

US-China Relations: Adrift Between Conflict and Tianxia

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Introduction

On August 2, 2022, Nancy Pelosi visited the island of Taiwan (officially the Republic of China) to underscore America's "unwavering commitment to supporting Taiwan's vibrant democracy."¹ Consequently, concern arose about whether aggression from China could be expected. Especially when the West was heavily involved in the Ukraine war, the idea of a potential neo-colonial-style invasion of the island nation did not seem too far-fetched. China has been drawing attention to the need for respect to its territorial integrity, for which the West, led by the US, has been answering inconsistently, in the current case by confirming its military support for Taiwan.² The Chinese military exercises that followed Pelosi's visit further sparked an array of assumptions that featured another war.

Such assumptions fit well into greater patterns of thought that work as guardrails to International Relations thought. With the bipolar global order having turned unipolar at the end of the Cold War, the international community experienced US hegemony in a liberal rules-based order. Recent events such as the withdrawal from Afghanistan or the 2008 financial crisis, however, reflect popular narratives such as Amsden's "rise of the rest" or the "decline of the West,"³ and by that an underlying assumption that the unipolar global order is at risk. Especially China has increasingly grown powerful in the global world order, opening the door to questions about what the future world order will look like.

Against this backdrop, a conceptualisation of the arising struggle between China and the West under US leadership as a great power competition and a looming battle for hegemony, suggests itself. Consequently, models such as the "Thucydides Trap" are applied to the situation installing concern about a prescribed and unpreventable war between two superpowers⁴.

However, such a conceptualisation only represents one side of the coin which is closely tied to Western knowledge production. In this framework, the idea of Western hegemony in a unipolar world order being a guarantor for stability has anchored itself so well that a challenge to the overarching system is seen as a threat.

Yet, to understand the competition that arises between China and the US, understanding the other side of the coin is necessary as well before jumping to conclusions. For this, it is imperative to acknowledge that Western assumptions are not necessarily universal and that Chinese International Relations thought has its own dynamics, ideas and beliefs about how the world works. Two key ideas that require a closer examination are the cultural concept of Tianxia ("all under heaven") which also alludes to Qin's Relational theory of International Relations.

Enriching the Western lens to analyse the situation with a Chinese one, opens corridors for new ideas about the alleged inter-state competition. Consequently, the situation forfeits a lot of its fright and paints a better picture of the respective US and Chinese policy approaches. We postulate a more engaging mutual understanding of the assumptions and beliefs held by political players in the two countries could ease tensions and encourage cooperation to counter the global problems of today.

1. US-Centric Western View: Conflict as the Core of Conceptualisation

The current world order features underlying beliefs derived from Western knowledge production. In the short period of the pax Americana, this world order benefitted mainly from the beliefs, assumptions, and standards of the Western powers⁵. This conception of world order also has clear ideas about the meaning of conflict. Referencing the idea of the Westphalian Peace, individual sovereign countries exist in a state of anarchy in which power competition often is a zero-sum game that leads to friction, causing conflicts to escalate.

When adhering to these thought patterns, the greatest looming international conflict is the arising competition between China and the West, headed by the US. As the strongest representative of the "rise of the rest" hypotheses, China presents a challenge to the liberal world order, as it embodies an alternative functioning system of political governance and economic development. Seeing this situation through a realist lens, a China that has invested in hard and soft power is regarded as a threat to the US and the West. Respectively, Western conceptualisations of US-China relations (for the sake of clarity in this paper, the term also comprises the relations between the West and China in general) frame a geopolitical struggle that could eventually transform into an all-out war to attain hegemony.

At least three different conceptualisations of US-China relations are seen in the Western political discourse, each of which will be elaborated on in the following paragraphs. First, especially in the US, the discourse features analogies drawn to the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union, hinting at a probable "new Cold War." Second, the idea of strategic competition acknowledges China as a pivotal actor in world politics and problem-solving, but also realises the element of systemic rivalry. Third, the influential, and hard-core realist theory of the Thucydides

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Trap regards China and the US as on the brink of war over hegemony. This last one slightly differs from the first one. We will discuss these discourses concisely below.

In the first conceptualization, the relations between the US and China are seen in the greater context of an all-out great power competition. For this, an analogy to the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the US is drawn⁶. This approach has mostly picked up pace in the Trump era, with the US taking a more assertive rhetorical stance towards the People's Republic. The Trump administration not only started a trade war with the Chinese regime but also ratcheted military support to Taiwan by negotiating arms deals and conducting military exercises in the South China Sea⁷. Following the example of the Cold War, the US also relied on its Western allies to stand by its side, operationalizing NATO as a forum of like-minded nations to fight the same cause.

After Trump set the groundwork for an overall hostile relationship in the style of “us-versus-them,” his successor Joe Biden even intensified the approach. Biden's foreign policy approach⁸ underscores the multidimensionality of this competition which fully maxes out the analogy of the Cold War and extends to all political fields. This is being done by putting the US's military and geopolitical focus completely on the Pacific region. Furthermore, Biden has given US-China relations an ideological touch by intensifying rhetoric that foregrounds an overall competition⁹ between political systems which only allows for one winner, effectively asking his allies to take sides. This fundamentalist attitude that the US embodies is also seen in Biden's ideological and dichotomous doctrine of making the confrontation between democracies and authoritarianism a hallmark of his presidency.

US-China relations are, therefore, often conceptualised as a restoration of great power competition. The analogy to the Cold War constructs China as a US opponent in multiple political arenas. Such include ideology, political systems, economy, and military matters. According to this perspective, China is a power in conflict with the West that attempts to shape a world order which is antithetical to the values and beliefs of the US and the West in any regard¹⁰.

The second conceptualization is more nuanced. It acknowledges the importance of cooperation between China and the West but still puts pivotal emphasis on conflict and competition. While this perspective is less prevalent in the US discourse, it is for example key to the European Union's (EU) China strategy which highlights China likewise as a cooperation partner to tackle international challenges such as climate change, but also as a systemic rival¹¹. Either way, this approach foregrounds the assumption of a zero-sum game and the idea that China pursues goals that are in no way beneficial to the West.

These first two conceptualisations respectively mirror the foreign policy approaches of the US and the EU and as such also highlight nuances in different conceptualisations of power politics that exist in the West. While the US has applied a hard stance towards China, at the latest since the Trump era, the EU is less radical in its approach. Not only is this a distinction of practicalities, but also theoretical underpinnings. While the US is all-out realist and regards any win by China as its own loss, the EU mixes the idea of the international to be a playing field of a zero-sum game with the liberal key idea of international cooperation for mutual good. Either way, however, conflict is still a key notion in any Western conception of relations with China.

This notion of conflict culminates in the third conceptualisation of the relations between the US and China. Popularized by Graham Allison in 2017, the Thucydides Trap describes how rising tensions between an international hegemon and an aspiring contestant challenge the ruling superpower. Accordingly, the result of such a dynamic is often war¹². The prominence of this theory and the intense debates that it has sparked regarding US-China relations are evident in the conflict-driven framing of the relations in the western, and especially in the US political discourse.¹³

The idea of conceptualising US-China relations according to the framework of the Thucydides Trap has been subject to various backlashes. Such critiques often stem from a wider critique of parochialism in Western International Relations. Furthermore, the idea has been condemned, among other things, for teleological assumptions in the related historiography and the issue of historical events not imitating each other. Moreover, critics blame the US to follow a one-dimensional worldview that neglects cosmopolitanism, thus giving rise to radical beliefs such as the Thucydides Trap.¹⁴

Examining the discourse that surrounds US-China relations, and relations between China and the West in general, therefore, discloses how conceptualisations of these are perhaps limited by an over-focusing on the theme of conflict. This does not play down the matter at hand and is not to say that conflict does not constitute an aspect of US-China relations. However, it critically questions a potential parochialism of Western international relations thought, a critique that is increasingly voiced in general.¹⁵

Either way, the uncontested hegemony of the US in the political sphere is degrading which also unravels the understanding of the Western conception of world order as a matter of course. The rise of China can arguably be regarded as the greatest challenge to the current world order. Understanding different conceptions of the respective relations between the two countries and not relying on a one-dimensional perspective are therefore pivotal.

2. China's Strategy and View on the World

Since its founding in 1949, the People's Republic of China has struggled to find its place in the international system. First, under Mao, it participated in the socialist bloc, then it joined the Non-Aligned Movement adopting the Third World view which opposed colonialism, imperialism and hegemonism. While relations with the Soviet Union deteriorated in the 1960s, the 1969 Nixon Doctrine¹⁶ reduced China's perception of the US as a threat, and inter-state relations shifted toward mutual cooperation. In 1971, China was granted a seat in the UN Security Council with the enactment of resolution no.¹⁷ 2758. Further adhering to the socialist ideology in the post-Mao era, China partially oriented itself alongside market-economic principles, implemented economic reforms and opening, and attracted foreign investment. Despite the belief that there would be no more socialist state structures after the collapse of the Soviet Union, "socialism with Chinese characteristics" began to emerge, highlighting the intensification of a comprehensive Chinese ideology over time.

The handover of Hong Kong¹⁸ from Britain to China in 1997 marked China's growing diplomatic influence alongside economic growth. Its policy toward Taiwan which was constructed around the same time emphasised China's commitment to territorial integrity and sovereignty.¹⁹

In the late 1990s, China sought a more harmonious and visible presence in the international system. It joined and became more involved in international organisations, one of such being membership²⁰ in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. However, these initially positive stances witnessed shifts along the road. In the West, there was a growing concern about China's increasing projection of power. On the Chinese side, events such as the accidental missile strike on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during NATO's military intervention in former Yugoslavia in 1999 or Western abuse of "responsibility to protect" in Libya made China eventually become more cautious toward the West. Thus, the relations started to become more calculated.

Chinese Foreign Policy and Tianxia

Starting in the 2000s, China attempted to address its negative image in international politics, by following soft power politics. The 2000s was a turning point for China when it made peace with its ancient history, culture, traditions and values in one hand, and preserving socialism in the other. The teachings of Confucius started to influence China's peaceful foreign strategy. To promote the Chinese language and culture abroad, Confucius institutes²¹ were established in 2004.

In the 2000s, theories such as Organski's "Power Transition Theory"²² and Mearsheimer's "Offensive Realism Theory"²³ were used by Western scholars as references toward the apparent growing "China threat". The main calculus was that a state would always want to grow stronger because the best way to ensure its security was to achieve hegemony, and that if a rising power was dissatisfied with the status quo, it would eventually adopt an aggressive policy. These ideas were generally repeated in political discourse. It was prophesied that a battle would eventually happen between the West and China, alluding to Huntington's "the clash of civilizations?".²⁴ The theory that still have its followers posited that Western civilization would eventually come into conflict with Islamic civilization and Chinese Confucianism.

During Hu Jintao's tenure (2003–2013), the foreign policy strategy aimed to allay the current concerns of the international community with the leveraged discourse of "peaceful development" and "harmonious society". Under this strategy, China proposed an alternative ruling structure in the international order. Based on a contemporary adaptation of the historical Tianxia (天下) system,²⁵ literally meaning "all under heaven", China revised its foreign policy discourse.

Tianxia is an ancient cultural concept that puts harmony over enmity. It emphasises that the actor, claiming hegemony in the international system, must have the support of other actors while governing. In this concept, an inclusive approach is taken as opposed to being perceived as the "other". With the Tianxia system, China places more emphasis on harmony than on equality or democracy, which it assumes cannot be achieved globally either way and can be easily manipulated. It claims the world's need is a system of hierarchical order, rather than the selfishness of nation-states in the Westphalian system, that is regarded as the major reason for the chaos of the international anarchical structure. In the system, states are considered as not separate and independent organisations but sub-actors under the moral governance of Tianxia. In this context, the UN is regarded as the playground of the existing system, which is driven by the self-interests of great powers. In the Tianxia, the hegemon, or a state at the top of the hierarchy, is not allowed to be imperialist or to take aggressive actions, but must adhere to the values. The system does not claim any cultural characteristics to be universal, and as such it does not disregard differences in language, culture, religion, or ideology. Unlike the Western understanding, it is not focused only on advancing one's self-interests and maximization of power. It formulates the relationship model that parties, between strong and weak or which are at the top and bottom of the hierarchy, would be satisfied. It argues for each country to act in accordance with its own circumstances for the resolution of global issues. China's "five principles of peaceful coexistence", the Peaceful Development strategy and Tianxia system have pointed to similar policies that each state, as an actor in the system, should take into account. China has formed its foreign policy within this context. These policies are referred in the 2005 White Paper of China²⁶ as follows:

Striving for a peaceful international environment to develop itself, and promoting world peace through its own

development; Achieving development by relying on itself, together with reform and innovation, while persisting in the policy of opening-up; Conforming to the trend of economic globalisation, and striving to achieve mutually beneficial common development with other countries; Sticking to peace, development and cooperation, and, together with all other countries, devoting itself to building a harmonious world marked by sustained peace and common prosperity.

According to this White Paper, China's basic principles and policies are peace, opening up, cooperation, harmony, and a win-win strategy. Consequently, peace and development should be pursued abroad while maintaining peace and harmony at home. It is stated that these two must coexist for a peaceful world where these two are interconnected and common peace and prosperity are achieved.

In line with overall policy in this period, China maintained its policy of "keeping low profile", which foresaw peaceful development within international order without asserting itself as a world power. In line with this mentality, China wanted to be referred to as "Responsible Power".

Yet, with Xi Jinping's ascendance to power in 2013, China's approach shifted. Xi presented China as a power that was "great and ready to fulfil its commitments." Defining China's relations with the US as a "New Model in Great Power Relations"²⁷, he emphasised that China was a great power, just like the US. The 2008–2012 U.S. economic crisis and the impression that the Washington consensus was at an end had a significant impact on Xi taking this initiative.

Along these lines, China launched major initiatives in the military, diplomatic, and economic fields during Xi's tenure. With the "Belt and Road Initiative", the country attempted to revive the historic Silk Road, of a new trade network that will reach as far as Europe, with more than 100 countries already participating, signifying China's growing influence abroad. In addition, Xi declared the "China Dream," or the "Rejuvenation of Chinese Society," for societal transformation. Within this notion, a broad discourse was leveraged that featured, inter alia, the durability of socialism, greater prosperity, territorial integrity, and sovereignty, as well as many underlying reforms.

During his tenure, Xi has pursued a strategy to demonstrate China's ability and potential to counter threats, without abandoning its pro-peace stance. In particular, China begun to pursue a more competitive foreign policy in relations with the US, challenging US hegemony which China views as more selfish and irresponsible, without provoking conflict or war. In the "trade and technology war" that began in 2018, China retaliated to the sanctions imposed by the US. The Chinese army's exercise in August 2022 that involved almost encircling the island of Taiwan after Pelosi's visit is another manifestation of this strategy. Yet the reactions that China considers necessary within the context of the current international system are occasionally perceived offensive in the West. But in the far east, China, however, does not consider its current foreign policy to be offensive. In fact, Chinese academics have long attempted to label "Chinese foreign policy" as "sui generis" highlighting its national characteristic underpinning theories and discourses. Among those, Qin Yaqin's Relational Theory²⁸, referring to the Tianxia system is a good reference to start with.

In his study, Qin emphasizes the "relationalism" of Neo-Confucianism, which focuses on continuous relationships and processes between countries that unfold over time. In characterizing the current system, Qin compares the intergovernmental system to economies where the rule of law is weak, and he argues that in an environment where laws are frequently not upheld, relational capacity, or Chinese "guanxi," can overcome the shortcomings of the rules-based systems. In this regard, it can be said to be a complementary theory to the current system meaning that it does not completely oppose or reject current theories. However, Qin asserts that morality is essential to IR because he believes that "rules based on normative power or moral power (the Confucian tradition defines morality in terms of behaviour toward others rather than in terms of perfection of the self), will lead to a sustainable order." Qin emphasizes "a shared understanding" in relationships. "In relational governance structures, cooperation is more likely when state actors share a common understanding of social norms and human morality" he stresses. Furthermore, relational theory, as in Tianxia, emphasises hierarchical morality, meaning that every actor should adhere to the values. This applies to the hegemon even more, as it is responsible to uphold the moral values in the system. In the international environment, Qin defines "relational governance as a process of negotiating socio-political arrangements that manage complex relationships in a community to produce order so that members behave reciprocally and cooperatively with mutual trust evolved over a shared understanding of social norms and human morality". Relational theory, in addition to hierarchy, expresses that bilateral relations are based on mutual trust and tolerance, regardless of this hierarchy.

3. Putting it both together: Evaluating the US Aims to Outmanoeuvre China?

Differences in Interpretation of Chinese Foreign Policy

As outlined, the assumptions that underpin China's foreign policies towards the West and the West's approach towards China are fundamentally different and rooted in contrasting discourses. A striking example of this is the "keeping low profile" policy that was followed by the Chinese state under Deng Xiaoping. The Chinese meaning of this policy was not to assert leadership while calmly monitoring changes and acting in harmony with foreign partners. Such an approach also mirrors the meanings of Tianxia which values Chinese leadership and harmony over competition. However, this was interpreted differently by the US. In the annual defence report of 2002²⁹,

this policy “not only suggests a desire to downplay China’s ambitions; it also affirms a long-term strategy to build up China’s comprehensive national power to maximise China’s options in the future.” Such differences also result from faulty evaluation, such as the concept of “rise” in Western political discourse. Hence, the Chinese approach to “a peaceful rise” plan was altered to “peaceful development” challenging the original meaning of the policy. Another varying interpretation arises in the very concept of Tianxia itself which is regarded as the foundation for Chinese hegemonic ambitions in the West and not as a foundation for worldwide harmony, for which it could also serve. Eventually, while China’s conception has long been positive following the “five principles of peaceful co-existence” in relations, the “China threat” perception has been growing in the West. Along the same lines, NATO Allies articulated commitment to “*address the systemic challenges posed by*” China in their latest 2022 Strategic Concept.³⁰

In general, therefore, Chinese and US foreign policy approaches rest on diametric assumptions about the approach of the respective other. This disjuncture plays out in several conflicts between the two countries. One example where such a disjuncture arises is in the technology war³¹ that has been fought between the West and China. The technology war is an alleged competition, especially carried out by the US and China over key technologies like 5G, artificial intelligence, or semiconductors. China’s ambition to challenge the US leadership in this field is from a Western perception contextualised as a threat. However, when following the principles of Tianxia, such an ongoing action receives a less threatening touch. Accordingly, China does attempt to challenge hegemony, however without actively engaging in destroying harmony. Yet, the conflict arises among the two blocs that conceptualise this “technology war” differently. This further results in responses such as the US employment of protectionist measures whereas China tries to domesticate the supply chains.

Secondly, the Covid policies employed by the US and China respectively exemplify the difference between different approaches to world order as well. When India was hit by one of the world’s worst Covid spikes in 2021, the Indian government reached out for international help. Employing a Trumpistic “America First” stance, the US government cited a need to vaccinate American people³² first before lifting bans on vaccine exports. Meanwhile, people in China slammed the US for a “selfish” response to India’s inquiry³³ and for not acting in accordance with American leadership ambitions in the international system. China, on the other hand, has been supporting other countries throughout the pandemic, often opposing its own approach to Trump’s “America First” agenda, sticking to principles of Tianxia.

Third, such misunderstandings of divergent assumptions ultimately play a role in the countries’ Taiwan strategy. In an understanding that follows Tianxia’s assumptions, China insists on a peaceful solution and even offers a “one country–two systems”-solution in which China’s hierarchy over Taiwan is recognized while China respects Taiwan’s self-governing rights in internal affairs. Such a solution evokes analogies to the historical tributary system, one of the earliest implementations of Tianxia. However, the US’s strategic ambiguity on the Taiwan issue is causing China to distrust the global order, and it has adopted a more offensive foreign policy discourse, especially since Xi took office. As another major actor in the international system, China expects its territorial integrity and sovereignty to be respected, while the US continues to openly support Taiwan. The Taiwan issue is viewed differently by both the US and China. For China, it is an obvious violation of sovereignty rights, and a threat to its security. For the US, China’s Taiwan policy resembles a growing threat to democracy and peace in the region, and the current global order. Especially after Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine since February 2022, the international community has been concerned over the Taiwan issue that may turn into a similar conflict.

4. Conclusion:

The relations between China and the West are tense. China’s increasing assertiveness on the international scene challenges the hegemony which has been built up by the US in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Cold War. For many political observers, the relations between the two countries feature many fault lines that could turn into conflict.

The theme of conflict is especially foregrounded in Western conceptualisations of the relations. For this, analogies to the Cold War are drawn. Some of the arguments reiterated in the academic and political milieus even predict aggravating relations that would eventually turn into an all-out war. However, in making sense of the relations, these Western conceptualisations often neglect Chinese perspectives which cause the image that is being framed to be comprehensively limited.

While Western perspectives often highlight conflict, Chinese perspectives underscore the importance of harmony and hierarchy. Such a notion stems from the cultural concept of Tianxia (literally meaning “all under the heaven”). The fact that China is challenging the US hegemony without provoking conflict or war can be read as continuum of this Tianxia concept.

Consequently, a huge disjuncture exists between the two countries’ perception of each other and their respective policies, leading to strained relations. These fundamental misunderstandings hamper potential cooperation between the two great powers, which is needed to build a resilient world order or tackle global problems like climate change.

For this cooperation to happen, both countries need to move towards each other in their assumptions and beliefs about the functioning of world order and international relations in general. For the West, this would include pro-

moting dialogue instead of creating or reproducing narratives of competition and conflict. For China, this would include explaining its foreign policies and ambitions considering how it is lacking these.

The perception of the “China threat” among Western policy elites is growing. While it is clear that increased co-operation will contribute to peace and stability in the region, the Chinese support to Russia in its war in Ukraine and its actions around Taiwan after Pelosi’s visit has strengthened the hand of the US that is actively trying to bloc accumulation of power by China. As a result, the parties are increasing their military presence in the region, becoming an even greater security threat to each other. However, with mutual dependence and cooperation, more liberal policies prioritising mutual gains could create the basis for future cooperation and abate tensions and prevent eventual far-reaching conflict.

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