



# CHINA-US COMPETITION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: BETWEEN STRUCTURAL REALISM AND THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the complex dynamics of contemporary relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China through the dual conceptual lenses of structural Realism and Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis. It investigates whether the current geopolitical friction represents a classic power transition sequence—popularized as the Thucydides Trap—or an ontological confrontation between fundamentally incompatible Western and Sinic value systems. Moving beyond traditional Cold War paradigms, the study highlights how the modern bilateral axis is defined by an unprecedented paradox: a deep economic integration that, rather than fostering peace, has been strategically weaponized to exploit mutual vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the paper explores the emergence of a techno-ideological dualism, where the competition for technological supremacy (AI, semiconductors, and 5G/6G networks) serves as the primary theater for digital authoritarianism and the struggle over global normative hegemony.

**Keywords:** *sectarian division, Sunni–Shia conflict, state cohesion, systemic vulnerability, national reconciliation.*

### Article info

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## Introduction

This paper analyzes the dynamics of relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China through the lens of foundational theories of International Relations (IR). The study investigates whether the current state of tension between the two states represents a classic power transition sequence (the Thucydides Trap) or if we are witnessing a revalidation of Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis. Furthermore, it aims to examine whether, unlike the Cold War, the contemporary configuration is defined by the weaponization of interdependence and a competition for global normativity.

In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, the relationship between the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) is not merely a simple bilateral interaction, but constitutes the central axis of the international system. After decades of "strategic engagement"—a policy grounded in the liberal premise that integrating China into global economic institutions (such as the WTO in 2001) would catalyze domestic political liberalization (Ikenberry, 2018)—the paradigm has irreversibly shifted toward fierce "strategic competition". This dynamic marks the end of the "unipolar moment" described by Charles Krauthammer and the transition toward a bipolar power structure, where systemic competition redefines global alliances.

This paradigm shift is not a mere diplomatic fluctuation, but a reflection of what John Mearsheimer (2001, 2019) terms "the tragedy of great power politics". From the perspective of offensive Realism, China's rise represents a structural challenge to American hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. The current stakes extend far beyond economic supremacy or the trade balance; they target the very normative architecture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We are witnessing a clash between the "rules-based international order" (liberal international order) promoted by the Washington administration, and Beijing's vision of a multipolar order defined by "absolute sovereignty" and the rejection of the universalism of Western values (Allison, 2017).

The transition from cooperation to confrontation has been accelerated by the consolidation of power under Xi Jinping's mandate, whose rhetoric regarding the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation"<sup>2</sup> suggests a desire to revise the global hierarchy. While Washington perceives

China's actions in the South China Sea and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as tools of geopolitical revisionism, Beijing interprets the American military presence in Asia as an anachronistic strategy of "containment". Moreover, the concept of "weaponized interdependence," theorized by Farrell and Newman (2019), explains how economic and technological networks (semiconductors, AI, 5G) have become the new theater of operations, where mutual vulnerabilities are exploited for strategic, rather than merely commercial, gains.

Thus, the US-China rivalry is not a simple conflict of interests, but an ontological competition to define international legitimacy. The fundamental question guiding this analysis is whether this civilizational and political clash can be managed through diplomatic mechanisms, or if the international system is condemned to repeat the historical cycle of violent power transitions, falling into what Graham Allison (2017) popularized as the "Thucydides Trap".

## I. Theoretical framework: Realism vs. the clash of civilizations theory

To decipher the complexity of the Sino-American relationship, the analysis must stem from a theoretical rigor that transcends the mere empirical observation of current events. Two conceptual lenses dominate the academic debate: Structural Realism (NeoRealism) and the Clash of Civilizations theory. Although seemingly divergent—one focusing on the distribution of material power, the other on cultural identity—both offer complementary explanations for the systemic nature of the current rivalry, as follows:

■ **Structural Realism (NeoRealism):** From the analytical perspective of Structural Realism, as articulated by Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, the international system is inherently anarchic, meaning that the rise of the People's Republic of China inevitably triggers a classic security dilemma for the United States. Within the framework of offensive Realism, great powers seek to maximize their share of global power with the ultimate, pragmatic objective of achieving regional hegemony rather than global dominance, which Mearsheimer argues is structurally unattainable

due to the "stopping power of water" and the sheer logistical impossibility of worldwide power projection. Consequently, China's strategic efforts to secure and dominate its own neighborhood by excluding American influence from East Asia are directly countered by the United States, acting as an offshore balancer, through a structural strategy of containment aimed at preventing the emergence of a peer regional rival.

■ **The Huntingtonian Paradigm:** Samuel Huntington argued that the fundamental source of conflict in the post-Cold War world would be cultural rather than ideological or economic. Furthermore, unlike the aforementioned Structural Realism, which places the nation-state at its center, the analytical unit proposed by Huntington is the civilization. The author identified the "Sinic" and "Western" civilizations as fundamentally incompatible. While the West promotes individualism and liberal democracy, China proposes a model based on Confucianism, hierarchy, and the supremacy of the collective (represented by the state).

From the perspective of Waltzian NeoRealism, the international system is defined by anarchy, forcing states—as rational and unitary actors—to prioritize security and survival through the accumulation of power (Waltz, 1979). Within this framework, the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) creates a classic security dilemma: Beijing's efforts to secure its "defensive perimeter" in the South China Sea are interpreted by the Trump administration as acts of revisionist aggression.

John Mearsheimer (2014) argues that in an anarchic system, great powers are "condemned" to competition. Therefore, according to Offensive Realism, China will not settle for a secondary role but will instead attempt to become a regional hegemon in Asia, replicating the American "Monroe Doctrine". This dynamic validates the hypothesis that the security architecture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is dictated by the balance of material forces (GDP, military capabilities, technology), where ideology plays a secondary role to the imperative of power.

While Realism explains why states conflict, Samuel Huntington's (1996) "Clash of Civilizations" theory explains its nature and intensity. Huntington anticipated that in the post-Cold War era, the most prominent fault lines of conflict would emerge along cultural boundaries. The US-China competition is not just a struggle over customs tariffs or hypersonic missiles, but a confrontation between two incompatible value systems: Western universalism vs. Sinic particularism.

The US promotes an order based on individualism, inalienable rights, and liberal democracy, which it considers globally valid. In contrast, China proposes a vision based on Confucianism, where collective stability,

hierarchy, and the central role of the state take priority (Mahbubani, 2020). From Huntington's perspective, the "Asian challenge" is fundamental because China no longer accepts the moral superiority of the West, asserting its own civilizational identity as a viable alternative to Western modernity.

Thus, we notice a fusion between these two paradigms. The current conflict is "total" in the international relations sense, as material (Realist) stakes are coupled with an identity-based (Huntingtonian) mistrust. This "clash" is exacerbated by what Constructivists call the "distribution of ideas": the way each power defines the "other" as an existential threat to its own way of life. Consequently, the competition for 5G or artificial intelligence becomes a battlefield for defining the ethical and social standards of the future, transforming the rivalry into a battle for normative hegemony.

However, a rigorous ontological assessment reveals that both theoretical frameworks, when applied in isolation, remain inherently imperfect and limited by their respective analytical blind spots. While Structural Realism offers a robust account of material power distribution, it tends to dismiss the deeply entrenched cultural and ideational vectors of state behavior, a limitation frequently highlighted by Constructivist and Neoclassical Realist scholars (e.g., Wendt, 1999; Rose, 1998). Conversely, the Huntingtonian paradigm captures the visceral nature of civilizational identity but struggles to account for the pragmatic, material security calculations that drive state actions within an anarchic system, drawing criticism for its cultural determinism (e.g., Said, 2001; Sen, 2006). Acknowledging these individual shortcomings, this paper proposes a theoretical synthesis. By orchestrating a deliberate fusion of these two otherwise divergent perspectives—echoing recent efforts in IR to bridge materialist and ideational paradigms (such as Barkin, 2003 on 'Realist Constructivism')—this study seeks to generate significant explanatory surplus, capturing both the material and cultural dimensions of the contemporary Sino-American rivalry.

## II. The Thucydides Trap and the dynamics of power transition

The concept of the "Thucydides Trap," popularized by political scientist Graham Allison (2017), has become a frequent explanatory lens. Inspired by the Greek historian's account of the Peloponnesian War, Allison argues that the structural stress resulting from the rise of an emerging power (Athens/China) threatening to displace an established

<sup>2</sup> Introduced as a core pillar of President Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" (Zhongguo Meng), this concept is explicitly tied to the year 2049 to mark the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Ideologically, the rhetoric of "rejuvenation" functions as an antithesis to the "Century of Humiliation" (1839–1949), emphasizing China's return to its rightful, historic position in the international hierarchy. Geopolitically, this narrative serves as the strategic mandate for Beijing's assertive foreign policy, the acceleration of military modernization, and initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

power (Sparta/US) creates a systemic vulnerability where minor incidents can trigger large-scale conflicts. Out of the 16 historical cases identified by the Harvard research team over the last five centuries, 12 resulted in war, raising fundamental questions about the predictability of the current trajectory.

In the contemporary context, this transition is not merely military, but represents a "rebalancing of aggregate capabilities". According to the Power Transition Theory (Organski, 1958), the probability of conflict escalating increases when the emerging power reaches parity with the hegemon and is "dissatisfied" with the rules of the existing international order. China, through its "Made in China 2025" and "Great Rejuvenation" programs, clearly signals its intention to renegotiate the terms of global governance, viewing the current liberal order as a post-war construct that exclusively serves Western interests.

The empirical analysis of power transition relies on macroeconomic data that confirms the erosion of the American advantage. Although the US maintains a nominal GDP superiority, China already surpassed the United States in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) as early as 2014, according to World Bank and IMF data. This economic reality provides Beijing with the necessary resources for an unprecedented projection of force beyond its borders.

However, unlike previous historical competitions, the current transition unfolds within an environment defined by the "technological frontier". The competition for supremacy in artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology, and 5G/6G communications represents the center of gravity of the new balance of power. As Kai-Fu Lee (2018) points out, China is no longer a mere "imitator" but a systemic innovator. In the Neorealist view, controlling emerging technologies equates to controlling the future battlespace, turning the technological gap into a critical factor of strategic stability.

If the economy serves as the engine of transition, military projection is its most visible indicator. The modernization of the Chinese armed forces (PLA), particularly the development of Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities, directly aims to neutralize the American naval advantage within the first island chain. This phenomenon is described by specialists like Aaron Friedberg (2011) as a strategy to "push" American influence out of East Asia.

In this context, the Taiwan issue becomes the ultimate test of the "Thucydides Trap". For Beijing, unification represents the closing of a "century of humiliation" and the consolidation of its superpower status. For the Washington administration, defending Taiwan is tied to the credibility of its alliance system and

the maintenance of a free maritime order. This collision of vital interests makes the probability of a miscalculation extremely high, confirming Allison's fears that the structural inertia of power transition often overrides the political will of individual leaders.

On the other hand, critics of Allison's theory, such as Amitav Acharya or Robert Keohane, argue that the analogy with Ancient Greece ignores modern factors that induce restraint: nuclear weapons, deep economic integration, and international institutions. Nonetheless, recent reality suggests a selective "decoupling". The concept of weaponized interdependence suggests that states utilize the central nodes of global networks (payment systems, semiconductor supply chains) to exert political pressure (Farrell and Newman, 2019). Thus, the power transition no longer necessarily leads to a total kinetic war, but rather to a state of "permanent hybrid war" for normativity and digital control.

In conclusion, the Thucydides Trap remains a valid analytical framework, but one that must be adapted to 21st-century realities. The tension between the US and China is not merely a battle for GDP supremacy, but a systemic dispute over how the world will be organized in the post-hegemonic era. Whether the American "Sparta" and the Chinese "Athens" will succeed in avoiding open conflict depends on their capacity to construct a "new model of major power relations"—a task that, historically speaking, has proven almost impossible without a major reordering crisis.

### III. Ideological dualism in the technological era: Liberal Democracy vs. Digital Authoritarianism

An essential component of the contemporary "clash" is the battle over technological standards. Control over artificial intelligence, 5G networks, and semiconductors is not just a matter of profit, but of social control. While Structural Realism explains tensions through the distribution of material power, the ideological dimension of the Sino-American relationship reveals a profound ontological fault line.

The contemporary conflict is not merely a territorial or commercial dispute, but a confrontation between two models of societal organization and the relationship between the individual and the state. While the United States remains the primary exponent of liberal democracy, based on inalienable individual rights and

the rule of law, the People's Republic of China (PRC) promotes an authoritarian model of "state capitalism," legitimized by economic performance and social stability (Fukuyama, 2018). This "competition of systems" has acquired a new dimension through the fusion of ideology and emerging technologies. We are witnessing the birth of an ideological dualism that no longer targets just geographical territory, but also the control of "informational space" and data flows. In this context, technology ceases to be a neutral instrument, becoming a vector for projecting political values.

The essence of the Chinese challenge resides in the development and export of what specialists call "digital authoritarianism". By utilizing artificial intelligence (AI), facial recognition, and social credit systems<sup>3</sup>, Beijing has created a mechanism of surveillance and social control of unprecedented historical efficiency (Zuboff, 2019). This model offers a technocratic solution to the age-old dilemma of dictatorial regimes: how to maintain economic growth without yielding to pressures for political liberalization.

From Stein Ringen's (2016) perspective, China has evolved into a "perfect dictatorship," where technology allows the state to monitor not just the actions, but also the intentions of its citizens. Worryingly for the liberal order, this model is presented as an "export product" to states in the Global South. Through the "Digital Silk Road," China offers critical infrastructure (5G, data centers) coupled with monitoring tools, providing illiberal regimes with a technological alternative to the Western democratic model (Polymeropoulos and Taylor, 2020).

The competition for technological supremacy between the US and China represents, in reality, a struggle for technical normativity. Whoever controls 5G technology standards or Internet governance protocols will define the rules of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The US and its allies advocate for a free, open, and interoperable internet, while China promotes the concept of "cyber sovereignty," which grants the state total control over information flows within its borders.

The fight for semiconductors (microchips) and AI algorithms is not just a supply chain issue, but a matter of national and ideological security. As Chris Miller (2022) argues in *Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology*, the capacity to produce the most advanced chips determines not only military power, but also the ability to impose a specific model of processing social reality. If Chinese algorithms dominate global communication platforms, values such as preventive

mentorship and the priority of the collective over the individual will become embedded norms in the global digital architecture.

A critical aspect of this dualism is the internal vulnerability of Western democracies to new technologies. While China uses technology to consolidate the state, in the US and Europe, the same instruments (social media, polarizing algorithms) have led to a fragmentation of social consensus and a crisis of trust in institutions. This "cohesion gap" provides China with a strategic advantage in the war of narratives.

Beijing exploits the failures of liberal democracies to demonstrate the superiority of its rapid and efficient decision-making model. The competition is no longer restricted to who has more aircraft carriers, but who offers a governance model more capable of managing complex crises (pandemics, climate change, inequality). In this sense, the ideological battle is one of "output legitimacy," where China's economic success challenges the Western dogma that long-term prosperity is impossible without political freedom.

We can conclude that we are witnessing a "bifurcation" of the international system. The world is heading toward a dual techno-ideological order: a sphere dominated by liberal values, centered on transparency and individual rights, and a sphere dominated by digital authoritarianism, centered on state control and technocratic efficiency. This split makes the "Clash of Civilizations" more than a cultural metaphor; it is a technological and political reality that risks permanently fragmenting globalization as we have known it since the 1990s.

### Economic interdependence

Analyzing the post-Cold War paradigm, we observe a perhaps exaggerated confidence in Keohane and Nye's theories regarding interdependence. It was wagered that integrating China into WTO structures would force long-term cooperation, making any military conflict financially irrational. However, the current decade forces us to rethink this model. We see how interdependence no longer functions as a barrier against war, but is instead used strategically as an instrument of political pressure between global actors.

The concept of "weaponized interdependence" (Farrell and Newman, 2019) explains how global networks—financial, technological, and energy-related—

<sup>3</sup>The social credit system is a large-scale government initiative implemented by China, through which citizens and companies are evaluated and assigned a 'score' based on their behavior. The official goal is to promote 'trust' within society, but external criticisms often describe it as an instrument of mass surveillance.

which were supposed to ensure interstate connections, have become instruments of coercion. The United States has used its control over the SWIFT payment system and semiconductor design architecture to slow down China's technological rise. In response, Beijing has utilized its dominance over rare earth element supply chains and its position as the "factory of the world" to exert political pressure on US allies, transforming the economy into an asymmetric battlefield.

The rift between the two superpowers has given rise to the process of 'decoupling'—a deliberate attempt to reduce mutual dependence in strategic sectors. Although a total separation of the two economies is considered by many economists to be impossible without a global systemic collapse, we are nevertheless witnessing a 'selective decoupling'. This primarily targets dual-use technologies (civilian and military), such as artificial intelligence and green energy. The term 'de-risking,' promoted by the European Union and subsequently adopted by the Biden administration, has nuanced the very approach described above.

Unlike total decoupling, de-risking implies maintaining general trade ties while securing critical supply chains to avoid vulnerabilities to potential political blackmail from Beijing (Sullivan, 2023). This strategy reflects a fundamental paradigm shift: prioritizing national security and resilience over pure economic efficiency, marking the end of the era of "hyper-globalization" (Rodrik, 2011). Nevertheless, at present, American President Donald Trump considers de-risking to be an insufficient measure. His policy aims for a much broader separation of the US economy from China's, arguing that any dependence on an adversary represents a national security risk.

The dispute over semiconductors is described by Chris Miller (2022) as the new "oil of the 21<sup>st</sup> century". China relies heavily on imports of advanced chips and lithography equipment (ASML), while the US depends on assembly and testing capabilities in China and Southeast Asia. The American CHIPS and Science Act (2022) represents an aggressive industrial policy designed to repatriate high-tech manufacturing and block China's access to future generations of computing. From China's perspective, this strategy is perceived as an attempt to "freeze" its economic development. Beijing's response, through its "dual circulation" strategy, aims to achieve technological self-sufficiency and reduce dependence on Western markets and technologies, while simultaneously stimulating domestic consumption. This dynamic creates an economic arms race, where innovation is no longer stimulated by cooperation, but by the need for strategic survival.

Another critical dimension of interdependence is the supremacy of the US dollar. China, holding a massive amount of US government bonds, has begun a cautious process of diversifying its reserves and promoting the internationalization of the yuan (RMB), especially in transactions with BRICS+ states. Although dollar hegemony remains intact in the short term, "de-dollarization" efforts indicate a desire to build a parallel financial infrastructure immune to American sanctions (Zoltan Pozsar, 2022).

The economic interdependence between the US and China, which was once considered the "anchor of stability," has transformed into a major source of conflict. Instead of preventing conflict, economic ties now provide leverage for "economic coercion". The conclusion is that the world economy is entering an era of geoeconomics, where trade is subordinated to geopolitics. This fragmentation risks creating two distinct economic blocs, validating Huntington's thesis of a world divided not just by ideas, but also by integrated circuits and incompatible payment systems.

## Conclusion

This study has attempted to demonstrate that the contemporary rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China is the result of a convergence of structural, ideological, and economic forces. While through the lens of Structural Realism we witness a classic power transition sequence marked by the "Thucydides Trap", the Huntingtonian perspective adds necessary depth, revealing that the stakes are, ultimately, cultural, and normative legitimacy.

Unlike the ideological bipolarity of the Cold War, the current configuration is defined by a paradox: an unprecedented economic interdependence which, instead of pacifying relations, has become a vector of vulnerability and coercion through the phenomenon of weaponized interdependence. Thus, the "Clash of Civilizations" no means manifests itself merely through political discourse, but is encoded in technological standards, artificial intelligence algorithms, and fragmented supply chains.

The question regarding the inevitability of a kinetic conflict (open war) remains the central point of debate in International Relations. Graham Allison (2017) warns that structural stress makes war likely rather than unlikely; however, history also offers examples of peacefully managed transitions (such as the transfer of hegemony from Great Britain to the US at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Nevertheless, reinvigorated nationalism, both in the US (in the form of "America First" or industrial protectionism) and in China (through

the "Chinese Dream" and "wolf warrior" diplomacy), reduces the room for compromise. In an environment dominated by the "security dilemma", any defensive step by one party is interpreted as an offensive threat by the other, fueling a spiral of militarization and hostile rhetoric that can escape the control of political leaders.

In an era of exacerbated nationalism, traditional diplomacy often seems anachronistic or insufficient. Yet, crisis diplomacy and the establishment of "guardrails" become imperative to avoid a nuclear disaster or a global economic collapse. Henry Kissinger (2011) emphasized the need for a "shared concept of order", warning that in the absence of a minimal consensus on the rules of coexistence, the world risks a catastrophe similar to that of 1914. The major challenge for 21<sup>st</sup>-century diplomacy is managing "strategic decoupling" without triggering a total rupture. This requires a shift from performative public diplomacy addressed to domestic nationalist audiences to a technical diplomacy focused on three points:

1. Transparency of military intentions in friction zones (Taiwan, South China Sea);
2. Joint governance of risks, such as generative artificial intelligence and climate change;
3. Maintaining direct communication channels between military commands to prevent tactical incidents from escalating into strategic crises.

The conclusion of this study is that we are not witnessing a simple repetition of history, but a redefinition of the concept of power. The "Clash of Civilizations" between China and the US will not be resolved through a total victory for either side, given that both states are too integrated and too heavily armed to be "defeated" in the traditional sense. The most probable, and at the same time most desirable, scenario is that of "competitive

coexistence" or a technological "cold peace". This implies accepting that Western and Sinic values will continue to compete for global influence, but that this competition must remain below the threshold of organized violence. The success of this fragile order will depend on the capacity of both civilizations to recognize that, although their worldviews are divergent, their destiny remains inextricably linked to the stability of the same global ecosystem.

Concurrently, a rigorous academic approach requires acknowledging the limitations of the proposed analytical framework. While this synthesized model offers significant explanatory surplus regarding the macro-systemic and cultural drivers of the rivalry, it inherently understates the impact of domestic political friction within both nations. For instance, electoral cycles and internal legislative pressures in the United States, alongside the complex intra-party dynamics of the Chinese Communist Party, introduce domestic variables that neither Structural Realism nor civilizational paradigms can fully encapsulate. Furthermore, the transnational interests of global corporations—which frequently push back against complete economic decoupling due to supply chain interdependencies—highlight a commercial counter-weight that occasionally disrupts both material balancing and ideological alignment. Future research should therefore aim to integrate these domestic and corporate variables into the current hybridized model to further refine its predictive accuracy.

Ultimately, the stakes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not the triumph of one civilization over another, but the capacity of the international system to accommodate two different models of modernity within a power structure that prevents the self-destruction of humanity.

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