

## Shifting Geostrategic Dynamics in An Era of Intense Competition

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**Abstract:** This paper synthesizes and analyzes the key shifts in the foreign policies of the People's Republic of China and the United States, with a particular focus on economic, military, and geopolitical dimensions. The analysis of the evolving strategic landscape in the Asia-Pacific region takes into account the geopolitical realignments in the international system, scenarios of multipolarity, global and regional conflicts, and the application of strategic management models to international relations, politics, economics, and defense.

**Key words:** geopolitics, strategy, United States, China, conflict, multipolarity

**JEL code:** F5

### 1. Introduction

We cannot escape the realities of our time, and these realities, as Aristotle asserted, are rooted in the events unfolding around us (Aristotle, 2018). The geopolitical landscape has undergone significant transformations, and it would be misguided to assume that the current strategic conditions mirror those described by various scholars at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. In this context, one might be tempted to believe that the conditions of our reality are cyclical, echoing the historical-philosophical theses of Arnold J. Toynbee (García, Bazán, Francisco, 1982). Toynbee attributed decisive importance to certain historical cycles, which impart a dialectical character to the future of universal history, particularly the notions of “decline” and “revival”.

Others may find resonance in the ideas of Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) and his concept of “*Corsi e ricorsi*”, a pendulum theory of history. This theory parallels the biblical metaphor found in the teachings of the patriarch Joseph in Genesis, which illustrates how periods of prosperity are often followed by periods of decline or crisis, and vice versa.

However, we must also consider the propositions of García Bazán (García, Bazán, Francisco, 1982), who, like many contemporary physicists, postulated that history is linear and therefore cannot repeat itself. Yet, since the entire universe is curved, this line forms a spiral, and from this perspective, societies encounter cycles or moments in history that bear similarities.

From any point on this spiral, whether descending or ascending, these similarities can be observed. Now, as we examine the current global reality, our present moment, through the lens of this postulate put forth by the Hispanic philosopher, the United States of America appears to be echoing certain political and strategic actions reminiscent of other empires throughout history (a notion that Toynbee also explores in his work). And while the American nation is a republic, philosophically and politically distinct from the concept of an empire, its territorial

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expanse, especially overseas, coupled with its military, economic, industrial, and technological might, make it difficult to view it as anything else.

Throughout its history as a nation, the United States has embraced various geopolitical models. Initially, it embodied the concept of a “Nation in Arms” (Von der Goltz, Colmar, 1895) but later adopted the thalassocratic approach (subsequently elaborated by Mahan) (Mahan, Alfred Thayer, 2004).

From nearly the moment of its inception as an independent nation, the establishment of a formidable overseas navy was a paramount priority for the Continental Congress.

The “U.S.S. Constitution”, still in active service, sets sail for certain celebrations, a testament to its storied past. This ship, along with three others of its class, began its journey as part of a squadron in the late 18th century, engaging in battles off the coast of North Africa. After nearly three decades of conflict with the British, the United States turned its attention to waging war on Native American territories, fighting significant battles in its push towards the Pacific Ocean.

Once this strategic objective was achieved, the American Civil War erupted, exposing the shortcomings in the strategic thinking of its leaders. During this period, naval power assumed a brief but crucial strategic role, with the Union forces asserting their dominance over the Confederates at sea and along the rivers.

The notion of the United States as a power nation emerged through a comparative study of British and French development. It was Admiral Mahan who proposed a model of strategic power projection beyond the nation’s borders, drawing upon and modernizing the prevailing British model of the 19th century (Mahan, Alfred Thayer, 2004).

This model embodied the concept of a thalassocratic state, characterized by the domination of the seas and, more specifically, the control of trade and maritime traffic.

This era also witnessed the unfolding of the geopolitical “Great Game” between the United Kingdom and the Russian Empire, a struggle for Asian resources. Simultaneously, French and Franco-African overseas expansion was underway.

The imperative to establish a robust domestic naval industry and a corresponding navy formed the cornerstone of strategic and geopolitical thought in the United States. The global conflicts of the 20th century left an indelible mark on the policies and ideologies of this powerful overseas nation, while also necessitating the updating of these concepts in light of technological and scientific advancements. It was during this period that the United States, immersed in the Cold War, began to adopt and implement various geopolitical and geostrategic concepts from thinkers such as Igor Ansoff, Nicholas John Spykman, Curtis LeMay, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Henry Kissinger.

In the aftermath of the United States’ achievement of a “Pax Americana”, which assumed and realized the solidification of a unipolar world order, with capitalist globalization at the forefront of strategic thought from 1990 to 2008, the global landscape was undergoing evident transformations. Even the most casual observer could discern the ubiquitous emergence of two strategic actors vying for the same prominence on the world stage, actors who have, through various means, challenged the ideas and strategic maneuvers of the American colossus.

Several authors, including Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Alexander Dugin, Dmitri Trenin, Gennady Zyuganov, Kamaludin Gadzhiev, Vladimir Kolosov, Nikolai Mironenko, and Nikolai Nartov, have introduced the concept of the “New Great Game”. This phrase encapsulates the contemporary understanding of geopolitics in Central Eurasia as a contest between the United States, the United Kingdom, and NATO countries on one side, and Russia, China, and the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on the other, all seeking to

secure “influence, power, hegemony, and advantages in Central Asia and the Caucasus”. Among these scholars, the work “Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia” by Alexander Dugin stands out, positioning him as the chief proponent of post-Soviet Russian expansionism.

For this geopolitical thinker, the heart of the world lies in Eurasia, a region that encompasses, as Polish-American strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski also asserts, the entirety of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. This is the pivotal axis, the new “Heartland”, a notion originally put forward by Halford Mackinder.

In truth, the realignment of this axis was a construct, or more precisely, a strategic misstep by Henry Kissinger, known as “Operation Marco Polo”<sup>1</sup>. Half a century ago, this initiative enabled him to engage in clandestine discussions with Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, paving the way for President Richard Nixon’s landmark visit to China and his meeting with Chairman Mao Zedong. Nixon had articulated the significance of engaging with China even before assuming office in January 1969. In an article published in *Foreign Affairs* magazine in October 1967, he wrote, “(...) From a long-term perspective, we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors.”

The strategy of bolstering China (through various agreements spanning from 1972 to 2020) across all dimensions, but particularly as a manufacturing hub for the United States, had the singular aim and strategic objective of undermining the former Soviet Union, which ultimately collapsed in 1989. No one could have foreseen that China would emerge as the formidable power it is today, much less that it would challenge the preeminence of the United States.

Nevertheless, the United States should have heeded several “future-bearing facts” (Godet, Michel, 2007) but instead chose to ignore them from a stance of absolute power denial. This historical oversight is tantamount to the first barbarian invasion of Rome.

As Toynbee himself elucidates, China belongs to an exclusive club of living social fossils, alongside the Jewish nation and certain indigenous Australian populations. Its ancient heritage and imperial ambitions were never relinquished; rather, they were perpetually stymied by more advanced nations across all domains.

The conclusion of the last third-generation war, the Falklands War and the South Atlantic conflict in 1982, in some ways hastened the United Kingdom’s handover of Hong Kong to China, just as Portugal did with Macau.

The diminishing influence of former colonial powers to the benefit of China should have served as a warning to the United States, but it went unheeded. The neglect of Chinese geopolitics was evident from the 1970s through the early 2000s.

It is worth noting that the last naval battle involving warships equipped with 122 mm guns occurred between the People's Republic of China and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1974 (Paracel Islands), 1981, 1984, and most significantly on March 14, 1988, during the Johnson South Reef Skirmish over control of the Johnson South Reef in the Union Banks region of the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. These four engagements, coupled with the failed Chinese attempt to invade Vietnam from the north, pointed to two overlooked scenarios.

China’s failure on land exposed the strategic inadequacy in the formation of its military apparatus. However, its naval forces, despite limited resources, had achieved notable strategic victories, particularly in securing China’s control over strategically vital locations such as islands, straits, passageways, and regions of historical geopolitical significance to the Americans and the Japanese.

It is also important to remember that it was not until 1988 that the People's Liberation Army Navy was led by

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-57772868>, Accessed 22/04/2023.

a naval officer, Liu Huaqing. Liu, who spent the majority of his career in science and technology-related administrative roles, was a close confidant of Deng Xiaoping, as his efforts to modernize the navy closely aligned with China's national policies (Cole, Bernard D., 2001).

As previously noted, China's Reform and Opening Up process paved the way for its naval strategy, which gradually adopted the concept of "near seas defense" (Li, Nan, 2009).

At that time, according to the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), Beijing anticipated localized conflicts along China's maritime periphery, in which the People's Liberation Army (PLA) would need to be able to achieve regional objectives and deter a modern adversary from military intervention (DIA, 2019, p. 63).

As a result, the Chinese Navy's aspirational operational range expanded significantly to encompass the maritime space between the Chinese coast and the so-called First Island Chain, which includes the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea.

Neither the State Department, the Department of Defense, nor the centralized intelligence agencies of the United States could anticipate or recognize the strategic opportunity that China had seized and how it would strengthen its position in the coming decades. Although the events of June 4, 1989, in Tiananmen Square could have decisively weakened the Chinese Communist regime, what followed instead was the acceleration of the seventh five-year plan, dominated by rigorous strategic planning from the Deng Xiaoping Strategic Planning Center. In March 1991, the fourth session of the Seventh National People's Congress (NPC) of China approved the State Council's report titled "The Ten-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Eighth Five-Year Plan".

Under Deng Xiaoping's guidance, this eighth plan marked the start of a new phase in China's development. The naval industry gained prominence and preeminence during this period, alongside advancements in electronics and weapons.

China's national economy maintained its growth momentum during this time. By 1995, the gross national product reached \$730 billion, a 4.3-fold increase from 1989. China became the world's largest producer of coal, cement, televisions, food, cotton, and cotton garments, followed by steel and chemical fibers, and ranked third in electricity supply.

China's economy experienced an annual growth rate of 11%, an increase of 4 percentage points compared to the seventh five-year planning period. During this same time, China became the primary holder and purchaser of U.S. foreign debt. It is worth noting that China is currently in its fifteenth five-year plan.

From 2000 to 2020, the Asian giant modified its military doctrine, gradually shifting away from mass armies and focusing on a military instrument based on technology transfer for its military, naval, and aerospace industries, always within the scientific development framework proposed by the Chinese Communist Party. China directly benefited from agreements with Israel, France, Russia, and the United States. During this period, the People's Republic of China implemented a mixed model for its navy. For technological reasons, the submarine arm was based on the Russian model:

- All Chinese submarines are based on Soviet designs, both conventional and nuclear, with modest indigenous technological developments.
- The naval aviation arm would consist of a mix of Russian models, such as the J-7 and J-11, and French rotary-wing aircraft based on the Eurocopter Ecureuil and Super Frelon.
- Naval electronics would begin to integrate Israeli technology. The substantial change would come from the surface fleet, which was almost entirely copied from the U.S. Navy, with the exception of the two

aircraft carriers (one Russian and one indigenous).

According to the report presented by James Fanell to Congress, the Chinese Navy already surpasses the U.S. Navy in some respects. China currently possesses or has deployed 330 ships and 66 submarines (396 in total), while the United States currently has a total of 283 deployed: 211 ships and 72 submarines (all nuclear-powered and technologically superior). Based on the projections in Fanell's report, by 2030, China will have 450 ships and 99 operational submarines, while the United States will have around 355. The significant uncertainty, in his view, is whether Washington will be able to fund sufficient naval construction to field such a number of ships and submarines by then. It is at this juncture that the concept of AUKUS emerges.

For China, in strategic matters, the Chinese Military Strategy was published in 2015, and in 2019, the new White Paper on National Defense was released. This document clearly identifies three global domains of particular interest for national defense: the nuclear domain, as the foundation of its national sovereignty; outer space, as a critical arena for international competition; and cyberspace, as a crucial area for national security, economic progress, and social development. The document emphasizes the defensive nature of its military instrument, peaceful development, territorial integrity, and the interests of the people as non-negotiable values of the nation.

After 40 years of economic reform and opening up, and the low-profile approach advocated by the Deng doctrine, the policymaking process in Xi's China has undergone profound transformations. The central leadership body of the Communist Party, across successive generations of collective leadership, continued and updated the policies championed by Deng Xiaoping, which allowed China to project an image of prosperity, maintain political stability, foster rapid economic development, and pursue an active diplomacy.

The Chinese Armed Forces implement the military strategic guideline of "active defense". Building a strong armed force is a key task in China's modernization process and a security guarantee for the country's peaceful development. Defense, which is subordinate to and serves national strategic objectives, provides an overarching guide for planning and directing the development and employment of the country's military instrument in pursuit of realizing the Chinese dream of great national rejuvenation. As stated in the book titled *China's Military Strategy*, the country adheres to a foreign policy of peace that opposes hegemonies and power politics in all their forms, and will never seek hegemony or expansion.

Consequently, the document asserts that China's armed forces will adapt to new changes in the security environment, steadfastly continue to support the maintenance of world peace, accelerate the modernization of national defense, resolutely safeguard China's sovereignty, security, and development interests, and provide a solid guarantee for achieving the national strategic goal of the "two centenaries".

In line with this objective, China progressively increased investment in the modernization of the PLA to transform it into a "more capable, professional, and lethal force", acquiring some of the world's most advanced weapons systems, ranging from hypersonic missile systems to new nuclear submarines.

The restructuring initiated by President Xi is the most extensive in three decades and aims to build a more professional and lethal military capable of winning "information wars" and projecting its influence far beyond its borders or nearby seas. To this end, he streamlined the powerful Central Military Commission he chairs, reducing the number of members and consolidating his control over it.

## **2. The Opening of the Port of Djibouti in Africa**

During this period, the People's Republic of China capitalized on a significant shift in foreign policy: the opening of the port of Djibouti in Africa.

This African maritime enclave in the eastern Horn of Africa enables control over and passage to the Strait of Malacca, and with it, free and secure access to the Indian Ocean. Not only the United States but also nations such as Japan, China, the United Kingdom, France, and other European countries lease sovereign spaces in this port, which is nearly equivalent to Casablanca in the 1940s. Without tensions, rival powers share ports, waters, and jurisdictions.

This strategic location ensures that the large Chinese merchant navy has a safe and short route without interfering with the sovereignty of India or other Asian nations, maintaining tensions primarily with Japan, Taiwan, and Korea. China also benefited from strategically low-cost ports, such as those in Sri Lanka, Kenya, some autonomous islands in the Marshall Islands, and East Timor, in addition to advantageous leases in South Africa and Namibia. In this way, steadily and surely, China is evolving into a thalassocratic nation, challenging the dominance of the United States in the Pacific Ocean.

Over the past three years, China has set a record by launching 42 satellites into orbit, many of which are military, and has launched its first domestically built aircraft carrier equipped with electromagnetic catapults. These advancements have solidified China as the second-largest naval power in the world, surpassing Russia, the United Kingdom, and France

### **3. The Quality of China's Naval Power**

It's difficult to assess the quality of China's naval power due to a lack of reliable data. However, in this global context, and after strategic missteps, the United States has reacted by creating the international alliance AUKUS. This alliance is essentially an expansion of the Anglo-Saxon Five Eyes intelligence network, but with a focus on naval intelligence and the inclusion of Canada.

Following James Fanell's line of thought, and faced with the impossibility of keeping up with China's productive capacity, the US Department of Defense made the historic decision not only to directly transfer a nuclear submarine to its ally, Australia, but also to sign treaties for their construction in both Australian and British shipyards, with the exception of missiles and torpedoes, which are reserved as exclusive technology.

This move weakened the French naval industry, which lost the biggest shipbuilding contract in history due to the creation of the alliance. The United States held consultations to incorporate India, but its consistently ambivalent position prevented progress in these talks.

However, AUKUS is not only a belated response to a strategic or industrial problem, as Fanell proposed. China itself has fueled many of the international problems that have simmered since 1974.

The conflict scenarios tested by China are based on the intersection of geopolitical and geostrategic matrices produced by the vulnerability of the energy base (oil and gas) of the main economies surrounding the South China Sea (Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN countries). Within this context, the level of regional dependence on Middle Eastern oil producers impacts the matrix of jurisdictional disputes opened, primarily by the sovereignty of the Spratly, Paracel, and Mischief Reef archipelagos. These disputes combine the struggle over offshore gas and oil basins with the security of maritime commercial supply routes (Golley, Jane, Jaivin, Linda, Farrelly, Paul J. & Sharon Strange, 2019).

On the other hand, there is the case of Taiwan, which constitutes the probable flashpoint in the short term, as

Xi's government has issued harsh warnings against the island's independence aspirations and assured that, if necessary, it would reunify the territory with the mainland "by force" (Arrosio, Héctor Agustín, 2012).

The strategic variables in which two critical potential conflict scenarios converge — the crisis scenario due to a fractured oil market and the scenario of clashes due to jurisdictional disputes — were operationalized in a new National Defense White Paper published on July 24, 2019. This document ratifies the defensive nature of China's defense policy and highlights sovereignty, security, territorial integrity, the guarantee of economic development interests, and the comprehensive construction of a modestly prosperous society as priority axes. Its main tenets are:

- 1) Maintain the security and unity of the country and guarantee the development of national interests. This is the "fault line" in the Pacific basin.
- 2) Prevent and resist any aggression, defending the security of maritime waters, airspace, and borders against any invasion.
- 3) Combat and contain secessionist forces for Taiwan independence, protests in Hong Kong, and all forms of terrorism, separatism, and extremism.

The South China Sea is an area of fundamental relevance for many countries in the Asia-Pacific region and one of the most active geopolitical scenarios in the world (SCIO, 2019).

The traffic of goods, as well as the high volume of oil and liquefied natural gas cargo ships, and its rich seabed make it a fundamental enclave for understanding the interests of the various national actors involved in this geopolitical framework.

For its part, Taiwan continues to be one of the main hotspots in the international system, as it is also a strategic enclave protected by the United States. The rise of independence sentiments and the solid Chinese position, which has set 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, as the deadline for the national reunification of Taiwan, make this a particularly volatile situation.

In simpler words, this is a declaration of future hostilities, with a date, year, and almost a specific hour.

The United States cannot sit idly by, especially when it observes how China is proactively copying policies it carried out a century ago. It confronts the two Koreas almost daily, so that South Korea has as its only hypothesis of conflict its northern neighbor. It extends and encourages North Korea with technologies and means to scare Japan almost weekly with missiles that pass over its territory. And it expands its territoriality by creating artificial islands in the South China Sea, using legal loopholes in international maritime conventions.

In short, we can conclude that time benefits the People's Republic of China, which is heading toward establishing not only the land route of the Silk Road that reached Europe in ancient times but also the "String of Pearls", a network of maritime routes and ports for its now high-value-added products. This palpable plan can be seen in Africa and now in South America.

The old geopolitics that so many postmodern authors disdained at the beginning of the 21st century is regaining vital importance to understand the future war. As various European analysts (including Henry Kissinger) maintain, the war in Ukraine will end in one form or another. In light of events, it has accelerated Russia's integration into the Asia-Pacific region, shifting the energy, industrial, and geopolitical axis.

Many postmodern authors, particularly Western ones, dismissed all geopolitical ideas at the beginning of the 21st century. However, in view of current events, their knowledge is becoming vitally important to understand the future war, which will surely take place in Taiwan (as established by the Chinese White Paper) or somewhere in the South China Sea.

In this current global scenario, Kant's "Perpetual Peace", or the pseudo-achievement of peaceful and harmonious world coexistence, is almost impossible. Without a global strategy (coupled with the United Nations' ineptitude in mediating war conflicts in a palpable way where members of the UN Security Council are involved) defined by an ability to think and design long-term diplomacy, the pragmatic realism of international relations theory will be more valid than ever. And the risks of global wars will be even more likely.

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