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WHY CHINA – US CONFRONTATION PERSISTS: THE UNABATED IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICT

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Abstract. The opposition between China and the US is a reflection of the major global contests of the 21st century. At its core, this conflict represents a rivalry between two distinct ideologies: liberal democracy and socialism with Chinese characteristics. Driven by these divergent ideological frameworks, Beijing and Washington exhibit uncompromising stances on a myriad of issues including the trade war, the Covid-19 pandemic, the special military operation in Ukraine, and the situation in Taiwan. The essence of this ongoing ideological struggle stems from the inability of US values, which champion a “free world”, to reconcile with China’s ideological objectives. The critical question about how will the escalating ideological conflict influence the global order amidst Sino-American rivalry still needs to be answered.

Keywords: China – US relations; ideological conflict; liberal democracy; socialism; Taiwan; Belt and road initiative; global conflict; attitudes; ideological objectives; Sino-American rivalry; China; the USA; Ukraine; Russia.

ЗАТЯЖНАЯ КОНФРОНТАЦИЯ КИТАЯ И США КАК БОРЬБА ИДЕОЛОГИЙ

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Аннотация. Противостояние между Китаем и США отражает ведущие глобальные противоречия XXI в. По сути, речь идет о соперничестве двух различных идеологий: либеральной демократии и социализма с китайской спецификой. Действуя в пределах своих идеологий, Пекин и Вашингтон занимают бескомпромиссные позиции по множеству вопросов, включая торговую войну, пандемию Covid-19, специальную военную операцию на Украине и ситуацию на Тайване. Причиной этого противостояния является несовместимость ценностей “свободного мира”, отстаиваемых США, с идеологическими устремлениями Китая. В условиях увеличивающегося разрыва между противоборствующими сторонами вопрос о возможном влиянии идеологий США и Китая на мировой порядок в целом остается открытым.

Ключевые слова: китайско-американские отношения; идеологический конфликт; либеральная демократия; социализм; Тайвань; инициатива “Один пояс, один путь”; глобальный конфликт; установки; идеологические цели; китайско-американское соперничество; Китай; США; Украина; Россия.

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Introduction

Amid escalating tensions between China and the US, encompassing trade, technology, and military supremacy, the potential for an ideological conflict remains an underexplored area. For over a century, the world experienced an American era defined by US ideologies, wealth, military prowess, alliances, and partnerships. In 1979, diplomatic relations were formally established between China and the US, acknowledging each other's presence on the global stage. Over the past four decades, despite divergences in political systems, strategic interests, and cultural values, both nations have maintained a largely cooperative stance, with bilateral relations progressing through various phases of engagement and cooperation. However, the election of D. Trump as president marked a shift towards a more confrontational approach towards China, leaving a lasting impact on bilateral relations. The inauguration of J. Biden has seen a continuation and intensification of tough rhetoric against China. This adversarial discourse has entrenched divisions, potentially complicating efforts for peaceful coexistence in the long term.

While scholars have long debated the role of ideology in international relations, ideological disparity has emerged as a prominent aspect of China – US relations. A scholar from Columbia University A. Weisiger views ideology as a theoretical framework in international politics that dictates specific policy prescriptions. However, these prescribed policies can obstruct effective communication and heighten the risk of misjudgments between states. Thus, ideological differences are intrinsically linked to international disputes and conflicts [1, p. 7]. In the context of China – US relations, competing ideologies have fostered opposing policies, escalated tensions,

and can potentially precipitate an imminent conflict. In this light, ideology continues to be central to the division between China and the US.

Chinese scholars and US strategists hold divergent perspectives on the ideological confrontation between their nations. Many American analysts adopt a confrontational stance towards the China – US ideological divide. Scholars such as H. Brands [2], A. L. Friedberg [3], and T. Chhabra [4] characterise China as authoritarian and argue that ideological confrontation is an intrinsic element of great-power competition, one that the US should not shy away from addressing. Moreover, they advocate that the US and other Western countries should devise a strategy to counterbalance China's influence. These views are also reflected by several senior officials within the US administration who believe that Washington's ultimate goal is to establish an ideological order that reinforces its hegemonic status.

Conversely, Chinese intellectuals rarely promote an ideological rivalry with the US. Scholars like Yan Xuetong [5], Wang Jisi [6], and Wu Xinbo [7] maintain that Beijing does not aim to disrupt the existing international order or supplant the US as the global hegemon. From Beijing's viewpoint, the most favourable outcome for both nations might be encapsulated by the Chinese adage *dou-er-bu-po*, suggesting a strategy of engagement without severance.

Although both parties recognise that some level of ideological competition is likely unavoidable, they concur that it is in their best interests to steer clear of unnecessary ideological confrontations. This article aims to explore the underpinnings of this ideological conflict and analyse the positions of China and the US regarding this ongoing dispute.

US “liberal empire”

Since its War of Independence, the US has championed a series of individual liberties including freedom of speech, religious freedom, jury trials, and individual citizens' and states' intrinsic rights [8, p. 217]. During World War I and after it, leveraging its unmatched economic, technological, and military capabilities, the US promoted a progressive agenda for its “liberal empire”. In 1918, president W. Wilson in his fourteen points, advocated for collective security post-World War I with a mutual guarantee of political independence and territorial integrity for all nations, big and small [9, p. 406]. At the 1944 Bretton Woods conference, the US spearheaded the creation of the World Bank, which aimed to provide loans to countries in the developing world. As World War II drew to a close in 1945, US leaders, along with their allies, established the UN. Shortly thereafter, to counterbalance the Soviet Union, the US, Canada, and several Western European nations founded the NATO. For over four decades, US policymakers viewed the coun-

try as playing a pivotal role in maintaining this liberal world order.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US has remained the sole dominant force in global politics. The world entered a new phase where the US government could intervene militarily and otherwise in foreign nations without fear of significant retaliation. In the 21st century, US leadership has persistently employed public, non-governmental, and politicised organisations to achieve its aims, primarily focusing on destabilising the internal dynamics of Russia. Concurrently, Washington has engaged in numerous military conflicts, including the Gulf War (1990–1991), the Kosovo War (1998–1999), the Afghanistan War (2001–2021), the Iraq War (2003–2011), the Libyan Civil War (2011), and various airstrikes in Syria. Additionally, under the pretext of promoting democracy, freedom, and human rights, the US government has extended its influence and devised strategies to orchestrate colour revolutions.

Historically, US strategists have regarded their nation as a pivotal member of liberal coalitions during critical periods: the allies in 1919, the UN in 1945, and the “free world” during the Cold War era. In 2007, to counter China’s military and diplomatic influence in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in the South China Sea, the US endorsed the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a strategic cooperative framework involving Australia, India, Japan, and the US [10, p. 2]. In September 2021, Washington announced the establishment of AUKUS, an enhanced trilateral security partnership with Australia and the UK. Although not explicitly aimed at China, AUKUS was designed to “uphold the international rules-based order where countries are free from all forms of military, economic, and political coercion” [11, p. 8].

However, the tenure of D. Trump marked a significant shift, with the US withdrawing from at least five major international agreements: the Paris agreement, the WHO, the UNESCO, the Iran nuclear deal, and the Trans-Pacific partnership. Despite D. Trump’s aggressive rollback of his predecessor’s policies, Washington and other Western democracies continued to support

a “rules-based” liberal world order. On his first day in office, president J. Biden re-committed the US to the Paris agreement and renewed support for the WHO and the UNESCO¹. The US government has consistently believed that its engagement with partners and allies yields substantial benefits for the American people.

From the US perspective, its liberal world order represents a “third way” between anarchy (an order with limited possibilities for cooperation) and hierarchy (an order maintained by the dominance of a leading state). As global interdependence increases, this liberal order avoids the extremes of anarchy and hierarchy, facilitating a collective approach to global challenges. The US liberal world order is layered: at its surface are internationalist ideologies and initiatives, while deeper layers consist of coalitions of like-minded states that develop and consolidate global rules and institutions.

The inner core of the US liberal order reveals its vulnerabilities and potential for failure when faced with crises and setbacks [12, p. 60]. This system champions enhanced cooperation and socio-economic progress. Consequently, the world should aim to expand rather than abandon this framework.

China’s ideological world view

On 1 October 1949, Mao Zedong, the leader of the Communist party at China (CPC), proclaimed the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. Since then, Marxism-Leninism has underpinned the official ideology of China. Initially, Marxism served as a blueprint for the nascent state, while early policymakers adapted certain tenets of communist ideology to suit national conditions, fostering its localisation in China. This adaptation led to the emergence of Mao Zedong thought, or Maoism, regarded as Marxism-Leninism tailored to the specifics of the Chinese Revolution. This ideology was later termed Chinese communism, Chinese Marxism, or the Sinicisation of Marxism.

In the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping initiated a transformative period of reform, opening up, and socialist modernisation. The gradual formation and development of Deng Xiaoping theory integrated the principles of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought with the practicalities of modern China. Entering the 21st century, Chinese leadership introduced the theory of three represents and the scientific outlook on development,

acknowledging the dominance of Western cultural influence and identifying ideological and cultural spheres as primary targets for Western forces².

In 2012, following his election as Secretary General of the CPC, president Xi Jinping led an exhibition at the National Museum of China titled “The road to rejuvenation”. He highlighted the treachery of Western imperial powers and Japan during what is referred to as China’s century of humiliation³. Xi Jinping cautioned against a repetition of history where China might again be subjugated by foreign powers. In that year, Xi Jinping also introduced the concept of the Chinese dream, which he defined as the realisation of a prosperous and robust nation, national rejuvenation, and the well-being of its people⁴. He proposed a two-stage development plan to achieve this dream: firstly, achieving basic socialist modernisation by 2035 and secondly, by the mid-21st century, transforming China into a leading modern socialist country⁵.

In 2013, China inaugurated the Belt and road initiative, creating a new paradigm for international cooperation.

¹The United States officially rejoins the Paris agreement [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-officially-rejoins-the-paris-agreement/> (date of access: 14.10.2023).

²Chinese president Hu Jintao warns of cultural warfare from West [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8988195/Chinese-President-Hu-Jintao-warns-of-cultural-warfare-from-West.html> (date of access: 14.10.2023).

³“The road of rejuvenation”: a must-see exhibition [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201807/19/WS5b50642ba310796df4df780b.html> (date of access: 15.10.2023).

⁴A reception to celebrate the 74th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China held in Beijing Xi Jinping delivers an important speech [Electronic resource]. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202310/t20231016_11161464.html (date of access: 15.10.2023).

⁵Secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era [Electronic resource]. URL: https://subsites.chinadaily.com.cn/npc/2021-12/24/c_693899_3.htm (date of access: 15.10.2023).

To support this initiative, China established entities such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Silk Road fund, and the China – Pakistan economic corridor, all of which have yielded significant outcomes.

In 2017, during the opening of the 19th National Congress of the CPC, Xi Jinping proclaimed that socialism with Chinese characteristics had entered a new era⁶. To fortify party leadership over ideological discourse and explore innovative approaches in advancing party-related theories, Xi Jinping articulated 14 guiding principles for the Chinese nation, the CPC, and his own leadership. Echoing his predecessors, Xi thought was enshrined in the Constitution during the 19th National congress of the CPC in 2018. As a proponent of Marxism, Xi Jinping's philosophy is grounded in historical and dialectical materialism. He asserted the necessity of aligning with historical trends to foster a stable international order⁷. At the 2018 Asia – Pacific economic cooperation forum, Xi Jinping observed that “the world is undergoing

profound changes unseen in a century” – highlighting not only the shifting international landscape but also persistent developmental imbalances⁸. Despite facing unprecedented challenges and opportunities, Xi Jinping remained confident that “time and situation are in our favour”⁹.

Drawing inspiration from Mao Zedong's notion of the rise of the East and the decline of the West, Beijing has underscored rapid shifts in global power dynamics¹⁰. Chinese policymakers perceive formidable challenges including economic development, improvement of people's livelihoods, environmental governance, and climate change mitigation. Despite these daunting prospects, the Chinese government has developed robust strategies to navigate these significant transformations and has unveiled a comprehensive long-term plan. Under the stewardship of the CPC, China is progressively asserting itself at the global forefront with newfound self-assurance.

Enduring ideological conflict

Since D. Trump's inauguration as president of the US, his administration initiated marked ideological shifts in America's stance towards China. These adjustments stemmed from the belief that China's ascent in comprehensive national power detracted from American dominance, and unless curtailed, China might surpass the US and assert its ideologies on the global stage. Washington perceived China's agenda of peaceful development and national rejuvenation as a significant threat, thereby labeling China as a revisionist power and a major strategic competitor. The 2017 US National security strategy accused China of challenging American power, influence, and interests, attempting to undermine American security and prosperity, appropriating US intellectual property, and striving to supplant the US in the Indo-Pacific region¹¹.

The US administration engaged in a prolonged trade war against China, ostensibly motivated by economic disparities but fundamentally driven by ideological differences, great power rivalry, and nationalism – all intensified by deep-seated mistrust over strategic intentions. The Trump administration maintained econo-

mic, political, and military pressures on China. Bilateral relations plummeted despite China's efforts to re-engage America. Moreover, this trade conflict represented merely a fraction of a broader, long-term ideological confrontation between the two nations.

Following the global outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, China implemented a stringent zero-Covid policy that astonished the international community. For nearly three years, the Chinese government enforced widespread lockdowns, rigorous contact tracing programmes, and bans on international travel, resulting in comparatively low coronavirus cases and fatalities relative to Western nations. During this period, Beijing largely disengaged from diplomatic interactions with Washington. Despite mounting criticism, which labeled his rhetoric as racist and anti-Chinese, president D. Trump persistently referred to the coronavirus as the “Chinese virus”¹². In response, the Chinese government accused the US of being unscientific, inequitable, and irresponsible, asserting that such attitudes severely compromised the American public's right to health and life¹³. Consequently, ideological tensions escalated.

⁶Socialism with Chinese characteristics enters new era: Xi [Electronic resource]. URL: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/18/c_136688475.htm (date of access: 15.10.2023).

⁷Forge ahead with confidence and fortitude to jointly create a better post-Covid world [Electronic resource]. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/202201/t20220117_10601026.html (date of access: 15.10.2023).

⁸Jointly charting a course toward a brighter future [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201811/18/WS5bf0df19a310eff30328958f.html> (date of access: 16.10.2023).

⁹Xi focus: Xi stresses good start for fully building modern socialist China [Electronic resource]. URL: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-01/12/c_139659544.htm (date of access: 16.10.2023).

¹⁰Xi Jinping's Chinese wisdom on ruling the country [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://www.news.cn/politics/2022-10/14/1129063609.htm> (date of access: 17.10.2023).

¹¹National security strategy of the United States of America [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> (date of access: 17.10.2023).

¹²Trump defends using “Chinese virus” label, ignoring growing criticism [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/politics/china-virus.html> (date of access: 18.10.2023).

¹³Reality check: falsehoods in U.S. perceptions of China [Electronic resource]. URL: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202206/t20220619_10706059.html (date of access: 19.10.2023).

When president J. Biden assumed office in 2021, his administration sought to undo several Trump-era restrictions on China. Nevertheless, bilateral relations continued to deteriorate as J. Biden maintained industry and trade policies that exhibited protectionist tendencies. Following the onset of the special military operation in Ukraine, despite China's proposed 12-point peace plan, Washington disparaged Beijing's policies, alleging that China supplied weapons to Russia and that a China – Russia axis had formed. J. Biden has framed the China – US confrontation as “a battle between the utility of democracies and autocracies in the twenty-first century”¹⁴. China has actively countered these narratives, which it views as unsupported by evidence from US officials. From Beijing's perspective, the special military operation in Ukraine could have been avoided had the Biden administration acknowledged Russia's legitimate security concerns about Ukraine joining NATO¹⁵.

Taiwan remains a critical focal point in the US – China ideological conflict. Taiwan is considered an integral part of China's territory. In 1979, the US acknowledged this stance through the one-China principle and the provisions of the three China – US joint communiqués. However, as ties between the US and Taiwan have strengthened, Washington has significantly infringed upon China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. While official diplomatic relations with Taiwan have not been

severed by Washington, high-profile visits have exacerbated tensions. In 2022, US House of Representatives speaker N. Pelosi visit to Taiwan provoked strong opposition from China. In 2023, following Taiwan's leader Tsai Ing-wen visit to the US, Beijing conducted three days of military exercises as a protest against what it perceives as interference in its internal affairs. Concurrently, the US has pursued a long-standing policy of arms sales to Taiwan. In 2023, the Biden administration approved a potential sale of 619 mln US dollars in new weapons to Taiwan¹⁶. Shortly thereafter, for the first time, the US approved the transfer of weapons to Taiwan under a programme typically reserved for sovereign states, further jeopardising peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.

The incident involving a Chinese balloon on 28 January 2023, exemplified the ideological rifts that continue to destabilise China – US relations. After US forces downed the balloon, Chinese authorities repeatedly claimed that it was an unmanned civilian airship employed for meteorological research, asserting that its passage over the US was an unforeseen, isolated event¹⁷. Conversely, American officials contended that the balloon was equipped with sophisticated surveillance technology designed to gather imagery and communications data¹⁸. This led Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken to postpone a scheduled visit to Beijing, marking a nadir in bilateral relations.

Conclusions

If the latter half of the 20th century was characterised by the ideological conflict between the US and the USSR pitting liberal democracy and market capitalism against communist party rule and central planning the 21st century is defined by the US – China dynamics. Western academics have posited that China is perpetuating the ideological confrontation initiated by the Soviet Union [13, p. 98]. Currently, China and the US are embroiled in a protracted rivalry. Unlike the Cold War, today's superpower clash involves the world's two largest economies, which are intricately linked.

To navigate this ideological battleground, Washington has leveraged alliances and international organisations to consolidate its global influence and contain China. In contrast, China advocates for peaceful development towards a new multipolar world order. Both

nations acknowledge the severe risk of conflict their tensions pose, preferring a stable relationship to mitigate the threat of significant military engagement. However, despite its growing strength, China faces challenges in pivotal technological sectors such as quantum computing, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and clean energy, underscoring the need for increased self-reliance and reduced susceptibility to external pressures.

The optimal approach for both countries to address their ideological disparities lies in mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, non-confrontation, and win-win cooperation. As major global and nuclear powers, China and the US must avoid comprehensive confrontation and avert a new cold war [14, p. 8].

Recent divergent reactions from Beijing and Washington to the Israel – Hamas war that erupted in October 2023

¹⁴Biden defines his underlying challenge with China: “Prove democracy works” [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/26/us/politics/biden-china-democracy.html> (date of access: 19.10.2023).

¹⁵Gabbard: Ukraine conflict avoidable if U. S. had recognized Russia concerns about Ukraine's NATO entry [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/gabbard-ukraine-conflict-avoidable-russia-concerns-ukraine-nato-entry> (date of access: 19.10.2023).

¹⁶Brigadier General Pat Ryder, Pentagon press secretary, holds a press briefing [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3317661/brigadier-general-pat-ryder-pentagon-press-secretary-holds-a-press-briefing/> (date of access: 19.10.2023).

¹⁷Balloon case demonstrates U. S. hysteria vis-à-vis China [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202302/10/WS63e57f34a31057c47ebadf48.html> (date of access: 20.10.2023).

¹⁸China has paused its spy balloon operations, U. S. officials say [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/15/us/politics/china-spy-balloon-program-paused.html> (date of access: 20.10.2023).

further illustrate these tensions. China advocated for a ceasefire and reiterated support for a two-state solution, while Washington unilaterally provided military backing to Israel, exacerbating regional tensions and amplifying the humanitarian crisis. The US adminis-

tration portrayed this conflict as part of a broader ideological struggle between autocracies and democracies, encompassing China as well. Thus, the ideological war may persist for decades, though its outcome remains uncertain.

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