

United States, China and the power transition in the 21st century

Estados Unidos, China y la transición de poder en el siglo XXI

Abstract: The objective of this paper is to understand the upsurge in global conflicts, especially those involving the two main world powers: China and the United States of America. Aiming this, the methodology sought to put in perspective the theories regarding power transition and the geopolitical strategy of the two main (global) powers, China and USA. The objective was that, in this way, the article could indicate which one best fits the current context. The conclusion of the study was, on the other way of what is being defended by a great part of the specialists, the geopolitics of the 21st century is not reediting the bipolar system, lived during the Cold War, but going through a transition crisis, typical of contexts in which there is the dispute between hegemonic and other ascending power, as occurred during the decades before World War I. It remains to be seen how this dynamic is going to be processed in the 21st century.

Keywords: China. USA. Geopolitics. History. Power Transition Theory.

Resumen: Este artículo busca comprender el resurgimiento de los conflictos internacionales. Para ello, la metodología compara las teorías de la transición de poder y la estrategia geopolítica de las dos superpotencias globales: China y Estados Unidos. El objetivo era señalar qué corriente teórica sería la más adecuada para explicar el contexto actual. La conclusión del estudio fue que, contrariamente a lo que está siendo defendido por buena parte de los expertos, la geopolítica del siglo XXI no está reeditando el sistema bipolar, vivido durante la Guerra Fría, sino atravesando una crisis de transición, típica de contextos en los que existe la disputa entre la potencia hegemónica y otro ascendente, como ocurrió durante las décadas anteriores a la Primera Guerra Mundial. Queda por ver cómo se procesará esa dinámica en el siglo XXI.

Palabras Clave: China. Estados Unidos Geopolítica. Historia. Teoría de la Transición de Poder.

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1 Introduction

In September 2020, Donald Trump took the floor of the United Nations General Assembly and, in an aggressive manner, affirmed the need to fight what the Republican called “Chinese virus”. The expression, in a double sense, referred to both the Coronavirus and the influence of the Asian country around the world, only by that fight, said the president, there would be peace and prosperity (DONALD ..., 2020).

Even after the change of command at the White House, as much as Joe Biden is more restrained with his words, the expectation is that the assertive conduct towards China will be maintained. According to Reuters, in a meeting with senators, the new president would have warned that the United States is Beijing’s most serious opponent and promised those present “to compete and win” the dispute with the Asian rival. “If we don’t start moving, they’ll eat our lunch,” the Democrat is alleged to have said (CHINA ..., 2021, n.p.).

How to interpret the recent escalation of rivalry between the two superpowers? That is the question that many analysts are asking. Political scientist Graham Allison (2020) argues that the international system would be going through a transition crisis, a concept that the professor explained through the expression Thucydides trap. According to Allison, thousands of years ago, Thucydides had already realized the systemic nature of conflicts in times of transition. Writing about the Peloponnesian War, the Greek historian demonstrated two factors that would have made the conflict between Spartans and Athenians inevitable: the rise of the second and the fear it caused in the first.

As much as there is an exaggeration in the idea that something would be inevitable, the metaphor is interesting. Now, if the conflict was inevitable, its outbreak is independent of the will of the respective rulers. If the actors, the century or the geography changed, the war would happen in the same way. That is, Thucydides was not only elucidating a local issue, but proposing an explanatory model that could be perfectly expanded. It was, therefore, to characterize the contexts in which there are similar dynamics, that the political scientist proposed the expression Thucydides trap.

It was, in effect, the Thucydides trap which would initiate the cataclysm of the First World War in the 19th century. In this context, the established order, led by the countries with the oldest industrialization, especially England and France, would be destabilized by the rapid growth of a recently unified Germany. And, in a world that had already been divided during Imperialism, the worldwide projection of the German Empire would invariably clash with hegemonic interests.

The question is whether China and the United States are, in fact, following the roadmap described above. For that, first, it is essential to know the debate about the so-called “power transition” theory and, secondly, the recent history of foreign policy of the two main powers of the 21st century. Only then will it be possible, in the sequence, to understand which of the theories about the transition of power would be the most adequate to explain the current context and, finally, to outline some ideas of how it would be possible to change the outcome of this dangerous plot.

As pessimistic as the above interpretation may seem, it is necessary to be clear that “different choices would have produced different results” (ALLISON, 2020, p. 270). At this point,

therefore, the key is to understand which decisions could increase and which would allow the risk of armed conflict to be removed. Paraphrasing Thucydides, we can say that it is the fear that the rise of Beijing has caused in Washington that has imposed on international relations theorists the urgent need to think about ways out so that the war is avoidable.

2 Theoretical considerations

Like the realist tradition, the theory of the transition of power favors the study of power relations. In the second case, however, the focus is on systemic asymmetries. Abramson Organski (1958), a pioneer in the field, for example, proposed a pyramid to characterize international hierarchies. States were classified into four levels: 1) dominant state, 2) great powers, 3) regional powers, 4) secondary powers. The argument is that the position that each actor occupies in the international hierarchy would be fundamental for the understanding of the factors that lead to cooperation or competition between States.

Also, according to Organski, the dominant powers would be composed of a small group of countries that disproportionately concentrate the available power resources. For this reason, these States would be interested in maintaining the status quo that privileges them. What is expected under normal conditions is that the superpower will seek to stabilize the system. In other words, unlike classical realism, peace does not come from the balance of power, but it would be imperial.

The problem is that the hierarchical pyramid is not static. The correlation of forces is always being modified, and when a power emerges capable of rivaling the established powers, the likelihood of an armed conflict would escalate considerably. In this case, systemic stability can be seen as detrimental to the interests of the dominant state, which would eventually impose a different dynamic. This is the context that can be classified as a transition of power. The question is whether the rivalry between the USA and China is following the script described by transition theorists.

Graham Allison, as said, was adamant in saying yes. John Mearsheimer (2001) also does not appear to be very optimistic about the current scenario. The offensive realism, proposed by Mearsheimer, argues that international security comes from the concentration of resources and not from the balance of power. Such a perspective significantly alters the expected behavior of the actors on the world geopolitical board. “The great powers would always be revisionist forces in the eternal search for the maximization of their power [...]. Only with greater sums of power resources would threats be overcome and security, in fact, achieved” (BARCELLOS; MÈRCHER, 2020, p. 389).

The transition periods, therefore, would configure scenarios of uncertainty and mutual distrust, which could induce the formation of a new security dilemma. The conclusion is that, in these contexts, there would be a high probability that competition between rival poles of power would escalate in the direction of a war conflict. “In short, China’s rise is unlikely to be tranquil” (MEARSHEIMER, 2014)

If such interpretations are correct, the increase in international friction would have a structural character and, in the coming years, the tendency would be to worsen it. However,

there are other interpretative proposals. Liberals, for example, are less pessimistic. According to this current, globalization would prefigure a complex interdependence framework, characterized by mutual dependence between the actors. In a scenario in which global markets are integrated, according to authors like Joseph Nye (2002), the emergence of a new global player would leverage the world economy and bring benefits to the international community as a whole. Therefore, as long as there are defined rules and multilateral institutions capable of mediating conflicts, the transition of power would occur without major upheavals.

Chinese geopolitical thinking also proposes another interpretive key for the current scenario. Professor Yan Xuetong, exponent of the so-called moral realism, understands that the conduct of States must be guided by ethical criteria and always seek the preservation of peace (RIBEIRO, 2020). For the transition to take place peacefully, Beijing should take advantage of the decay of American soft power and enlist followers in the international community through moral conduct. “Even if China overcomes the United States in general power, it cannot exercise international leadership unless it can attract followers, which requires articulating and defending an ideology that appeals to other cultures” (LARSON, 2020, p. 164 apud RIBEIRO, 2020, p. 632).

This is what Eastern intellectuals call the real path. The example used to support moral realism comes from Eastern history, from the Warring States period, when the decay of the Zhou State and the rise of the Qin dynasty occurred. In the case of the Warring States, unlike what happened in Ancient Greece, hegemonic balance would have occurred, not mutual destruction. The proposal is that, in the name of a balanced and peaceful environment, global governance should favor the “distribution of international responsibility to reduce threats common to all countries” (XUETONG, 2019, p. 7 apud RIBEIRO, 2020, p. 630).

Well, in the face of such a multifaceted debate, the basic question is: who would be right? At this point, the only certainty is that a new geopolitical cycle is being initiated. And, in the midst of so many doubts, it remains to put the hypotheses of the theorists to the test. Where are we going? The answer to this distressing question must be sought, first, in the reevaluation of recent history.

3 The competitive coexistence of the 1990s

Professors Li Xing and Timothy Shaw (2018) used the expression “sleeping in the same bed with different dreams” to characterize changes in world geopolitics. The pillars of the bilateral China / USA relationship were founded on an unstable basis because they had the objective of isolating a common enemy: the USSR. It was a “marriage” of convenience and, as such, should be revised after the collapse of the Bolshevik experience.

What would follow? The North American interpretation was that a policy of direct confrontation could isolate Westerners on the Asian continent (KISSINGER, 2012). For this reason, the redefinition of diplomatic guidelines would be done with great caution. Henceforth, according to Henry Kissinger (2011), both (China and the USA) would merge their strategies in a pattern of cooperative coexistence. “The United States and China realized that they needed each

other because both were too big to be dominated, too special to be transformed and too necessary for each other to allow the luxury of isolation” (KISSINGER, 2011, p. 469).

Cooperative coexistence should favor areas where there would be complementarity. The observed pattern, however, would be different. In the North American perspective, cooperation should be carried out through a clear hierarchy. China would become a partner of the US-led order. The Chinese, in turn, wanted to ride the tiger (XING; SHAW, 2018), an image that represents the dialectical tension between the opportunities and the dangers inherent in strategic cooperation with the main world power.

Gradually, emerging rivalries would bury the hope that the pattern of cooperative coexistence would be established. In practice, what happened was a competitive coexistence and, in this model, China was clearly taking advantage.

The USA, seeing the dangerous growth of a rival pole in Asia, would begin to reevaluate the strategy that was being adopted. Conforming what some scholars have defined as China's syndrome, characterized by “a mixture of psychological anxiety, emotional hysteria and empathic demonization” (XING; SHAW, 2018, p. 55). The reason for such anguish is the recognition that the balance of power is swinging towards the east and that, therefore, time would be detrimental to American interests. In the 21st century, the bed has become too small to accommodate two giants.

4 The American strategy

The correction of directions in US foreign policy had been initiated during the Obama administration. In 2011, shortly after China overtook Japan and became the second largest economy in the world, the Democrat would start the strategy known as Pivot/Rebalance to Asia. The idea was to counteract the Chinese influence by approaching the nations of the Pacific Basin and Southeast Asia. The strategic objective was the political, economic and military strangulation of the Asian rival (PECEQUILO, 2013).

In 2015, after seven years of negotiations, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was signed, a free trade agreement involving twelve countries bordering the Pacific Ocean. The TPP should strengthen the North American position through commercial cooptation (PECEQUILO, 2013). In December 2017, the Trump administration published the new National Security Strategy report, which openly pointed to China as a strategic competitor and main threat to the country's global interests (RIBEIRO, 2020). The turn in American politics was complete.

According to Ambassador Samuel Pinheiro Guimarães, the American foreign policy would henceforth pursue the following objectives: 1) eliminate the trade deficit, 2) prevent the transfer of advanced technology, 3) reduce the presence of Chinese students in the USA, 4) prevent the adoption of Huawei's 5G technology, 5) promote the return of industrial production to the USA, 6) expand the country's budget and military presence, 7) align European countries with the USA against China (GUIMARÃES, 2020).

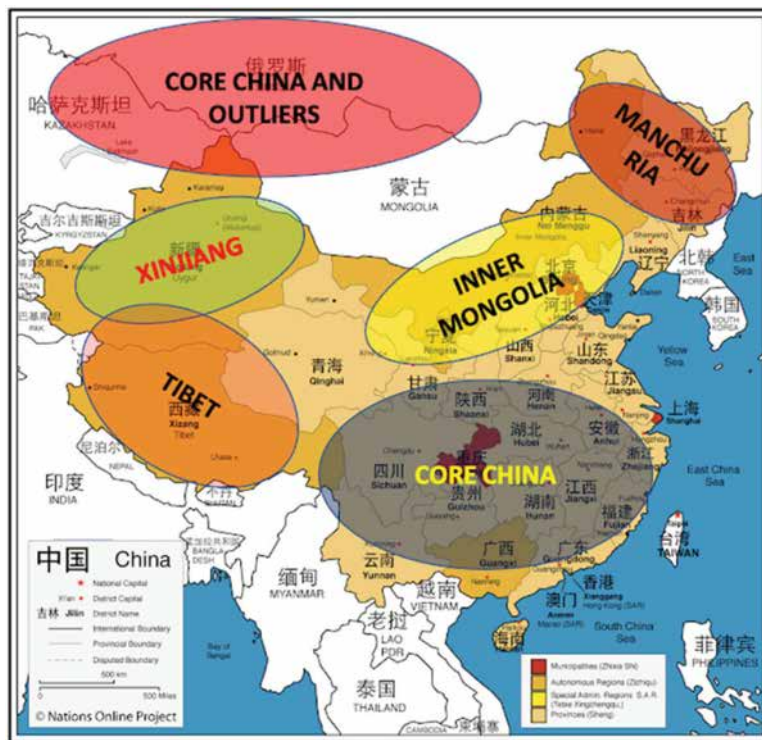
According to the influential political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski (2012), in a conflict environment, the stability of the Asian continent will depend on what Jimmy Carter's former Counselor called “two overlapping regional triangles, nucleated in China. The first refers to

China, India and Pakistan. The second to China, Japan and Korea with the states of Southeast Asia playing a supporting role” (BRZEZINSKI, 2012, p. 162 apud PECEQUILO, 2013, p. 3697).

In the case of the first, which involves problem areas, such as Tibet and the autonomous region of Xinjiang, the central issue would be that of human rights. The problem is that both Xinjiang and Tibet are strategic territories for the geopolitical ambitions of the PRC. Xinjiang allows direct access to Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, Russia, Mongolia and India, a key area for the most daring project in recent decades, the new Silk Road. The autonomous region also acts as a “bumper” for the central area of the country, in addition to housing natural resources and being the main area for testing nuclear weapons.

In Tibet important military bases are installed, mainly of the Air Force, due to its altitude. The Himalayas, which cross the entire border with India, form an artificial protective wall, offering an important strategic advantage to the power that controls the mountain range. It is also in Tibet that are the source of the main rivers that cross the Asian continent and, from a geopolitical perspective, dominating water sources means exercising power in the water supply of several countries.

Figure 1 - Strategic position of Xinjiang and Tibet



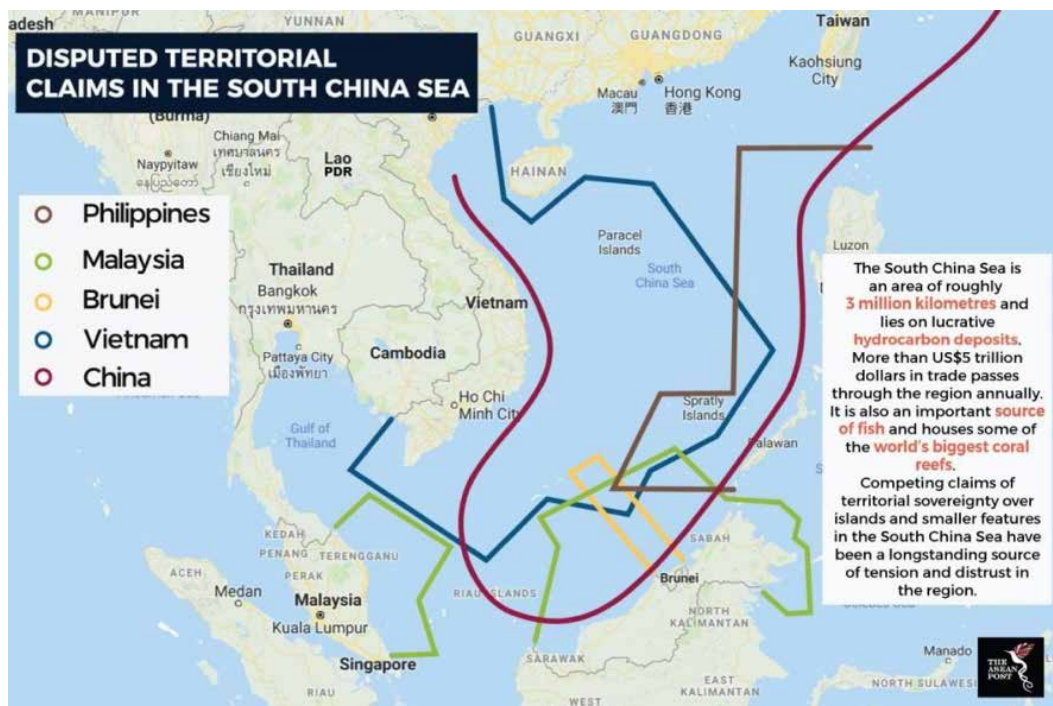
Source: Shankar (2020).

In the second triangle, the United States intends to intensify conflicts in Asia and the Pacific in order to consolidate the strategic-military encirclement of the Asian rival. The points of vulnerability are many. The dispute with Japan over the East Sea islands has been going on for years and expo-

ses the historic unhealed wounds between the two main Asian powers. But it is in the South China Sea that tensions have reached dangerous levels. The Communist Party claims the right over the so-called nine-lane islands, or ten, if Taiwan is included, which would give sovereignty to the Chinese from the sea, which has been called the Asian Mediterranean, such is its strategic importance, and which has also recently been compared to the Persian Gulf, due to oil and natural gas reserves.

In 1992, China passed controversial legislation that puts the South China Sea under the country's sovereignty, a document that is not recognized by any of the governments in the regional surroundings. This fact causes friction with Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei and the Philippines. Indeed, in 2016, the Hague Permanent Court of Arbitration recognized the Philippines' right to economically explore the South China Sea. Researchers Diego Pautasso and Gaio Dória (2017) highlight the existence of strong indications that the USA would have influenced the lawsuit of these countries in the International Court (especially that of the Philippines). Washington's goal, by fomenting the litigation, would be to balance Beijing's weight in the region. In any case, in the end, the Resolution would be ignored.

Figure 2 - Importance of the South Sea for China's military and commercial security.



Source: Gnanasagaran (2018).

Taiwan and Hong Kong are also points of instability. If a power wants to dominate the mainland, it will first have to enter the island of Taiwan. The strait leaves the main financial centers vulnerable: Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong are cities located near the east coast. Taiwan is also in a strategic position for the CCP's ambitions to control trade routes

across the South China Sea. In recent history, therefore, Taiwan was (and remains) a space of tension, the epicenter of the shock caused by contact between the West and the East.

Hong Kong, on the other hand, with a political system similar to that of Western democracies, has been noted in recent years as a nucleus of resistance to political centralization promoted by the Communist Party. The island is also the main channel of influence for Western propaganda in the country. This puts Beijing in the face of a complex dilemma. If, on the one hand, Hong Kong's autonomy can be used as a form of internal destabilization; on the other hand, the repression of popular movements can strengthen the Western narrative regarding the "totalitarian danger", in addition to hindering the strategy of approaching the government of Taipei (Taiwan's capital).

It is in this context that the recent return to anti-communist discourse must be interpreted. Not as an explanation of reality, but as part of the containment of Chinese geopolitical power. The notion of a new Cold War is an attempt to stop the Chinese strategy of co-opting partners by example. An idea that, as seen, is at the basis of moral realism. Now, by reducing geopolitics to the confrontation between good and evil, it would become the obligation of the so-called "free and democratic nations" to engage in the fight against the common enemy, which, in practice, would place them under the tutelage of the United States. Therefore, according to this narrative, China should be seen as a threat to freedom and could never serve as an example to other actors in the international community.

In sum, the Chinese expansion is producing imbalances in the balance of power, a fact that allows for more assertive action on the part of the United States. Apparently, Washington will act in two directions: 1) indirectly, seeking to intensify the rival's points of vulnerability and 2) directly, resorting to the notion of a new Cold War, in order to rescue the values that confer legitimacy to the containment policy and which will be used to block Chinese influence in areas where the Western power is unable to compete under advantageous conditions.

5 The Chinese strategy

The Chinese dream "captures the strong desire of a billion Chinese: to be rich, powerful and respected" (ALLISON, 2020, p. 136). Now, considering that the country has grown close to double digits in the last four decades, it is possible to say that the model followed has shown success. The Chinese strategy, therefore, is to maintain the pace of modernization of previous years. In other words, if the American leadership wants to intensify the rival's points of vulnerability, the Eastern planners intend to annul them. It is, within this perspective, that the oriental narrative of peaceful ascension must be understood.

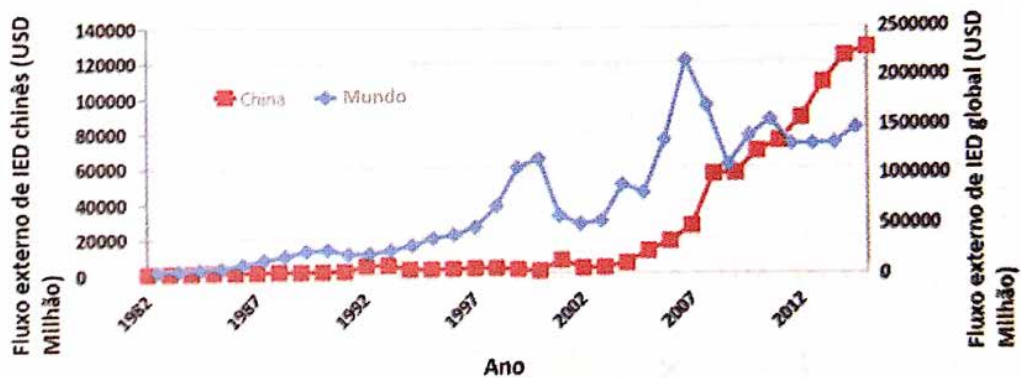
In practical terms, the country's foreign policy would be aiming at four objectives: 1) to return the leadership in the Asian continent. 2) re-establish the territory of Greater China, which includes the separatist regions of Tibet and Xinjiang. 3) to recover the sphere of influence and to prevent the action of Americans in their strategic surroundings, 4) to take a leading role in the relevant issues of the world diplomatic debate (ALLISON, 2020). In addition to those mentioned, we can include the dispute for the vanguard in cutting-edge technological production and the control of part of the sources of raw materials, food production and global energy.

To this end, Beijing operates on two fronts. In the western part, the CCP seeks projection in the area that Western geopolitics defined as Heartland. First introduced in 2013, the New Silk

Road (OBOR), the most ambitious economic initiative undertaken by the Asian country so far, would begin to revitalize the logistics infrastructure to stimulate China's trade with Africa and Eurasia. Configuring itself as an important strategic corridor for political and economic projection in the region.

Researchers Leonardo Mècher and Bruna Barcellos, point out that, since 1999, the country's strategic objective has been to boost investments by its multinational companies around the world and ensure access to the fundamental resources for maintaining the rapid expansion of economic activity. In addition to allowing the acquisition of new technologies (BARCELLOS; MÉRCHER, 2020).

Gráfico 1 – External flow of Chinese FDI.



Source: Unctad (2013 apud Ma; Overbeek, 2018, p. 75).

In 2020, under the leadership of Beijing, the largest free trade agreement in the world (RCEP) would be created, involving countries in Asia and the Pacific, without the participation of the United States. The RCEP is being called by the Western media as Chinese globalization. As much as it may sound like an exaggeration, the term is interesting. China was the main beneficiary of the global financial deregulation of the previous decades and, increasingly, it needs international trade to maintain its growth pace. The problem is that, apparently, such rules are being revised. In response, it would be occurring the conformation of a synocentric system (PAUTASSO; UNGARETTI, 2017). In other words, "Chinese globalization" would serve as an antidote to the retreat of "American" globalization".

Figure 3 – International Economic Corridors



Source: Alves (2017).

In the east, the goal is to test American naval supremacy in the Pacific and thereby reconfigure maritime space. Washington's assertive attitude produces psychological effects that cannot be overlooked. It is common to hear from the Chinese authorities references to the so-called century of humiliation, between the first Opium War (1839) and the Communist Revolution (1949), in which the country was subject to successive foreign occupations. "For many Chinese, pursuing national interests is not only important to move China towards national rejuvenation, but because it actively protects China from another period of oppression" (TISCHLER, 2020, n.p.).

The argument is that such humiliations were only possible due to the internal weakening of the Qing dynasty, which allowed foreign interference in Chinese domestic affairs. At this point, there is a clear parallel between national history and the current separatist conflicts, which are being stimulated by the Americans. As Mark Tischler, an expert in Asian geopolitics, demonstrated:

Understanding this narrative is essential for the understanding of Beijing's domestic, foreign, and defense policy. While for American decision-makers losing control of the South China Sea might be a significant blow to Washington's strategic standing, for their Chinese counterparts losing control of the region may signal the first steps of another occupation. This might sound like hyperbole, but the haunting memories of this dark past play an immensely strong force in Beijing's contemporary policies (TISCHLER, 2020.)

This mentality has been instrumental in driving the recent expansion of the Asian country's military power. The naval strategy, first, must guarantee the supremacy of the seas that surround its territory - which involves Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines and the southern China Sea - and, subsequently, be able to project power globally (VIOLANTE; MARRONI; MAIA, 2020).

It is an ambition that, it must be said, is becoming more and more plausible: "thanks to the continuous regaining of power of influence in East Asia, for China the American position in the western Pacific is in decline. Chinese actions in the region have managed to accelerate this retreat, most noticeably in the South China Sea". (ALLISON, 2020, p. 180).

The geopolitics of contemporary China, therefore, operates in a multidimensional way. The hegemonic transition, however, needs more than economic weight and military strength. As the Chinese themselves pointed out, it takes legitimacy to lead. The strategy, in this case, has been to bet on the growing contradictions of the post-Cold War international order, shaped by American values, and which delivered very little of what it had promised.

The globalization of the last decades has produced imbalances and strengthened asymmetries, concentrated power in a few States, at the same time that it has made possible the rise of new regional centers. Here, there is a strong contradiction. Now, the capital of China, Beijing, as said, was the main beneficiary of financial deregulation and, therefore, depends on the maintenance of the system it criticizes. The justification is that "Chinese globalization" would be guided by different rules. The promise is that it will be able to provide an inclusive integration model, which would allow to overcome the asymmetries between developed and developing countries (PAUTASSO; UNGARETTI, 2017).

For this, Beijing seeks moral strength in the narrative that, like a good part of the emerging countries, China was subjugated by the imperial project of the western powers. However, having overcome the peripheral condition, the country would be in a position to modify the imposed system in order to perpetuate the submission of peripheral peoples. It is in this way that the principle of moral realism of enlisting followers by example is being put into practice in the 21st century.

6 21st century geopolitics and power transition theorists

After presenting the main theories of the power transition, and the strategic insertion of the two main global superpowers, the time has come to answer the last question proposed: which of the explanatory currents would be the most appropriate to interpret the current context? This issue will be addressed below.

The liberal proposal is certainly the most fragile. The reason is a contradiction between the "ought" and the "is" of the international system. The New World Order was an American creation and, as such, should be sustained by the country's global hegemony. Washington's supremacy would be a key element in the governance of the system. Thus, at the moment when a defiant power arose, it could be understood as a threat to the reproduction of the liberal order itself.

Ultimately, therefore, what would be at risk would be the values that, according to liberalism, should ensure that the transition takes place in a peaceful manner. This is the logic underlying the rescue of the new Cold War concept in recent years; what would be in dispute would be freedom from

the totalitarian threat. In the end, this interpretation would make it impossible for the hegemonic dispute to be managed by multilateral institutions.

Moral realism also has limitations. How would it be possible to form a hegemonic balance in a context in which the challenging power grows at a rate three times greater than the established power? There are also countless historical examples - such as the Third Vietnam War (1978), support for UNITA in the civil war in Angola and the treatment reserved for separatists in Xinjiang and Tibet - which, contrary to what is alleged, demonstrate that the country Asia is far from privileging moral values in its internal and external conduct.

In addition, Beijing's stance in Asia does not indicate a willingness to share responsibility with other actors. The country's rise is also not without conflict; the surrounding countries - such as India, Japan, Vietnam, Australia, Malaysia, the Philippines, among others - often perceive the new regional power as a threat to the sovereignty of these states and not as an alternative to American hegemony. Chinese performance in Asia, therefore, is far from the proposal expressed by the concept of the real path. Furthermore, from the North American point of view, the proposed division of responsibility sounds like a strategy to recognize the global power of the Asian rival; that is, it would be just another step towards the transition of power.

What is being verified in 21st century geopolitics, therefore, is closer to Graham's Thucydides trap metaphor and Mearsheimer's offensive realism. In 2014, John Mearsheimer already argued that if China maintained the pace of growth of previous decades (which is happening), sooner or later, Beijing would need to project power in its strategic environment. The United States, in reaction, would seek approximation with the other countries in the region, in order to block the growth of the challenging power. It is precisely what has been happening in recent years. "As much as China rejects in its speech the idea of hegemony (...), and is not even in a hegemonic position over the other powers, it maintains concrete data on Mearsheimer's maximum power" (BARCELOS; MÈRCHER, 2020, p 379, our translation).

7 Final Considerations

The history of the 21st century will be told according to the way in which China will be inserted as a power in the international system. It is necessary to be clear that this movement is never smooth, however, the turbulences produced can vary greatly in intensity.

Apparently, international rivalry is following the same path that led Ancient Greece to ruin after the Peloponnesian War, and which, millennia later, would sink Europe into the cataclysm of the two world wars. It would be a mistake, however, to understand Thucydides' trap in a fatalistic way. As much as the Greek historian said that the Peloponnesian War was inevitable, it must be recognized that practically everything can be avoided. In human history, there is no inexorable fate.

If the cause of Hegemonic War between the established power and the defying power is structural, the form with which it will be conducted will depend decisively on the choices of the two main protagonists. In other words, the war does not have to be military. To this end, the United States must accept that Beijing's growing geopolitical weight is an unavoidable reality, to separate its vital interests from those transitory, in order to put the latter on the diplomatic negotiating table, in a joint effort of understanding.

Asia's geopolitics, for example, while vital to the Chinese, does not threaten the security of any nation on the American continent. In that case, it is obvious who should be inclined to give in. Rather than sending aircraft carriers to the South China Sea, it might be more productive to mediate dialogue between the parties involved, in order to also mitigate the military pressure that Beijing is clearly exerting on its neighbors. Such an act would even help the United States to recover the moral strength of its foreign policy, which, in recent years, has entered an accelerated process of wear and tear. In addition to decisively affecting the Chinese ambition to lead by example.

There is no way to prevent the expansion of power in the international system from an act that grows at the pace that China has been presenting. Any form of containment policy, therefore, in addition to being highly risky in the medium and long term, will be doomed to failure. The maintenance of North American hegemony needs more internal reforms, which allow the resumption of dynamism, especially with regard to the production of new technologies, which reconfigures the country's external insertion. American authorities need to be clear about this reality.

In short, the inevitable rivalry between two superpowers must be conducted within the limits imposed by the higher need for peacekeeping. For this, it must be borne in mind that Thucydides' trap ended up ruining both Sparta and Athens and, in the 19th century, it would also devastate the European continent. Not to mention that, in the atomic era, if set in motion, the military machine of doomsday (KISSINGER, 2012) may lose its metaphorical content.

The lesson we can learn from the past, therefore, is that war has never been a solution, be it hot or cold. If it is not possible for two giants to sleep in the same bed, they will need to moderate their dreams for humanity to continue dreaming.

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