

# The United States and China: the dispute of the Twenty-First Century. Is it just power?

*Estados Unidos y China: la disputa del siglo XXI. ¿Es solo poder?*

**Abstract:** The hegemonic dispute between the US and China, a key contemporary event, leads us to reflect on the future of the global order. Traditional resources of power (political, economic and military), inexorably, will be present. In this context, specific variables will influence the process, with emphasis on leadership in the scientific-technological segment, the balance of military power, alliance policies and the central ideational factors that characterize the different worldviews. As the aforementioned dispute gains momentum, the accurate reading of events of a cyclical nature and their connections with outstanding structural issues in international relations grows in importance. The resulting analyzes will support the inevitable reordering of national strategies. This article aims to unveil the aforementioned variables, relating them in cause and effect to the dominant Western-centric strategic thinking. The conclusion seeks to portray some challenges related to the eventual construction of a new global order.

**Keywords:** hegemonic dispute; global order; national strategy.

**Resumen:** La disputa hegemónica entre EE. UU. y China, un evento contemporáneo clave, nos lleva a reflexionar sobre el futuro del orden global. Los recursos tradicionales de poder (político, económico y militar), inexorablemente, estarán presentes. En este contexto, variables específicas influirán en el proceso, con énfasis en el liderazgo del segmento científico-tecnológico, el equilibrio del poder militar, las políticas de alianzas y en los factores ideacionales centrales que caracterizan las distintas cosmovisiones. A medida que la disputa antes mencionada gana impulso, crece en importancia la lectura precisa de los acontecimientos de carácter coyuntural y sus conexiones con relevantes cuestiones estructurales de las relaciones internacionales. Los análisis resultantes apoyarán el inevitable reordenamiento de las estrategias nacionales. Este artículo pretende develar las variables antes mencionadas, relacionándolas en causa y efecto con el dominante pensamiento estratégico occidentalocéntrico. La conclusión busca retratar algunos desafíos relacionados con la eventual construcción de un nuevo orden global.

**Palabras clave:** disputa hegemónica; orden mundial; estrategia nacional.

**Guilherme Otávio**

**Godinho de Carvalho** 

Exército Brasileiro. Centro de Estudos  
Estratégicos do Exército (CEEEEx)  
Universidade de Brasília (UnB)  
Brasília, DF, Brasil  
guilhermeart90@gmail.com

**Received: Jul. 11 2021**

**Approved: Jan. 10 2023**

**COLEÇÃO MEIRA MATTOS**

**ISSN on-line 2316-4891 / ISSN print 2316-4833**

<http://ebrevistas.eb.mil.br/index.php/RMM/index>



## 1 INTRODUCTION

The liberal international order inherited from World War II (WW II), ratified in part in the post-Cold War period, has been put to the test. For some years now, to varying degrees, a process of shifting power from the West to the East has been suggested. The allegation of the occurrence of an alleged hegemonic transition (now underway) from the United States of America (USA) to China, accompanied by the emergence of other poles of power – essentially regional – frames the idea (CARVALHO, 2022, p. 94). Such a framework can be characterized by the emergence of a multipolar international order, where two powers seek the hegemonic condition and other states (or blocs) try to play relevant roles in the process of shaping a new global order.

Traditional theories of International Relations (IR) have long identified the importance of transition periods between hegemonies, emphasizing the relevance of revisionist actors and dynamics involved in the dispute, as well as the possible erosive impacts on the stability of the international system. The *mainstream* of the analysts, including the Americans, consider China the only geopolitical rival really capable of threatening the US position at the top of the global order. From this perspective, strategists have worked to advise the agents involved in the highest-level decision-making processes in their countries, seeking the best solutions to the myriad of instigating issues that are now evident.

Allison (2020) argues that the withering rise of China causes a seismic shift in the global balance of power. From the repertoire of challenges to US hegemony, ranging from a robust economic rise to growing empowerment in the military field, China presents something new to its main rival: competitive advantage in prominent niches of the scientific-technological field. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States has led all technological revolutions, presenting itself as the inducer of the transformation processes linked to them. Currently, by positioning itself as a competitor that dominates part of relevant segments in the technological sphere, China demonstrates a willingness to fight hard for leadership in the sector. Among the segments directly impacted, the defense segment stands out.

Drawing on significant economic potential, China spends some of its vast domestic savings in various parts of the world. Investments in infrastructure that enable access to natural resources and/or favor the establishment of strategic logistics corridors, associated with the granting of financial loans under very “special” conditions, are part of the country’s list of options. From this framework emerges an intricate network of nations that make up the repertoire of Chinese foreign policy, part of it focused on the economic and financial engagement of nations and corporations. Blackwill and Harris (2016), in exploring the concept of *geo-economics*<sup>1</sup>, defend the idea of Chinese protagonism in this segment, “considering China as the best available lens to understand how geo-economic tools operate in practice” (BLACKWILL; HARRIS, 2016, p. 93).

---

<sup>1</sup> The use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests and produce favorable geopolitical outcomes, considering the effects of other nations’ economic actions on a country’s geopolitical objectives (BLACKWILL; HARRIS, 2016, p. 20).

Unlike other powers, China does not enjoy consolidated security guarantees. The low institutionalization of the defense architecture in its strategic environment leads the country to seek maximum autonomy from its military power. Heavy investments in obtaining capabilities for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) outsource one of the central components of China's grand strategy, indicating the intention of the country's policymakers to establish a military structure that ensures its economic and strategic interests. Such a situation could lead us to infer increased friction with other global actors.

In this context, in the game of great powers, the expansion of areas of influence and the recomposition of partnerships and strategic alliances tend to characterize contemporary geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics. From the set of incident variables, it is indisputable that hard power will continue to occupy a prominent place. To the material foundations (military and economic) linked to it, it is associated a growing diplomatic assertiveness, oriented towards the defense of national interests and the communication of immaterial values. Different perspectives, worldviews and self-perceptions lead us to reflect on how and to what degree the aforementioned variables will be considered in the fluid dynamics of international politics (CARVALHO, 2022).

Successive theoretical debates that frame the field of IR study are anchored in philosophical and epistemological reflections, influenced by different ways of seeing the world. Focal and monochrome lenses have been replaced by others that allow a broader and more plural reading of international phenomena, generating new strategies for capturing and interpreting reality. The classical representation of a world marked by competition and the imposition of force is increasingly being replaced by that of a global order characterized by complementarities and interdependencies.

In the wake of the so-called "upheavals", the emergence of "subaltern" and "periphery" actors reinforce a discourse that challenges the predominance of hard power, sharing less competitive and more inclusive conceptions. A possible synthesis that translates the essence of this movement in the field of IR would be something as "the current world cries out for different things". However, the acceleration and deepening of a possible process of hegemonic transition, along the lines of the classic geopolitical disputes, seem to challenge the aforementioned analytical proposals.

Thus, by adding complexity to the international competition now installed, the combination of material and ideational factors allows us to formulate the following question: **are the traditional Western-centric concepts, references and perspectives, especially those that over-emphasize the centrality of power distribution in the international system, sufficient to understand the emergence of the Chinese-American competition for global hegemony? Anyway, is it just power?**

In trying to answer the question and stimulate some reflections, this article discusses the capabilities of China and the US to transform their power resources into real power, highlighting the relevance of scientific-technological and military variables in the process.

It highlights the meaning and weight of ideas in the competition, such as the (communicated) translation of values, interpretations of the world and self-perceptions. Conceptually, it explores some limitations of the so-called Western-centric vision, with the intention of shedding light on some characteristics of the current process of transformation of the world order. To this end, the work is divided into three sections, in addition to this introduction and a conclusion.

The first section addresses the competition in the field of Science and Technology (S&T) and its proximity to defense issues, especially regarding the achievement of military capabilities that aggregate technologies capable of impacting the distribution of global power. In the second section, considerations are drawn about the value and weight of “worldviews” in the composition of the matrix of variables that permeates the game of the great powers. The third section reflects on the effectiveness and resilience of the traditional West-centric view in understanding contemporary dynamics, superficially addressing how the process of defining the international agenda interacts with the likely emergence of a multipolar system. In conclusion, it is argued that the Chinese-American dispute ranges from issues related to the distribution of power to ideational factors related to their worldviews.

## 2 THE COMPETITION IN THE FIELD OF S&T AND ITS INTERACTION WITH THE DEFENSE SEGMENT

Not so long ago - 30 years or less - China figured timidly in any *ranking* that depicted levels of education, science and innovation. Currently, after vigorous investments in the qualification of human resources, referenced in a solid strategy, the country occupies a prominent place as a developer and supplier of cutting-edge technologies. When analyzing their results in the International Program for Student Assessment (PISA)<sup>2</sup>, whose score is higher than the average of the countries of the Organization for cooperation and Development (OECD)<sup>3</sup>, the origin of the advances obtained is clearly identified.

In China, the growing investment in education translates into positive reflections for various segments of the economy. The share of global value added in high-tech products grows continuously, with emphasis on segments such as computing, semiconductors, pharmaceuticals and communication equipments. The progressive number of patents<sup>4</sup> and the amount invested in research and development (R&D) corroborate the increase in the valuation of its role as a country with a high native capacity for technological innovation, despite still being considered an incubator of cyber piracy and corporate espionage<sup>5</sup>.

2 On the subject, consult the link available at: <https://exame.com/mundo/pisa-mostra-que-a-china-e-o-pais-a-ser-copiado-em-educacao/>. Accessed: 12 Dec. 2022.

3 On the subject, consult the link available at: <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/PISA%202018%20Insights%20and%20Interpretations%20FINAL%20PDF.pdf> accessed: 12 Dec. 2022.

4 On the subject, consult the link available at: [https://www.wipo.int/pressroom/en/articles/2021/article\\_0002.html](https://www.wipo.int/pressroom/en/articles/2021/article_0002.html). Accessed: 12 Dec. 2022.

5 On the subject, consult the link available at: <https://mittechreview.com.br/como-a-china-se-tornou-uma-gigante-de-espionagem-cibernetica-sem-igual-e-duradoura/>. Accessed: 12 Dec. 2022.

The latest Five-Year Plan of the Communist Party of China - CPC (2021-2025)<sup>6</sup> lists seven strategic areas considered essential to “national security and overall development”: artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, integrated circuits, genetics and biotechnology research, neuroscience, and the aerospace sector. According to the document, the country intends to create national laboratories and strengthen academic programs to develop and support some of the aforementioned technologies. In addition, vaccines, deep sea exploration and voice recognition are also present in the list of goals. For the first time, the CPC devoted a chapter exclusively to technology, announcing its intention to raise R&D spending by more than 7% per year, representing, in absolute terms, 2.4% of GDP.

The context of a “technology war” is putting pressure on Beijing to “de-Americanize” technology supply chains. The strategy aims to replace US inputs with domestic technology or from alternative suppliers in Southeast Asia and Europe. Improving domestic innovation and protecting technology chains are priorities in the CPC’s 14th Five-Year Plan. In this context, a bifurcation of production chains between China and the US is likely to occur in areas such as telecommunications, infrastructure, data storage, armaments and submarine data cables.

China leads the production of rare earths, while the US dominates that of semiconductors and software necessary for chips manufacture. The semiconductor dispute is a prime example of how the value chain between the two countries is unraveling (or at least weakening). US punishes Chinese firms and wants to boost local production<sup>7</sup>. China stocks up chips and analyzes own means of manufacturing.

The next generations of mobile telephony represent a paradigm shift of our era, enabling the use of devices and applications that only acquire functionality by franchising a large data traffic. From the set of disruptive technologies that will depend on said condition, AI emerges in importance. By adding cognition to robots and weaponry, which applications are promising to leverage military capabilities at all levels and domains, AI has the potential to alter the traditional and well-known characteristics of conflicts, delegating to their holders fundamental strategic advantages. In this sense, China’s current leadership in the fifth generation segment of mobile telephony (5G) tends to allow it to obtain benefits more immediately.

As for the availability of military power, the asymmetry is significant. The US maintains its military spending at high levels, which has ensured it world leadership for decades. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2021)<sup>8</sup>, US military expenditures reached \$ 778 billion in 2020, which represented a 4.4% increase from the previous year and 39% of total global military expenditures. It was the third consecutive year of growth, after seven continuous declines. A significant portion of this increase

---

6 On the subject, consult the link available at: [https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/t0237\\_5th\\_Plenum\\_Proposal\\_EN-1.pdf](https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/t0237_5th_Plenum_Proposal_EN-1.pdf). Accessed: 12 Dec. 2022.

7 In October 2022, the US government issued a tough measure restricting Chinese companies’ access to chips technology, which increased the commercial and technological competition between the two countries.

8 On the subject, consult the link available at: <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>. Accessed: 12 Dec. 2022.

is attributed to increased investments in R&D, as well as the progress of several long-term projects related to the modernization of the nuclear arsenal and the entire US defense sector.

In 2020, China remained in the vice-leadership of global military spending (\$252 billion). From the superficial analysis of the disbursed profile, a significant portion was destined to obtain military equipment with high added technological value (aircraft, satellites, own inertial navigation system, missiles, cybernetic interferers, etc.), some of them of national origin. Together, the US and China account for 2/3 of the world's military spending.

The occurrence of tests linked to the development of hypersonic missiles by China has aroused the attention of the international community. The dominance of capabilities linked to a fractional orbital bombardment system (FOBS), although not unprecedented, brings the Asian country to a differentiated position in the list of effective threats to the United States. An eventual success in overcoming US missile defenses could lead to an expensive, undesirable and dangerous arms race<sup>9</sup>.

The International press recently released images attributed to the construction of silos for intercontinental ballistic missiles, in the desert of Gansu province, in northwest China, alerting international security experts to the subject<sup>10</sup>. It is estimated that the PLA has at its disposal about 200 nuclear warheads in a condition to be operated, which has generated speculation in the Pentagon about a possible change in Chinese nuclear strategy, a concern externalized in the *Annual Report to Congress-Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*<sup>11</sup>. Although a clear nuclear asymmetry favorable to the United States persists, the incorporation of new capabilities raises the degree of availability and readiness of the Chinese armed forces, impacting the balance of power.

Also connected to the aerospace dimension and with high added technological value, the satellite segment has acquired increasing relevance in the spectrum of competition between the great powers. The intention of the use of space for non-peaceful purposes is accompanied by outstanding investments in the development of technologies aimed at anti-satellite weapons. The US, China and Russia are locked in a relatively quiet dispute, fraught with intense debate and an exchange of accusations, which has required sophisticated diplomatic articulation. The Treaty on Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in outer Space (PPWT)<sup>12</sup>, which Beijing and Moscow submitted to the UN, is an example of a concertation instrument now under evaluation.

---

9 On the subject, consult the link available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/18/hypersonic-china-missile-nuclear-fobs/>. Accessed: 12 Dec. 2022.

10 On the subject, consult the links available at: <https://www.economist.com/china/2021/07/31/china-is-rapidly-building-new-nuclear-missile-silos> and <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/30/china-nuclear-weapons-silos-arms-control/>. Accessed: 12 Dec. 2022.

11 On the subject, consult the link available at: <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>. Accessed: 12 Dec. 2022.

12 On the subject, consult the link available at: <https://www.nti.org/learn/treaties-and-regimes/proposed-prevention-arms-race-space-paros-treaty/>. Accessed: 12 Dec. 2022.

From the foregoing, it is possible to infer that, despite the covid-19 pandemic and the reduction of part of its economic activity, China has been able to sustain the production of its high-tech industry, signaling persistence for global technology leadership. Such a stance is directly related to its geopolitical ambitions as a rising power and drives the dispute with the US. As instruments capable of aggregating power resources, the development and mastery of disruptive technologies, increasingly associated with sophisticated military equipment, are progressively intensifying connections with national strategies. In this competitive environment, the management of the technological race in favor of national objectives and interests assumes centrality, adding complexity to geostrategic and geopolitical disputes.

### 3 THE ROLE AND WEIGHT OF IDEAS

Based on the theoretical formulation of classical realism, Morgenthau (2003) attributed significant relevance to the structural condition of the international system, highlighting the search for the maximization of state power in the face of an anarchic structure, resulting from the endless defense of national interests. In arguing for the existence of limitations on the exercise of power in the international system, Morgenthau presents the balance of power<sup>13</sup> as the most important measure of restraint and embarrassment.

Walt (2021, n.p.) lists a set of conditions that minimize the likelihood of China and the United States going to war, pointing out that, in addition to geographical factors (size, population and location), the two countries have nuclear weapons, which limits the ability of either to embarrass or compel the other to impose their wills. Neither country is likely to convert the other to its preferred political ideology. “Like it or not, the two powers will have to coexist for a long time.” It seems appropriate, therefore, to recall the synthesis of the context of strategic disputes and indirect conflicts that characterized the Cold War: “impossible peace, unlikely war” (ARON, 1948).

In a speech to the US Congress in April 2021, President Joe Biden, while outlining some of his government goals, recognized that his country faces a new era of competition, needing to readjust strategies to improve its game. In defending democracy, Biden stressed that the US has the obligation and duty to remain as a political role model to the world, which therefore impels it to oppose autocracies - “[...] we have to prove that democracy works” (UNITED States, 2021, n. p.).

The defense of the fundamental values that identify the US as a nation originates in the founding of the country, when the structural basis of its socio-political organizations was established. Unlike their neighbors, the northern inhabitants of the “new world” enjoyed relative freedom and political autonomy – unusual at the time - making it up to them to decide on the main internal issues. Such a framework amalgamated the development of an autonomous mentality of governance, an incipient sign of the representative value of freedom for those pioneers.

---

<sup>13</sup> The aspiration for power on the part of various nations, in which each of them tries to maintain or alter the status quo, necessarily leads to a configuration called balance of power, as well as to policies that are intended to preserve this balance (MORGENTHAU, 2003, p. 321).

Moïsi (2009) describes that US history (as well as Israel's) was built on "messianic hope and belief in an America as a land of redemption, liberation, and a new beginning." The republic, founded as idealistic, vibrant and modest, in less than two centuries expanded to the status of an empire. Optimism, individualism, flexibility, the cult of excellence and the conviction to be unique were the key ingredients of success. "The United States, from its genesis as a nation, has seen itself as a project in the making, not as a memory or tradition to be protected or outdated. "(MOÏSI, 2009, p. 109).

The idea of "Manifest Destiny" is confused with that of the existence of a tradition of North American foreign policy<sup>14</sup>, its core being explained in a 2012 speech, defeated (by Obama) candidate Mitt Romney said, "God didn't create this country to be a nation of followers. The US is not destined to be just one of several global powers in balance. America must lead the world or others will." Schlesinger (1992) links such a conviction to "providentialism"<sup>15</sup>, which would have helped propel the country (from an ideational point of view) to promote freedom and democracy around the world, as well as imprinted some of the main contours to what is known as North American exceptionalism.

However, throughout recent history, by resorting to the use of force to achieve political objectives, linking them to the idea of a "missionary destiny", the US ended up contributing to conform the image of an imperialist power before part of the international system. During the Cold War, when the universalization of US values was intertwined with the strategy of containment (territorial and ideational) of communism, the amplification of interventionism as a strategy to defend US interests contributed to the aforementioned assertiveness. However, one can infer the occurrence of a "strategic mirroring" between the US and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in that period, each seeking to expand and consolidate areas of influence. Attraction and coercion fueled debates about the role of each model in formulating grand strategies during the Cold War.

In the rise and fall of the Great Powers (1989), Paul Kennedy argued that the total sum of US interests and its global obligations would extrapolate the country's capabilities to defend them simultaneously. Since the end of WW II, it would be the first time that the largest global power would face the debate that embraces an uncomfortable paradigm: the possibility of the power transfer process to be established. With the end of the Cold War and in the wake of the events resulting from the September 11, 2001 attack, the world has seen a change in strategic posture on the part of the United States and its main allies. The emergence of the war on terror and the conflicts linked to it ended up creating conditions for a China, until then "contained and apparently satisfied", to take advantage of the opportunities that were unfolding. The country decided to show the world that the Middle Kingdom was determined to resume its place in the international system. And in its own way.

---

14 Mead (2006) proposed categorizing US foreign policy into four "schools": Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian, Jacksonian, and Wilsonian.

15 "Providentialism" is understood as a condition linked to the strong influence of religion on North American Society, referring to the idea that the United States is a nation chosen by God to be the reference and example for all humanity. It underpins belief in the "messianic mission" and the role of "God's chosen nation".



Xi Jinping's vision for China, translated as "the Chinese Dream," seeks to capture the nation's desire to be rich, powerful and respected. Like the US, the idea of a Chinese exceptionalism, associated with Confucian philosophy, is internalized in the world's oldest civilization. In the early 1970s, when preparing to advise Nixon on the rapprochement with the Asian nation, Henry Kissinger had already assimilated that China's international relations were the external expression of its principles of internal social and political order. In Kissinger's interpretation, the communist country considered the international system highly hierarchical and not egalitarian. Thus, the understanding of the dynamics that govern the international order would be a derivation of the Confucian expression "know your place".

After long Chinese domination in Asia, the first half of the nineteenth century marks the beginning of the period known as "century of humiliation". Military defeats, economic colonization, and occupation by foreign powers imprinted deep resentments on Chinese civilization. To the younger generations, a teaching is massively passed on: "never forget; never again." In 1949, under Mao, the victory of the communists in the civil war rescued the expropriated sovereignty. Even though the country got rid of foreign imperialist domination, the price charged by the new regime was very high. Only after the death of Mao (1976), with the rise of Deng Xiaoping, a new transformation began, with developments to the present day.

China, a power dissatisfied with the current international order, wants to be placed in a different condition than it is today. Since 2010, the Asian country has become the second largest economy in the world, which could overtake the North American one by the end of the 2020s. Ambitious projects, such as "*Belt and Road Initiative*", enhance its international projection and enable its grand strategy, instrumentalized by an assertive foreign policy, centered on the expression of economic power and secured by a strong military power.

At the same time, in order to achieve its political goals, the Chinese state uses, with relative success, the resources of *soft power*. While the West's leadership in this field is real, efforts have been made to enhance it. Cultural elements (cultural diplomacy), humanitarian ("mask diplomacy") and associated with economic cooperation are some examples. Alternating relationships with the potential to generate economic dependence (investments) and financial commitments (loans that characterize "financial traps"), the Chinese Grand Strategy is being made viable. By increasing its ability to mark presence in various parts of the world, as well as its power to influence state and non-state segments, Xi Jinping's vision of "making China great again" – combining prosperity and power – is becoming established.

According to Walt (2021), China believes that a proper world order is essentially westphalian. The country emphasizes territorial sovereignty, non-interference, and privileges the needs of the collective (such as economic security) over the rights or freedoms of the individual. Finally, China craves an international system that provides security for its CCP's autocratic model. The US, in contrast, has long promoted a world order based on so-called

liberal values, the ideational foundations of which are centered on the appreciation of certain inalienable rights, embodied in respect for Human Rights and fundamental freedoms for all. Although they seek to strengthen their narratives, both powers are not entirely faithful to the content of their speeches.

Referring to the strengthening of the PLA's military power, Xi Jinping summarizes the process as follows: "fighting and winning wars." "In order to realize the Great Rebirth of the Chinese nation, we must ensure harmony between a prosperous country and a strong military." Allison (2020) points out that the strength of words – and the idea contained therein – is particularly important to China as it seeks to recover from the humiliation suffered at the hands of foreign powers. Even if the speech is presented in this way, it apparently does not mean that China wants to fight (for now). However, anchored in long-term goals, the message has the right address.

Gray (2016), seeking to analyze how ideas and practices interact in the operationalization of *high politics*, presents strategic culture as "the essential unit for all strategic experience." Even emphasizing the inadequacy of considering all strategic behavior subject to cultural influence, Colin Gray warns that the dimensions of strategy are expressed in behavior (of people and institutions) anchored in culture<sup>16</sup>. "The strategy has many dimensions, and one of them is cultural."

The constructivist current of IR, when analyzing foreign policy through its main axis – diplomacy –, seeks to make it clear that the political construction of the narrative and its operationalization are components of the strategic culture of the state actor to which it is linked. Thus, it considers strategic culture as an essential analytical tool in the areas of political decision-making, security and defense, geopolitics, geostrategy, strategic intelligence and organizational culture.

Although the United States and China manifest conflicting political and economic interests on a large scale, the values embedded in the discourses of both nations show traces of convergence. The idea of exceptionalism is a characteristic common to both peoples, as is the belief that both act with honesty of purpose and fidelity to their "manifest destinies". Such qualities (or characteristics) end up typifying and qualifying the identity cultures of China and the United States, reflecting in the shaping of their foreign policies.

In this perspective, the analyses directed to the vigorous emergence of China as a possible postulant to the *status quo* the US supports should not be reduced to traditional (and important) geopolitical issues. The weight of the ideational factors is substantive, gathering potential to influence the mitigation or aggravation of the imponderable debates that will follow each other throughout the unstable process of transfer of power now appreciated.

---

<sup>16</sup> Culture or cultures comprise the persistent, socially transmitted ideas, attitudes, traditions, habits of mind, and preferred methods of operation that are more or less specific to a particular, geographically based security community that has a unique historical experience (GRAY, 2016, p. 176).

#### 4 WESTERN-CENTRISM AND THE INTERNATIONAL AGENDA

Hobson (2012) argues that the main concepts developed by many of the most relevant IR scholars to explain global affairs – both from a historical and conjunctural or predictive perspective – are deeply centered on the Western model of thought. Based on references that make more sense from the perspective of a “Western civilization”, provincial analyses would be produced disregarding a more universalist and, consequently, more inclusive vision, causing damage to the value judgment of international phenomena.

There would thus be a normative division between a “Western universalism” and a “non-Western particularism” on the one hand, and “Western modernity” and “non-Western tradition” on the other. As a result of this distortion, the establishment of a global agenda is usually seen as something possible only for the West. This Western privilege ends up not recognizing – or despising – non-Western agency, which only acquires any relevance when it poses a fundamental threat to the West. Thus, it is assumed that, from the perspective of “Western civilization”, a future non-Western global order would be “chaotic, disorienting and dangerous” (STUENKEL, 2018).

Obviously, when considering the aforementioned argument, the object now appreciated in this work is affected, deserving pertinent reflection. Stuenkel (2018) ponders that the widely accepted model of “Western diffusionism” is based on the premise that history is a Western-led process, which would weaken the non-Western share of contributions to reflective formulations of the international environment. By neglecting important events that occurred outside the European context – especially from a more prior historical perspective -, relevant events related to more than four thousand years of Chinese history are minimized, which can cause possible distortions and constructions of biased narratives.

Mearsheimer (2015) argues that the relative decline of the West will make the world more unstable and dangerous, with the potential for the outbreak of war, a prospect that the realist author classifies as “depressing”. Other analysts infer, against the same backdrop, that the resulting structural fragility will significantly reduce the ability of states to cooperate effectively. A new norm would increasingly be the “absence of norms”. Such approaches are anchored, simultaneously, in the centrality of the role of the West and in the discredit attributed to multipolarity, conditions that would weaken the power of global consultation as the absence of *hegemon* would increase the instability of the international system.

On the other hand, a brief historical digression would point out difficulties for the defenders of the aforementioned perspectives in explaining the various moments of instability experienced under the US-led liberal order, including the occurrence of wars and other violent conflicts. Kissinger (2014) argues that, in the process of building the

world order in the post WW II, North American exceptionalism and idealism were essential. However, in the context of debates that arouse suspicion about an irrefutable North American legitimacy<sup>17</sup> in the conduct of the process, it is observed, recurrently, the inference of the practice of coercion in the course of various events. By not disregarding the use of all available resources of power to give proper form and meaning to the international order, Washington has embodied the supremacy of its own “*way of life*” and, as a consequence, it was selective enough to underestimate the relevance of other possibilities of agencies, of cultures and of thoughts.

The democratic tide that emerged after the Soviet collapse (1991), which encompassed different parts of the world, led to the false understanding that “there would be an end to history”, materialized by the victory of Western liberal democracy over the autocratic model spread by the extinct USSR. More recently, the Arab Spring rekindled similar sentiment, soon cooled by the imposition of the complex reality experienced in the countries that participated in the movement (only Tunisia carried out the ideas defended there). Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) describe, argumentatively, the recent emergence of a crisis of the North American political system, inserted in the context of an eventual process of worldwide democratic decline. In this context, one can see the emergence of doubts about the prevalence (or not) of a political model capable of framing the process of redistribution of power.

The US (and the West in general) values ideational factors as the great drivers of the “global conversion” process. Anchored in the vision of liberal democratic culture, they discursively minimize the role of military power in the creation and maintenance of the current global order. Although the argument is seductive, it does not find, in its entirety, support in conjunctural and historical reality. The emergence of autocrat and/or populist governments has contributed to debasing the thesis that so-called “Western values” will perennially be strong enough to shape the international order. The thesis of the emergence of a “bipolar multipolarity”, with China (a communist dictatorship) as the power willing to challenge world hegemony with the US, corroborates in questioning the perennial strength of the West-centric model.

In the context of the contemporary phenomenon that we proposed to appreciate, it is possible to identify some points with potential to shape coping/accommodation strategies. The occurrence of a sense of image rescue, whether based on revisionism (China) or attrition (USA), impels Washington and Beijing to strategically reposition themselves on the various global boards. In pursuit of its objectives, strategies based on *hard power* will inevitably compete with concerted and accommodative postures, which will require sophisticated political and diplomatic articulations. The dispute over areas of influence, so remarkable in the period of the Cold War, tends to intensify, requiring skill in the management of the resources of *soft / smart power*. Hard power and ideas will foster competition, in a world watching the exacerbation of nationalism – ample fodder for the fostering of competition.

---

<sup>17</sup> Legitimacy, in international politics, means the recognized authority to govern in the international hierarchy. Such a concept presupposes the existence of an “international society” (CLARK, 2003). David Lake elaborated the theory of relational authority, conceptualizing legitimacy in IR (LAKE, 2009).

From another perspective, economic interdependence, a fundamental variable to interpret the real scope of movements directed to cause effects of constraint, coercion or punishment, will continue to play a regulatory role in the balance of power. However, it will not reach the depth and scope theorized by Keohane and Nye (1977). Although less warmonger than the Maoist Era (1949-1976), the contemporary profile of Chinese foreign policy, inaugurated by Deng Xiaoping (1978-1992)<sup>18</sup>, has undergone harsh adjustments, acquiring active and confrontational biases. The rise of Xi Jinping (2012) and the recent reorganization of the CCP<sup>19</sup> seem to contextualize the current period of change. Military reform, cybersecurity, finance and foreign policy are some of the core areas covered by the ongoing process. On the other hand, the Biden administration does not seem to be very willing to reverse some measures taken by its predecessor and that signaled the deepening of the competition with the Asian power, demonstrating that “the pivot to Asia” is the support column of the contemporary US grand strategy.

In this context, it is appropriate to return to the debate on the definition of international agenda, a topic traditionally associated with the established powers. Supported by the effectiveness of their power resources, large nations project particular influence (and control) over international organizations, which elevates them to the condition of privileged agents in the process of formulating agendas. Political leadership, international credibility and relevant intellectual capital, among other factors, make up, from the perspective of the Western powers, the necessary assumptions to enable states to the role of shapers of the “great global debate”.

However, although the broad condition of global asymmetry may constrain the participation of emerging nations in the process of formulating the international agenda, it is fair to infer that it is not impenetrable. Among the aforementioned factors, it appears that international credibility is an accessible assumption, especially for those states committed to the so-called “global public goods”. However, credibility must be linked to other related conditions, such as reputation (relative to legitimacy arising from good results in dealing with similar domestic agendas) and recognized diplomatic capacity (relative to good foreign policy tradition).

The covid-19 pandemic, climate change, demographic issues, migration, defense of human rights, weapons of mass destruction, among other issues on the contemporary international agenda, demand actions coated with consultation and rapprochement. In this perspective, the global attraction capacity assumes relevance, degrading (even partially) the direct action potential of the economic and military powers. In the race for prominence in debates involving major global issues, both the United States and China have increasingly relied on resources from *smart power*.

---

18 Peaceful ascension, passive and non-confrontational in nature, based on the effective transformation of its resources from economic power into real power. The opening-up and profound reforms promoted in the period underpinned China’s robust economic development, transforming the country and ushering in a new era in global geopolitics. Deng Xiaoping’s famous phrase “it doesn’t matter what color the cat is, as long as it hunts the mouse” sums up the political pragmatism of the post-Mao era. (CARRIÇO, 2013)

19 On the subject, consult the link available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/after-xi>. Accessed: 12 Dec. 2022.

Clark (2003) argues that in transitions of power, an essential issue at stake is the maintenance or acquisition of prestige. Prestige determines who gives the orders and directs the international system, the nature of this order and how it will be exercised – by coercive means or by legitimate authority. In adapting its strategies to deal with the emergence of Beijing, the United States (and the West) will be forced to revise and rethink some concepts linked to the vision of an essentially West-centric world. The recurrent habit of interpreting singularly specific processes according to highly generalized models leads to the repetition of strategic errors, at a repeatedly higher cost.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Starting from a more comprehensive framework that is capable of framing some of the main uncertainties that characterize the emerging hegemonic competition, it is legitimate to consider that the Chinese-American dispute ranges from traditional issues related to the distribution of power (geopolitical, geo-economic and geostrategic) to ideational factors related to their worldviews.

The contours of multipolarity that the international system has been acquiring, with the possible prevalence (even if temporal) of asymmetric bipolarity, will require the readjustment of the national strategies of states attentive to the phenomenon. The competition for the conformation of areas of influence (or something similar) will be marked by sophisticated diplomacy and the use of traditional resources of power. Attraction, persuasion and deterrence will be words increasingly present in the vocabulary of strategists and decision makers, vigilantes who will be at the global chessboard.

Major initiatives are expected from the major powers. However, for diligent emerging States, the ability to recognize opportunities will become the great differential. For these nations, soon, the greatest challenge to be overcome will be to identify, strategically, the most advantageous way to reposition themselves in the face of inexorable systemic movements. Raising (or not) the profile of international action, enhancing resources of economic and military power, boosting commercial insertion, positioning itself in the face of major global debates, among others, will be variables present in the contemporary strategic formulations of states.

From the diffusion of debates about what is relevant to be studied/analyzed by the IR field, different views emerge. From the confrontation between the alleged “myopias” of traditional looks with the new reading lenses of a changing world, it is inferred that it was not only the world that changed, but also the perspective over this world. In this article, when evaluating the current competition between the US and China in the context of the subfield of international security, it is possible to conclude that the phenomenon should not be observed exclusively from the perspective of the distribution of power.

When analyzing, summarily, the variable “dispute for the leadership of the scientific-technological domain”, it is inferred inexorable spillovers to the security segment, exploring some probable uncertainties adhering to the game of the great powers. It sought to highlight the centrality of S&T in changing the world balance of power, indicating a likely and gradual reduction in the asymmetry of military power between the US and China, driven by the evolution of disruptive technologies and the acquisition of new capabilities.

It is argued that there is a growing relevance of the influence of ideational factors in the construction of foreign policy rhetoric, both in the US and in China, reflecting in the process of competition for Hegemony. It is argued that material factors, intrinsically associated with the accumulation of power resources, will not be sufficient to move the pieces of the board alone, which will lend complexity to the probable conformation of a new international order. The crisis of the world will carry with it the crisis of the theorization of the world.

Notwithstanding the national peculiarities characteristic of complex societies, an interpretation of the Chinese phenomenon according to a Western stylization is absolutely incomplete. By maintaining the resilience of Western-centric thinking in order to base strategies aimed at the current (and future) moment of hegemonic competition, it is very likely that referential limitations do not offer, effectively, sufficient elasticity and breadth for the construction of appropriate strategic options.

Despite the fact that the race for the accumulation of hard power is the traditional dictum that regulates the pace of competition in the international arena, efforts to find accommodation and reduce conflict will be imperiously necessary. At a time of reorganization of the traditional global alliance frameworks, indispensable for the achievement of the diffuse political objectives of the great powers (and with reflections for the entire international system), it is important that diplomatic intelligence and negotiation capacity prevail, political tools that cool an undesirable escalation in the dispute for world hegemony. And it's not just power that will move the pieces in the great power game.

**REFERENCE**

- ALLISON, G. **A caminho da guerra**. Rio de Janeiro: Intrínseca, 2020.
- ARON, R. **Le grand schisme**. Paris: [Gallimard], 1948.
- BLACKWILL, R.; HARRIS, J. **War by other means: geoeconomics and statecraft**. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016.
- CARRIÇO, A. Grande estratégia e o «sonho da China» de Xi Jinping. *Relações Internacionais*, Lisboa, n. 38, p. 23-33, jun. 2013. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3gAsKya>. Accessed: 11 Oct. 2021.
- CARVALHO, G. O. G. Disputa hegemônica, fatores ideacionais e disputa do tabuleiro internacional: entre a ideologia e o pragmatismo. **Análise Estratégica**, Brasília DF, v. 23, n. 1, 2022. Available at: <http://www.ebrevistas.eb.mil.br/CEEEExAE/article/view/9336>. Accessed: 30 Oct. 2021.
- CLARK, I. Legitimacy in a global order. **Review of International Studies**, Cambridge, v. 29, n. S1, p. 75-95, Dec. 2003.
- GRAY, C. S. **Estratégia moderna**. Tradução Geraldo Alves Portilho Júnior. Rio de Janeiro: Biblioteca do Exército, 2016.
- HOBSON, J. **The eurocentric conception of world politics: western international theory 1760-2010**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- KENNEDY, P. **Ascensão e queda das grandes potências**. [Rio de Janeiro: Elsevier], 1987.
- KEOHANE, R. O; NYE, J. Power and Interdependence: **World Politics in Transition**. Boston: Little Brown, 1977.
- KISSINGER, H. **World order: reflections on the character of nations and the course of the history**. New York: Penguin Press, 2014.
- LAKE, D. A. Relational authority and legitimacy in international relations. **American Behavioral Scientist**, [s. l.], v. 53, n. 3, 2009.
- LEVITSKY, S.; ZIBLAT'T, D. **Como as democracias morrem**. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2018.
- MEAD, W. R. **Uma orientação especial: a política externa norte-americana e sua influência no mundo**. Rio de Janeiro: Biblioteca do Exército, 2006.



MEARSHEIMER, J. J. Can China rise peacefully? **The National Interest**, [Washington, DC], Oct. 25, 2015. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully>. Accessed: 10 Oct. 2021.

MOÏSI, D. **A geopolítica das emoções**: como as culturas do Ocidente, do Oriente Médio e da Ásia estão remodelando o mundo. Rio de Janeiro: Elsevier; Campus, 2009.

MORGENTHAU, H. J. **A política entre as nações**: a luta pelo poder e pela paz. Brasília, DF: Ed. UnB; São Paulo: Imprensa Oficial do Estado de São Paulo, 2003.

SIPRI. Armament and disarmament/Arms and military expenditure. **Military expenditure**. Solna, Sweden: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2021. Available at: <https://www.sipri.org/research/armament-and-disarmament/arms-and-military-expenditure/military-expenditure>. Accessed: 8 Oct. 2021.

STUENKEL, O. **O mundo pós-ocidental**: potências emergentes e a nova ordem global. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2018.

UNITED STATES. The White House. **Remarks by President Biden in address to a Joint Session of Congress**. Washington, DC: The White House, Apr. 28, 2021. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/29/remarks-by-president-biden-in-address-to-a-joint-session-of-congress/>. Accessed: 12 Dec. 2022.

WALT, S. The world might want China's rules: Washington shouldn't assume its values are more attractive to others than Beijing's. **Foreign Policy Magazine**, Washington, DC, May 4, 2021. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/04/the-world-might-want-chinas-rules/>. Access in: 10 Oct. 2021.

