disadvantage the American businesses and workers. He justified his stance by saying that the agreement would cost \$3 trillion in lost GDP and 6.5 million jobs, while economies like China or India were treated better. Experts of the sector reminded that without the U.S. it would be difficult for the world to reach the goal that they set in the Paris Agreement. The U.S. contributed for about 15% of global emissions of carbon, but it also played

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<sup>250</sup> COVAX closed on December 31, 2023, having delivered nearly 2 billion doses of vaccines to 146 economies, and averted an estimated 2.7 million deaths in lower-income economies. See: CEPI, Gavi, UNICEF, and World Health Organization, *COVID-19 Vaccinations Shift to Regular Immunisation as COVAX Draws to a Close*, December 19, 2023.

<sup>251</sup> Joseph R. Biden, Jr., *Executive Order 13990: Protecting Public Health and the Environment and Restoring Science to Tackle the Climate Crisis*, 86 Fed. Reg. 7037 (January 25, 2021).

<sup>252</sup> Whipple, *The Fight of His Life: Inside Joe Biden's White House*, p.145.

<sup>253</sup> Ivi, p.146.

a crucial role as a provider of funding and innovation to assist developing countries in addressing global warming<sup>254</sup>.

Following the signing of the executive order<sup>255</sup>, the first goal of the new administration was to show the world that the United States was back on climate change matters. The year's most consequential event was COP26, scheduled to take place in Glasgow, Scotland, from October 31 to November 12, 2021. The world's leaders would be flying to attend the meeting in person, not virtually. When it was time for Biden's speech, the President of the United States stepped up to the podium and began:

We'll demonstrate to the world that the United States is not only back at the table but hopefully leading by the power of our example. I know it hasn't been the case, and that's why my administration is working overtime to show that our climate commitment is action, not words<sup>256</sup>.

Joe Biden was able to restore the leadership of the United States inside the international organizations, giving new impetus to multilateral agreements, signalling a completely different direction from his predecessor's national and international policies.

However, the elephant in the room needed to be addressed too: it was time to focus on China.

#### **4.3 U.S.–China Relations: between confrontation and cooperation**

While Biden reversed many of Trump's policies, on key strategic fronts like trade and national security, the administration maintained continuity when necessary. That concerned also the position toward China. During the Obama administration, when Biden was his vice president from 2009 to 2017, relations with Beijing were assigned a high degree of importance, stemming in part from China's new status as the world's second-largest economy. Diplomacy was used to shape stable relations between the two countries which, according to Obama's point of view, would determine the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The first meeting between the two presidents occurred in November 2021, through a Zoom call. Mr. Biden, in the three and a half hours of talks, immediately stated that they should adopt "common-sense guardrails", while Mr. Xi called Mr. Biden "my old friend" and used a nautical metaphor, comparing the two countries to ships that must together navigate the ocean's wind and waves without

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<sup>254</sup> *BBC News*, "Paris Climate Deal: Trump Pulls US Out of 2015 Accord", June 2, 2017.

<sup>255</sup> For Joe Biden, climate change has been a high priority throughout his political career. He could claim the authorship of the first bill in Congress to address climate change. Indeed, Biden's global Climate Protection Act, which called for setting up a task force on global warming, died in the Senate in 1986, but it passed as part of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act on December 12, 1987. See: Joseph R. Biden, Jr., *S.420 — A Bill to Initiate a United States Strategy, and to Further Multilateral Action, in Response to the Problem of Global Warming*, 100th Cong., 1st sess., introduced January 29, 1987.

<sup>256</sup> Whipple, *The Fight of His Life: Inside Joe Biden's White House*, p.153.

colliding<sup>257</sup>. In public remarks, Biden described relations in optimistic terms: “If we get this relationship right with a genuine new model, the possibilities are limitless”<sup>258</sup>.

But the mood in Washington had changed, and with the Trump administration, what was once seen as America’s potential partner became its primary rival. During his electoral campaign, Biden referred to Chinese President Xi as a “thug” and criticized the behaviour of China, especially on national security matters<sup>259</sup>.



Figure 12: President Joe Biden speaks virtually with Chinese leader Xi Jinping from the White House in Washington, DC, in their first meeting<sup>260</sup>.

However, the very first springboard for the new relations with China under President Biden occurred on March 18 and 19, 2021, in Anchorage, Alaska. The first high-level meeting between U.S.-Chinese officials was conducted on the American side by the Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, while China was represented by Yang Jiechi, a member of the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party and foreign minister Wang Yi. At the centre of the discussion, as Secretary Blinken highlighted during his opening remarks, there were matters related to trade, cyber espionage and human rights issues defined as “actions threaten the rules-based order

<sup>257</sup> Steven Lee Myers e David E. Sanger, “Biden Meets Xi at Virtual Summit”, *New York Times*, November 16, 2021.

<sup>258</sup> Ben Westcott, “China Looms as Biden’s Biggest Foreign Policy Challenge. Here’s Where He Stands”, *CNN*, November 16, 2020.

<sup>259</sup> Demetri Sevastopulo, “‘This Is a Guy Who Is a Thug’: How US Elite Became Hawks on Xi’s China”, *Financial Times*, October 8, 2020.

<sup>260</sup> “Xi, Biden wrap up ‘virtual’ meeting amid rising tension”, *Al Jazeera*, November 16, 2021.

that maintains global stability. That's why they're not merely internal matters and why we feel an obligation to raise these issues here today".<sup>261</sup>

Blinken's comments apparently caught the Chinese off guard. This led China's top diplomat, Yang Jiechi, to deliver a 16-minute speech, significantly exceeding the two-minute limit that had been agreed upon during difficult pre-meeting protocol negotiations, arguing that: "The United States has exercised long-arm jurisdiction and suppression and overstretched the national security through the use of force or financial hegemony, and this has created obstacles for normal trade activities, and the United States has also been persuading some countries to launch attacks on China"<sup>262</sup>.

Despite the harsh words of the first meeting, the second day saw the conclusion of some agreements and the talks were then called constructive. However, the two-day meeting ended without a joint statement, reflecting the deep disagreements already manifested during the opening remarks. Nevertheless, both sides agreed to maintain open lines of communication and to use talks as an opportunity to hear and better understand each other's issues. Even if the summit produced certain outcomes such as the establishment of a Climate Working Group, it was crystal clear that China's assertive posture remained unchanged since Trump's administration, and so did the Biden administration's approach, especially on the most discussed matter: tariffs.

The trade war, which started in 2018, escalated quickly throughout Trump's term, and despite the Phase One Agreement, it was never fully resolved. The economic measures were maintained with the Biden administration for both strategic and political reasons. The tariffs had broad bipartisan support from both Republicans and Democrats, who viewed China as a systemic threat to the U.S. economy and national security. Secondly, the duties were seen as a useful tool against unfair Chinese practices related to trade, intellectual property rights and state subsidies. With the publication of the *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* in March 2021<sup>263</sup>, Washington wanted to let the world know that the United States was still present and was ready to counter China's challenges. As it was reported:

By restoring U.S. credibility and reasserting forward-looking global leadership, we will ensure that America, not China, sets the international agenda, working alongside others to shape new global norms and agreements that advance our interests and reflect our values. By bolstering and defending our unparalleled network of allies and partners, and making smart defence investments,

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<sup>261</sup> Antony J. Blinken, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Director Yang and State Councilor Wang at the Top of Their Meeting", *U.S. Department of State*, March 18, 2021.

<sup>262</sup> Thomas Wright, "The US and China Finally Get Real with Each Other", *Brookings Institution*, March 22, 2021.

<sup>263</sup> The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, March 3, 2021.

we will also deter Chinese aggression and counter threats to our collective security, prosperity, and democratic way of life<sup>264</sup>.

To restore the historical relations with the long-term partners, the White House has used every political stage to advocate a common transatlantic approach towards China. Indeed, Biden's first visit was to Europe. In June 2021, the Heads of State and Government participated in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels where they released a Joint Communiqué agreeing that "China's stated ambitions and assertive behaviour present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to alliance security". It was the first time that a NATO official paper references threats from China<sup>265</sup>.

During the meeting, the thirty leaders expressed concerns about what they said were its "coercive policies" and the covert ways China was using to modernize its armed forces. Biden was able to push his allies towards a common stance to adopt against Xi's policies and to collectively respond to him.

Biden found overseas the same concerns he held regarding China's growing assertiveness. Under his administration, Washington increasingly pivoted toward the Indo-Pacific, aiming to counterbalance Beijing's influence through a combination of alliances, economic initiatives, and military presence. This shift from a NATO clouded by concern to an Indo-Pacific central to America's vision signals not a rupture but an evolutionary continuity: that of a power which, fully aware of what is at stake, responds with resolve, alliances, and a clear ambition to lead, once again, the global order.

#### **4.4 A "free and open" Indo-Pacific**

During Obama's tenure, Washington's focus on foreign policy was the "Pivot to Asia", or "rebalancing" to the Asia-Pacific. In July 2013, Vice President Joe Biden visited India and Singapore. During his trip, he declared that the United States considered the Indo-Pacific region as an integral part of the America's strategy for Asia. Although Obama's Pacific policy didn't adopt the phrase "Indo-Pacific", it included India in the Asia-Pacific region, emphasizing the need to continue to strengthen its strategic and economic partnership with the country.

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<sup>264</sup> Ivi, p.20.

<sup>265</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Brussels Summit Communiqué*, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels, June 14, 2021.

In February 2021, Joe Biden announced the establishment of a China Task Force<sup>266</sup> in the Department of Defense to provide a baseline assessment of the department's policies, programs and processes regarding the challenges China poses. The task force was led by Ely Ratner (appointed by Biden to be the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs under Secretary Lloyd Austin) with the contribution from experts across the Department of Defense, including representatives from all the Services, several Combatant Commands, the Joint Staff, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and the Intelligence Community. Their evaluation took four months and ended in June, with the submission of a report to the Department of Defense. Washington was aware that there needed to be a whole-of-government effort, including bipartisan support in Congress, to address the increasing competition with Beijing<sup>267</sup>. The Biden administration's strategic behaviour was very clear: it aimed to compete with China. In this context, the Indo-Pacific emerged as the pivotal arena where the contest for global influence was unfolding.

The term Indo-Pacific was first articulated by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in his first term in office, in an August 2007 speech to the Indian Parliament<sup>268</sup> and then used during Trump's administration. The President himself talked about it during a conference in Vietnam, on November 10, 2017, when he said: "The story of the Indo-Pacific in recent decades is the story of what is possible when people take ownership of their future.... This region has emerged as a beautiful constellation of nations, each its own bright star, satellites to none"<sup>269</sup>.

Although U.S. officials acknowledged the importance of connectivity and infrastructure investment in fostering an Indo-Pacific community, their efforts were hindered by the Trump administration's economic strategy, based on American nationalism and bilateral trade pressure, rather than strengthening multilateral or military alliances in the region. In contrast, the Biden administration, continuing Obama's "Pivot to Asia", has prioritized rebuilding alliances and engaging in multilateral cooperation through initiatives such as the Quad, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and reinforced ties with ASEAN partners, restoring a comprehensive strategic presence in the region.

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<sup>266</sup> There are several working groups or committees with the name of "China," whose purpose is to review U.S.-China relations, formulate China policies, and coordinate with departments. This phenomenon shows that the U.S.' hardline policy toward China continued even during the Biden administration.

<sup>267</sup> Jim Garamone, "Biden Announces DOD China Task Force", *U.S. Department of Defense*, February 10, 2021.

<sup>268</sup> Tunchinmang Langel, "The Indo-Pacific Legacy of Abe Shinzo", *National Maritime Foundation*, July 16, 2022.

<sup>269</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit | Da Nang, Vietnam", *The White House*, November 10, 2017.

In February 2022, the Biden-Harris administration published the *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*<sup>270</sup>, a report that outlined the new approaches that Washington wanted to adopt in the region, determined to strengthen its long-term position. Moreover, it recognised the mounting challenges from the PRC. As it is reported:

The PRC is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world's most influential power. The PRC's coercion and aggression span the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific. From the economic coercion of Australia to the conflict along the Line of Actual Control with India to the growing pressure on Taiwan and bullying of neighbours in the East and South China Seas, our allies and partners in the region bear much of the cost of the PRC's harmful behaviour. In the process, the PRC is also undermining human rights and international law, including freedom of navigation, as well as other principles that have brought stability and prosperity to the Indo-Pacific<sup>271</sup>.

But there were a lot of challenges to counter.

#### **4.4.1 The Chinese military posture**

China's assertiveness in the South China Sea (SCS) has steadily increased and remained a central concern for the U.S. Covering 1.4 million square miles, the South China Sea serves as a vital maritime gateway. The region is estimated to carry around 24% of global maritime trade worth approximately \$7.4 trillion per year. Beneath its surface lies a rich ecosystem that provides 12% of the world's fish supply and supports millions of livelihoods in surrounding nations. Additionally, significant oil and gas reserves, estimated by the U.S. at 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 11 billion barrels of oil, make the seabed strategically valuable<sup>272</sup>. This is why for Beijing, establishing control over the region served multiple objectives: it enables the projection of naval power far from its shores, it provides a defensive buffer zone along its maritime periphery, and it strengthens its surveillance capacity over the U.S. and allied military movements.

As mentioned in chapter 2, the region's geopolitical complexity is centred around two main island chains: the Spratly Islands in the south and the Paracel Islands in the north. Several nations, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam, have overlapping claims. However, China's claim is the most expansive, covering more than 80% of the sea based on a

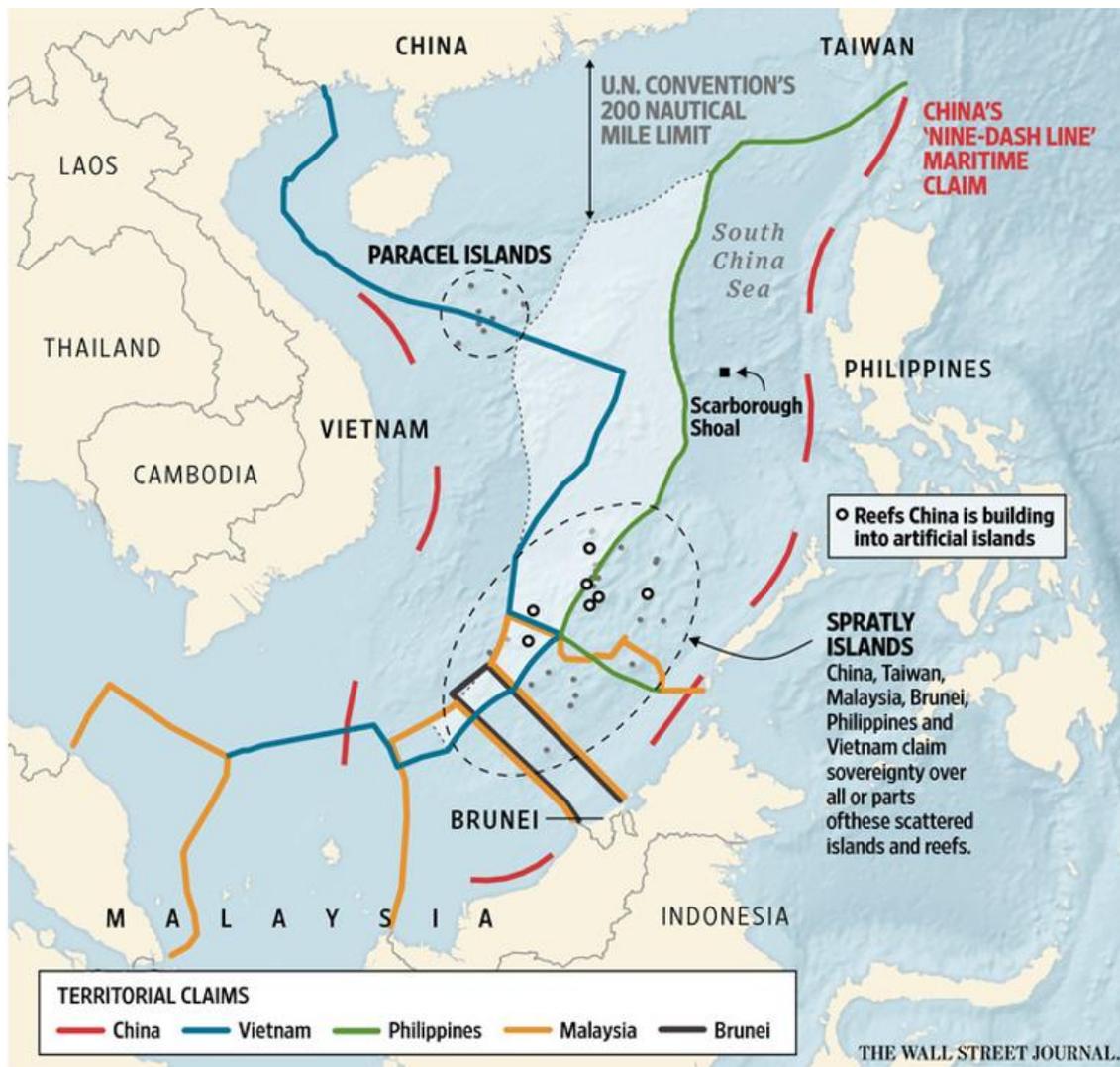
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<sup>270</sup> The White House, *The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, February 2022.

<sup>271</sup> Ivi, p.5.

<sup>272</sup> Celia Siade-Cox, "China Continues to Militarize the South China Sea – Here's What Should Be Done," *George W. Bush Institute*, April 25, 2025.

1947 map featuring the so-called “Nine-dash line”<sup>273</sup>. Tensions significantly escalated in the 2010s as China started building massive artificial islands, complete with runways, missile systems, and radar facilities, effectively militarizing the region<sup>274</sup>.



Map 1: China's South China Sea Claims (2009)<sup>275</sup>

In 2016, an international tribunal in The Hague ruled that China's claims have no legal basis under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)<sup>276</sup>. The tribunal also stated that the Spratly and Paracel Islands were “rocks,” not islands, and thus not entitled to

<sup>273</sup> This claim has deep historical and emotional roots for China, linked to past conflicts with foreign powers and a national desire to assert sovereignty. The Nine-Dash Line is an imaginary line drawn by China in the South China Sea to delimit its territorial claims over much of this strategic maritime area. The line extends in a U shape, covering about 80% of the South China Sea, and includes numerous disputed islands. China considers this line as the historical basis for its sovereignty claims, but its ambiguity and lack of clear definition have drawn criticism from other neighbouring countries.

<sup>274</sup> Bloomberg Originals, *The Militarization of the South China Sea*, YouTube video, duration 23:13, posted May 2, 2024.

<sup>275</sup> WSJ News Graphics, "The South China Sea Dispute," *Wall Street Journal*, last updated July 12, 2016.

<sup>276</sup> Permanent Court of Arbitration, *The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China)*, Case No. 2013-19, Award, July 12, 2016.

exclusive economic zones (EEZs). China rejected the ruling outright and has continued to enforce and intensify its claims aggressively, preventing other countries like Vietnam and the Philippines from exploiting their own maritime resources.

Amid the COVID-19 global pandemic in March 2022, U.S. Indo-Pacific Admiral John C. Aquino confirmed that “China has fully militarized at least three of several islands it built...arming them with anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile systems, laser and jamming equipment and fighter jets in an increasingly aggressive move that threatens all nations operating nearby”<sup>277</sup>.

Since the beginning of Xi Jinping’s leadership, China has demonstrated its military capabilities more confidently in the SCS and expressed escalatory foreign policy rhetoric in ways that were not observable in previous years<sup>278</sup>.



Figure 13: A satellite photo released by Planet Labs shows structures built by China on an island in the Paracel archipelago in the South China Sea, August 15, 2023<sup>279</sup>.

The military buildup in the South China Sea is not just about regional dominance, it’s also linked to China’s broader strategy, including a possible future conflict over Taiwan. Analysts

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<sup>277</sup> Associated Press, “China Has Fully Militarized Three Islands in South China Sea, US Admiral Says”, *The Guardian*, March 21, 2022.

<sup>278</sup> Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr., ed., *The United States and China in the Era of Global Transformations* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023), p.51.

<sup>279</sup> Planet Labs PBC / Associated Press, satellite image showing Chinese military structures in the South China Sea, in *Le Monde*, August 24, 2023.

suggest the artificial islands could serve as forward operating bases to deter or delay U.S. military intervention in a Taiwan crisis. Moreover, China may be trying to create a protective zone for its ballistic missile submarines, securing its southern coast from the U.S. presence. Consequently, the Chinese assertive posture is manifested clearly in the frequent military drills conducted around Taiwan, as a measure used in retaliation for actions undertaken by the Taiwanese government.

A prominent example was the visit of the U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. In the leadup of her travel to Taiwan on August 2, 2022, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) took a series of actions to demonstrate its resolve and willingness to escalate, with the hope of deterring her visit. This included military drills and operations around the island.

On July 28, China began testing Taiwan's defences by sending unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) over Taiwan's Dongyin Island, marking the first time that China has sent drones over Taiwan's airspace. Shortly after, on August 1, China placed the PLA Eastern Theater Command (ETC), which led military operations against Taiwan on high alert. Then, Beijing announced military exercises and live fire drills in the South China Sea from August 2 to 6. The PLA's Southern Theater Command (STC), which is responsible for operations in the South China Sea and some operations around Taiwan, was placed on high alert too. On August 2, PLA aircraft flew close to the Taiwan Strait centreline<sup>280</sup>.

But Beijing failed to deter Speaker Pelosi from landing to Taiwan. Her visit showed support for the island and held discussions with Taipei that focused mainly on reaffirming the U.S. presence, promoting shared interest in advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement: "China firmly opposes and sternly condemns this and has made serious *démarche* and strong protest to the United States".

The decision of sending Pelosi was supported by many Republican senators, who issued a statement approving Pelosi's congressional delegation, which was composed entirely of Democrats in Taiwan. The Republicans clearly stated: "We support Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's trip to Taiwan... This travel is consistent with the United States' One China policy to which we are committed. We are also committed now, more than ever, to all elements of the Taiwan Relations Act"<sup>281</sup>.

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<sup>280</sup> Bonny Lin, Brian Hart, Matthew P. Funaiole, Samantha Lu, Hannah Price, and Nicholas Kaufman, "Tracking the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis", *ChinaPower* (Center for Strategic and International Studies).

<sup>281</sup> Jeremy Herb and Eric Cheung, "US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi Lands in Taiwan amid Threats of Chinese Retaliation", *CNN*, updated August 2, 2022.

The second massive exercise took place in April 2023, after the U.S. Speaker of the House, Kevin McCarthy received Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen in the U.S.<sup>282</sup> The Chinese military launched the “Joint Sword” drills, which were undertaken in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. Although these were smaller and slightly farther away than those conducted the previous year, China showed its military capacity by dispatching several warships and dozens of aircraft. According to Taiwan’s Ministry of Defense, 91 aircraft and 12 naval vessels were detected in the Taiwan Strait on April 10. Of those 91 aircraft, 54 crossed the median line, with everything from Su-30 and J-16 fighters to J-16D electronic attack jets and H-6 nuclear-capable bombers taking part in the drills<sup>283</sup>.

The Chinese aggressive stance was further fuelled by domestic nationalism, as sovereignty over the South China Sea has become deeply intertwined with the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy and its narrative of restoring national greatness. The increase in military and civilian activities in the SCS reflected the core ideational foundations of Beijing, that in 2012 reclassified the South China Sea as a “core international interest”, placing it alongside other sensitive issue, which means China is prepared to fight to defend it.

#### **4.4.2 The American countermeasures**

China’s military approach also reflected a broader strategic goal: to reduce the American influence in the region and challenge the existing liberal order by gradually shifting the balance of power in its favour. Under Biden, the United States responded by drawing up support from like-minded nations to uphold the freedom of the seas and intensified the Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea.

In February 2021, the U.S. Navy completed its first operation since President Joe Biden took office: the USS John S. McCain, a guided-missile destroyer, asserted navigational rights and freedoms in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands. A spokesperson for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Southern Theater Command criticized the FONOP, accusing the U.S. military of “seriously damaging regional peace and stability” and “seriously violating China's sovereignty and security”. The U.S. Navy continued to conduct regular FONOPs throughout 2022–2024,

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<sup>282</sup> Michael Martina and David Brunnstrom, “U.S. Speaker Meets Taiwan Leader and Stresses Need to Speed Up Arms Deliveries”, *Reuters*, April 6, 2023.

<sup>283</sup> Lin et al., “Tracking the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis.”

including patrols near the Spratly Islands and Second Thomas Shoal<sup>284</sup>, reinforcing the message that Washington would not recognize China's excessive maritime claims<sup>285</sup>.

From August 3 to August 15, 2021, the United States Navy carried out a military exercise named Large-Scale Exercise 2021 (LSE 21)<sup>286</sup>, aimed to counter both Russia and China simultaneously in the European and Indo-Pacific theatres. It involved more than 25,000 personnel, making it one of the biggest naval simulations in decades. The main goal was to test the new combat strategies and concepts that reflected how the U.S. military planned to fight, combining real-world training with simulated scenarios (e.g., some ships were physically at sea, while others were in port but virtually connected). It involved high-level coordination: even four-star admirals and simulated top decision-makers like a mock "Secretary of Defense" participated to simulate in command decisions.

The exercise was unique because it made coordination much more complex, combining a method that mixes real life training and virtual simulations. Moreover, it showed that the U.S. military is preparing for large-scale, high-tech and geographically distributed warfare<sup>287</sup>.

Alongside domestic drills, President Biden prioritized the inclusion of Indo-Pacific allies in joint military exercises, which condemned the Chinese behaviour in the SCS. Examples of this cooperation are the Balikatan exercises (it means *shoulder-to-shoulder* in Tagalog), longstanding bilateral exercises that highlight the deep-rooted partnership between the Philippines and the United States. This cooperation started in 1991, following the closure of U.S. military bases at Subic Bay and Clark Field, as part of a redefined military cooperation between the two nations<sup>288</sup>.

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<sup>284</sup> The Second Thomas Shoal, also known as Ayungin Shoal, is a submerged reef located in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, approximately 105 nautical miles west of Palawan, Philippines. It is classified as a low-tide elevation, meaning it is exposed at low tide but submerged at high tide and thus does not qualify as an island capable of generating territorial waters on its own. The shoal lies within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and continental shelf, as established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration confirmed that the shoal falls within Philippine jurisdiction. To assert its presence, the Philippines grounded a naval ship, the *BRP Sierra Madre*, on the shoal in 1999, maintaining a small military detachment there. While the legal status places the shoal within the Philippines' EEZ, it remains subject to dispute by other regional claimants.

<sup>285</sup> Zachary Haver, "US Conducts 1st South China Sea Freedom of Navigation Op Under Biden", *Radio Free Asia*, February 5, 2021.

<sup>286</sup> Commander, U.S. Fleet Forces Command, U.S. Pacific Fleet, and U.S. Naval Forces Europe, "U.S. Navy Kicks Off Large-Scale Exercise 2021", *U.S. Fleet Forces Command*, August 3, 2021.

<sup>287</sup> Sam LaGrone, "Large Scale Exercise 2021 Tests How Navy, Marines Could Fight a Future Global Battle", *USNI News*, August 9, 2021.

<sup>288</sup> Between 1991 and 1995, the exercises were conducted regularly. However, in 1996, they were suspended due to the Philippine Senate's failure to ratify the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which regulates the legal status of U.S. troops in the country. The exercise was resumed in 1999 after the VFA was signed and implemented, returning to an annual schedule. In the years that followed, Balikatan increasingly focused on counterterrorism operations and internal security cooperation, particularly in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks. With the signing of the Enhanced Defense

The 37<sup>th</sup> edition of the Balikatan exercise took place from March 28 to April 8, 2022<sup>289</sup>. It saw the participation of over 8,000 troops from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the U.S. military, which trained together from the northern coast of Luzon to Palawan, focusing on different issues such as maritime security and amphibious operations. As reported by Brig. Gen. Joseph Clearfield, the U.S. Marine Corps Forces Pacific Deputy Commander: “The completion of yet another successful Balikatan is a clear example of our shared commitment to advancing peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region”. Balikatan 2022 marked a significant comeback after two years of limited or cancel activity. In 2020 the exercise was cancelled due to the order of then President Rodrigo Duterte, who temporarily ended the Visiting Forces Agreement<sup>290</sup> with the U.S. This move was seen as a political gesture to improve relations with China, moving slightly away from the U.S. influence. In 2021, Balikatan was held but on a reduced scale due to both political tensions and COVID-19 constraints<sup>291</sup>.

From April 11 to April 28, more than 17,600 members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the U.S. military participated in Balikatan 2023<sup>292</sup>. The increase in the number of soldiers involved showed that the scope of the exercise grew consistently year after year and the 2023 edition was focused mainly on planning, coordination and command and control (C2) during complex crisis scenarios. It was also the first Balikatan under President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., who took office in 2022 and signalled a renewed closeness to the U.S., in contrast to his predecessor Duterte's flirtation with China.

There were four major activities that both nations featured: Command Post Exercise (CPX), Cyber Defense Exercise, Field Training Exercise (FTX) and Humanitarian Civic Assistance (HCA). These were aimed at strengthening the networked operations, information sharing and

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Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in 2014, the exercise expanded its scope to include scenarios of territorial defence and disaster response. In 2020, Balikatan was cancelled for the first time, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the temporary suspension of the VFA by then-President Rodrigo Duterte.

<sup>289</sup> U.S. Embassy Manila, “37th Iteration of Balikatan Exercise Set to Begin in the Philippines”, *U.S. Embassy in the Philippines*, March 22, 2022.

<sup>290</sup> The Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) is a bilateral agreement between the United States and the Philippines that provides the legal framework for U.S. military personnel to operate in the Philippines. It supports and operationalizes the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), which commits both nations to aid each other in the event of an armed attack in the Pacific region. *See: Treaties and Other International Acts Series* 12931, Defense: Status of Forces Agreement Between the United States of America and the Philippines, signed at Manila February 10, 1998, and October 9, 1998.

<sup>291</sup> U.S. Embassy Manila, “U.S. and Philippine Forces Successfully Conclude 37th Balikatan”, *U.S. Embassy in the Philippines*, April 8, 2022.

<sup>292</sup> U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, “Philippine, U.S. Troops to Hold Largest Ever Balikatan Exercise from April 11 to 28”, April 4, 2023.

the multi-domain logistics, elements that lacked in the earlier editions and that reflect a modern battlefield requirement<sup>293</sup>.

Balikatan 2024 took place from April 22 to May 10, and it was organized across different locations in the Philippines, such as Batanes, the northernmost island group of the Philippines, near Taiwan; Palawan, western Philippines, near the South China Sea; and Central Luzon, the chosen location for air and missile defence exercises<sup>294</sup>. 2024 marked a special edition also for the involvement of French military forces, in addition to 14 observers, representatives of other countries who were invited not to participate directly in the training, but just to observe the drills. These included countries such as the U.S. treaty allies, like Japan, South Korea and Australia (actively participated), ASEAN nations like Indonesia, Vietnam or Singapore, and European partners like France (actively participated).

Despite not being invited, also the Chinese warships from the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) were observed shadowing the Multilateral Maritime Exercise (MME) portion of Balikatan. The ships were within the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone but outside the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit. Chinese ships were acting mainly as surveillance vessels but didn't interfere with the overall exercise<sup>295</sup>. In 2024, over 16,000 personnel participated, focusing on simulating cyber-attacks and command decision-making, real-life field drills and humanitarian aid, like building infrastructure and providing medical support<sup>296</sup>.

Although both Washington and Manila insisted that the drills were not directed at any country but were mainly aimed at improving the Philippines' emergency response capabilities, the focus on territorial defence in the chosen areas strongly suggests that both parties were exercising for a potential conflict scenario with the People's Republic of China. This led Beijing to respond, strongly criticizing the drills, asserting that the Philippines and countries outside Asia are joining forces against China, and warned that the exercises could lead to confrontations and undermine regional stability<sup>297</sup>.

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<sup>293</sup> Other special features were included. The first one, the SINKEX (Sink Exercise), involved the sinking of a decommissioned Philippine Navy ship, the BRP Pangasinan (PS-31), during a live-fire coastal defence drill in Zambales. The purpose was to simulate the real-world littoral combat scenarios. The second one was the use of the M-142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) for the first time in a Balikatan exercise. This system is the U.S. precision long range rocket artillery system and even though it had been present in the previous editions, it was never used.

<sup>294</sup> U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, "Philippine, U.S. Troops to Kick Off Exercise Balikatan 2024", April 17, 2024.

<sup>295</sup> This year's activities occurred against the backdrop of dangerous confrontations between the Philippines and China, including a widely reported incident in which a China Coast Guard vessel rammed a Philippine fishing boat near Scarborough Shoal in April.

<sup>296</sup> "Balikatan 2024", Vol. 150, no. 6 (June 2024), U.S. Naval Institute.

<sup>297</sup> Lorenzo Piccioli, "Usa e Filippine si esercitano spalla a spalla. Ecco Balikatan 2024", *Formiche.net*, May 8, 2024.

President Biden has devoted considerable effort to reaffirm the relationship between the United States and the Philippines to deter China, especially considering their historical ties. He has vowed that the U.S. would defend the Philippines from any attack in the South China Sea, calling its support for Manila “ironclad”, considering the Mutual Defense Treaty in place since 1951<sup>298</sup>. Additionally, he recognized the importance of including in the military operations long-standing allies in the Indo-Pacific region such as Japan.

In April 2024, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, and United States President Joe Biden met at the White House for the first trilateral Leaders’ Summit, where they committed to deepening cooperation across sectors, including maritime security, to advance a shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific<sup>299</sup>. Speaking at the start of three-way talks at the White House, Mr. Biden said that “any attack on Philippine aircraft, vessels or armed forces in the South China Sea would invoke our mutual defence treaty”<sup>300</sup>.

The cooperation between the three nations remained consistent until the end of the Biden administration, with the last drill conducted in December 2024. As reported by Reuters, the Philippines held maritime drills with the United States and Japan inside its exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea. These drills, involving a U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon aircraft, the Philippine Navy’s BRP Andres Bonifacio, a C-90 aircraft, and Japan’s Murasame-class destroyer JS Samidare, marked the Philippines' latest set of joint exercises with its allies amid growing Chinese assertiveness<sup>301</sup>.

The measures used by the Biden administration to deter Beijing’s forces illustrated Washington's commitment to upholding the rules-based international order in the South China Sea. Through an expanded military presence, enhanced regional partnerships, and consistent diplomatic messaging, the United States seeks not only to deter unilateral actions by Beijing, but also to reassure its allies of its enduring strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

#### **4.4.3 Indo-Pacific Partnerships: The Quad, AUKUS, and strategic balancing**

Since none of the American allies in Asia could offset China on their own in the immediate future, they needed strong backing from the United States: a more effective counterbalance to China would rather be a regional bloc to contain it.

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<sup>298</sup> Bernd Debusmann Jr., “Biden Vows to Defend Philippines in the South China Sea”, *BBC News*, April 12, 2024.

<sup>299</sup> Dzirhan Mahadzir, “Japanese, U.S., the Philippines Drill in the South China Sea; China Contests U.S. Position on Territorial Disputes,” *USNI News*, September 5, 2023.

<sup>300</sup> Helen Davidson, “Biden Pledges to Defend Philippines from Any Attack in South China Sea”, *The Guardian*, April 12, 2024.

<sup>301</sup> Reuters, “Philippines Holds Drills with Allies after South China Sea Confrontation”, *Reuters*, December 6, 2024.

The Quad, or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, is an informal group of four democracies, the United States, India, Japan and Australia, committed to supporting a peaceful, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilient<sup>302</sup>. The cooperation emerged informally in response to the Indian Ocean tsunami, but the first official Quadrilateral dialogue was initiated by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. However, after pressure from China and the withdrawal of Australia, due to a shift in Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's foreign policy, the Quad lost momentum. From 2008 to 2017, the Quad was largely inactive, but countries continued bilateral and trilateral partnerships.

Following the revival of dialogue in 2017 under President Donald Trump, the Biden administration has sustained and further developed cooperation among the four countries. From 2021, their leaders have become more aligned in their concerns over China's assertive actions in the region, showing greater willingness to develop a coordinated agenda for cooperation. On September 24, 2021, President Biden hosted Prime Minister Scott Morrison of Australia, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga of Japan at the White House for the first-ever in-person Leaders' Summit of the Quad<sup>303</sup>. They discussed the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges, such as COVID-19 vaccine distribution, climate change, emerging technologies and supply chain resilience. Throughout President Biden's tenure, the meetings were held regularly and without interruption, extending through to the end of 2024.

However, questions about the Quad's effectiveness persist due to its vaguely defined objectives. The organization lacked clear, binding commitments or a formal institutional structure and its goals, such as promoting a "free and open Indo-Pacific", were strategically broad and diplomatically cautious. The Indo-Pacific coalition has also been touted as "Asian NATO", due to concerns connected with the evolving regional situation. The Cold War-type power alignment and "bloc confrontation" has been perceived by China vis-à-vis the Quad. On the contrary, its members assured that it was not a military grouping meant to counter China. Also, the four members have repeatedly clarified that the vision of security dialogue is not oriented toward any specific state but focused on non-traditional issues that apply to all stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific region<sup>304</sup>.

This is why the entry of AUKUS (an acronym for the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia) has led to a polarization of opinion with some commentators clearly favouring it over

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<sup>302</sup> Sheila A. Smith, "The Quad in the Indo-Pacific: What to Know", *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 27, 2021.

<sup>303</sup> U.S. Embassy & Consulates in India, "Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders' Summit", *U.S. Department of State*.

<sup>304</sup> Pranav Bhaskar and Sitakanta Mishra, "Why the Quad Can Become an Asian NATO", *The Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies* 12, no. 1 (2025), p114.

Quad due to its unambiguous military nature. While the Quad remains a diplomatic and strategic forum focused on non-traditional security challenges, the evolving geopolitical landscape has also prompted the United States and its closest allies to establish more robust defence-oriented partnerships, and AUKUS represents a prominent example<sup>305</sup>.

Its creation was announced in September 2021, when the leaders of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States agreed on the creation of this enhanced trilateral security partnership to strengthen the ability of each government to support security and defence interests. It was created to promote deeper information and technology sharing and to foster deeper integration of security and defence-related science, technology, industrial bases and supply chains<sup>306</sup>.

The first initiative under AUKUS was to embolden the naval capabilities of Australia to check the increasing strength of the Chinese naval fleet in the Indo-Pacific. As such, it allowed Australia to build nuclear-powered submarines for the first time, using technology provided by the United States. These types of weapons offered several advantages such as extended range, endurance and stealth, features that have become necessities, given changing geopolitics and shifting defence dynamics in the Indo-Pacific<sup>307</sup>.

The second initiative intended to strengthen interoperability, focusing on cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and additional undersea capabilities. This aimed to boost development across cutting-edge technologies like robotic and autonomous underwater vehicles, quantum technology, artificial intelligence (AI), hypersonic, and electronic warfare.

Quad and AUKUS are two prominent examples of the United States and its allies' initiatives to bolster security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific to counter Chinese aggressive posture and to establish a foundation for achieving "integrated deterrence". The leadership role taken by Washington in the formation of these groups was a clear sign that the United States was starting to respond in an appropriate way to the dynamics of balance of power. Under Biden's presidency, the U.S. built on these initiatives by adopting a grand strategy of balance with the

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<sup>305</sup> Anubhav S. Goswami, "Balancing Grand Strategy for America to Offset Thucydides's Trap with China", *Journal of Strategic Security* 15, no. 2 (2022), p.12.

<sup>306</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "AUKUS: The Trilateral Security Partnership Between Australia, U.K. and U.S.", *U.S. Department of Defense*.

<sup>307</sup> Lauren Kahn, "AUKUS Explained: How Will the Trilateral Pact Shape Indo-Pacific Security?", *Council on Foreign Relations*, last updated June 12, 2023.

intention of raising the defensive capabilities of its allies and its strategic partners in Asia to counterbalance China<sup>308</sup>.

#### **4.5 Continuity in the perception of China as a “systemic rival”**

The final years of the Biden presidency largely followed a familiar script, marked by a fluctuating approach toward the Chinese rival. The discontinuity in U.S. foreign policy that Xi Jinping had hoped for with the end of the first Trump administration ultimately failed to materialize, resulting instead in an even sharper confrontation between Washington and Beijing.

The “managed competition” theorized by Biden’s cabinet during the presidential meeting<sup>309</sup> in Indonesia in November 2022, was quickly short-circuited by the January-February 2023 “spy balloon incident” and Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine that began a year earlier. As reported by BBC News in 2023, China expressed strong dissatisfaction and opposition towards the U.S. use of force to attack China’s civilian unmanned airship, which entered the United States airspace due to force majeure<sup>310</sup>.

Even though China’s foreign ministry vowed retaliation, communication channels remained open thanks to the Sullivan-Wang cooperation<sup>311</sup>. This led the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to visit Beijing in June 2023 and Foreign Minister Wang Yi to visit Washington in November of the same year<sup>312</sup>. The two sides’ dialogues were aimed at stabilizing the unstable relationship and paved the way for the second in-person leaders’ summit in Woodside, California in November 2023. Joe Biden and Xi Jinping discussed topics including Taiwan, the South China Sea, the war in Ukraine and in the Middle East. They committed to restarting high-level military-to-military communication and agreed to establish a working group to discuss the risks of artificial intelligence<sup>313</sup>.

On the same occasion President Biden reaffirmed the “five commitments” that he had previously made to Xi at their 2022 Bali meeting, namely that: “The United States does not seek a new Cold War, does not seek to change China’s system, does not seek to revitalize its

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<sup>308</sup> Anubhav S. Goswami *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2022), p.15.

<sup>309</sup> President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. met on November 14 with President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), in Bali, Indonesia, during the G20 Summit.

<sup>310</sup> *BBC News*, “China Balloon: US Shoots Down Airship over Atlantic”, February 5, 2023.

<sup>311</sup> Alexandra Sharp, “Sullivan Heads to Beijing for High-Level U.S.-China Talks”, *Foreign Policy*, August 27, 2024.

<sup>312</sup> U.S. Mission China, “Secretary Blinken’s Visit to the People’s Republic of China (PRC)”, *U.S. Embassy & Consulates in China*, June 20, 2023.

<sup>313</sup> The White House, “Readout of President Joe Biden’s Meeting with President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China”, *Briefing Room – Statements and Releases*, November 15, 2023.

alliances against China, does not support Taiwan independence, and has no intention to have conflict with China”<sup>314</sup>.

However, the concept of China as a “strategic rival” did not disappear during the 2021-2024 presidency either. Shortly after the revival of their relations, on May 14, 2024, President Biden announced a tariff increase on a range of imports from China. He directed the U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai to impose tariffs on about \$18 billion worth of imports from China in an array of those sectors considered strategic for national security and economic leadership such as: steel and aluminium, semiconductors, electric vehicles (EVs), batteries, critical minerals, solar cells, ship-to-shore cranes, and medical products. This decision came as part of a legally required 4-year review of the Trump-era tariffs originally imposed in 2018 under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974. The White House justified these measures to counter China’s growing overcapacity and export surges that threaten to significantly harm American workers, businesses, and communities. The new measures target the import side, restricting China’s access to the U.S. market<sup>315</sup>.

Even if retaliatory measures lasted until the end of 2024, on November 16, 2024, in Lima, Peru, Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping held their last of three in-person meetings during the Biden presidency. During the four years of the Biden administration, the U.S.-China relationship has traversed a difficult and, at times, rocky course. But over the past two years the two governments have managed to find some stability by reestablishing some channels of communication and exchanges. The closing chapter of Biden’s presidency left unresolved many of the structural tensions underpinning the U.S.-China rivalry. As the administration came to an end, hopes for long-term stabilization remained fragile, overshadowed by a shifting domestic landscape in the United States<sup>316</sup>.

Like many pivotal moments in American history, the election of the 47<sup>th</sup> President of the United States was marked by a profound political shock. The re-election of Donald J. Trump represented a rare event in U.S. history, as only one other president, Grover Cleveland, had previously served two non-consecutive terms. What made this return even more significant was the context in which it occurred: despite numerous legal accusations and ongoing criminal proceedings, Trump succeeded in regaining the confidence of a substantial portion of the

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<sup>314</sup> David Shambaugh, “Are Sino-American Relations Back on Track?”, *China-US Focus*, November 18, 2023.

<sup>315</sup> Matthew P. Goodman, “Weighing Biden’s China Tariffs”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 24, 2024.

<sup>316</sup> David Shambaugh, “Reviewing U.S.-China Relations During Biden Era: Finding Some Modest Stability”, *ChinaUSFocus*, November 22, 2024.

American electorate<sup>317</sup>. The projections of Kamala Harris's victory proved to be wrong, capturing many of the same errors that had already emerged with Trump's previous campaign. Underestimating turnout in rural areas and failing to capture the persistence of "shy Trump voters" led to a different conclusion. The electorate's decision to return to Trump, despite his legal troubles, underscored deeper controversies within the U.S. society. Economic grievances were addressed by Trump's message of economic nationalism and protectionism, while his promise to restore a "traditional America", as he promised during the electoral campaign, appeared to be an appealing call for many voters. The MAGA movement was back.

For the Chinese leadership, the outcome came as a cold shower: Xi Jinping suddenly found himself facing the return of an unpredictable counterpart. However, the international landscape has changed profoundly since 2017: global dynamics have shifted, and the balance of power has become more fluid and complex. Within this evolving scenario, a new chapter in American foreign policy is taking shape.

Welcome to the Trump 2.0 era.

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<sup>317</sup> Before the 2024 presidential election, Donald Trump faced multiple legal proceedings: (1) *People v. Trump* in New York, involving 34 felony counts for falsifying business records related to hush money payments to Stormy Daniels; (2) a federal indictment in Florida charging over 40 counts, including wilful retention of national defence information and obstruction, for mishandling classified documents at Mar-a-Lago; (3) a federal case in Washington, D.C., charging him with conspiracy and obstruction for attempting to overturn the 2020 election, tied to the January 6 Capitol attack; and (4) a Georgia state indictment under the RICO statute for interfering in the 2020 election results. In addition, Trump was found civilly liable in New York for fraud and in separate cases for defamation and sexual abuse involving E. Jean Carroll. See: Amy O'Kruk e Curt Merrill, "Donald Trump's Criminal Cases, in One Place", *CNN*, January 10, 2025.

## CHAPTER 5

### China in the Future of the Global Order

#### 5.1 China between continuity and change: the Xi factor

*The Chinese Dream is the dream of our nation and every Chinese.  
All the Chinese who live in our great country in this great age share  
the opportunity to pursue excellence, realize our dreams,  
and develop ourselves along with our country*<sup>318</sup>.

Xi Jinping – Address to the First Session of the 12th National People’s Congress  
Thursday, March 14, 2013.  
Beijing, Great Hall of the People.

On March 14, 2013, when Xi Jinping was elected president of the People’s Republic of China and delivered his inaugural speech, many believed it would be the beginning of yet another term in the long political history of the country. Official statements and promises of stability depicted a predictable transition of power. However, the events that unfolded surpassed all expectations. Xi's term was not merely another presidential cycle, but the start of a new era characterized by an unprecedented centralization of power, unparalleled global ambitions, and a profound redefinition of China itself, both domestically and on the international stage.

Xi Jinping sought to consolidate power since assuming China’s leadership in 2012 and gradually cracked down on dissenting voices in the CCP. He has overseen a wide-scale anti-corruption campaign within the Communist Party to strengthen his grip on power. Critics have called it a political purge since it targeted not just “flies”, that is, officials at low bureaucratic levels, but also “tigers”<sup>319</sup>, including centrally appointed bureaucrats, high ranking military officers, and former member of the Politburo Standing Committee<sup>320</sup>.

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<sup>318</sup> 习近平 (Xi Jinping). "Address to the First Session of the 12th National People’s Congress [在第十二届全国人民代表大会第一次会议上的讲话]". CSIS Interpret: China, original work published in National People's Congress [中华人民共和国全国人民代表大会], March 17, 2013.

<sup>319</sup> Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, vol. 1, chap. 17, “Combat Corruption”, January 22, 2013.

<sup>320</sup> Carlotta Dotto, Simone McCarthy, Nectar Gan, and Noemi Cassanelli, “Xi Has Changed China”, *CNN*, October 18, 2022.

The organ entitled to direct this huge campaign was the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), which between 2012 and 2025 investigated six million officials at all levels. This number includes cases concluded with warnings, suspensions, or expulsion from the Party<sup>321</sup>.

Xi moved quickly to centralize political authority in his own hands and assumed the leadership of all the most important committees overseeing policies, such as those concerning cyber issues, economic reforms and national security<sup>322</sup>. He reorganized the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and between 2015 and 2016, Xi's military reforms created a system of joint theatre commands, establishing new structures such as the Strategic Support Force to facilitate joint operations and conduct informatized warfare<sup>323</sup>. It also reduced its size bringing the total personnel from 2.3 to 2 million in 2018. As part of this reorganizational campaign, all the general departments (i.e., the General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department, and General Armament Department) were dissolved because their autonomy had resulted in inadequate oversight and corruption. Xi personally spearheaded these reforms, dedicated considerable resources and time.

As a demonstration of this commitment, he attended more military events than Hu Jintao to establish closer ties with new leaders and services: he made 53 public appearances between 2012 and 2015 compared to Hu Jintao's 36 appearances from 2004 and 2007<sup>324</sup>. In April 2016, Xi appointed himself commander-in-chief of the Central Military Commission (CMC) Joint Operations Centre. As Tai Ming Cheung, Director of the University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation (IGCC), has observed "No other Chinese Communist Party leader, not even Mao Zedong, has controlled the military to the same extent as Xi does today."<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> In the most serious cases, the CCDI has issued death sentences, which were later converted into death sentences with a two-year reprieve. In such cases, if the convicted person does not commit further crimes during the two-year suspension period, the sentence is automatically commuted to life imprisonment, with no possibility of further reduction or parole.

<sup>322</sup> A RAND report of 2015 highlighted the PLA modernization status and describe it as "incomplete". Among the major weaknesses there was the PLA's antiquated organizational structure, which had experienced few major changes since the 1950s. Key problems included the lack of a permanent joint command and control (C2) structure, inadequate central supervision, which bred corruption and lowered morale, and institutional barriers in the defence research and development (R&D) process. See: Michael S. Chase, Jeffrey Engstrom, Tai Ming Cheung, Kristen Gunness, Scott W. Harold, Susan Puska, and Samuel K. Berkowitz, *China's Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015).

<sup>323</sup> In 2024, the Central Military Commission (CMC) announced the dissolution of the *Strategic Support Force* (SSF), which had been established in 2015 to consolidate information warfare capabilities. Following this reorganization, three new forces were created under the direct authority of the CMC: the *Aerospace Force* (ASF), the *Cyberspace Force* (CSF), and the *Information Support Force* (ISF). The ASF and CSF retain operational functions in their respective space and cyber domains, while the ISF serves an inter-service support role, tasked with developing networks and information systems for all components of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). This new structure, complementing the four traditional services (army, navy, air force, and rocket force), reflects Beijing's goal of advancing "informatization" and laying the groundwork for a future "intelligentized" military. See: International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). "China's New Information Support Force: The People's Liberation Army Announced a Major Restructuring of Its Information-Support Forces. What Does It All Mean?", *IISS Analysis*, April 19, 2024.

<sup>324</sup> Jenny Li. "CHINA UNDER XI JINPING." *Journal of International Affairs* 75, no. 1 (2022), p.263.

<sup>325</sup> Susan L. Shirk, "China in Xi's 'New Era': The Return to Personalistic Rule", *Journal of Democracy*.

It was clear then that with the new president, personalistic rule was back.

In 2018, China approved the removal of the two-term limit on the presidency, allowing Xi Jinping to remain in power<sup>326</sup>. The National People's Congress paved the way for Xi to potentially remain president for life, reminding the one-man rule system that characterized China during the imperial era. The overwhelming support showed the complete control of Xi over Chinese politics as he serves simultaneously as head of state, leader of the Communist Party, and commander-in-chief of the PLA<sup>327</sup>. For more than three decades, the Chinese political system had been run by a process of collective leadership, while the decision-making process was shared with the Politburo Standing Committee. After the death of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping sought to prevent “the overconcentration of power” by introducing fixed terms of office, term limits and a mandatory retirement age. Moves designed to decentralize the authority, bring order to political life and prevent the rise of dictatorial power<sup>328</sup>.

The abolition of the presidential term, while strengthening Xi's ability to implement far-reaching reforms, created what analysts describe as a “single point of failure” (SPOF). In system engineering, a SPOF refers to a critical component whose breakdown causes the entire system to collapse. Applied to authoritarian politics, the concept highlights the fragility of regimes where power is excessively concentrated in one individual. In such a framework, policy errors are less likely to be corrected and dissenting voices are marginalized, exposing China to long-term risks of instability. Without institutional checks and balances, the question inevitably arises: who guards the guardians?

Xi had matched his personal growth with a dramatic intensification of the government's power in society and in economy. Since 2013, CCP has banned media and classroom discussion on several topics associated with the Western values, such as citizens' rights, judicial independence and civil society considered as subversive. Moreover, university professors who are members of the Party must defend CCP in class if anyone criticized it and, it comes without saying that western textbooks are banned, being replaced by versions that emphasize Marxism<sup>329</sup>. The CCP expanded and tightened its censorship apparatus, adopting a harsher approach to control the information. The rationale behind

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<sup>326</sup> In September 2017, the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) approved the initiation of the constitutional revision process, which was subsequently discussed and formalized at the Second Plenum of the 19th Central Committee of the CCP (January 2018). The proposal was then transmitted to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) and submitted to the plenary session of the 13th NPC, which on March 11, 2018, approved the amendment with 2,958 votes in favour, 2 against, 3 abstentions and one invalid vote. The amendment abolished presidential term limits, incorporated “Xi Jinping Thought” into the Constitution, and established the National Supervisory Commission. *See*: “China: 2018 Constitutional Amendment Adopted”, *Library of Congress* (May 18, 2018),

<sup>327</sup> *BBC News*, “China's Xi Allowed to Remain ‘President for Life’ as Term Limits Removed”, March 11, 2018.

<sup>328</sup> Shirk, “China in Xi's ‘New Era’.”

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid*.

this hardline stance can be partially understood through a leaked internal directive from 2012, the *Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere* (commonly known as “Document No. 9”), issued by the Central Party Committee. The directive argued that Western nations were actively attempting to undermine China’s political system and identified several ideological dangers, such as political pluralism and adversarial journalism, that may threaten the CCP’s hold on power. What follows illustrates the CCP’s discourse regarding Western “universal values”:

The goal of espousing “universal values” is to claim that the West’s value system defies time and space, transcends nation and class, and applies to all humanity. This is mainly expressed in the following ways: [The people who espouse universal values] believe Western freedom, democracy, and human rights are universal and eternal. This is evident in their distortion of the Party’s own promotion of democracy, freedom, equality, justice, rule of law, and other such values; their claim that the CCP’s acceptance of universal values is a victory for universal values,” that “the West’s values are the prevailing norm for all human civilization,” that “only when China accepts Western values will it have a future,” and that “Reform and Opening is just a process of gradually accepting universal rights.” Given Western nations’ long-term dominance in the realms of economics, military affairs, science, and technology, these arguments can be confusing and deceptive. The goal [of such slogans] is to obscure the essential differences between the West’s value system and the value system we advocate, ultimately using the West’s value systems to supplant the core values of Socialism<sup>330</sup>.

The release of this document was followed by a comprehensive campaign to strengthen Party oversight over China’s information environment, including measures such as purging politically unreliable academics from universities and reducing the number of news outlets allowed to operate within the country<sup>331</sup>.

On the economic front, Xi has strengthened the position of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), giving them a leading role in economic development campaigns. This model is often referred to as “China, Inc.,” a term coined by Mark Wu of Harvard Law School to describe the unique integration of state, market, and party within China’s economy<sup>332</sup>. In this system, the State has direct control over the SOEs through the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) and operate alongside private enterprises under the strategic guidance of the CCP. The state also maintains

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<sup>330</sup> *Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation: How Much Is a Hardline Party Directive Shaping China’s Current Political Climate?* (November 8, 2013), ChinaFile.

<sup>331</sup> Kieran Green, Andrew Sprott, Ed Francis, Brian Lafferty, Hartley Wise, Molly Henry, Grace Faerber, and Frank Miller, *Censorship Practices of the People’s Republic of China* (Washington, DC: U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, February 20, 2024), p.11.

<sup>332</sup> Mark Wu, *The “China, Inc.” Challenge to Global Trade Governance*, Harvard International Law Journal 57 (2016): 1001–1063, Harvard Public Law Working Paper No. 16-35, May 13, 2016.

significant financial control through major banks such as the Bank of China, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, China Construction Bank, and Agricultural Bank of China, coordinated by entities like Central Huijin Investment Ltd. and regulatory bodies including the National Development and Reform Commission. The CCP ensures overarching control over economic policy by influencing SOE leadership appointments, while private companies are allowed to grow in ways that complement state objectives, creating a hybrid model that blends state planning, party oversight, and market forces to enhance China's domestic development and global economic influence<sup>333</sup>. In 2017, Beijing unveiled plans to broaden and experiment with Party participation by acquiring minority stakes in media and technology firms, including major companies such as Alibaba and Tencent, granting the Party a measure of decision-making authority<sup>334</sup>.

In his vision, Xi was very careful to distinguish the Chinese Dream, rooted in collective values, from the more individualistic American Dream, emphasizing that the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation “is a dream of the whole nation, as well as of every individual,” and that “only when the country does well, and the nation does well, every person can do well”<sup>335</sup>. The concept of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” introduced by Xi was set to profoundly reshape China's policies in the years that followed<sup>336</sup>.

## 5.2 Projecting influence beyond borders

Under Xi, China actively sought to shape international norms and institutions and forcefully asserts its presence on the global stage. He planned to achieve his dream with two-step strategic plan. From 2021 to 2035, China would seek to transform itself into a modern socialist country, through continued economic development. Then, from 2035 to 2049, China would continue a path of national rejuvenation to become what Xi describes as a “global leader in terms of comprehensive national strength and international influence” and reach what is considered his “rightful place” as a great power by 2049, the centennial of the PRC's founding<sup>337</sup>.

His most notable gambit on this front is the Belt and Road Initiative, a modern incarnation of the ancient Silk Road<sup>338</sup>. Launched in 2013, the project included a vast collection of investments

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<sup>333</sup> Federico Giuliani, “Stato, Partito, imprese: come funziona il sistema economico cinese”, *Inside Over*, December 18, 2020.

<sup>334</sup> Elizabeth C. Economy, “China's New Revolution: The Reign of Xi Jinping”, *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 3 (2018), p.64.

<sup>335</sup> *The Third Revolution: Xi Vision*, Council on Foreign Relations.

<sup>336</sup> Xi was not the first Chinese leader to invoke the theme of “rejuvenation”. Deng Xiaoping spoke of the “invigoration of China”, while his successors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao both emphasized the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. In the last thirty years, all Chinese leaders have aimed to build a nation capable of reclaiming its status as a global power.

<sup>337</sup> Li, “China under Xi Jinping,” p. 64.

<sup>338</sup> The name “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) was coined in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, who drew inspiration from the ancient Silk Road, a network of trade routes established during the Han Dynasty some 2,000 years ago that connected

initiatives that were originally devised to link East Asia and Europe through physical infrastructure and then it evolved to encompass Africa and Latin America as well. The concept of BRI connectivity focuses on building new links across continents by strengthening five types of connectivity: infrastructure connectivity; policy coordination; unimpeded trade; financial integration; and people-to-people bonds<sup>339</sup>.

Xi's vision has included creating a vast network railway, energy pipelines, highways and streamlined border crossings, stretching west through the rugged former Soviet republics and south toward Southeast Asian countries. It sought to establish a transport network consisting of a 'Belt', i.e. overland transport connecting China to Europe through Central Asia; and a 'Road', i.e. a Maritime Silk Road (MSR) to southern Europe through the Suez Canal and back to Asia, with a stopover in East Africa<sup>340</sup>. Six international economic corridors form the backbone of the BRI<sup>341</sup>:

1. The China–Mongolia–Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC)
2. The New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB)
3. The China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC)
4. The China–Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CIPEC)
5. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)
6. The Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC)

Examples of such projects include the Peshawar–Karachi motorway in Pakistan, the Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway (the first transnational electrified railway in Africa) and the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway. Oil and gas projects under the BRI include the Datka–Kemin transmission line in Kyrgyzstan and the Karot hydropower station and Port Qasim coal-fired power plant in Pakistan. China emphasized that it could be an alternative to Western development models for developing countries, pointing to its own rapid economic rise as proof of the effectiveness of its approach.

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China to the Mediterranean via Eurasia. The term "Silk Road" itself was first introduced by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, while in China the routes were historically referred to more prosaically as the northern and southern routes.

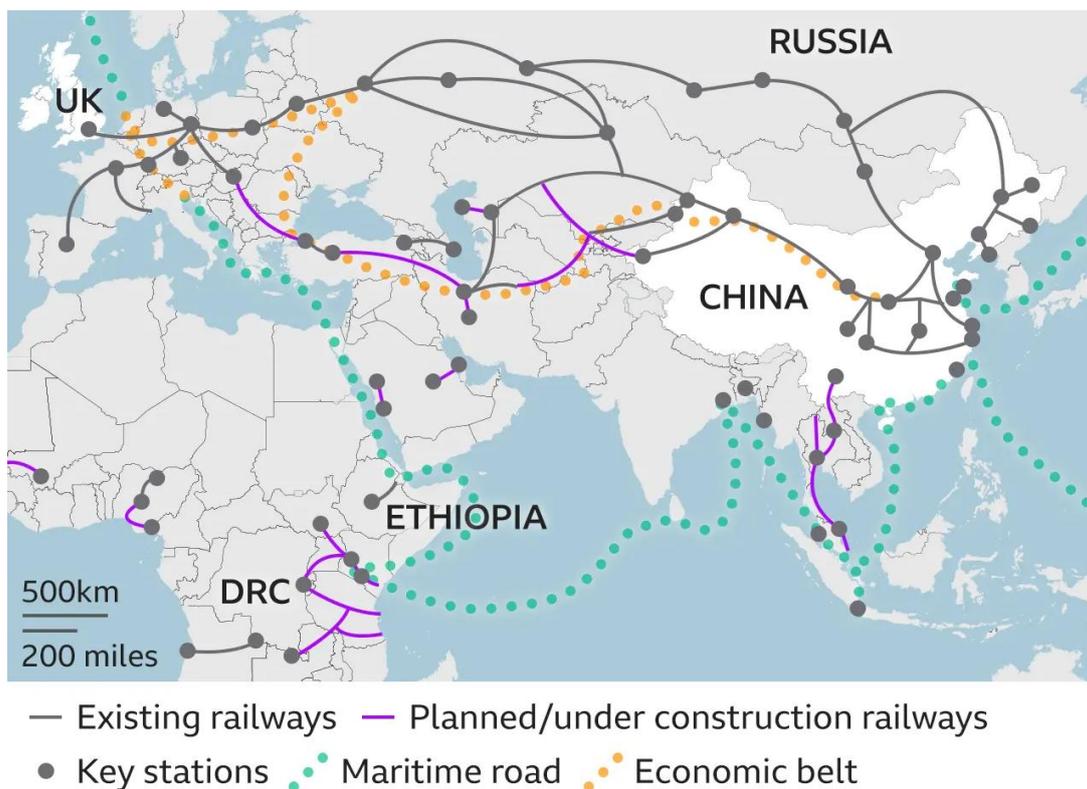
<sup>339</sup> Rebecca Nadin, Elvira Mami, Linda Calabrese, Yue Cao, and Yunnan Chen, "The BRI in Context" in *Ten Years of the Belt and Road Initiative: What Has the BRI Delivered for Connectivity in Developing Countries?* (ODI, 2023).

<sup>340</sup> Nadin et al., "The BRI in Context.", p. 7.

<sup>341</sup> "An Overview of Six Economic Corridors and Six Connectivity Networks", *Belt and Road Portal*, updated April 28, 2019.

In addition, the maritime route of the BRI proposes more direct linkage of Chinese ports with emerging countries and economic regions. Consequently, it comprises three sea routes, or blue economic passages<sup>342</sup>:

7. The China–Indian Ocean–Africa–Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage, linking the CIPEC, CPEC and CCIMEC.
8. The China–Oceania–South Pacific Blue Economic Passage.
9. The China–Northern Europe Blue Economic Passage, through the Arctic Ocean.



Map 2: Belt and Road Initiative Expansion Plan<sup>343</sup>

This opportunity could also be leveraged for economic purposes, as it may serve to promote the internationalization of the RMB (renminbi). China’s expanding trade with foreign partners increases the global demand for the RMB, while a growing network of currency-swap agreements<sup>344</sup> with other

<sup>342</sup> Pelagia Karpathiotaki, Yunhua Tian, Yanping Zhou, and Xiaohao Huang, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Contributions to Connectivity” in *New Dimensions of Connectivity in the Asia-Pacific*, ed. Christopher Findlay and Somkiat Tangkitvanich, 1st ed. (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021), p.44.

<sup>343</sup> Source: Merics, *Belt and Road Initiative Expansion Plan*, published in Tessa Wong, “Belt and Road Initiative: Is China’s trillion-dollar gamble worth it?”, *BBC News*, 17 October 2023.

<sup>344</sup> A currency swap agreement is a bilateral arrangement between two central banks to exchange currencies at a pre-agreed rate for a specified period. These agreements allow participating countries to access foreign currency liquidity, facilitate trade and investment in local currencies, and reduce reliance on third-party currencies such as the U.S. dollar. In the context of China, currency swap lines with other central banks support the international use of the renminbi (RMB) by enabling foreign banks and businesses to conduct cross-border transactions in RMB without needing to convert through another major currency.

central banks facilitates its cross-border use<sup>345</sup>. China benefits from a high degree of trade complementarity with the countries involved in the BRI, which facilitates the use of the RMB as a unit of account and a medium of exchange in bilateral transactions. Moreover, many partner countries have less developed financial markets compared to the Chinese one; the partial opening of China's capital account allows the RMB to also function as a store of value. In this way, the BRI contributes to reinforce the RMB in the international financial system.

Yet, appearances can be deceiving.

The rapid expansion of the BRI has generated several economic and financial concerns among the participating countries. The investment project has been labelled by some Western nations as “debt trap diplomacy”, a development finance scheme that aims to burden countries with some unaffordable loans, making them more vulnerable to Chinese coercion. A notable example is Sri Lanka, which is already in default, unable to meet the interest payments on loans financing ports or power plants. Now citizens must face rising levels of poverty, high unemployment and soaring inflation, amid rising public dissatisfaction<sup>346</sup>.

Economic difficulties have been among the key factors behind the cancellation or the delays in building the infrastructure promised under the BRI. In 2024, the Lowy Institute reported that there has been a significant gap between China's promises and the implementation of the Southeast Asia's development landscape, between what Beijing commits to and what it delivers. This gap amounts to more than \$50 billion in unfulfilled project financing, with projects being cancelled or downsized. Moreover, several corridors have experienced major backlashes<sup>347</sup>. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has been hampered by multiple challenges, including persistent security threats in Balochistan<sup>348</sup>, Pakistan's growing debt burden and delays in infrastructure delivery. Furthermore, many energy projects provided by the CPEC have proved to be financially unsustainable, with the Pakistani government struggling to meet payment obligations<sup>349</sup>.

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<sup>345</sup> Nadin et al., “The BRI in Context.”, p.11.

<sup>346</sup> Mark A. Green, “Debt Distress on the Road to “Belt and Road”, *Wilson Center*, January 16, 2024.

<sup>347</sup> Alexandre Dayant and Grace Stanhope, *Mind the Gap: Ambition versus Delivery in China's BRI Megaprojects in Southeast Asia* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, March 2024).

<sup>348</sup> Security threats in Balochistan are largely linked to the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), which denounces Chinese projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and the port of Gwadar—as exploitative ventures that exclude the local population from economic benefits, aggravating resentment in a region already marked by poverty and marginalization. *See*: Beatrice Nicolini, “Cosa succede in Balochistan?” *Polidemos*, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore.

<sup>349</sup> “Why China's Belt and Road Initiative Is Failing – With No Coherent Plan and No End in Sight”, *VRF Bharat*, June 23, 2025.

These systematic problems led Beijing to become more selective in its investments and focus mainly on green energy projects or high-tech manufacturing, which entail greater potential for financial sustainability and political acceptability.

Following the announcement of the BRI, in 2015 the State Council revealed its plans to make China a leading powerhouse in high tech industries to become a manufacturing superpower by 2049. The initiative, called “Made in China 2025” (MIC) was aimed to create regional Chinese alternatives to foreign goods that it was heavily reliant on, reducing its dependence on foreign companies and positioning itself as a global contender against Western dominance in technologically advanced and high-demand industries. The State Council outlined a three-step strategy to achieve these results by 2049:

1. Making China a strong manufacturing country by 2025
2. Competing with other manufacturing rivals by 2035
3. Transforming China into a manufacturing superpower by 2049

The plan targets ten high-tech and strategic industries that are electric cars, information technology, telecommunications, artificial intelligence, advanced robotics, agricultural technology, aerospace engineering, maritime engineering, biomedicine, and rail infrastructure. By transforming these industries, China sought to capture a larger share of the global market, embed itself within international supply chains, challenge the U.S. technological dominance and drive what it calls the “Fourth Industrial Revolution”. President Xi clearly highlighted that the Chinese technological base needed to “catch up and surpass” the West, reducing China’s reliance on Western technology, while promoting its own alternative high-quality technology to the world<sup>350</sup>.

Most of the goals set out in the MIC25 have been met and the initiative has been successful in advancing China’s self-sufficiency and industrial competitiveness. Sectors such as shipbuilding, electric vehicles (EVs) and renewable energy saw significant transformations. For example, wind and solar capacity saw consistent double-digit year-on-year increases<sup>351</sup>. China emerged as the global

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<sup>350</sup> Siddhant Nair, “Made in China 2025: China’s Quest for Self-Reliance and Market Dominance”, *ORCA—Organisation for Research on China and Asia*, August 30, 2022.

<sup>351</sup> According to IEA data, China’s renewable electricity generation has grown dramatically since 2000, with modern renewables accounting for 30.2% of total electricity generation in 2022, up 82% from 2000. In 2023, hydroelectric power represented 46.6% of non-combustible renewable electricity generation, wind power 32.1%, and solar photovoltaic 21.2%. The rapid expansion of wind and solar capacity has positioned China as a global leader in these sectors, reflecting significant investment in technology, large-scale deployment, and the creation of integrated industrial ecosystems around renewable energy. *See*: International Energy Agency (IEA), *Energy Transitions Indicators: Renewable Electricity Generation in China*.

leader in shipbuilding, it stands as the largest exporter of photovoltaic (PV) solar panels<sup>352</sup>, and it has made rapid advances in the production and development of electric vehicles, establishing comprehensive industrial ecosystems around these technologies. According to the latest data, 60-70% of the targets on the original list were met: there are still some obstacles in some areas, or some targets have shifted into other goals, but China continues to move along the right path<sup>353</sup>.

The country has not yet reached its targets in aerospace, high-end robots and the growth rate of manufacturing value-added output. Even with substantial investment, China continues to depend on foreign technology for advanced semiconductors and essential high-end components. Domestic progress in biopharmaceuticals and next-generation aircraft has fallen short of expectations. However, China's targets are generally seen as a direction rather than an actual figure to be achieved by a specific date. Even at a slower pace, China has transformed itself over the last decade to drive 29% of global manufacturing value added, almost the same as the U.S. and Europe combined<sup>354</sup>.

To continue the Made in China 2025's trajectory, China officially launched the China Standards 2035 strategy in 2018, aiming to provide guidance for the government in leading Chinese tech companies to set global standards for emerging technologies, such as 5G, the Internet of Things (IoT) and the artificial intelligence<sup>355</sup>. This strategy represents a crucial step forward in reducing dependence on foreign technology and increasing China's influence in defining global technical standards. The project was further implemented with the introduction of the National Standardization Development Outline (NSD)<sup>356</sup>, the first official national document providing a clear vision for improving technical capabilities of Chinese companies and promoting technological standardization in the coming years.

To translate this vision into concrete actions, on July 8, 2022, the State Administration for Market Supervision (SAMR), together with other 16 departments, issued the National Standardization Development Action Plan, detailing sector-specific roadmaps, outlining the steps to be taken by the end of 2023 to implement the objectives of the NSD Outline. By connecting this Action Plan to the broader China Standards 2035 strategy, China is effectively translating long-term ambitions into

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<sup>352</sup> Global solar PV manufacturing capacity has increasingly moved from Europe, Japan and the United States to China over the last decade. China has invested over \$50 billion in new PV supply capacity (ten times more than Europe) and created more than 300,000 manufacturing jobs across the solar PV value chain since 2011. Today, China's share in all the manufacturing stages of solar panels (such as polysilicon, ingots, wafers, cells and modules) exceeds 80%. See: International Energy Agency (IEA), *Solar PV Global Supply Chains: Executive Summary*.

<sup>353</sup> "Made in China 2025: Looking at a Decade of China's Self-Sufficiency Drive", *CKGSB Knowledge*, June 26, 2025.

<sup>354</sup> Evelyn Cheng, "Where 'Made in China 2025' Missed the Mark", *CNBC*, April 17, 2025.

<sup>355</sup> Yi Wu, "China Standards 2035 Strategy: Recent Developments and Implications for Foreign Companies", *China Briefing*, July 26, 2022.

<sup>356</sup> Xinhua News Agency. *The Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and the State Council Publish the "National Standardization Development Outline."* October 10, 2021. Translated by Etcetera Language Group, Inc., edited by Ben Murphy. Washington, DC: Center for Security and Emerging Technology (CSET), November 8, 2021.

measurable milestones, reinforcing its goal of global leadership in both technological and economic arenas<sup>357</sup>.

Artificial intelligence is one of the Chinese government's strategic priorities, with the goal of becoming the world leader in this field by 2030. Thanks to vast data availability and multi-billion-dollar investments, China is rapidly closing the gap with the United States in the development of advanced AI models, as evidenced by the DeepSeek case. This artificial intelligence startup has quickly become a global symbol of Chinese technological progress against the American system such as GPT-4, Claude or Gemini, and is regarded as a cheaper and more efficient AI than its American counterparts. What made DeepSeek particularly remarkable was not just its quality, but its cost-efficiency, since it uses fewer technological resources than those required by its competitors. It took 2.8 million GPU hours on Nvidia H800 chips to train the Chinese system, corresponding to an estimated compute cost of around \$5.5-6 million, a fraction of the hundreds of millions of dollars believed to be necessary for models of comparable ability in the United States<sup>358</sup>. This result challenges the prevailing assumption that frontier AI requires massive, centralized infrastructure and it signals that China can produce cutting-edge AI systems despite U.S. export controls on advanced semiconductors.

Despite these successes, there are still sectors where China struggles to compete with the West. Advanced semiconductors remain a weak point: although the country has made progress in developing 7-nanometer chips, it still lags the production capabilities of companies such as TSMC and Samsung, which dominate 5-nanometer chip production and beyond. Moreover, export restrictions, tariffs and the blocking of foreign tech transfer that the Chinese government had to face during the past years complicate China's drive under MIC25. Both Europe and United States tried to limit the pressing Chinese technological advancement through domestic policies such as the CHIPS Act in U.S. and the European Chips Act.

The Biden administration signed into law the Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors (CHIPS) and Science Act in 2022, allocating more than \$53 billion in federal incentives and \$24 billion in tax credits to boost domestic semiconductor manufacturing, alongside \$200 billion in long-term R&D investments in fields such as artificial intelligence. Europe passed a similar policy, the

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<sup>357</sup> Wu, "China Standards 2035 Strategy."

<sup>358</sup> Charles Thibout, "*The Emergence of a Chinese AI Superpower? Reflections on the Deepseek Case*", IRIS (Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques), February 3, 2025.

European Chips Act, adopted in 2023, that provided a budget of €43 billion, set the goal of doubling Europe's share of global chip production from 10% to 20% by 2030<sup>359</sup>.

Together, these measures show how MIC25, far from being a purely domestic program, provoked a defensive industrial response that risks fragmenting global value chains and reinforcing the technological rivalry between China and the West.

### **5.3 Chinese modern Empire**

China's overseas investments have expanded rapidly over the past two decades, reshaping global economic and geopolitical dynamics. Driven by projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative and a broader vision of strategic expansion, Chinese capital has flowed to nearly every continent. Chinese companies are investing in new regions like Africa or Latin America, moving away from traditional destinations like North America or Europe. These regions have become focal points of Beijing's engagement, fostering deep economic ties, infrastructure development, and bilateral cooperation that extend beyond trade to include technology, energy, and industrial projects.

According to the *Global Times*<sup>360</sup>, China remained a major global leader in outward foreign direct investment (OFDI)<sup>361</sup> in 2024, with flows reaching \$192.2 billion, an 8.4% increase compared to the previous year. This marks thirteen consecutive years in the global top three and nine straight years in which China's share of global OFDI has exceeded 10%. China's increasingly diversified investments continue to generate broad economic benefits, strengthening its role in the global economy. Chinese investors demonstrated a global reach, operating in more than 80% of countries and regions. As of the end of 2024, they had set up 52,000 overseas enterprises in 190 countries and regions, including 19,000 in BRI partner countries.

These developments are viewed as both opportunities and challenges from the American point of view, as evidenced by the completely different approaches of the Obama and Trump administrations following the announcement of the BRI.

The proposal of the BRI in 2013 was received coldly by the Obama administration, which didn't hold any congressional hearing to deal with this initiative or take any practical measures. He chose a policy

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<sup>359</sup> Michelle Kurilla, "What Is the CHIPS Act?", *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 29, 2024.

<sup>360</sup> *Global Times*, "China's Outward FDI Hits \$192.2b in 2024, Ranking Third Globally for 13 Years Running", September 8, 2025.

<sup>361</sup> Outward Foreign Direct Investment (OFDI) refers to capital flows originating from one country and directed toward productive, commercial, or financial activities abroad. It encompasses the investments made by companies or institutions of a country outside its national borders, through a) acquisitions or mergers with foreign companies; b) creation of new enterprises (greenfield investments); c) establishment of subsidiaries or joint ventures abroad, d) reinvestment of profits generated by existing overseas operations. The purpose of OFDI may include accessing new markets, securing natural resources, acquiring technology and expertise, or integrating into global value chains.

of negligence and the lack of references to BRI in his policy documents regarding Sino-American ties signalled the inertial qualities of Obama's strategic policies. On the other hand, once Donald Trump assumed power, he focused on the strategic rivalry in U.S.-China relations and has openly questioned the BRI's viability, arguing that it might present the U.S. with significant obstacles in both economic and geopolitical domains<sup>362</sup>.

For a short period, Trump's stance towards the BRI was positive and in a White House press conference in May 2017, a spokesperson said that the U.S. was "considering cooperation under the BRI as it is a 'major trade initiative' and 'obviously, trade is a major issue for us'"<sup>363</sup>. During a meeting with the PRC State Councillor Yang Jiechi, Trump reportedly said the U.S. "is willing to conduct cooperation in relevant projects of the BRI"<sup>364</sup>. However, it did not take long for the administration to embrace a clear, public and negative position toward the massive Chinese project. In October 2017, the then Secretary of Defense James Mattis stated during a U.S. Senate hearing about the BRI initiative that "there are many belts and roads, and no one nation should put itself into a position of dictating 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR)"<sup>365</sup>. This was further underscored by the strong criticism expressed by Rex Tillerson, former U.S. Secretary of State, who, echoing Mattis, remarked that "China has One Belt, One Road; the United States and the global economy have many belts and many roads, and no single country determines the belt or the road"<sup>366</sup>.

The risks connected with the large investment infrastructure promoted by the BRI were also highlighted in the 2017 National Security Strategy<sup>367</sup>:

China and Russia target their investments in the developing world to expand influence and gain competitive advantages against the United States. China is investing billions of dollars in infrastructure across the globe.

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<sup>362</sup> Behzad Abdollahpour, Maziar Mozaffari-Falarti, and Foad Izadi, "China's Belt and Road Initiative amid Obama's Negligence and Trump's Pessimism", *The World of the Orient* 2022, no. 3 (October 2022), p.152.

<sup>363</sup> Jean-Marc F. Blanchard, "The United States-China Rivalry and the BRI", *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations* 21, no. 2 (2021), p.293.

<sup>364</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "US President Donald Trump Meets with Yang Jiechi," updated June 23, 2017.

<sup>365</sup> U.S. Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *Political and Security Situation in Afghanistan: Hearing Before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate*, October 3, 2017 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2017), p. 61.

<sup>366</sup> Rex Tillerson, "Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century: An Address by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson", *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, October 18, 2017.

<sup>367</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017), p.38.

Considering these issues, the Trump administration adopted alternatives such as the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act<sup>368</sup> which came into effect in October 2018<sup>369</sup>. It established the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (IDFC), the country's primary agency for financial private investment in developing nations and it was designed to modernize and expand the functions of the former Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC)<sup>370</sup>. The IDFC can mobilize up to \$60 billion through loans, with the mission not only to promote economic growth in partner countries but also to provide transparent and sustainable alternative to Chinese BRI financing<sup>371</sup>. With this project, Washington wanted to protect its strategic interests, concerned also by the strategic ramifications of Chinese influence in those areas where the U.S. has historically close diplomatic and economic ties.

China's global strategy extends beyond its domestic modernization plans: through massive investments in infrastructure, energy, and digital networks abroad, Beijing is positioning itself as an alternative development partner to the West. In this context, two emblematic cases deserve particular attention: Africa and Latin America. In both regions, Chinese investments have taken on a prominent role not only because of their growing volume, but above all due to the strategic implications they carry at the economic and geopolitical level.

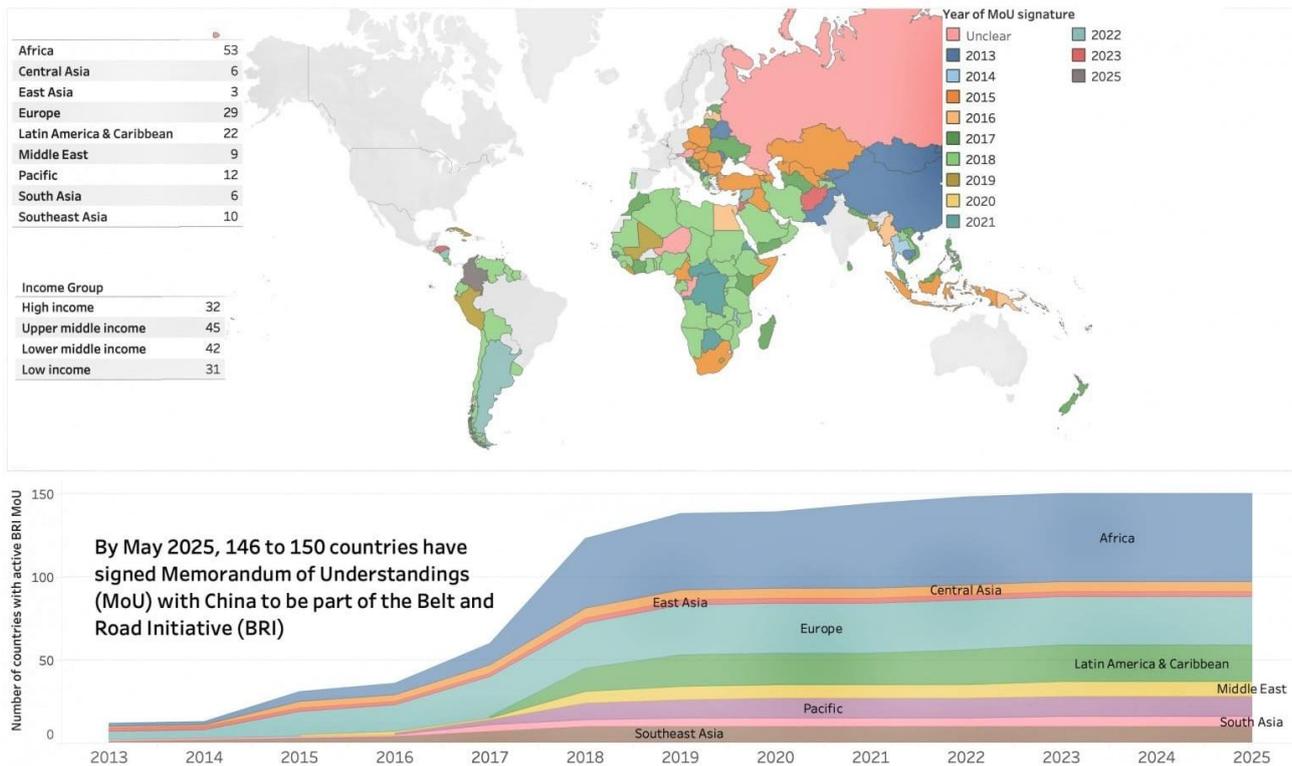
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<sup>368</sup> *Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act of 2018*, Pub. L. No. 115-254, Division F, 132 Stat. 3485 (2018).

<sup>369</sup> Blanchard, "The United States–China Rivalry and the BRI", p.297.

<sup>370</sup> Founded in 1971, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) was a U.S. government organization that supported American private investment in developing nations by offering loan guarantees, political risk insurance, and funding. The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), established under the BUILD Act, took its place in 2018. It has more financial resources and a wider range of tools to compete with projects like China's Belt and Road.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*



Map 3: Current countries of the Belt and Road Initiative<sup>372</sup>

### 5.3.1 Africa

The engagement of the PRC with Africa is not a new development, but it dates to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. It gained prominence in the early 2000s due to reciprocal needs: Africa required infrastructure, which China could provide, while China sought mineral resources abundant in Africa. The Two Markets, Two Resources Policy emerged as a practical application of the “Going Global” (Go Out) strategy, promoted under Jiang Zemin, providing a framework for China’s targeted engagement with the continent<sup>373</sup>. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can be seen as an extension and globalization of the Go Out Policy, used to promote large-scale infrastructure projects, financial cooperation, and connectivity across multiple sectors, particularly energy and transport, thereby supporting African development while advancing China’s broader international economic and geopolitical objectives.

<sup>372</sup> Green Finance & Development Center, “Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)”.

<sup>373</sup> During the latter part of Jiang Zemin’s tenure as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the “Going Out” policy was conceived. Jiang promoted the involvement of Chinese businesses in international investment and trade. In internal addresses to CPC members from 1992 to 1996, he highlighted the importance of foreign investment and specifically encouraged the expansion of Chinese firms abroad. At the 15th Party Congress and the National Foreign Investment Work Conference the following year, Jiang emphasized that the policy constituted a new phase in China’s opening strategy, urging the creation of globally competitive Chinese enterprises. See: Rahul Karan Reddy, “China’s Going Global Policy: A Prelude to the BRI”, ORF Center for Asia (ORCASIA).

However, these mega-BRI projects have come with hefty price tags that have contributed to compounding the debt stress of several African nations<sup>374</sup>.

In January 2015, China and the African Union signed a memorandum of understanding<sup>375</sup> to cooperate on industrialization infrastructure and connect 53 African states with high-speed railways, aviation, and highways. This memorandum complemented and aligned with Agenda 2063; the long-term strategic framework of the African Union (AU) aimed at transforming Africa into a prosperous, integrated and resilient continent by the year 2063. Adopted in 2013, it outlined a comprehensive plan for social, economic, political and cultural development across the continent<sup>376</sup>. Massive national and regional projects worth billions of dollars, mostly in the transport and energy sectors, began to pop up across the continent.

Unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese lenders have accepted raw materials as a form of repayment on infrastructure loans: the so-called resources-for-infrastructure (RFI) deals. Examples of RFI deals include Angola's oil-backed Chinese credit lines and Ghana's bauxite-for-infrastructure deal with Sinohydro, a hydropower engineering and construction state-owned enterprise. RFI deals play to many African countries' comparative advantage as resource suppliers. However, because of the volatility of global markets, resource profits can fluctuate widely, making it difficult to repay Chinese debt (as it was the case with Angola)<sup>377</sup>.

China's strong diplomatic relationships with Africa support Beijing's broader political objective of increasing its influence among developing countries, often referred to as the Global South. Through these ties, China seeks access to natural resources and other inputs for its domestic manufacturing industry, sometimes enabling it to reduce dependence on volatile international commodity markets.

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<sup>374</sup> Bagwandeem, Mandira. "Changing Realities: China-Africa Infrastructure Development." *Asia Policy* 17, no. 3 (2022), p. 18.

<sup>375</sup> China Daily, "China, African Union Commission Sign Memorandum of Cooperation," *National Development and Reform Commission*, December 15, 2021.

<sup>376</sup> The goals outlined in the Agenda comprise: a) A prosperous Africa, based on inclusive growth and sustainable development; b) An integrated continent politically united and based on the ideals of Pan Africanism and the vision of African renaissance; c) An Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law; d) A peaceful and secure Africa; e) Africa with strong cultural identity, common heritage, values and ethics; f) An Africa whose developments is people driven, relying on the potential offered by African people, especially its women and youth, and caring children; g) An Africa as a strong, united, resilient and influential global player and partner. See: African Union, *2025 Theme of the Year: "2025 Year of Reparations: Justice for Africans & People of African Descent through Reparations. Goals & Priority Areas of Agenda 2063"*.

<sup>377</sup> China is also prepared to use the money made from infrastructure constructed in China as a form of payback to guarantee repayment. For example, in February 2022, AidData revealed that the Export-Import Bank of China demanded that "all revenue generated by the [airport] be used to repay the loan on a priority basis for 20 years". See: Rachel Bernstein, Cobus van Staden, Mandira Bagwandeem, Ovigwe Eguegu, Bulelani Jili, Obert Hodzi, Chiponda Chimbelu, and Roukaya Kasenally, "Expanding Engagement: Perspectives on the Africa-China Relationship," *Asia Policy* 17, no. 3 (July 2022), p.23.

Beijing also aims to diversify its foreign markets, ensuring economic resilience and continued market access in the face of potential trade restrictions or policies from Western countries.

Chinese state-owned enterprises invested largely in North Africa. In Algeria, the group Jingdong Steel announced its plans to invest \$500 million in a new steel plant in the Draa Lhaja industrial zone, aiming to use 80% local raw materials to produce 500.000 tons of steel sheets and pipes for the building and public-works sector and create 3.000 jobs. In this case, half of the production was intended to serve the Algerian market, while the rest will be exported. Additional projects had also been launched in Egypt, thanks to the China State Construction Engineering Corporation, which continued to construct Egypt's New Administrative Capital near Cairo, a \$3.8 billion project that will reportedly house more than six million people when complete<sup>378</sup>. In August, African Development Bank President Akinwumi Adesina praised several Chinese companies for their advancements on two significant infrastructure initiatives in Dodoma, Tanzania's capital: the Msalato International Airport and the 112.3-kilometer Dodoma City Outer Ring Road<sup>379</sup>.

In parallel with its economic initiatives, China has increasingly focused on the security sector in African countries, demonstrating a multifaceted approach to its engagement on the continent. Beijing has forged closer bilateral relationships with many military and security forces in Africa, institutionalizing multilateral security cooperation with the African Union through FOCAC (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation)<sup>380</sup>.

After the Cold War the Western presence in Africa diminished, particularly in terms of direct investment and unconditional aid, while remaining focused on governance and human rights conditionalities. This created space for China, which strengthened ties with African states by offering loans and development assistance with fewer political conditions. Unlike the West, which often tied aid to democratic reforms and human rights, China emphasized sovereignty and non-interference<sup>381</sup>.

However, there is also another side to the coin.

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<sup>378</sup> Other investments regard the building of a large-scale facility for lithium-ion battery electrolytes in the Jorf Lasfar industrial zone in Morocco, expecting to produce one hundred fifty tons annually of finished products for the global battery market.

<sup>379</sup> Nathan Schoonover, "China in Africa: June 2025", *Foreign Affairs*, Council on Foreign Relations, August 19, 2025.

<sup>380</sup> A prominent case is Kenya, which receives military aid from China and acquires Chinese weapon systems. Between 2000 and 2017, Kenya received \$7.9 million worth of military aid from China as donations. Between 2000 and 2023, Kenya bought 92 armoured personnel carriers, nine helicopters, and six light transport aircraft from China. In addition, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) hospital ship, Peace Ark, has visited Kenya as part of Chinese military aid. The PLAN visited the Mombasa port in 2010, 2014, and 2019. See: Oluwatimilehin Sotubo and Cortez A. Cooper III, *Chinese Engagement with Africa: A RAND Research Primer* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, July 15, 2025), p.23.

<sup>381</sup> Ivi, p.31.

Beyond the problem of economic dependency, criticisms argue that Chinese presence in Africa could be compared to a form of neocolonialism, an indirect form of control exerted by powerful countries that use, for their advantages, economic and political power to exploit the labour and resources of the “colonised countries”. This dynamic is manifested through opaque loan structures and economic dependency that bind African economies tightly to Chinese interests. Several African countries, such as Zambia and Algeria, have already encountered difficulties with BRI investments, generating some concerns that the Belt and Road Initiative is creating a long-term vulnerability rather than sustainable development<sup>382</sup>. Indeed, after years of borrowing heavily from Chinese lenders to fund infrastructure, Zambia experienced default, with about one-third of its external debt owed to China. Similarly, Angola has relied on oil-backed loans from Beijing worth more than \$40 billion, repaying them with crude shipments; while these agreements have supported post-war reconstruction, they have also made Angola structurally dependent on China as its main oil buyer and creditor<sup>383</sup>.

This “win-win” narrative masks asymmetries of power, in which only the Chinese part secures political influence and economic leverage, while African states assume disproportionate financial and social risks.

### **5.3.2 Latin America**

The strategic logic behind China’s engagement in Africa is mirrored in Latin America: through large-scale investments in mining, energy, and transport infrastructure, China not only secures access to key resources but also cultivates long-term influence in regions traditionally under U.S. sway. China’s role in Latin America and the Caribbean has grown rapidly since the turn of the century, promising economic opportunity but also raising concerns over Beijing’s influence.

In May 2025, China hosted Latin American and Caribbean leaders at a summit in Beijing, where Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled a five-pillar plan that will guide China’s engagement with 33 countries in the region over the next three years. Under the Development pillar, aligned with China’s Global Development Initiative, Beijing offered a \$9 billion credit line to support regional infrastructure, poverty reduction, and digital transformation.

The United States and its allies fear that China is using these relationships to pursue its geopolitical goals. While Biden saw China as a “strategic competitor” in the region, the re-election of Donald Trump has marked a shift in U.S. policy toward Latin America, increasing aggressive economic

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<sup>382</sup> Marcus Vinicius de Freitas, “The Impact of Chinese Investments in Africa: Neocolonialism or Cooperation?”, *Policy Center for the New South*, August 2, 2023.

<sup>383</sup> Sumie Yoshikawa, “China and Angola: From the Pioneering ‘Angolan Model’ to a ‘New’ Relationship”, *Analysis from the East-West Center*, vol. 28, no. 170 (November 2024), p.4.

measures that could push countries further toward China. In 2000, the Chinese market accounted for less than 2% of Latin America's exports, but China's rapid growth and resulting demand drove the region's subsequent commodities boom. Over the next eight years, trade grew at an annual rate of 31%, and even during the financial crisis in 2009 the dynamism remained unabated<sup>384</sup>. By 2021, trade exceeded \$450 billion, a figure which grew to a record \$518 billion in 2024, according to Chinese state media, and some economists predict that it could exceed \$700 billion by 2035<sup>385</sup>.

Soybeans and other vegetables, animal products, copper, gasoline, oil, and other raw commodities required by China to fuel its industrial development are among Latin America's top exports to China. In exchange, the region primarily imports manufactured items with higher added value; some analysts claim that this trade has caused local industries to be undercut by cheaper. As of 2024, Beijing has signed free trade agreements with Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Peru<sup>386</sup>.

Chinese outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) and loans also play a major role in strengthening ties with Latin America. In 2024, China's OFDI in the region amounted to roughly \$8.5 billion, or approximately 6% of China's total OFDI. Meanwhile, the state-owned China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China are among the region's leading lenders; since 2005, they have loaned more than \$120 billion to Latin American and Caribbean<sup>387</sup> countries and state-owned enterprises, often in exchange for oil and used to fund energy and infrastructure projects<sup>388</sup>.

The interests in the region for China are far more complicated. The soft power exercised through economic and political ties has helped Beijing to build political goodwill with local governments and present itself as a viable alternative partner to the United States and Europe, mirroring Africa's situation.

Among the various areas of cooperation, the energy sector has emerged as the most dynamic field in which collaboration between China and Latin America has expanded in recent years. These endeavours underscore the strategic importance of the region's natural resources for China's long-term energy security, while simultaneously positioning Latin America as a critical partner in Beijing's

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<sup>384</sup> Inter-American Development Bank 2011. *Ten Years After the Take-off: Taking Stock of China-Latin America and the Caribbean Economic Relations*.

<sup>385</sup> China Daily, "Xi: Ties with Latin America to Strengthen", *National Development and Reform Commission*, January 31, 2023.

<sup>386</sup> Shannon K. O'Neil, "Latin America Shouldn't Be a Pawn in U.S.-China Rivalry," *Foreign Affairs*, Latin America Studies Program, September 24, 2021.

<sup>387</sup> Enrique Dussel Peters, *Monitor of Chinese OFDI in Latin America and the Caribbean 2025* (Mexico City: National Autonomous University of Mexico, March 2025).

<sup>388</sup> Venezuela is by far the biggest borrower; it has received nearly \$60 billion worth of Chinese state loans, mostly relating to energy and infrastructure. That is nearly double the amount for the second-largest borrower, Brazil. Additionally, China is a nonborrowing, voting member of the Inter-American Development Bank and the Caribbean Development Bank.

pursuit of a diversified and sustainable energy portfolio<sup>389</sup>. The Chinese state-owned firm PowerChina, for example, has had projects underway in several Latin American countries since 2022. In 2023, China paid around \$3 billion to purchase two Peruvian electricity suppliers from Italy's biggest utility company, garnering what some experts have called a near monopoly on Peru's electricity distribution. China has also financed major solar and wind projects, including Latin America's largest solar facility in Jujuy, Argentina, and the Punta Sierra wind farm in Coquimbo, Chile<sup>390</sup>. Lastly, in late 2024, China has opened a new mega port in Peru, opening doors for more Chinese investment in South America.

U.S. policymakers and military officials have raised concerns about China's growing presence in Latin America even as Washington remains focused elsewhere, especially on major ongoing conflicts in Europe and the Middle East. During his first term in office, President Trump adopted a tougher stance than his predecessors by imposing sanctions on several countries, including Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, and slashed aid to others, most prominent being the so-called Northern Triangle countries in Central America. These developments brought certain governments closer to China, a trend that was further reinforced by the first Trump administration's retreat from trade engagement with the region, including its withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

President Biden had long argued that the United States should renew its leadership role in the region to counter a rising China. Launching the Build Back Better World (B3W) in 2021 with his Group of Seven (G7) counterparts, he aimed to counter China's BRI by developing infrastructure in low and middle-income countries, including in Latin America. However, the Biden administration committed only \$6 million to B3W in its first year, later renamed the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment. Since the beginning of 2025, with Trump's second term in office, he has once again pursued an approach closely resembling that of his first administration, marked by strong opposition toward China. He has repeatedly alleged that China secretly controls the Panama Canal, despite Panamanian ownership, and has threatened to retake the waterway, which the United States handed over to Panama in 1999. The Trump administration argues that China could use those ports to turn the Panama Canal into a "choke point" against the U.S.<sup>391</sup>

For LAC (Latin America and Caribbean) countries, the allure of Chinese investment and infrastructure is undeniable. However, there are several matters behind this engagement. First, the trade balance remains highly asymmetric: Latin America exports are based on raw commodities that

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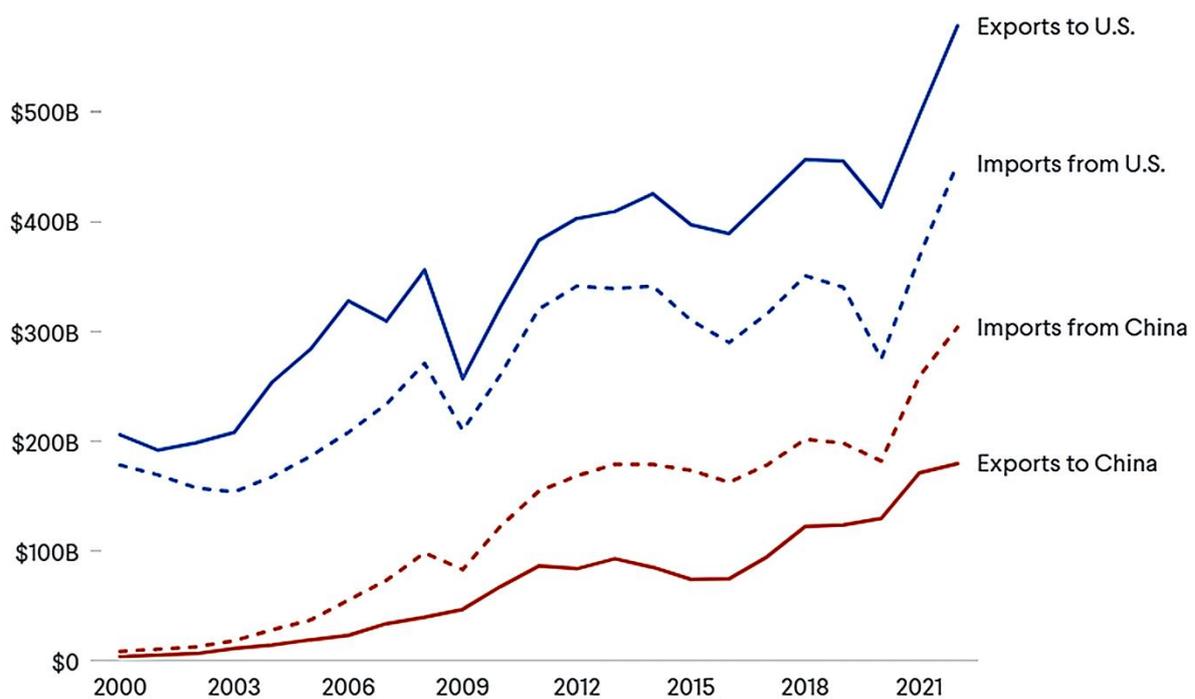
<sup>389</sup> Diana Roy, "China's Growing Influence in Latin America", *Council on Foreign Relations*.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>391</sup> Mithil Aggarwal, "Trump Says China Controls the Panama Canal—but Here's How It Really Works", *NBC News*, January 23, 2025.

are then transformed in final goods in China, a pattern that is slowing down industrialization in the region. Second, Chinese loans are often collateralized by natural resources, increasing the vulnerability to debt crises and reducing governments’ fiscal flexibility. Third, the geopolitical implications are significant, with Washington repeatedly voicing its unease at the prospect of a major Chinese influence so close to the American territory. Lastly, Chinese-backed projects have consistently encountered local resistance, as communities protest environmental degradation or lack of consultation, paving the way for the “NIMBY” (Not In My Back Yard) response. Locals accept the need for infrastructure and energy development in principle but reject its implementation in their own territories, particularly when it is seen as serving foreign rather than local interests.

These trade-offs are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. The challenge for these governments lies in balancing the immediate benefits of Chinese partnership with the long-term risks of dependency, while managing Washington concerns<sup>392</sup>.



Graphic 2: Latin America's trade in goods<sup>393</sup>

<sup>392</sup> Leland Lazarus, “How China Is Seeking Dominance in Latin America”, *Americas Quarterly*, June 10, 2025.

<sup>393</sup> World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), *Trade Data for Latin America*, accessed via Diana Roy, “China’s Growing Influence in Latin America”, June 6, 2025.

## 5.4 What comes after Xi Jinping?

The question of political succession in China has become increasingly critical under the leadership of Xi Jinping. Historically, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sought to institutionalize leadership transitions to prevent instability and avoid the return of a lifelong dictatorship. After the excesses of Mao's personal rule, Deng Xiaoping promoted the principle of "rule by law, not by man" and introduced a set of informal but effective mechanisms to ensure orderly succession. Among them was *gedai zhiding* ("choosing one's successor's successor"), which allowed a leader not only to influence the selection of their immediate replacement but also of the following generation, thereby fostering continuity. Deng also reinforced unofficial term limits and age restrictions, most notably the "seven up, eight down" rule<sup>394</sup>, to promote generational turnover. These norms functioned relatively well, producing smooth transitions, such as from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, and from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping. However, Xi's centralization of authority, removal of term limits, and sidelining of potential rivals eroded these conventions, generating significant uncertainty about the post-Xi era.

Contrary to initial expectations of liberal reform, Xi quickly moved to consolidate personal authority. His anti-corruption campaign targeted both senior and junior officials alike and it functioned primarily as a tool to eliminate rivals and enforce loyalty. Two key possible successors, Bo Xilai and Sun Zhengcai, were imprisoned for life<sup>395</sup>. At the same time, Xi consolidated his power in 2018, with the abolition of presidential term limits, effectively allowing him to rule indefinitely. However, the absence of a clear succession plan mirrors patterns seen in other personalist regimes, such as the Soviet Union under Stalin<sup>396</sup>. Authoritarian systems almost inevitably face crises of succession.

Moving through his twelfth year at the helm of China's ruling Communist Party, speculation about his eventual successor, and what a sudden departure might mean, has become increasingly difficult to ignore. Now 72 years old, and with no clear heir apparent, Xi retains an unrelenting grip on power. Rumours of Xi's declining health have added concerns about his succession. In Xi's recent visits

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<sup>394</sup> "Seven up, eight down" is an informal rule of thumb in Chinese elite politics that refers to age limits for promotion. Officials aged 67 or younger at the time of a Party Congress may still be promoted ("up"), while those aged 68 or older are expected to retire ("down"). Though never codified, it has shaped leadership transitions since the 1990s, though Xi Jinping has increasingly bent or ignored this convention.

<sup>395</sup> Bo Xilai, former Party Secretary of Chongqing and member of the Politburo, was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2013 for corruption, embezzlement, and abuse of power, following the acceptance of bribes and misuse of his political position. Sun Zhengcai, former Politburo member and Party Secretary of Chongqing, considered a rising political star, was convicted of taking more than 170 million yuan (\$27 million) in bribes, directly or through third parties. *See*: Lily Kuo, "China Sentences Former Political Rising Star to Life in Prison for Corruption", *The Guardian*, May 8, 2018.

<sup>396</sup> Stalin's refusal to set up a clear succession plan created chaos when he died in 1953. A collective leadership (including Malenkov, Beria, Molotov, and later Khrushchev) scrambled to fill the vacuum, leading to intense rivalries, purges, and backroom manoeuvring. Nikita Khrushchev was able to consolidate his power after few years, but only after Beria was arrested and executed, and Malenkov sidelined. Stalin's death showed how personalist rule without succession planning can unleash instability, elite infighting, and abrupt shifts in policy direction, even in a tightly controlled authoritarian system.

to Russia, foreign media captured moments where his head appeared to shake uncontrollably. His constant tilting of his head to the left has led many to suspect that he may have suffered a serious illness, such as a stroke. Furthermore, a scar on Xi's head, visible in a photo from August 2024, further supports claims of health issues. These physical signs, combined with Xi's temporary disappearance from public view, have led some to argue that his grip on power is weakening<sup>397</sup>.

Looking at the future, the most important years ahead for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are 2027, when the 21<sup>st</sup> Party Congress convenes; 2032, when the 22<sup>nd</sup> Party Congress meets; and 2035, in which Xi is expected to achieve the “socialist modernization”. The defining question at the next Party Congress in 2027 will be whether Xi identifies an heir-apparent rather than whether he will step down. Another, somewhat less important year is 2029, which will mark the 80th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Born in 1953, Xi will be 74 in 2027 and 79 in 2032. Extending the hypothetical considerations, Xi will be 82 in 2035, the age at which Mao Zedong died, making it entirely possible that he will remain in office into the mid-2030s. However, by his fifth term beginning in 2032, he will surely need to have a clear successor in place.

Xi's dilemma is choosing someone loyal enough to preserve his legacy, but also strong enough to withstand the Communist Party's internal squabbles. But as Xi delays in choosing a successor, the risk of internal chaos increases.

The possible candidate could come from the “top seven”, the members of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC). This is the most elite decision-making body of China’s Communist Party, and it is formed by the seven men who decide the country’s path. On a day-to-day basis the PBSC has ultimate responsibility for and administrative authority over all policy domains, and its members approve personnel appointments across China. The composition of the PBSC is one of the most important indicators of the power of a General Secretary: the more loyalists he can place in the PBSC, the more powerful his position<sup>398</sup>. However, the current members are already relatively elderly. In 2032, when Xi could leave power, many of them will be close to 70 years old, making a long continuity of government impossible<sup>399</sup>.

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<sup>397</sup> Jennifer Zeng, “Xi Jinping, Power Struggles and Successor Lists in the CCP”, *Japan Forward*, May 26, 2025.

<sup>398</sup> *China Open Source Observatory*, “PBSC”.

<sup>399</sup> One possible candidate is Li Qiang, the former Shanghai party chief and Mr Xi confidant, who was promoted as number two in the party hierarchy. Since becoming premier in March 2023, he has chaired eight State Council plenary meetings in just two years, matching the number held during any five-year term by both of his two predecessors, Wen Jiabao (2003-2013) and Li Keqiang. These meetings previously focused on annual work reports and formalities, have now become more substantive under Li. For the last two years they have set the national agenda and issued instructions following the March parliamentary session. See: Neil Thomas, “China’s Overlooked Premier Is Slowly Building up Power: Xi Jinping Has Turned over Critical Economic Roles to Li Qiang”, *Foreign Policy*, June 5, 2025.

This opens three possibilities: the first scenario could be a return to collective leadership, which could reintroduce checks and balances and reduce the risks of over-centralization. However, this system might also weaken decision-making efficiency and slow down China's ability to respond to crises. A second scenario is the rise of a new strongman, who would guarantee continuity and stability but at the cost of perpetuating authoritarian rigidity and intensifying domestic repression. Finally, a more destabilizing option is the fragmentation within the Communist Party, where adverse factions struggle for dominance, potentially leading to policy paralysis or system breakdown.

The post-Xi period could witness a return to collective leadership, the emergence of a more liberal administration, or, conversely, intensified authoritarianism. In the most extreme scenario, the CCP itself could fracture, precipitating systemic collapse. Whatever the outcome, Xi's refusal to prepare a successor ensures that the transition of power will mark a decisive turning point in Chinese history, with profound consequences not only for domestic governance but also for international politics<sup>400</sup>.

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<sup>400</sup> *Who Will Rule China After Xi Jinping?* YouTube video, posted by Business Basics, November 21, 2024.

## CONCLUSION

Napoleon's warning that the "Sleeping Dragon" would one day awaken has proved true: China's extraordinary rise has profoundly transformed international politics and challenged the order that had lasted for more than a century under the guidance of the United States.

As this thesis has shown, the perception of China as a "strategic rival" has evolved progressively across the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations, each shaping policies and rhetoric in ways that reveal both discontinuities and surprising continuities. To provide a concise answer to the research question, the approach of each administration, both, American and Chinese, can be summarized in a single word, along with their corresponding implications for the global stability.

Barack Obama: *Engagement*.

He was the first U.S. president to visit China in the first year of his presidency, a gesture that represented his willingness to treat Beijing as a potential partner on global challenges. Yet, despite this cooperative spirit, frictions soon emerged. Persistent trade imbalances and accusations of unfair currency practices raised concerns in Washington, while a series of cyberattacks attributed to Chinese actors in 2009–2010 deepened mistrust. Tensions were further aggravated by Beijing's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, where U.S. freedom of navigation operations collided with Chinese territorial claims. These developments gradually eroded the narrative of China as a "responsible stakeholder" and laid the groundwork for a more competitive posture. The overall implication for global stability was one of *relative balance*, where engagement coexisted with emerging rivalry.

Donald Trump: *Confrontation*.

Trump consolidated the hostile narrative by openly defining China a "strategic competitor". He was direct and often confrontational, accusing Beijing of stealing intellectual property rights and threatening U.S. national security through new technologies. Therefore, Washington introduced tariffs on Chinese goods and imposed restrictions on technology firms, opening a clear contest over Beijing's global ambitions. The COVID-19 crisis in the final phase of his mandate further fuelled this antagonism and created the conditions for Biden to largely maintain a firm stance toward China. The implication for global stability was one of *disruption*, as established economic ties fractured and the risk of broader confrontation intensified.

Joe Biden: *Competition*.

From 2021, Biden's policy has maintained the same line as Trump's, with one major change: engaging Washington's closest allies in Europe and Asia, with the final goal of countering Chinese ambitions. The new president changed the direction, prioritizing building alliances and reinvigorating old ones. AUKUS and Quad became fundamental in building the new Indo-Pacific strategy for Washington, modernizing the regional armies and giving access to cutting-edge military technologies. This "managed competition" recognised both rivalry as well as the need for selective cooperation. The implication for global stability has been *fragmentation*: the emergence of competing blocs, technological decoupling, and increasing polarization in the international order.

Xi Jinping: *Centralization*.

Beijing, on the other hand, has evolved over the years under the leadership and aegis of Xi Jinping. His centralization of power along with the abolition of term limits marked a return to the personalistic rule, while international initiatives projected Chinese soft power in other continents, reshaping global governance. The internal stability is ensured through the Communist Party, which exercises tight control over groups, ideas and activities that can be seen as challenging the Party leadership. The implication for global stability is *assertion*: a more confident China that seeks to redefine norms, expand its sphere of influence, and present itself as an alternative to the U.S.-led international order.

In 2025 the situation has shifted once again. With Trump's return to the White House, Xi Jinping finds himself dealing with a U.S. administration marked by volatility, whose policies often swing in unpredictable directions, generating a pessimistic vision of their future. Even during the first months of the new presidency, hostility has reached a level that makes war thinkable, and perhaps even likely, within the next decade. The bilateral relationship is passing through a particularly dangerous phase, and it is likely to remain competitive for years to come.

However, the future is never set in stone.

Looking ahead, the analysis further describes scenarios that may unfold in the context of a possible competition or cooperation between the two superpowers. After all, the past is not always a reliable predictor of the future, and relying on a single moment in time to forecast long-term developments may easily lead to misjudgements.

The list of frictions in the relationship between the United States and China is long and growing, but the analysis in this case will delve into the alliances, the military and the technological domains. The

common features that connect them is that they are developing quickly and could be transformed in potential threats for the immediate future.

One of the major points of friction in the alliance framework, is the Xi-Putin axis. The “security first” policy promoted by Beijing grew the scope and scale of cooperation between China and Russia. Putin and Xi had met in person more than forty times since the beginning of Xi’s mandate in 2013 and their relationship was further strengthened by the meetings in multilateral settings, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS framework. Their partnership symbolizes their ambition to reshape the existing international order to their liking, and not the Western one. If on one side Beijing is committed to the survival of the Russian political leadership, it also appears prepared to tolerate a degree of internal instability in Russia, as it happened in the last few years, so long as this does not directly threaten China’s core interests. In other words, Xi’s support extends beyond Putin’s regime to its possible successors. This relationship enables China to accumulate leverage over isolated Russia, that, constrained by sanctions and Western disengagement, has little choice but to deepen its reliance on China. In return, Beijing gains favourable energy deals, access to sensitive technology and increased weight in Eurasian diplomacy.

However, this alliance has several shortcomings too. Long-term support for Russia, even during the war in Ukraine, exposes Chinese banks and companies to U.S. and EU penalties, which could restrict China’s access to Western markets and technology, that are still vital for its growth. Discounted Russian energy may be attractive now, but overreliance exposes China to supply disruptions if pipelines or political agreements falter. Moreover, if Russia loses in Ukraine, this will demolish vital parts of China’s strategic architecture. A weakened Kremlin would struggle to maintain control, leading to fragmentation across Russian territory and destabilizing the long border with China, that would have to face spillovers, including uncontrolled migration, arms proliferation and destabilisation of Central Asia partners. The widening power disparity between a stagnating Russia and an ascendant China threatens to transform their partnership into an increasingly lopsided affair.

The alliance between Putin and Xi poses greatest threat to the U.S., but it is ready to pursue a blend of coercion and transactional diplomacy. On the coercive side, Washington may expand tariffs, imposes secondary sanctions on Chinese firms dealing with Russia and demands greater burden-sharing from NATO allies, signalling that it would not tolerate a Eurasian bloc challenging U.S. primacy. The risks are equally evident. Excessive reliance on tariffs and sanctions might further entrench Sino-Russian cooperation and alienate U.S. allies who prefer a multilateral approach.

Xi is also seeking to attract another key neighbour: India. Although New Delhi has long been regarded as a strategic partner of the United States, recent frictions over trade barriers, climate policy and

India's refusal to fully distance itself from Russia, have complicated this alignment. Modi appears increasingly interested in exploring alternative directions, and closer engagement with Beijing may offer him new opportunities in shaping India's global role. Xi framed the two countries as at a critical stage of development and rejuvenation, which have a common denominator: growth. Thus, they need to support each other.

Despite unresolved border disputes, New Delhi has shown signs of improving its relationship with Beijing within the broader framework of BRICS. For Modi closer ties to Xi means avoiding being overly dependent on Washington: for Xi, improving relations with India helps weaken U.S. containment efforts in Asia and build legitimacy for a multipolar order. If this understanding between China, Russia and India deepens, it could crystallize into a powerful bloc, posing challenges to Washington's influence and reshaping the geopolitical landscape.

On the military front several possibilities open, with the Indo-Pacific being one of the most dangerous flashpoints. In this scenario, the United States has something that China lacks: a dense network of allies in the region. Japan, South Korea, Australia and Taiwan each bring military, economic or strategic assets that amplify U.S. power. Beijing's list of partners is far less impressive. Russia and North Korea are constrained by economic weakness, diplomatic isolation and internal fragility. This asymmetry underscores a structural imbalance in the rivalry, with Washington able to project influence through an alliance architecture that provides both legitimacy and operational capacity.

The most likely scenario in which the U.S. will be involved in using their military capabilities is a conflict between Taiwan and China. A possible unexpected escalation between Beijing and Taipei could call on Washington to intervene and, at that point, the People's Liberation Army and the U.S. Forces could come to a confrontation. Washington's most significant advantage lies in the superior naval power, advanced technologies such as stealth aircraft and missile defence systems. Beijing by contrast benefits from proximity. Its ability to rapidly concentrate forces across the Strait, supported by a vast and growing arsenal of ballistic and cruise missiles, makes China a formidable opponent. The balance, therefore, is asymmetrical: the United States holds qualitative and global advantages, while China relies on geographical immediacy, mass, and political resolve. This asymmetry makes any confrontation over Taiwan uniquely dangerous, as neither side possesses an unambiguous path to victory.

Technological developments are the final area that may play a key role in determining whether the future will be marked by a unipolar world. Artificial intelligence, quantum computing, robotics and other cutting-edge innovations have become quickly significant concerns for both Washington and Beijing, considered indispensable components in the broader contest for global primacy. The U.S.

still holds a primary role in the production of advanced semiconductors and its dynamic innovation ecosystem, controlling the initial stages of research and development (R&D) of the supply chain, and supported by important technological allies, such as Taiwan. Nonetheless, China holds certain advantages as well, since its territory is rich in raw materials essential to produce high-tech equipment. By controlling the primary resources, Beijing can use access to critical minerals to gain political and economic advantages over its competitors.

While China is rapidly progressing in applied fields such as artificial intelligence, robotics and 5G, the U.S. is trying to re-shore the entire supply chain within its national borders. By doing so, Washington aims to secure a direct control over the production of critical materials and advanced components, reducing exposure to external shocks.

An important aspect highlighted throughout the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations was the conception of China as a “strategic competitor” rather than an “enemy”: while the two terms imply conflict, they are not synonymous. The word “competitors” highlights two states that pursue overlapping or conflicting interests in key domains but stop short of open hostility. Usually there is competition for power and influence, but also room for cooperation in areas of mutual interests. “Enemies”, on the other side, describes two states that see each other as existential threats: there is an open antagonism and no space for cooperation. In this case hostility dominates the relationship. Essentially, it resembles the U.S.-Soviet Union relationship during the Cold War, marked by the final goal of containment or defeat. This distinction leads the analysis to a specific question: can China and the United States coexist peacefully?

There are few possibilities in which Washington and Beijing can find a *modus vivendi* for coexistence, managing their frictions, without sliding into a major power war. The main driver for collaboration could derive from shared threats or common interests, such as climate change and artificial intelligence.

As happened under the Obama administration with the agreement reached in 2009 during COP15, it demonstrated how coordinated action can produce global breakthroughs. Both nations are leaders in some complementary areas: the U.S. remains at the forefront of advanced clean technologies, while China dominates in solar panel and battery production. The establishment of international standards for green finance could be a stabilizing factor for their relations, offering a channel of dialogue insulated from other contentious issues. As climate change has proven to be a “shared fate” issue, the potential benefits from this collaboration are worldwide, since this would accelerate global decarbonization, greater technological innovation.

The same narrative could be adopted in the artificial intelligence framework. This is a double-edged sword, that represents a domain of strategic rivalry as well as an area where cooperation could mitigate global crises. Washington and Beijing pursue AI advancements for economic competitiveness and national security, but they also share some concerns about transparency, reliability or cybersecurity. Joint efforts could focus on establishing ethical standards, promoting safety testing and creating new mechanisms to avoid escalation through multilateral forums such as G20 or the United Nations. These could be formidable platforms where the U.S. and China could shape international norms, as they already did in the past. In these frameworks, the application of AI systems could then be extended to other sectors, such as healthcare, climate modelling or disaster response.

Nonetheless, it is evident that the coexistence of two superpowers inevitably entails considerable costs.

First, there should be a geopolitical bargain in which the United States accepts China's continued growth and development but works to balance its regional hegemony and receives reassurance from Beijing that it can be content without global pre-eminence. On the other side, China should demonstrate that it does not seek to replace U.S. hegemony with a hegemony of its own, and that it can be satisfied with something approximating equality in East Asia combined with a greater global role or at least acknowledge that this is better than risking war or attempting to challenge the United States on every front. Meanwhile, both sides would compete economically to maximize their national wealth, but they would do so in a way that does not intentionally damage the other.

Besides all possible scenarios, the trajectory of their relations will be shaped by different dynamics of power chosen by Washington and Beijing. Whether the coming decades are marked by conflict or cooperation will rest heavily on the prudence, or recklessness, of their leaders. It is clear, then, that the relationship between the United States and China will be the biggest question mark of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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