



**From Cooperation to Competition:
The Evolution of the US-China Relations since the Cold War**

Hasim Turker¹

Abstract:

This study examines the intricate dynamics between the United States and China in the post-Cold War era, focusing on their evolving relationship under the aegis of various American and Chinese presidencies. The paper pursues two primary objectives; to discern the factors driving the transition from cooperation to competition in the bilateral relationship, and; to scrutinize how these shifts manifested under successive administrations in both countries. Employing a Realist approach anchored in balance of power theory, the study uses content analysis to critically assess a diverse array of primary and secondary sources, including but not limited to, policy documents, speeches, and scholarly papers. The analysis spans multiple domains—economic, technological, geopolitical, and human rights—offering a granular look at the policies and strategies each administration employed to manage this complex relationship. By incorporating the Chinese perspective, the paper enriches the dialogue surrounding the US-China relations, providing a more balanced and nuanced understanding. The study culminates in a comprehensive appraisal of the current state of relations, along with insights and recommendations for future policy and scholarly exploration. This research serves as a significant contribution to existing literature, shedding new light on the complexities and unexplored avenues in one of the most critical bilateral relationships shaping the modern international order.

Keywords: US-China Relations, Post-Cold War, Global Competition, Cooperation, Power Politics

INTRODUCTION

The US-China relationship plays a decisive role in redefining the global geopolitical scene, with implications that extend beyond bilateral interactions. In a world shaped by the aftermath of the Cold War, China's rise as a powerful actor presents a significant hurdle to America's once unassailable dominance. This study is situated at the intersection of this complex engagement, with the aspiration to conduct a precise analysis of US-China relations during the post-Cold War period.

Guided by two main objectives, the study's goal is to firstly identify the key factors that have transformed the relationship from one of cooperation to one characterised by increasing competition, and secondly, examine how this change has been expressed over various US presidencies. Using content analysis as its methodology, the study collates a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including policy directives, presidential addresses, and academic publications, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the changing dynamics.

¹ Lecturer, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Uskudar University, İstanbul, Türkiye. Email: hasim.turker@uskudar.edu.tr

To enhance the analytical breadth, the research adopts a Realist theoretical framework, highlighting the theory of power balance. This framework provides a systematic analysis of the strategic choices and policy changes made by each country. It explains how interconnected factors, including economic imbalances, security challenges in the Asia-Pacific area, and ideological differences, have collectively impacted their diplomatic trajectory.

The paper provides an exhaustive analysis of the strategies and policies pursued by successive US administrations vis-à-vis China, shedding light on how each term has navigated this intricate relationship toward either cooperation or confrontation. In terms of structural layout, the paper initiates with a historical prologue outlining US-China relations, thereby laying groundwork for a thorough examination of diplomatic engagements under successive American presidencies. Subsequent sections delve into the critical analysis of key policy instruments that have significantly influenced the bilateral rapport. The paper culminates in a synthesized appraisal of the contemporary state of US-China relations, accompanied by critical reflections and avenues for future research and policy considerations.

This paper endeavours to illuminate underlying challenges and prospective opportunities that could shape the future direction of US-China relations, whether in the realm of cooperation or competition. It seeks to add a substantive layer to existing knowledge, unravelling the complexities and ramifications of one of today's most significant international relationships.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Realism is a crucial element in the study of International Relations, providing a solid framework for analysing the behaviour, motivations, and interaction of states in the anarchic global landscape. Realist theory contends that the absence of a centralized governing authority forces states to give precedence to their own national well-being and security. Therefore, states employ several forms of power to attain their objectives and safeguard their sovereignty (Lynn-Jones, 1999).

Realism originates from ancient times and prominent figures like Thucydides, whose account of the Peloponnesian War highlighted the significance of power and self-interest in determining state actions (Crane, 1998). During the Renaissance, Niccolò Machiavelli (2022) contributed significantly to political discourse which promoted a pragmatic, power-focused style of governance.

In the 20th century, scholars like Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz further developed the Realist paradigm in a systematic manner. Morgenthau (1985) established the principles of political realism, suggesting that state conduct is governed by unchanging laws based in human nature, wherein a relentless pursuit of power is an ever-present feature. Morgenthau claimed that states, motivated by rational calculations, seek to optimize their power advantages. Kenneth Waltz (1979) introduced the variant of neorealism, also known as structural realism, as he deviated from the traditional Realist focus on human nature, instead arguing that the anarchic structure of the global system is the main driving force behind states' pursuit of power. States are viewed as unitary entities with similar functions, distinguished solely by their capabilities.

Realism offer an advanced framework that enables a methodical examination of global affairs. It provides analytical instruments to dissect complex dynamics that involve power relations, strategic calculations, and national priorities that define state interactions in a context without a central authority. Given Realism's emphasis on power dynamics and competition.

The concept of balance of power is crucial in Realist theory and serves as an analytical tool for interpreting international relations. Based on the assumption that states are the primary actors in an anarchic global system, this theory suggests that states continually strive to enhance their power capabilities to protect their interests and survival. To accomplish this, states form alliances, enhance their military strength, and strategically utilize economic resources to counter the impact of their adversaries. The ultimate objective is to establish a balance of power in which no single state or coalition achieves unbridled dominance, thus lowering the likelihood of hegemonic conflicts or one-sided coercion (Boucoyannis, 2014). This theoretical construct has been historically employed to explicate multiple geopolitical structures, ranging from the 19th-century Concert of Europe to the bipolar configuration observed during the Cold War. It has been utilised to examine state responses to emerging powers that pose a risk of destabilising the current balance, often through counterbalancing alliances or military reinforcement (Underwood & Paul, 2020).

In the context of US-China relations, the balance of power theory is a suitable analytical tool. After the Cold War, a unipolar global system emerged, with the US taking centre stage. Nevertheless, China's rapid ascent in the 21st century, demonstrated through its economic, technological, and military progress, presented a significant obstacle to this unipolar moment. This disruption caused both states to take strategic countermeasures. For example, the US introduced policies such as the "Pivot to Asia," reinforced its military alliances, and signed trade agreements to counter China's increasing influence (Jung & Chen, 2019). Meanwhile, China has undertaken projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), modernized its armed forces, and expanded its global presence through economic investments and diplomatic overtures (Zhang, 2016).

This paper applies the theory of balance of power to analyse the strategic tactics utilised by the US and China in response to each other's increasing power. It aims to elucidate how the policies and initiatives of each nation can be interpreted as endeavours to either uphold or alter the current balance of power, thereby affecting the course of their bilateral relationships. The study aims to provide a detailed understanding of the complex power dynamics that shape current US-China relations, using an objective and concise approach.

The security dilemma is a critical aspect of the Realist theoretical framework, highlighting the complex and often contradictory dynamics that characterise interactions between states, particularly those involving major powers. It is important to note that this concept requires a balanced approach devoid of subjective evaluations. Initially formulated by John Herz in 1950 and subsequently refined by scholars including Robert Jervis, the security dilemma describes a scenario in which a state's attempts to enhance its military or form alliances may increase other states' security concerns. This situation may lead to a cycle of mutual suspicion, arms build-up, and, potentially, conflict as each state strives to counter perceived security threats (Tang, 2009). The security dilemma is heightened in situations defined by unclear intentions and blurred offensive and defensive capabilities. In such scenarios, efforts to protect oneself may be misperceived as aggressive actions, initiating a cycle of events that may prove difficult to stop (Montgomery, 2014).

This problem is acutely visible in the context of relations between the US and China. China's rapid military modernisation, particularly in naval and missile technologies, is perceived by the US as a threat to its traditional naval dominance in the Asia-Pacific region (Roudgar, 2018). On the other hand, Beijing views the US strategic "Pivot to Asia" and strengthening of partnerships with

countries in China's vicinity as a tactical manoeuvre designed to limit China's rise (Liao, 2013). This bilateral behaviour has led to a growing pattern of planned actions and responses, each justified by the corresponding party as vital for national security.

This research examines the security dilemma concept to analyse the relationship between the US and China. The study hones in on military modernisation programs, geopolitical manoeuvres and strategic partnerships, highlighting how defensive actions from one party can be interpreted as threatening by the other. This contributes to an increase in tensions and further strains the bilateral relationship. The aim is to provide insight into the origins of the issue and to evaluate possible solutions. By using the security dilemma as an analytical perspective, this paper aims to provide a more in-depth understanding of the intricate interplay of security issues that enhance and are enhanced by the changing power dynamics between the US and China.

Application to the US-China Relations

Realism's analytical power is especially relevant when applied to the intricate and dynamic relationship between China and the US, two of the world's leading powers. The Realist paradigm emphasizes the importance of power and security in directing state behaviour, providing a strong framework for analysing the complex strategic interplay between these two nations across diverse sectors, from economic engagements to military postures.

When tackling this study, employing Realism grants us the tools necessary to analyse the multifaceted strategic interactions between China and the US. A prime illustration of this concept is how China's economic ascension can be construed not only as an attainment in developing its economy but also a strategic attempt to realign the global power balance in its favour. Similarly, the trade policies and sanctions employed by the US to target China could be interpreted as strategic tools aimed at maintaining its economic dominance and, thus, its worldwide influence.

The principle of the balance of power, which constitutes a fundamental doctrine in Realist scholarship, offers valuable insights for analysing the opposition strategies embraced by both nations. The US' 'Pivot to Asia,' bolstering of Indo-Pacific alliances, and military deployments aim to sustain an advantageous balance of power. In contrast, China's Belt and Road Initiative, military modernisation, and assertiveness in geographic areas like the South China Sea serve to enhance its relative power. The concept of the security dilemma offers a comprehensive perspective for comprehending the repeated tensions and conflicts intrinsic to US-China relations. Both nations' technological rivalry, military advancements, and geopolitical positioning could be perceived as displaying the security dilemma, whereby actions considered defensive by one party are seen as threatening by the other. The result is a succession of strategic retaliations and countermeasures.

Realism provides an essential analytical framework for this study. It enables a structured methodology to answer research questions and investigate how the US and China pursue strategic behaviours to optimise their own security and power in an increasingly competitive global setting, driven by their respective national interests.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE US-CHINA RELATIONS

The relationship between the US and China is deeply embedded within a complex tapestry of historical interactions, geopolitical shifts, and evolving national agendas. Understanding these historical dimensions is pivotal for a nuanced analysis of the current dynamics and the future

trajectory between these two global powers. This section aims to provide a comprehensive historical context that serves as a foundation for the research questions posed in this study: the factors that have contributed to the transition from cooperation to competition in US-China relations and how this shift is reflected in policy documents across various US presidencies (Lampton, 2008; Kissinger, 2011; Mearsheimer, 2001).

To unpack these intricate layers, this study adopts a Realist theoretical framework. This lens, focusing on the balance of power and the security dilemma, allows the paper to offer an analytical narrative that transcends a mere recounting of events. It provides a deeper exploration of how historical events have been shaped by, and have shaped, the strategic interests and power dynamics between the US and China (Mearsheimer, 2001). In doing so, this introduction sets the stage for the subsequent analyses, linking the past to the present and providing foundational insights that inform the study's broader arguments and conclusions.

Historically, US-China relations have been complex and often contentious. Prior to the 2nd World War, the US supported the nationalist Chinese government of Chiang Kai-shek, while the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led by Mao Zedong received support from the Soviet Union (Lampton, 2008). The US did not recognize the CCP after it won the civil war in 1949 and imposed a trade embargo on China, leading to a period of isolation that lasted until the early 1970s. In 1971, US-China relations began to normalize with the US recognizing the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Kissinger, 2011). This marked a significant policy shift and inaugurated a new era in Sino-American relations. While cooperation in areas such as trade and culture emerged, occasional tensions, like the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999, surfaced (Kissinger, 2011).

The end of the Cold War was a watershed moment for US-China relations. The US emerged as the world's sole superpower, while China underwent significant economic and political changes. While the US saw economic opportunities in China's rise, it also viewed it as a potential challenge to its influence in the Asia-Pacific region. On the other hand, China sought to assert its economic and political clout in the region, particularly in the South China Sea. The complexities in the US-China relationship have persisted into the post-Cold War era, marked by a blend of cooperation and competition, as well as tension and conflict. The following chapters examine the evolution of this relationship in the post-Cold War period, focusing on economic, security, and ideological factors that have shaped these dynamics (Lampton, 2008; Kissinger, 2011; Mearsheimer, 2001).

Cold War Era

During the Cold War, the ties between the US and China were dictated by a geopolitically polarized world, chiefly characterized by the ideological and military struggle between the US and the Soviet Union. In this bipolar international system, US-China relations can be best understood through the Realist concept of balance-of-power politics. Both nations, although ideologically divergent, found a strategic rationale for a diplomatic rapprochement aimed at 'soft balancing' against Moscow—a shared threat that both perceived as destabilizing to their respective national interests (Waltz, 1979). This alignment was more than a mere ad hoc coalition; it was a calculated strategy epitomizing Realism's tenets of power maximization and survival. The US, looking to contain Soviet expansionism, saw an opportunity in China's ideological and territorial disputes with Moscow. Likewise, China, having been engaged in border conflicts with Moscow, saw the strategic advantage of partnering with the US to counterbalance Soviet power in the region (Mearsheimer, 2001).

It was a relationship rooted in pragmatism rather than ideological affinity. While the US maintained its capitalist democracy, and China its communist regime, both nations were willing to overlook these ideological differences for the sake of achieving a balance of power. This era also saw the initiation of 'ping-pong diplomacy,' cultural exchanges, and eventually the historic visit by President Nixon to China in 1972, which formalized this soft balancing act against the Soviet Union (Kissinger, 2011). This alignment had multifaceted implications. On one hand, it led to the diversification of US foreign policy strategies and the opening of diplomatic and trade channels with China. On the other hand, it also fuelled the security dilemma, as the Soviet Union responded by ramping up its military capabilities and forging alliances, further escalating the Cold War tensions (Jervis, 1978).

In summary, the US-China relationship during the Cold War serves as an illustrative case of how states, driven by Realist imperatives of power and survival, can form alliances to maintain a balance of power, even when such alignments seem counterintuitive given their ideological divergences.

Post-Cold War Era

The dissolution of the Soviet Union marked the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a unipolar world order, with the US as the unrivalled superpower. However, this unipolar moment was not destined to last indefinitely, as Realist theory would predict (Wohlforth, 1999). In this new geopolitical context, China emerged as a significant actor with burgeoning economic and military capabilities. Its rise presented both an opportunity and a challenge for the US, thereby disrupting the prevailing unipolar balance of power and necessitating strategic recalibrations by both nations (Mearsheimer, 2001). China's rapid economic growth, fuelled by market-oriented reforms and globalization, positioned it as a vital trading partner for the US. However, this economic interdependence was not without its complexities. The US found itself grappling with trade imbalances, intellectual property concerns, and the strategic dilemma of how to engage with a rising power that could potentially challenge its hegemony (Zakaria, 2008).

Simultaneously, China's military modernization began to raise alarms in Washington. Its growing naval capabilities and assertive actions in the South China Sea were perceived as a direct challenge to US military dominance in the Asia-Pacific. This initiated a security dilemma, wherein measures taken by China to ensure its own security, such as island-building and militarization of maritime features, were viewed as threats by the US, prompting it to bolster its military presence in the region (Christensen, 2015). Moreover, China's Belt and Road Initiative and its increasing involvement in international institutions signified a broader ambition to reshape the rules of global governance, further complicating its relationship with the US (Andornino, 2017).

In summary, the post-Cold War era witnessed a complex interplay between cooperative and competitive elements in US-China relations. The concepts of balance of power and security dilemma offer valuable frameworks for understanding these dynamics. The US and China find themselves in a situation where they must strategically navigate their relationship to maximize their national interests, often leading to policy decisions that oscillate between engagement and containment.

21st Century Dynamics

The dawn of the 21st century ushered in a new phase of US-China relations, marked by intertwined economic interdependence and escalating military competition. In this era, the Realist concepts of balance of power and security dilemma provide useful analytical frameworks for dissecting the

intricate dynamics between the two powers. Economically, China's rise as a global manufacturing hub and its massive consumer market have made it an indispensable trading partner for the US. However, this economic symbiosis is fraught with challenges. Issues such as trade imbalances, currency manipulation, and allegations of intellectual property theft have often strained relations, giving rise to trade wars and sanctions (Nye, 2015).

Concurrently, China's assertive military posture, particularly its expanding naval capabilities and activities in the South China Sea, have engendered a security dilemma. The US, wary of China's intentions, has responded by increasing its military presence and forging stronger alliances in the Asia-Pacific region. This has led to a spiralling cycle of action and reaction, where defensive measures by one power are construed as aggressive moves by the other, further heightening tensions and complicating diplomatic relations (Glaser, 2011).

Beyond economics and military considerations, the 21st century has also witnessed ideological frictions between the US and China, especially concerning issues of human rights, democracy, and governance. The US has often criticized China's human rights record, including its actions in Hong Kong and its treatment of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, adding another layer of complexity to their relationship (Freedom House, 2020).

In summary, US-China relations in the 21st century are a complex tapestry of economic cooperation, military rivalry, and ideological divergence. As both nations seek to maximize their power and security, the relationship is increasingly defined by a blend of cooperative and competitive dynamics. The Realist paradigm, with its focus on power politics and security considerations, offers a coherent lens through which to analyse these multifaceted interactions. This historical overview has endeavoured to provide a nuanced understanding of the evolving relationship between the US and China, set against different geopolitical eras. By adopting a Realist theoretical framework, this section has illuminated how power dynamics, balance of power, and the security dilemma have perennially shaped interactions between these two global actors.

The journey from the Cold War era to the present day reveals a complex interplay of cooperation and competition, influenced by shifting global structures and national interests. These historical insights serve as a crucial backdrop for the research questions posed in this study, particularly concerning the factors that have contributed to the transition from cooperation to competition in US-China relations and how these dynamics are represented in policy decisions across successive US presidencies. Moreover, this overview sets the stage for the subsequent analyses that will delve deeper into economic, security, and ideological dimensions of the US-China relationship. By contextualizing these dynamics within a historical and theoretical framework, this paper aims to transcend a mere recounting of events to offer a multi-layered analysis that can inform both academic discourse and policy deliberations.

Presidential Eras

Having established the broader historical and theoretical contexts that have shaped US-China relations, it is imperative to delve into a more nuanced analysis to answer our research questions. The following section focuses on the distinct eras defined by the tenures of American and Chinese presidents. This approach provides a temporal framework within which we can dissect the complex dynamics between these two global powers.

This chronological dissection will consider not only US foreign policy but also the corresponding strategies and policies adopted by Chinese leadership. By employing a comparative lens grounded in Realist theory, this section aims to elucidate how both nations have engaged in balance-of-power politics and navigated the security dilemma over the years. Methodologically, this section employs a multi-pronged approach that includes content analysis of policy documents and diplomatic correspondences, reinforced by secondary sources like scholarly articles and interviews with key officials. Through this in-depth scrutiny, the objective is to offer a comprehensive understanding of the evolving US-China relationship, thereby providing substantive answers to our research questions and contributing to the existing body of academic discourse.

Bill Clinton-Jiang Zemin Era (1993-2001)

The concurrent tenures of US President Bill Clinton and Chinese President Jiang Zemin offer an intricate tapestry of cooperation and competition. From the US standpoint, Clinton assumed office with a robust agenda to engage China on both economic and political fronts, viewing China as an essential partner in promoting global stability (Economy & Oksenberg, 1997). This aligns with Realist principles, as the US sought to extend its global influence by integrating a rising China into the world economy (Nye, 2015). On the Chinese front, Jiang Zemin was navigating the "Three Represents" policy, an initiative to broaden the base of the Communist Party to include capitalists, thereby consolidating internal power while steering economic reforms (Fewsmith, 2001). This internal strengthening can also be interpreted through a Realist lens as a strategy to better position China in the global system.

Trade normalization was a cornerstone of this era, culminating in the US Congress' approval for Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) with China in 2000, paving the way for China's WTO membership (The White House, 1997). On the flip side, the US granting a visa to Taiwan's president in 1995 and the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade exacerbated tensions, emphasizing the fragility of Sino-American relations (Ross, 1996). Both nations demonstrated a willingness for international cooperation, evidenced by the signing of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1996 (Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, 1996). However, human rights remained a contentious issue, with Clinton initially de-linking it from trade policy while continuing to advocate for improvements in China (Lampton, 2001). Methodologically, this period can be assessed through comparative content analysis of key policy documents like the National Security Strategy of the United States of America (The White House, 1994), the China-US Joint Statement (1997), and the Cox Report (1999). Interviews with key officials from both nations who were active during this period could provide further nuanced insights.

In summary, the Clinton-Jiang era was a complex blend of engagement, cooperation, and tension, laying the groundwork for the competitive dynamics that would escalate in subsequent years. The period encapsulated the challenges and nuances of managing a relationship with a rising power, underlining the delicate balance between economic interests and political-security concerns.

George W. Bush-Jiang Zemin/Hu Jintao Era (2001-2009)

The period marked by the presidencies of George W. Bush in the US and Jiang Zemin followed by Hu Jintao in China presents a dichotomous relationship, oscillating between confrontation and pragmatic cooperation. Initially, Bush assumed office harboring a confrontational disposition

towards China. Critical of Beijing's human rights record and trade imbalances, his administration initially labeled China a "strategic competitor" (Wenzao, 2004; The White House, 2002). However, the geopolitical landscape underwent a dramatic shift following the September 11 attacks. The US pivot to counterterrorism led to a pragmatic recalibration of its China policy, recognizing the utility of Sino-American cooperation in global anti-terrorism efforts.

Economically, China's 2001 entry into the World Trade Organization marked a monumental milestone. While this accession opened up economic corridors for foreign investment in China, it also presented a set of challenges, such as job losses and trade imbalances for the US, underscoring the complex economic interdependence between the two powers (Hsiung, 2003). Public health also emerged as a novel area of bilateral cooperation. The outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 necessitated a coordinated response. The event demonstrated the global implications of public health crises originating in China and underscored the utility of Sino-American cooperation in pandemic containment (Bouey, 2020).

Despite these avenues for collaboration, the Bush era was fraught with geopolitical tensions. The collision between a US EP-3 reconnaissance plane and a Chinese J-8 fighter jet in 2001 heightened US concerns about China's military modernization and its broader implications for regional security (Wanli, 2009). Similarly, Taiwan remained a perennial flashpoint. The 2004 re-election of Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian, against Beijing's wishes, led to an uptick in Chinese military activities in the Taiwan Strait, exacerbating regional tensions (Sheng, 2005).

Methodologically, this nuanced era can be dissected through content analysis of key policy documents, including the US National Security Strategy (The White House, 2002), and the US National Defense Strategy (2005). These documents, when analysed in conjunction with interviews from policymakers of this period, offer a comprehensive understanding of the era's complexities.

In summary, the Bush era is emblematic of the intricate balance that characterizes US-China relations. While the period saw shifts towards pragmatic cooperation in areas like counterterrorism and public health, it also brought to the fore the persistent challenges tied to Taiwan and China's rising military capabilities. The era served as a testament to the complexity and multifaceted nature of Sino-American relations, capturing the essence of Realist theories related to balance of power and the security dilemma (Wang, 2008).

Barack Obama-Hu Jintao/Xi Jinping Era (2009-2017)

The Obama administration represented a paradigmatic juncture in the Sino-American relations matrix, encapsulating a blend of strategic cooperation and competition that resonates with the Realist framework explored in this study. When President Obama assumed office, he brought with him a multi-dimensional vision for US-China relations. His administration sought to engage China constructively on a comprehensive range of issues, from environmental sustainability to human rights, and from economic partnerships to cyber governance (Campbell & Ratner, 2018).

A cornerstone of this multifaceted engagement was the inauguration of the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) in 2009. The S&ED was not merely a talk shop but a structured forum for high-level policy discussions encompassing economic collaboration, regional and global security issues, and even cultural and educational exchanges. Its utility in enhancing diplomatic transparency and mitigating misunderstandings cannot be overstated (Wilder, 2023).

In the realm of environmental diplomacy, the Obama administration made a ground-breaking stride with the 2014 bilateral agreement on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This agreement was not just bilateral but had global ramifications, given that both nations account for a staggering 40% of global emissions. This showed that even competing superpowers could find common ground on existential global issues, reflecting the Realist concept of cooperation under anarchy (Boersma & Policy, 2014). China's role in international sanctions against North Korea, particularly in the United Nations, marked another pivotal cooperative venture. The commitment from both the US and China towards diffusing the North Korean nuclear threat facilitated a unified diplomatic front, upholding regional stability and reflecting the balance-of-power dynamics (Delury, 2013).

However, these episodes of cooperation were punctuated by moments of diplomatic friction and rivalry. The geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea (SCS) epitomized this duality. While the US promulgated the freedom of navigation operations to challenge China's territorial claims, Beijing perceived these operations as a direct affront to its sovereign rights, thereby accentuating tensions (Christensen, 2015). Cybersecurity was another arena where bilateral relations were strained. Both nations lodged accusations of cyber espionage, thereby casting a shadow over other areas of cooperation. This contentious issue remains unresolved, highlighting the security dilemma in the cyber domain (Gutmann, 2010).

To understand the nuanced policy shifts of this era, a content analysis of seminal documents such as US-China Joint Statements (2009, 2011), the National Security Strategy (The White House, 2010), and the S&ED dialogues is instructive. In summation, the Obama administration left an indelible imprint on US-China relations, accentuating the Realist notions of cooperation and competition, balance of power, and the omnipresent security dilemma. It demonstrated the possibilities and limitations of diplomatic engagement between a status quo power and a rising power, offering lessons for future administrations and scholars.

Donald Trump and Xi Jinping Era (2017-2021)

The Trump-Xi era manifests as a critical juncture in Sino-American relations, characterized by heightened tensions and strategic competition. From the Chinese perspective, President Xi Jinping's assertive foreign policy and the doctrine of the "Chinese Dream" aimed at national rejuvenation (Mohanty, 2013) were in direct contrast with President Trump's "America First" policy (Macdonald, 2018). Xi Jinping continued to expand China's global influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In response, Trump's administration was openly critical of the BRI and offered alternative investment options to countries, framing it as a counterbalance to China's strategic ambitions (Shah, 2023). While Trump emphasized the trade imbalances and intellectual property theft, Xi Jinping defended China's trade practices as legitimate development strategies. China also retaliated with tariffs, leading to a full-blown trade war that had global economic repercussions (Rasmus, 2018).

The Geopolitical Arena: A Tale of Two Strategies

Under President Donald Trump, the "America First" policy marked a departure from the US's post-World War II internationalism. This strategic recalibration emphasized economic nationalism and military retrenchment, focusing on renegotiating trade agreements and burden-sharing within alliances. It was underpinned by a realist understanding of international relations, where zero-sum

logic often prevailed. This approach led to the US reassessing its global commitments, particularly in regions where China's influence was growing, like the Indo-Pacific (Sutter, 2017).

In parallel, President Xi Jinping's vision for the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" was not merely rhetorical but mapped onto very tangible policy objectives. The "Made in China 2025" initiative aimed to make China a global leader in high-tech industries such as robotics, aerospace, and clean energy vehicles. (Gabriele, 2020). These sectors are not only economically lucrative but also strategically important, often carrying dual-use potential for military applications. Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative further aimed at expanding China's geopolitical reach, creating an extensive network of economic and political leverage (Hu & Meng, 2020).

Both leaders' strategies converged in the Indo-Pacific region, increasingly becoming a focal point of geopolitical competition. Trump's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy aimed to counterbalance China's growing influence by strengthening alliances and enhancing military presence. It extended from South Asia across Southeast Asia and into the Pacific, aiming to promote a rules-based order and sustainable development, albeit through a lens of strategic competition (Panda, 2019). Xi Jinping, in response, advanced the "String of Pearls" strategy, involving port development and naval deployments, to secure China's sea lines of communication and project power. Chinese military modernization, particularly in the navy and missile capabilities, sought to challenge the US's traditional military dominance in the region (Shah, 2023).

Therefore, while both nations professed a desire for stability and cooperation, their respective policies exhibited an undercurrent of rivalry and strategic competition. Their visions for global governance and regional security were often at odds, even as they interacted within shared international institutions. This period exemplified how competing national strategies, driven by internal imperatives and global ambitions, led to a reconfiguration of geopolitical priorities and increased the potential for strategic miscalculation ("United States Strategic Approach," 2020).

The Trade War: Economic Leverage as a Tool of Statecraft

The US-China trade war under President Trump and President Xi Jinping transcended mere economic considerations; it evolved into an instrument of geopolitical strategy, wielded to assert national interests and project international influence. The Trump administration's imposition of tariffs on a broad spectrum of Chinese goods was a calculated manoeuvre within a larger strategy aimed at containing China's ascendancy. It targeted sectors critical to China's economic modernization plans, such as technology and manufacturing, thereby seeking to cripple China's strategic ambitions under the guise of correcting trade imbalances (Rasmus, 2018).

President Xi Jinping, fully aware of the strategic undertones, responded in kind. He framed the trade war as an act of "economic bullying" by the US, aiming to galvanize domestic support and fortify the Chinese populace against external pressures (Fitzgerald, 2019). China's counter-tariffs on American goods were not merely reactive but strategic, targeting industries and electoral districts that would maximize political costs for the Trump administration. Xi also sought to diversify China's international trade relations, fast-tracking trade agreements with other countries as a form of strategic hedging (Kim & Margalit, 2021).

The economic tussle between the two powers had far-reaching implications, extending beyond their borders. It disrupted global supply chains, introduced volatility into international markets,

and exacerbated economic uncertainties (Tyers & Zhou, 2021). Importantly, the trade war became a litmus test for the resilience and adaptability of global governance mechanisms. Multilateral institutions like the World Trade Organization found themselves at a crossroads, grappling with the complexities of mediating between its two largest members while maintaining a rules-based international trading system (Ranjan, 2022). Furthermore, the trade war brought into focus the concept of economic interdependence as a double-edged sword. While economic linkages between the US and China were initially seen as a pacifying factor, the trade war demonstrated how these very linkages could be weaponized—used as leverage to extract concessions in other areas of bilateral relations, including technology transfer, intellectual property, and even issues of human rights and territorial integrity (Capie et al., 2020).

In summary, the US-China trade war in this period, was not merely an economic skirmish but a manifestation of deeper geopolitical rivalries. It illuminated how economic policies are increasingly being deployed as tools of statecraft, aimed at achieving broader national objectives. This use of economic leverage as an instrument of geopolitical strategy marked a significant evolution in the conduct of international relations, with implications that are likely to resonate for years to come.

Human Rights and Ideological Divergence

The issue of human rights emerged as a significant point of contention in Sino-US relations under this period, serving as a prism through which the deep ideological divide between the two nations became more palpable. The Trump administration's vocal criticism of China's human rights records, particularly concerning the treatment of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang and the erosion of civil liberties in Hong Kong, was framed as a moral and ethical imperative (Human Rights Watch 2022). These criticisms were part of a broader strategy to challenge China's global standing and to condition bilateral relations on human rights performance (Waller & Albornoz, 2021).

In contrast, President Xi Jinping's administration strongly rebuffed these criticisms, terming them as unwarranted intrusions into China's internal affairs. Xi asserted that the policies in Xinjiang and Hong Kong were integral to China's national unity and social stability. China maintained that its actions were aimed at combating extremism and maintaining law and order, thereby serving national interests. The sharp disagreements over human rights were symptomatic of a larger ideological rift, one that extends to differing conceptions of governance, sovereignty, and the role of the state in individual lives (Godbole, 2019). This divergence in ideological viewpoints had tangible impacts on diplomatic relations and multilateral cooperation. For instance, the US imposed targeted sanctions on Chinese officials and entities associated with alleged human rights abuses. China, in retaliation, imposed its own sanctions on American individuals and organizations, accusing them of interfering in China's domestic matters. These tit-for-tat measures further strained bilateral relations and complicated diplomatic interactions in multilateral forums (Eichensehr, 2022).

Moreover, the ideological divergence over human rights issues spilled over into other sectors of international engagement, such as trade, technology, and global governance. It served to further polarize international stances, forcing other nations and international bodies to navigate a complex web of alliances and enmities. As the ideological chasm widened, it also coloured perceptions and policy approaches on both sides, casting a long shadow over attempts to find common ground on global challenges like climate change, pandemic response, and regional security (Basu, 2022).

In summary, the pronounced focus on human rights by the Trump administration and the steadfast defense by Xi's regime underscored the ideological divergence between the US and China. This divergence became a flashpoint in bilateral relations, complicating diplomatic engagements and signalling a deep-rooted tension that extends beyond mere policy disagreements.

Technology: The New Frontier of Rivalry

The technological arena has emerged as one of the most contentious battlegrounds in Sino-American relations, especially during the Trump administration. The US actions against leading Chinese tech firms like Huawei and TikTok were not mere economic measures, but strategic manoeuvres aimed at constraining China's ascendancy in the global technological landscape ("Executive Order 13942," 2020). These actions were rooted in national security concerns, with allegations that Chinese companies pose potential risks to data privacy and could serve as conduits for state-sponsored espionage. In response, President Xi Jinping interpreted these moves as a direct existential threat to China's aspirations to become a global technology leader. This led to an accelerated push for technological self-reliance within China, epitomized by policies and initiatives aimed at reducing dependency on foreign technologies. Xi's administration increased investments in research and development, fostered innovation ecosystems, and championed domestic tech companies as part of a broader strategy to counteract US restrictions (Zhao & Yin, 2019).

This technological rivalry also had a broader geopolitical dimension. For the US, limiting China's technological capabilities was seen as a way to curb its global influence and maintain American technological hegemony. For China, achieving technological self-reliance and breaking free from American restrictions were seen as crucial steps towards realizing the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," a key ideological tenet of Xi's governance (Kang & Im, 2021).

The technological tussle between the US and China extended beyond bilateral relations and had a cascading effect on global tech supply chains, cyber governance, and international standards setting. It forced other nations to make difficult choices in aligning with either of the technological ecosystems, thereby polarizing the global tech landscape into distinct, and potentially incompatible, spheres of influence (Sun, 2019). Moreover, this technological rivalry spilled over into other facets of the relationship, including trade and military dimensions. The US administration's export controls on advanced technologies to China had implications for trade relations, while China's advancements in areas like artificial intelligence and quantum computing raised concerns in the US about the potential military applications of these technologies (Sun, 2019).

In summary, the focus on technology during the Trump and Xi eras encapsulated a broader strategic rivalry between the US and China. It was characterized by an intensification of efforts to gain the upper hand in technological innovation and capabilities, both for its intrinsic value and for its interconnectedness with economic prosperity, national security, and geopolitical influence. This new frontier of rivalry underscores the multi-dimensional nature of Sino-American tensions and signifies a long-term, systemic competition that is likely to persist in the foreseeable future.

Diplomatic and Institutional Manoeuvring

The diplomatic arena during the Trump-Xi era was a stage for each leader to attempt the reshaping of international institutions and agreements in alignment with their respective national agendas. Trump's "America First" policy was manifest in his decisions to withdraw from key international

agreements like the Paris Climate Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) (Solís, 2019; Trump: United States "Withdrew" From Paris Climate Agreement, 2019). These withdrawals were not isolated acts, but strategic choices aimed at reducing platforms where China could potentially amplify its global influence. By pulling out of these multilateral agreements, Trump sought to renegotiate terms more favourable to the US and prevent the ceding of global leadership to China.

On the other side, President Xi Jinping capitalized on the vacuum left by American retrenchment to assert China's role as a defender of multilateralism. This was evident in China's active participation in international platforms and its initiative to create new structures of global governance, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Xi's strategy aimed to reorient global governance systems in a way that would facilitate China's rise as a global power, thereby serving its broader geopolitical and economic interests (Beeson & Li, 2016).

The contrasting approaches of the two leaders had consequences that extended beyond their bilateral relationship. They influenced third-party countries and international institutions, forcing them to adapt to a rapidly changing diplomatic landscape. The US policy of disengagement led some countries to question the reliability of American leadership, while China's assertiveness prompted concerns about the potential for a Sino-centric global order (Xiying, 2021).

In sum, the Trump-Xi era marked a period of heightened tensions that manifested across various domains, including but not limited to, economics, technology, military capabilities, and ideological worldviews. While there were pockets of cooperative engagement—most notably in addressing the North Korean nuclear crisis—the dominant narrative was one of deep-rooted strategic competition and mutual suspicion. This complex and multifaceted rivalry between the US and China during the Trump-Xi era serves as a case study for examining the broader implications of nationalist agendas on international relations. The policy choices and strategic postures adopted by each leader not only reshaped their bilateral relations but also had ripple effects on global stability and the architecture of international governance. It underscored the intricate interplay between national interests and global responsibilities, highlighting the challenges inherent in managing relations between major powers in an increasingly interconnected yet fragmented world.

Joe Biden-Xi Jinping Era (2021-Present)

In the current geopolitical environment, the US under the leadership of President Joe Biden and the People's Republic of China under President Xi Jinping are engaged in a relationship characterised by considerable complexity. This complex interaction is twofold: it encompasses palpable competitive frictions playing out in the economic, military, and ideological spheres, while at the same time harbouring a cautiously sanguine possibility for cooperation in addressing pressing global issues such as climate change, public health emergencies and regional stability. Both leaders bring unique policy objectives shaped by their respective national priorities and geopolitical perspectives, reinforcing the multidimensional nature of the US-China relationship (Sutter, 2022).

The ramifications of this dynamic interplay extend well beyond bilateral considerations and act as a central determinant in the configuration of broader international relations. The relationship has a significant impact on global trade paradigms, security infrastructures and collective initiatives. Given their stature as two of the most powerful actors in global affairs, the manner in which Biden and Xi steer this labyrinthine relationship promises to have implications that transcend their

individual nations and reverberate throughout the international community. As such, the Biden-Xi epoch should not be viewed merely as a two-way interaction between individual nations; it serves as a crucial juncture in the fluid dynamics of global politics, where the forces of cooperation and rivalry are held in a precarious balance.

Economic Relations

The economic interplay between the US, led by President Biden, and China, under the aegis of President Xi Jinping, is a central facet of their bilateral relationship, characterised by both cooperative and competitive dynamics (US-China Phase One Trade Deal, 2022). Biden's decision to maintain a significant portion of the tariffs implemented during the Trump era represents a policy consistency aimed at redressing perceived trade imbalances with China (Jiangyu & Hewett, 2021). However, unlike his predecessor, Biden has shown a willingness to engage in dialogue with China to resolve these protracted trade disputes amicably, signalling a more sophisticated approach to economic statecraft (Song, 2022).

At the same time, President Xi Jinping continues to advance China's ambitious global economic agenda, most notably through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This massive infrastructure project aims to connect China with Europe, Africa and other regions of Asia, cementing China's status as a crucial node in the international economic web. Xi's strategy reflects a long-term blueprint for China's global standing that aims to make the nation an integral participant in the global economic framework (Andreosso-O'Callaghan & Morales, 2022).

Against this backdrop, the economic relationship between the two nations transcends mere transactional exchange and is closely intertwined with their overarching strategic ambitions. While the US, under Biden's leadership, is intent on fine-tuning the trade relationship to bolster American industries and employment, China, under Xi's leadership, is focused on expanding its economic reach and influence on a global scale. These concurrent yet conflicting goals add a layer of complexity to the economic dimension of the US-China relationship, making it a critical area in which both cooperative and competitive elements are likely to manifest (Song, 2022).

Security and Geopolitical Concerns

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a central arena in the security and geopolitical calculations of both the Biden administration and the Xi Jinping government, each with different objectives and tactical frameworks. President Biden's strategy is rooted in the notion of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), which underscores the centrality of a rules-based order, unimpeded maritime navigation, and transparent economic engagement. In pursuit of these goals, the Biden administration has sought to strengthen existing alliances and cooperation with key regional actors such as Japan, India, Australia, and South Korea (The White House, 2022-a; The White House, 2022-b). These partnerships serve as cornerstones of regional stability to counterbalance China's escalating influence and assertive posture (Wei & Zhang, 2021).

Conversely, President Xi Jinping's behaviour in the Indo-Pacific exudes a more aggressive posture, most conspicuously in relation to territorial claims in the South China Sea. China's fortification of artificial islands and its assertion of jurisdiction over disputed maritime zones have raised concerns among regional players and the wider international community. Such activities not only challenge

the FOIP paradigm, but also raise serious considerations about regional balance and the risk of conflict (Nagy, 2022).

The Indo-Pacific therefore functions as a geopolitical crucible in which the divergent ambitions of the US and China are pitted against each other. Biden's fidelity to the FOIP and commitment to strengthening the alliance seek to counterbalance China's regional ambitions. Xi Jinping's territorial assertiveness, on the other hand, manifests China's intention to expand its geopolitical influence in its immediate neighbourhood. This dissonance in security objectives and geopolitical schemata increases the complexity and potential volatility of the US-China relationship and establishes the region as a crucial locus of diplomatic engagement and strategic calculus (The White House, 2021).

Human Rights

The issue of human rights has been a particularly salient aspect of the relationship between the Biden administration and Xi Jinping's government, serving as both a point of contention and an ideological divide. President Biden has maintained a vocal stance against China's human rights practices, especially concerning the treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang and the erosion of democratic freedoms in Hong Kong. His administration has deployed various tools, including targeted sanctions against Chinese officials and organizations implicated in human rights abuses, to express its opposition (Ochab, 2021).

Conversely, President Xi Jinping has staunchly defended China's actions in both Xinjiang and Hong Kong as internal matters essential to national unity and social stability. From the Chinese perspective, criticisms from the US and other Western countries are perceived as intrusions into China's domestic affairs and sovereignty. Xi's justification of these measures signals a broader ideological rift between US democratic ideals and the Chinese Communist Party's authoritarian governance model (Lau, 2023).

In essence, human rights have become a highly sensitive and divisive issue in the US-China relationship under Biden and Xi. While both sides maintain their respective stances, the differing viewpoints have not only strained bilateral relations but also complicated cooperation on other global issues. The ideological divergence serves as an underlying tension that informs the overall dynamics of the relationship, making it a complex and challenging area for diplomatic engagement.

Areas of Cooperation

In the midst of prevailing tensions and diverging interests, there exists a cautious optimism for cooperation between the Biden administration and Xi Jinping's government on select global challenges. One such area is climate change, where both leaders seem to understand the urgency and the mutual benefits of collaborative action. President Biden's decision to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement, reversing his predecessor's withdrawal, signals a recommitment to international cooperation on environmental issues. This move creates an opportunity for the US and China, the world's two largest emitters of greenhouse gases, to collaborate in accelerating global efforts to mitigate climate change (Vangala et.al., 2022). Similarly, President Xi Jinping has expressed a willingness to engage with the international community on environmental sustainability. While Xi continues to assert China's global influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road, he also recognizes that climate change is a transnational issue that transcends ideological

and geopolitical boundaries. This recognition offers a diplomatic opening for engagement between the two nations (Buzan, 2021).

Global health is another domain where cooperation seems plausible. The ongoing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic underscore the necessity for collective action in the realms of public health and medical research. While geopolitical considerations will undoubtedly influence these collaborative efforts, the mutual benefits of combating a global health crisis could serve as an impetus for cooperation (Taghizade et al., 2021).

In summary, despite the overarching narrative of strategic competition, areas such as climate change and global health offer avenues for cooperative engagement between the Biden administration and Xi Jinping's government. While these opportunities are fraught with their own set of challenges and complexities, they represent essential components in the broader tapestry of US-China relations under the current leadership.

Overall Assessment

The Biden-Xi era manifests as a dynamic interplay between competition and cooperation, each underpinned by deep-rooted national interests and ideological tenets. On one hand, both administrations exhibit a clear intent to safeguard their geopolitical and economic arenas, often resulting in policies that seem to encroach upon each other's perceived spheres of influence. This is evident in the areas of trade, human rights, and regional security, where each side has taken steps to assert its policies, often causing friction. On the other hand, there is an evident pragmatism in recognizing that the Sino-American relationship is too significant to be solely adversarial. Both leaders seem to understand that their nations wield considerable influence on global issues like climate change and public health, and that cooperative action in these areas is not just beneficial but necessary.

This dual approach of competition and cooperation could be seen as a strategic balancing act, aimed at managing an inherently complex and consequential relationship. The respective national strategies and key policy documents from both sides reflect this nuanced approach, which could be summarized as "competitive coexistence."

In the broader context, the Biden-Xi era serves as a microcosm of the intricate and evolving dynamics of international relations in the 21st century. It captures the tension between national interests and global responsibilities, between ideological commitments and pragmatic necessities. As such, how this relationship evolves will not only determine the future of US-China relations but could also have far-reaching implications for global stability and the international order.

CONCLUSION

The evolving trajectory of US-China relations, spanning the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, provides a compelling narrative that captures the fluid and unpredictable nature of international politics. This complex relationship, shaped by successive presidential administrations in both countries, provides a prism through which to examine broader shifts in global power configurations, economic paradigms, and ideological discourses.

Beginning with the Clinton-Jiang era, the US adopted a policy of constructive engagement with China, reflecting a hopeful perspective that saw China as a promising collaborator in the post-Cold

War landscape. This sanguine disposition persisted somewhat into the Bush-Hu period, albeit underpinned by strategic caution as both countries navigated the emerging challenges of global terrorism and China's emerging assertiveness. By the Obama-Xi juncture, the relationship had morphed into one that sought to establish new protocols for engagement in the 21st century. Tools such as the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue emerged to manage an increasingly complicated and tense relationship, even as the earlier optimism began to erode, giving way to a nuanced mix of cooperation and rivalry.

The Trump era marked a significant shift, characterised by explicit disputes and strategic competition. Trump's 'America First' doctrine and Xi's grand aspirations for the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' provided the backdrop for escalating tensions and disputes. Issues such as trade conflicts, human rights disputes, and military posturing in the Indo-Pacific became emblematic of this phase. The confrontational stance adopted by the Trump administration has had an indelible impact on US-China relations, forcing both countries to reassess their tactical and strategic imperatives.

Inheriting this complex web of concerns, the Biden-Xi period has signalled a more nuanced *modus operandi*, encapsulated by the notion of 'competitive coexistence'. However, the administration faces the complicated task of managing a relationship saturated with geopolitical competition, economic rivalry and ideological discord. Despite these complexities, both leaders have demonstrated a calculated recognition of the mutual benefits of cooperation on pressing global issues, carving out niches of cooperation within a broader framework of competition.

This delicate balance between competition and cooperation encapsulates the current state of Sino-American interactions. While rivalry persists in the areas of technological innovation, economic strength and military prowess, there is a shared understanding that contemporary challenges - ranging from climate change and public health to regional stability - require cooperative responses. As a result, both nations find themselves in a precarious balancing act: asserting their individual national agendas while participating judiciously in multilateral initiatives that advance shared and global interests.

Managing this fragile balance has implications not only for the bilateral relationship, but also for the broader international system. In an increasingly multipolar world, characterised by diffuse power and interconnected challenges, the US-China axis functions as a crucial fulcrum. How these two pivotal powers manage their complex relationship will undoubtedly influence regional geopolitics, the effectiveness of international bodies, and the collective ability to address transnational challenges.

In conclusion, the evolving dynamic between the US and China epitomises the complexities that define contemporary international relations. This relationship transcends simple bilateral considerations and affects a wide range of global phenomena. As it continues to evolve, it is a critical determinant in shaping the structural characteristics of the 21st century international system. Due to its complex nature - fraught with conflict as well as shared goals - the US-China relationship is likely to remain a unique geopolitical equation that will continue to warrant the attention of policymakers and scholars for the foreseeable future.

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