SJIF Impact Factor (2025): 8.688| ISI I.F. Value: 1.241| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2016 ISSN: 2455-7838(Online)
EPRA International Journal of Research and Development (IJRD)
Volume: 10 | Issue: 5 | May 2025 - Peer Reviewed Journal

GREAT-POWER CONTEST: EVALUATING AMERICAN AND CHINESE ROLES IN SHAPING WORLD AFFAIRS

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ABSTRACT
The early 21st century has been defined by a shifting balance of power in which the United States and China stand as the principal actors. This article investigates the many layers of competition between these two superpowers, contrasting America's established role as a champion of liberal norms with China's swiftly growing economic and strategic reach that often contests the prevailing international structure. We survey their contest across key arenas—trade and investment, military deployments, technological breakthroughs, and ideological influence—and consider how this struggle shapes pressing global challenges such as climate policy, health governance, and collective security. By unpacking the tactics each country employs, the study sheds light on possible future paths of this rivalry and its broader consequences for the world order. Recognizing the subtleties of U.S.–China competition is essential for decision-makers, analysts, and stakeholders navigating today's interconnected geopolitical landscape.
KEYWORDS: *United States; China; great-power rivalry; economic statecraft; military projection; technological competition; global governance; international security.*

In recent decades, the rivalry between the United States and China has emerged as one of the most prominent and extensively discussed topics within the field of international relations. [18] These two global superpowers, with their formidable economic and military capabilities, exert significant influence over various aspects of worldwide politics, economics, and security. This rivalry is expressed through diverse means, ranging from trade conflicts and technological competitions to diplomatic maneuvering and military strategies. [15]

The significance of this research area is heightened by the backdrop of pressing global challenges, such as climate change, pandemics, and geopolitical conflicts. Given the increasing interdependence among nations, the world must find solutions that can only be achieved through cooperation, or that may be exacerbated by competition. [20] Comprehending the dynamics of the US-China rivalry is crucial for analyzing the future trajectory of global politics and security, and for developing strategies that foster stability within the international system.

Historical Context

The relationship between the United States and China has a lengthy and intricate history tracing back to the 18th century. [16] The initial interactions were predominantly driven by trade, as American vessels began frequenting Chinese ports. However, the 20th century witnessed more substantial transformations:

– **19th century**: The Second Opium War (1856-1860) and subsequent unequal treaties led to significant foreign influence in China, including the United States.

– The **first half of the 20th century**: Establishment of diplomatic relations in 1949 after the victory of the Chinese Communist Party led by Mao Zedong. The US supported the Nationalists, which led to a cooling of relations.

– **1970s**: Thawing of relations initiated by President Nixon's visit to China in 1972. This event was a turning point that paved the way for normalization of relations and economic cooperation.

– **1980s-early 2000s**: A period of relative stability when the US supported China's economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping. However, as China's economy grew, concerns about its influence on the international stage began.

– **2001**: China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) was an important milestone, but also increased economic competition.

– **2010s**: Deepening rivalry caused by China's growing influence in Asia and the world. Increased trade conflicts and technological disputes, especially in the high-tech sector.

– **2018-2021**: US-China trade war, imposition of tariffs and import restrictions. In parallel, both sides have increased military activity in the South China Sea and around Taiwan.

Historical events have significantly shaped and influenced the dynamics of the modern rivalry between the United States and China. These past events, ranging from ideological clashes and trade dependencies to geopolitical conflicts and technological competitions, have formed the complex and multifaceted relationship between the two global superpowers as we see it today. [13]

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The lingering effects of historical factors, such as the contrast between capitalist and communist models, the interdependence of their economies, the legacy of past military confrontations, and the current race for technological supremacy, all contribute to the intricate and often contentious nature of the U.S.-China rivalry on the world stage.

Economic Rivalry

The economic rivalry between the United States and China is a multifaceted phenomenon with profound implications for the global economy. While China's GDP reached approximately 80% of the US GDP in 2021, the two countries have pursued distinct economic strategies that have led to intensifying competition and tensions [10,14]. However, China's higher growth rate presents a significant challenge to the United States, as it signifies a shift in the global economic balance of power. This dynamic extends beyond GDP figures, impacting foreign trade, foreign direct investment, and other key economic indicators.

Trade between the two countries also plays an important role in their economic rivalry. The US is one of the largest buyers of Chinese goods, while China acts as an important market for US exporters. [1] However, the US trade deficit with China is a concern for US politicians and economists, leading to the imposition of tariffs and import restrictions, especially as part of the trade war launched in 2018.

Technological competition between the US and China is another important component of this rivalry. Both countries seek leadership in innovation and patents. For example, in 2020, China became the leader in the number of patents filed, indicating its desire for technological superiority. At the same time, the US continues to be a high-tech center, especially in areas such as software and biotechnology. Effective intellectual property protection in both countries plays a key role in maintaining competitiveness.

The impact of economic competition on global markets cannot be underestimated. Rivalry between the world's two largest economies is shaping new trade routes, changing supply chains and influencing pricing strategies in international markets. [2] For example, an increase in protectionist measures by the US may lead to a change in the structure of global trade and strengthen the position of other countries, such as India or Southeast Asian countries. Moreover, the technological race leads to the creation of new standards and norms that may change the rules of the game at the global level.

Thus, the economic rivalry between the US and China is a complex and multilayered process that has a significant impact on global economic trends and the structure of international relations.

Political Influence

The political influence of the United States and China in the international arena is demonstrated through their active engagement in global institutions, the strategic diplomatic relationships they cultivate, and their involvement in regional disputes. [8]

First, the United States and China play key roles in international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). At the UN, both countries have veto power in the Security Council, allowing them to exert significant influence over international decisions and resolutions. The US traditionally favours democratic values and human rights, while China emphasizes the sovereignty of states and non-interference in internal affairs. In the WTO, China, having become a member in 2001, has actively used its position to promote export interests, while the US has expressed concerns about China's trade practices, sometimes leading to conflicts at the level of the organization. [9]

Second, diplomatic strategies and alliances are important tools for realising the foreign policy goals of both countries. The US is actively developing alliances with democratic states such as Japan and South Korea, as well as with NATO, which allows it to maintain influence in Asia and Europe. At the same time, China is forging its strategic alliances through the Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to strengthen economic ties with developing countries. These alliances serve not only economic purposes but also political ones, creating blocks of influence in the international arena. [4]

Finally, the influence of the US and China on regional conflicts, such as the Taiwan issue and the situation in the South China Sea, demonstrates their conflicting interests. Taiwan remains a key element of Chinese national identity, and Beijing views it as an integral part of its territory. In response, the U.S. supports Taiwan through arms sales and diplomatic support, causing tensions between Washington and Beijing. In the South China Sea, China is actively expanding its territorial claims, which faces opposition from the US and its allies, who are conducting freedom of navigation operations in this strategically important region. [6]

The political influence of the United States and China in the international arena is characterized by intricate engagement within global institutions, the strategic development of diplomatic alliances, and active involvement in regional disputes, all of which collectively shape the dynamics of international politics.

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Military Rivalry

The military competition between the United States and China is a crucial component of their relationship and significantly influences international security. An examination of three key elements is warranted: a comparison of military capabilities, an analysis of security strategies, and an assessment of the impact on global stability.

1. Comparison of military power

Powers and Resources

– **The United States:** Possesses the largest military in the world with highly developed technology. Their arsenal includes advanced combat aircraft, aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines and missile defence systems. The US also has significant resources to conduct operations around the world.

– **China:** In recent decades, China has significantly increased its military spending and modernised its armed forces. The Chinese Army (People's Liberation Army) has become increasingly technologically advanced, with an emphasis on cybernetics, unmanned technology, and hypersonic weapons.

Population and Training

– China has a numerically large military, but the U.S. is superior in terms of the professionalism and training of its troops. The U.S. military has experience in various conflicts, while Chinese troops are still developing their skills in real-world combat.

2. Security strategies: defensive and offensive.

USA:

– **Defensive Strategy:** The US has traditionally taken a proactive approach to security, including interventions and allied support. They use their bases abroad for force projection and rapid response to crises.

– **Defensive measures:** Include missile defence systems and strengthening alliances with other countries such as Japan, South Korea and NATO.

China:

– **Offensive strategy:** China is developing its military capabilities in the South China Sea and around Taiwan in an effort to strengthen its territorial claims.

– **Defensive measures:** Emphasis on cybersecurity and critical infrastructure protection, and the development of A2/AD (anti-access/area denial) systems to limit adversary access to strategically important regions.

3. Impact on global security and stability

Regional tensions:

– Military rivalry between the U.S. and China is increasing tensions in Asia, especially in hotspots such as Taiwan and the South China Sea. This could lead to conflicts or even open clashes.

Global Security:

– Competition between the two powers could lead to an arms race, which would negatively affect global stability. Other countries may be forced to choose sides or strengthen their own military capabilities to defend against potential threats.

International Relations

– Rivalries affect alliances and international organisations. Countries may seek new alliances or strengthen old ones, which changes the balance of power on the world stage.

Consequently, the military competition between the United States and China encompasses various facets that impact global security and stability, thereby presenting novel challenges for the international community.

Social and Cultural Aspects

In the contemporary global context, the strategic use of propaganda and soft power has become pivotal in shaping public perception, particularly in the backdrop of the rivalry between the United States and China. Soft power, as a concept, denotes a state's capacity to attract and persuade others through cultural, ideological, and diplomatic means, rather than relying on military or economic coercion. The United States actively leverages its cultural accomplishments, such as film, music, and fashion, to disseminate its values and lifestyle. Conversely, China employs a propaganda approach, emphasizing its historical achievements and socio-economic progress to cultivate a favourable international image. [19]

Educational and cultural exchange programmes, such as the Fulbright program in the US and various initiatives in China, play a crucial role in promoting mutual understanding between countries. These programmes enrich the participants' educational experience and foster a deeper appreciation for cultural differences and commonalities. Consequently, a new generation of leaders is emerging who are well-equipped to operate in the context of a globalised world. [3]

The strategic employment of cultural initiatives has become increasingly prominent in shaping international relations. Both the United States and China are actively leveraging cultural diplomacy to further their respective interests. For instance, China has

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established Confucius Institutes worldwide, which focus on the study of Chinese language and culture, thereby bolstering its position within the global educational landscape. [11] Conversely, the United States supports various programmes aimed at disseminating the English language and American cultural influence through organisations like American Centres.

The social and cultural dimensions of US-China engagement constitute a intricate network of interactions, with advocacy, educational programs, and cultural diplomacy playing a pivotal role. These elements not only influence public perceptions, but also significantly impact international relations, nurturing both collaboration and competition between the two nations. In the context of globalization, it is crucial to consider these aspects when examining the dynamics of modern international affairs. [7]

The future of competition and cooperation

The United States-China relationship stands at a critical crossroads, with potential trajectories ranging from confrontation to cooperation. One of the more probable scenarios envisions a continuation of strategic rivalry, wherein both nations strive to bolster their respective positions on the global stage, potentially heightening military and political tensions in the Asia-Pacific region. [12] Conversely, there exists the possibility of a more constructive approach, where the parties endeavour to manage conflicts and cultivate cooperative frameworks.

The involvement of third-party nations and international institutions is growing increasingly vital in addressing the tensions between the United States and China. Countries such as India, Japan, and European Union members could serve as mediators, facilitating discussions and deescalating conflicts. International organizations like the United Nations and World Trade Organization can offer platforms to address contentious matters and develop mutually acceptable solutions. [5] These frameworks have a crucial part to play in establishing norms and standards that will help prevent the escalation of conflicts and promote sustainable peace.

The potential for collaboration between the United States and China in addressing global issues such as climate change and infectious diseases represents another crucial area of examination. Both nations face significant environmental challenges that necessitate joint initiatives to achieve sustainable development goals. [17]For instance, their participation in international climate accords like the Paris Agreement can provide a foundation for cooperative efforts in advancing clean technology innovations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the necessity for international collaboration in combating infectious diseases within the health domain. Facilitating the exchange of knowledge and resources between the United States and China could substantially strengthen the global response to potential future pandemics. Despite the prevailing differences between the two nations, there exist substantial opportunities for them to cooperate in addressing shared challenges. [14]

In conclusion, the trajectory of the U.S.-China relationship hinges on their capacity to strike a balance between rivalry and collaboration. The involvement of third-party nations and international institutions will be pivotal in promoting stability, preventing escalation of conflicts, and effectively addressing the global challenges confronting the international community.

The evolving dynamics between the United States and China represent a defining feature of the 21st-century global order. As this analysis has demonstrated, their competition extends across multiple dimensions, from economic and technological spheres to ideological and military domains. While rivalry is inherent in this relationship, there exist opportunities for cooperation on shared global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and nuclear proliferation.

The future trajectory of this complex interplay will significantly shape the international system. A descent into open conflict would have devastating consequences for all, while a purely cooperative scenario appears unlikely given the existing geopolitical realities. A more plausible outcome is a continuation of strategic competition, punctuated by periods of cooperation on issues of mutual interest.

Navigating this complex landscape necessitates a nuanced understanding of the historical context, the motivations driving both nations, and the potential points of friction and collaboration. The international community, including states, multilateral institutions, and non-state actors, has a crucial role to play in shaping the rules of engagement, mitigating risks, and fostering a more stable and prosperous global order. The ability of the United States and China to manage their rivalry responsibly while identifying areas of common ground will be paramount in determining the future of global peace and prosperity.

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