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## **Great-Power Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Sino-US Relations, Power Transition, War, and the Contest for Supremacy in Asia**

**Principal Author: Dr. Zahid Ullah**<sup>1</sup> lecturer in Political Science at Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Email address: [zahid.ullah@awkum.edu.pk](mailto:zahid.ullah@awkum.edu.pk) and/or [zahidqau@gmail.com](mailto:zahidqau@gmail.com)

**Co-Author: Zeeshan Ahmad**<sup>2</sup> Department of Political Science, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Email: [za930143@gmail.com](mailto:za930143@gmail.com)

**Co-Author: Maghfoor Ullah**<sup>3</sup> Department of Political Science, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Email: [maghfoorkhattak987@gmail.com](mailto:maghfoorkhattak987@gmail.com)

**Co-Author: Dr. Muhammad Qasim Khan**<sup>4</sup> Director General Centre of Excellence on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Email: [edp.cve@kp.govt.pk](mailto:edp.cve@kp.govt.pk) and/or [qasimkhandaudzai@gmail.com](mailto:qasimkhandaudzai@gmail.com)

**Co-Author: Mahnoor Zaman**<sup>5</sup> MPhil scholar in the Department of Political Science at Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Email: [mahnoorzaman6@gmail.com](mailto:mahnoorzaman6@gmail.com)

**Co-Author: Muhammad Riaz**<sup>6</sup> PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Email: [riaz.khan@uop.edu.pk](mailto:riaz.khan@uop.edu.pk)

**Co-Author: Kashmala Asad Khan**<sup>7</sup> Department of Defence and Diplomatic Studies/IR, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Email: [misswaxir@icloud.com](mailto:misswaxir@icloud.com)

### **Abstract**

World history is full of the rise and fall of great powers. A common feature is found in the rise and fall of great powers: War. This article explores the role of war in the great powers rise and decline and argues that war has played a decisive role at the time of power transition— from the dominant power to the emerging one—in international politics. Will war play a role in the on- going struggle for supremacy between the US and China as well? Keeping in view the conflicting politico-economic ideologies, clashing visions for ordering the world, and the existence of irreconcilable differences over strategic issues, it is highly unlikely that the US- China contest will defy the logic of history and follow the inevitable pattern towards war. These fundamental differences, when coupled with the absence of an effective conflict and/or crisis management mechanism, little military-to-military communications, their divergent positions on Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the strategic design behind the economic-clad Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China, etc., the argument of a peaceful transition of power seems doubtfully optimistic. This article, therefore, argues that there is a strong possibility of a tense, conflict- ridden relationship— having every potential for spiraling into an armed conflict—between the US and the China than peaceful coexistence and a cooperative bond between them, unless and until it is avoided through robust diplomatic efforts by both great powers.

Key Words: Power Transition, War, Sino-US, BRI, Thucydides Trap, Taiwan, South China Sea

### **Introduction**

“Never before in history has a rising power ascended so far, so fast, on so many different dimensions as China.”

Graham Allison (Allison G. , 2015)

Geopolitics is back. Rivalries between great powers have already taken centre stage. Walter Russel Mead has rightly pointed out that “old-fashioned power plays are back in international relations,” (Mead, 2014). Relatedly, there is a raging debate on the nature and direction of change in the world order. The prevailing West-led liberal order is evidently facing a challenge from a rising power— China. China has asserted its authority to influence world order according to its political, economic, and strategic vision, culture and interests, while the US (and its allies in the West) endeavours to maintain the prevailing “rule-based” world order. Simply put, today’s international politics is dominated by discussions about the strategic competition between the US and China. There is another dimension to the debate as well: the decline of the US and the rise of China as a super power. So, a geopolitical and/or geo-strategic competition between the US and China, and a changing world order constitute the main axis of this debate in international politics.

China is evidently leading the change, and is already declared by the US as a “revisionist power”— that is, it is trying to re-order the world according to its vision and interests (The White House, 2017). Also, it has the capacity and intent to undertake such an endeavour; it will move the world away from the universal values that have underpinned the foundation of economic development and democracy for the last seven decades (Blinken, 2022). Echoing the sentiments of the US, the EU President Von Der Leyen asserts that China’s “clear goal is a systemic change of the international order with China at its centre [...] China's positions in multilateral bodies show its determination to promote an alternative vision of the world order” (Leyen, 2023). So, there is a near unanimity in the West, the US and the EU, on the threat posed by China to the West-led liberal world order.

What is China’s blueprint for a new world order? China, undoubtedly, sees the West-led order as “deeply-flawed,” which is why it is trying to refashion it to suit its vision and interests (Junqian & Weiwei, 2018). China claims that it wants a different but better world order for the mankind, and it is based on an UN-like vision and architecture: respect for state sovereignty, dialogue, the rule of law, and a wholesome cooperation. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is touted as a model for future inter-states relations, as it “is not a solo but a symphony revolving around voluntary participation and cooperation” (Muhammad, 2022).

Furthermore, the BRI subsumes other high-impact initiatives such as: the Global Security Initiative (GSI)— to shape the international environment in which its security interests are well protected; the Global Development Initiative (GDI)— to make the world favourable for its development; and the Global Civilisational Initiative (GCI)— to ensure that civilizational diversity is respected in order to avoid discord and ideological divisions (Kewalramani, 2023). All this shows that the BRI is not a project of some innocuous economic connectivity, but it also

provides an alternative to the current international order. So, the claim that China has the intent and capacity to refashion the prevailing world order seems tenable.

Nevertheless, the US, as the dominant power, is not only aware of the threat posed by China to its global standing, but is also actively working to minimize the threat. China is already declared as a “revisionist power”— “the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it” (US State Department, 2022). The Peoples Republic of China (PRC, henceforth) is also labelled as “the most consequential strategic competitor for the coming decades” (US Department of Defense, 2022). And the US strategy to counter China “can be summed up in three words: invest, align, compete” (US State Department, 2022). So, the US is taking counter-measures such as solidifying the existing alliances, forging new ones, and expanding its power and influence— both within and without— to prevent China from revising the West-led, rule-based international order.

In addition, there is little disagreement on the fact that it was the West that brought the PRC into the international system with the hope that it would become a “responsible stakeholder,” but that goal proved to be elusive. Instead, the PRC is not only trying to change the prevailing international system but also to replace it with a new one to better safeguard its geostrategic, geo-economic, and geopolitical interests. Also, it relishes its position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and opposes the inclusion of India and Japan as permanent members even though publicly it supports the UNSC expansion (Gardels, 2022). The design behind China’s understanding of multilateralism “is to steadily institutionalise its leadership over the developing world by creating, expanding and funding a raft of China-led groupings of countries” (Kynge, 2023). In other words, “China wants to rule the world by controlling the rules” (Schuman, 2021). All this shows that there exist irreconcilable differences between the existing superpower (US) and the emerging super power (China). The question is, who will succeed: whether the US will be able to maintain the current order or China to replace the existing order with its own.

The phenomenon of supplanting an existing super power by an emerging one is referred to as power transition. Power transition is a kind of hegemonic theory that stipulates that difference in rates of growth, imperial outreach and its cost, and “the development of vested domestic interests lead to the rise and fall of hegemons, and the probability of a major war is greatest at the point when the declining leader is being overtaken by the rising challenger” (Levy, 1998). War as a result of transition from an existing to the emerging power has roots in Thucydides’ “History of the Peloponnesian war” in which he argues that it was the threat posed by Athens to the power and prestige of Sparta that led to war between the two powers. Graham Allison coined the expression/phrase “Thucydides Trap” for the interplay between the existing and the rising power that could lead to war, as was the case in Peloponnesian war.

Power transition can either be peaceful or violent. Graham Allison's research shows that "in 12 of 16 past cases in which a rising power has confronted a ruling power, the result has been bloodshed" (Allison G. , 2015). Aaron L Friedberg highlights that "world history is replete with examples of the troubled, often violent, relations between fast-rising states and their once dominant rivals" (Friedberg, 2012). Rober Gilpin is of the view that once power and capabilities of rising powers grow, they then take measures to ensure their access to markets, raw material, transportation routes; they defend their own citizens and take steps to protect their allies, and to possess what they considers is rightfully theirs—both in the region as well as in the world (Gilpin R. , 1981). The US-China relations will, therefore, be tense, conflict-ridden, if the history of power transition and war is any guide. The possibility of war between China and the US cannot be ruled out altogether.

Before moving on to discuss the US-China equation through the power transition framework, it will be helpful to first shed light on its mechanism and then situate the phenomenon in history.

### **The Mechanism behind Power Transition**

Power transition in international politics refers to the narrowing of the gap— economic, political, and strategic—powers between the existing and the emerging great power and/or the eclipsing of the existing dominant power by the emerging one. In other words, "power transitions occur when a challenger surpasses the dominant state in material capabilities" (Kim & Morrow, 1992). For Organski and Kugler, "shifts in the international distribution of power are often believed to create the conditions likely to lead to at least the most important wars" (Organski & Kugler, 1980). So, there is a link between power transition and great—power wars.

In addition, the fear of the loss of power and prestige by the ruling great power leads to war with the rising power. Its roots can be traced to the Greek city states of the 4th BC when Athens, the emerging power, threatened the power and prestige of the existing power, Sparta. This situation— the threat to Sparta's great power status from an emerging power Athens— caused the Peloponnesian War between them (Holsti, 1988). In the Middle Ages, the threat posed by the Mamelukes to the Ottoman Empire led to war and the ultimate defeat of the Mamelukes (Glubb J. , 1978). So, war has occurred three out of four times in world history during power transition for the above-mentioned factors.

The world is witnessing another power transition. The rise of China and its threat to the sole global superpower, the US, is the example of today's power transition. There is a debate as whether the rise of China and the threat its poses to the US power status will inevitably results in a war, or it will be a peaceful transition. There is a good deal of literature that points to a violent transition (Wittkopf & Kegley Jr, 2016; Friedberg, 2012); while there is evidence that points to a peaceful transition of power (Buzan & Cox, 2013). It is to be seen whether Sino-US relations will defy the logic of history and of power transition that has resulted in Wars in most of such cases. It is apt to shed some light on the history of power transition.

## **Power Transition and the Rise and Falls of Empires: An Historical Context**

It is useful to study the recorded history to identify patterns and learn some lessons—both for the present as well as for the future of the world. Sir John Glubb has rightly pointed out that “history is a dynamic process that gradually changes, advances, and retreats, but generally flows ahead in a single, powerful stream” (Glubb J. , 1978). This march of history can easily be observed in the interaction of various civilizations in the past.

Power transition leading to great-power wars is not unprecedented. The rise and fall of empires have a long history dating back to the famous Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. According to Thucydides, “it was the rise of Athens and the fears that this instilled in Sparta that made the war inevitable” (Thucydides, 1972). This pattern continued with the rise of Persia under Cyrus. Persia invaded Greece in 538 B.C, and the Persian Empire lasted for over two hundred years (Frye, 2023). The pendulum of supremacy then swung back to Greece that ushered in the era of Greek’s geo-political mastery from 331 BC onwards. Under the leadership of Alexander, the great, Greece became an empire in 331 B.C, which lasted for 231 years. The Greeks were supplanted by the mighty Roman Empire in 261 B.C, and their empire lasted for 233 years.

The rise and fall of great powers can be observed during the Middle Ages as well. In the East, history continued to experience the emergence and disintegration of great powers. First came the Arabs followed by the Mamelukes. With the emergence of the Arab empire in 634 A.D to its fragmentation in 880 A.D, the Arab thus dominated the East and part of the West for 246 years (Glubb J. , 1978). The decline of the Mamelukes paved the way for the rise of the Ottoman Empire (1320-1570 A.D), which lasted for nearly 250 years (Teschke, 1998).

The contest for supremacy then shifted to the West (Europe) from the thirteenth century onwards. The balance tilted both militarily as well as intellectually— thanks to the Renaissance. Equipped with new knowledge and techniques, Europe rose to prominence. Portugal became the first European colonial power. Although territorially small, Portugal “took an early lead in terms of naval exploration and became the real global superpower,” (Buckler & Cross, 2013) with its reach extended “from Brazil to Japan, with everything in-between” (CBS News, 2013). In 1580, King Philip of Spain was accepted as the ruler of Portugal after the Spanish victory over Portugal at Alcantara, and Portugal remained under Spanish control for over sixty years (Stanford University, n.d.).

There was again a global war in the transition of power when the Spanish-Dutch war from 1580-1608 yielded the truce of the 1608 and established evangelical union and catholic league (Perry, Chase, Jacob, Jacob, & Laue, 2012). The Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648) between Hapsburg Spain and Austria Hungary with their rivals— Sweden, France, and Holland— the result was the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) that established a new world order (Kegely & Raymond, 2002). History thus provides a pattern of the rise and fall of great powers through power transition and wars.

Figure 1 provides a timeline of the rise and fall of great powers over the last few centuries.

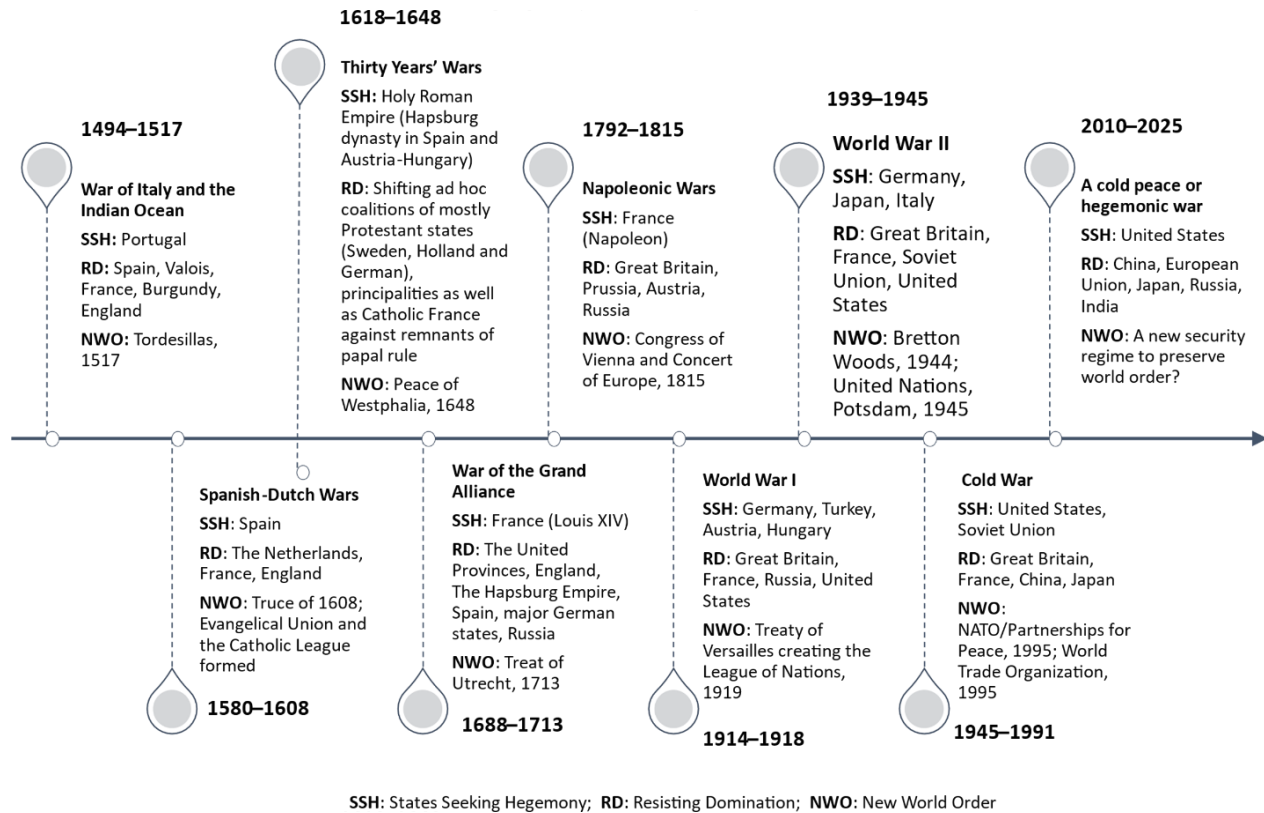


Figure 1 Timeline of Global Wars and New World Orders in the last few centuries.

(Source: *World Politics: Trends and Transformation (2010-11 Editions)* chapter #3 Pp. 67)

The above evidence suggests that power transition frequently results from wars which has ultimately has led to the toppling of the ruling power from its preeminent position in world politics, and its place is taken by a new superpower. The problem in today’s politics is the power equation between the US, as the existing power, and China, as the rising power. The next section is about the ongoing contest between the two great powers of the twenty first century, and what shape it will take in the future.

## Great Powers Rivalries in the Twenty-First Century: The Case of Sino—US Competition

*“Periods of conflict are followed by a new global order, a change in power, institutions, and alliances as the great power struggle develops in several phases” Arnold J. Toynbee.*

So, great power rivalries are the hallmark of international politics. Great powers competition defines the fate of states in world history. The absence of a robust channel of communication—either diplomatic or military—to address outstanding issues between the two great powers portends a conflict-prone Sino-US relationship. In such a relationship, the rhetoric of “peaceful rise” will prove to be nothing more than a rhetoric and both great powers are unlikely to escape the unintended consequences of great power politics and the war that frequently ensues.

There is a context to this proposition. Writing back in 1998, Zbigniew Brzezinski claimed that the US was the most comprehensive global superpower as it was unrivalled in all four aspects of power, namely, military, economic, cultural, and technological. He added that Russia and China were powers that resented the American hegemony (Brzezinski Z. , 1998). Russia and China have been resenting the US hegemony since 1996 when the Russian President Boris Yeltsin visited China. Previously, “the Chinese leaders spoke of the hegemony of the West, particularly of the US, now the Russian leader thunders against any imposition of unipolarity on the world, also meaning American hegemony” (Murarka, 1997). It shows that the perceived and constructed common enemy (US) keeps the erstwhile rival (China and the USSR) together.

Since then, the friendship between Russia and China is on an upward trajectory: It went from Treaty for Good Neighbourliness, Friendship, and Cooperation of 2001 to the Sino-Russian relationship at “their highest point in history” (2009) (Bolt, 2014) to the “no-limit friendship” of 2023 (Sanjinez, Huang, & London, 2023). During the Cold War, USSR was the big brother, while in the post-Cold War era, Russia is a junior partner to the Peoples Republic of China. All this shows that Russia has shown willingness to play second fiddle to China. How China came to outshine Russia, formerly Soviet Union, a super power from 1945 until 1991, and has become a power in itself to reckon with, is discussed below.

### **China as a Great Power and the Threat it Poses to the US Great Power Status**

“In [Colonel] Liu’s view, no matter how much China commits itself to a “peaceful rise,” conflict is inherent in US-China relations. The relationship between China and the United States will be a ‘marathon contest’ and the ‘duel of the century’” (Qtd in Henry Kissinger) (Kissinger, 2012).

Napoleon Bonaparte is often attributed to have stated: “Let China sleep, for when she wakes, she will shake the world” (Ochab, 2021). Chinese sources confirm that “the sleeping giant [is] wide-awake” (Tahfim, 2028). President Xi of China unequivocally stated in 2020 that no force could shake the great Chinese nation and that no force could stop it from marching ahead (Ballawar, 2020). The former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao tactfully titled his 2003 Harvard speech as “turning your eyes to China” (Jiabao W. , 2003). So, there is an academic agreement on the great power status of China but there is disagreement on which countries to “adapt themselves to a ‘China century’ and join the bandwagon of making a fortune in this revitalized ancient oriental

kingdom” (Wu, 2006). It is, therefore, tenable to refer to China as a great power. But this did not happen suddenly, there is a trajectory for its rise.

The journey of China’s rise to global power status began in 1964 when it joined the nuclear club. It has now a permanent seat on the UN Security Council; it has already successfully tested its anti-satellite missile system; it has one of the biggest militaries in the world, and is the 6<sup>th</sup> highest global spender on defence; and its foreign exchange reserves have jumped from \$1.2 trillion in 2007 (Oneal, 2007) to \$3.1 trillion in 2023 (Rahim, 2023). All this is a precursor to China initiating transformational projects such as the Built and Road Initiative, as explained earlier. For President Xi of China, all this was possible due to “self-confidence in our path, self-confidence in our theories, self-confidence in our system, self-confidence in our culture” (Economy, 2022). China considers itself as a great power due to its strong economy, coherent ideology, and advanced military, and wants others to recognise it as one.

China’s great power status and its proactive role on the world state could not go unnoticed in other capitals. Bruce Jones rightly points out that “China’s rise — to the position of the world’s second largest economy, its largest energy consumer, and its number two defense spender — has unsettled global affairs” (Jones B. , 2020). What would this unsettling of the world affairs by China mean for the Sino-US relationship? Whether would it be a peaceful co-existence or transition from the US-led to a China-led world order.

## **Sino-US Relationship: From Enmity to Amity through Precarity to Conflict?**

The ascent of China is under academic as well as policy scrutiny for quite some time now. The increased focus on China is following what has been perceived as a strategic shift from a peaceful rise to “a more assertive posture towards the West is amplifying a change in international dynamics from patterns of multilateral cooperation towards a pattern of competition. We are entering, or have entered, a phase of rivalry between the great and major powers” (Jones, 2020). This phase of rivalry is going to be tense, conflict-ridden, and could end up in war. Graham Allison noted the following back in 2015:

Based on the current trajectory, war between the United States and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than recognized at the moment. Indeed, judging by the historical record, war is more likely than not. Moreover, current underestimations and misapprehensions of the hazards inherent in the U.S.-China relationship contribute greatly to those hazards. A risk associated with Thucydides’s Trap is that business as usual—not just an unexpected, extraordinary event—can trigger large-scale conflict (Allison G. , 2015).

Why are people pessimistic about peaceful power transition— from US to China— and/or peaceful co-existence between the two great powers? The roots of the pessimism lie in the



existence of so many divergent points between them: the absence of an effective conflict and/or crisis management mechanism, their divergent positions on Taiwan and the South China Sea. One can easily discern the pursuit of national interests rather than finding a mutually satisfying modus operandi in the interaction of the two great powers, as shown below.

### **The Absence of Crisis Management Mechanism between the US and China**

Military-to-military communication is a must for keeping tension from tipping into direct conflict between rival super powers. Until recently, there did not exist any such channel between them. The US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin lamented China's rejection of military-to-military communications in June 2023 even after he consistently stressed "the importance of countries, with large, with significant capabilities, being able to talk to each other so you can manage crises and prevent things from spiraling out of control unnecessarily" (Britzky, 2023). In November 2023, China did agree to the opening of a communication channel between the two militaries, but President Biden had to say "trust but verify" (Liptak & Lee, 2023). There is a context to President Biden's skepticism—trust but verify.

China and the US signed an agreement during the Trump administration that was meant to "enable the two militaries to communicate to reduce the risk of miscalculation" (Griffiths, 2017), but was later abandoned by the US due to "the rise in bilateral distrust coupled with an overall increase in U.S. and Chinese military operations in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait" (Haenle, 2021). The level of distrust and suspicion of intention on China side is not less significant, as it "sees little value in pursuing talks with the Biden administration on trade or other issues, having concluded that the U.S. is seeking to block its economic progress and 'encircle' its military" (Luce, 2023). President Xi recently told President Biden that "China has no plans to surpass or unseat the United States, and the United States should not scheme to suppress or contain China" (Liptak & Lee, 2023). Keeping in view the level of distrust and mutual suspicion between the US and China, there is little to believe that there will be a well-functioning and coordinated and conflict-resolution mechanism to stop small scale incidents from spiraling into a full-blown conflict.

The level of distrust and suspicion takes a more dangerous turn when one looks at the existence of challenging issues such as Taiwan and the South China Sea. The absence of a military-to-military and/or conflict resolution mechanism becomes all the more important in the context of the divergent positions of the US and China on issues such as Taiwan and South China Sea. A brief look at both issues will be helpful in order to come to grips with the complexity of the Sino-US relations.

### **Taiwan: The Most Contentious Challenge**

Taiwan constitutes one of the biggest flashpoints between the two super powers. The US position is that there should not be any forced, violent change in the status quo regarding Taiwan, as "it

sits in the so-called ‘first island chain’, which includes a list of US-friendly territories that are crucial to US foreign policy” (Brown D. , 2022). China’s position is no less stubborn: It keeps urging “the US to stop arming the island and to support China’s “peaceful reunification” (MacCarthy, 2023). These diametrically opposite positions on Taiwan does not augur well for Sino-US relations.

Related to China, the desire for peaceful re-unification seems problematic when juxtaposed with President Xi’s statement such as “reunification with Taiwan ‘must be fulfilled’ and has not ruled out the possible use of force to achieve this” (Brown D. , 2022). China sees any other option, read independence of Taiwan, as tantamount “to split[ing] the motherland” (Lou, 1999). Moreover, China has “made [it] clear that concerns over the island were the biggest and most dangerous issue in US-China relations” (Liptak & Lee, 2023). There is a history to this Chinese position on Taiwan.

There is evidence to suggest that “the island first came under full Chinese control in the 17th Century when the Qing dynasty began administering it. Then, in 1895, they gave up the island to Japan after losing the first Sino Japanese war” (Brown D. , 2022). It fell into the Chinese hands again after the defeat of Japan in World War Two, but soon civil war erupted between the Kuomintang (KMT)—the nationalist party— and the communists. In 1949, the Mao Zedong’s led Communists took over most of the mainland China and the by Chiang Kai-shek-led Kuomintang’s forces fled to Taiwan and declared it as the Republic of China (RoC) (Wenger & Zimmermann, 2004). The relations between the People’s Republic of China (Communists led China) and the Republic of China (Taiwan) have been tense since then.

On the one hand, Taiwan is of one the biggest foreign policy challenges for China (Oksenberg, 1997); it is also one of the most critical issues in Sino-American relationship, on the other (Wohlforth, 2015). The US supported the KMT in the civil war (1945-1949), and it has remained Taiwan’s key strategic ally. China has never budged from its claim of sovereignty over the whole of China— both mainland and Taiwan.

An additional challenge for China regarding Taiwan is its democracy (it turned democratic in the 1990s), and it poses a threat to the authoritarian system of China (Zhonggong zhongyang, 1998). It is due to these reasons that China never changed its position on Taiwan: its peaceful re-unification with China— with the option of use of force on the table as well (Jones B. , 2020). All this portend for a not—so—normal outcome.

There are clear divergent positions on Taiwan between Taipei and Beijing, on the one hand, and between the US and China, on the other. Taiwan wants to maintain its independence, its democracy, its territorial integrity (Maizland L. , 2023). While leaders of Mainland China “continue to view the reintegration of Taiwan as an essential component of the national psyche” (Fu, 1996/97), and it has vowed on a number of occasions “to eventually unify Taiwan with the mainland, using force if necessary” (Maizland L. , 2023).

There are indications of the eventual use of force to re-integrate Taiwan with the mainland, on the part of China. The US Department of Defence noted in its report in 2021 that “the PLA’s

2027 modernization goals could provide Beijing with more credible military options in a Taiwan contingency” (US Department of Defence, 2021). The rhetoric of re-unification—peaceful or otherwise— when coupled with the PRCs military modernization drive shows that “China-Taiwan war is inevitable but not imminent” (Lo, 2022). The US will face one of its toughest foreign policy choices if war happens between PRC and RoC.

In light of the above evidence, it would not be far-fetched to argue that any attempt by China for forceful re-unification of Taiwan with the mainland to drag the US into the conflict, as defending democratic Taiwan against authoritarian China will make a good case both at home and abroad. Richard Haas has persuasively argued that “allowing China to capture the island would have massive consequences/strategic and economic repercussions: US allies would re-think their dependence on the US for security, so they would either opt for appeasing China or move towards nuclear weapons-based strategic autonomy. The US has made it clear that its key foreign policy goals include: “the promo of democracy, the preservation of U.S. credibility, loyalty to traditional allies and friends, the engagement and integration of an emerging power into the international system, and the maintenance of and stability in Asia as a whole” (Campbell & Derek , 2001). Not coming to the rescue of Taiwan will thus greatly affect US standing on the geo-political chessboard.

Furthermore, such a confrontation would lead to economic shock across the globe due to Taiwan’s pre-eminent position in producing advanced chips/semi-conductors. Richard N. Haas stresses that Washington needs to have unambiguous strategic clarity “leaving no doubt that the United States would intervene militarily to protect the island and putting in place the security and economic means to back up that pledge” (Haas, 2022). Taiwan is thus a flashpoint between the US and China, and it could be a potential war theater between the two super powers.

The US and China relationship hinges on the equation between China and Taiwan, on the one hand, and between US and China, on the other. There are diametrically opposed viewpoints on Taiwan. Taiwan wants to keep its sovereignty and democracy; China wants Taiwan’s re-unification—peaceful or otherwise; while US has historically vowed to support the independence and democracy of Taiwan, and will presumably intervene militarily if China invades the island. Nevertheless, Taiwan is not the only potential flashpoint and/or war theater between US and China, South China Sea is another. The next section deals with the conflict in the South China Sea.

## **The South China Sea Dispute between Regional Contestation and International Intervention**

The South China Sea dispute has become a focus of international attention, as it is often singled out as another major source of tension between the US and China in Southeast Asia. The roots of the tension and instability lie in China’s ambition to be recognised as a great power, and the threat it poses to the littoral states— Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Brunei.

The rise of China as a great power has transformed regional rivalries into a great power competition. The South China Sea has become another bone of contention between China and the regional states, on the one hand, and between China and the US, on the other. Stein Tønnesson rightly points out:

Economically, of course, the South China Sea, with its major shipping lanes, had always been a link between China and the Southeast Asian countries, as well as between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Politically, however, the dispute over maritime delimitation and sovereignty to islands continued to form an obstacle to regional integration. Southeast Asians tended to see the Chinese U-shaped line as a thorn in their flesh, and a challenge to the whole idea of a Southeast Asian region (Tønnesson, 2002).

The South China Sea is “the beating heart of Asia-Pacific and a crossroads of the global economy [...] More than half of the world’s merchant shipping tonnage passes through the Straits of Malacca, Sunda and Lombok each year with nearly all of it” from there onwards head towards the Sea (Kemp, 2014). The Sea is “a strategic area that holds vast mineral and energy resources and is regarded as a ‘maritime super highway’ between the Indian and Pacific oceans” (Singh, 2017). So, the South China Sea is not only a natural resource-rich area but is also serving as a vital maritime route for international trade, which is why it has become an arena for geopolitical contests between great powers.

The South China Sea was not always a contested space. It had not only been calm since ancient times, but it also provided an opportunity for fishing for fishermen from the coastal states; it remained a trouble-free navigation route for regional and international ships until the late twentieth century (Gao & Jia, 2013). It was in the late twentieth century when claims and counter-claims about sovereign control over the Sea started in earnest.

The process of claiming control started with “the physical occupation of the Nansha, or Spratly, Islands by some of the coastal states in the 1970s. This process continued through the rest of the century” (Gao & Jia, 2013). China has become the biggest claimant of the Sea: “In recent years, the People’s Republic of China has asserted historic claims to about eighty per cent of the South China Sea” (Singh, 2017). The challenge is not the asserting of control over islands that historically belong to China, but “with an additional Chinese claim of historical rights of fishing, navigation, and other maritime activities (including the exploration and exploitation of resources, mineral or otherwise) on the islands and in the adjacent waters” (Gao & Jia, 2013). These claims deeply anger the littoral states. The US has already cautioned that “territorial disputes over tiny islands and reefs in the South China Sea are poisoning relations between China and its neighbours in Southeast Asia” (Kemp, 2014). So, the Sea is too important—both economically and strategically, to be left for China’s sovereign control.

Moreover, the sensitivity of the dispute lies in “the strategic importance of the South China Sea. It contains major sea-lanes including some of the busiest shipping routes in the world. Most

contentiously, [...] the Spratlys sit atop vast deposits of oil and gas” (Snyder, 2011). Such claims, coupled with the aggressive posture of China, add to the anxiety in the policy makers in the already anxious regional and international capitals.

According to a senior US official, “China has restricted access to Scarborough Reef, put pressure on the long-standing Philippine presence at the Second Thomas Shoal, begun land reclamation activities at multiple locations, and moved an oil rig into disputed waters near the Paracel Islands” (Kemp, 2014). Moreover, the PRC has turned at least three islands in the disputed South China Sea into military bases by “arming them with anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile systems, laser and jamming equipment and fighter jets in an increasingly aggressive move that threatens all nations operating nearby” (The Guardian, 2022). These Chinese aggressive actions prompted the US to respond and show its commitment to its allies in the region.

As late as October 2023, President Joseph R. Biden had to demonstrate his “ironclad” commitment by stating that “the US will defend the Philippines in case of any attack in the Disputed South China Sea” (Guinto, 2023). This was not the first time the US had to act the way it did in late 2023. In 1995, in response to the Chinese navy construction of an artificial island on the Mischief Reef near the border of the Philippines, President William J. Clinton not only sent an aircraft carrier to the Taiwan Straits, but had to unequivocally state that the US “would not tolerate any interference with shipping and would view “with serious concern any restriction on maritime activity in the South China Sea that was not consistent with international law” (Tønnesson, 2002).

The Sea thus remains significant— economically, geopolitically, and geo-strategically. It will have long lasting implications for the region, for the geopolitical and geostrategic calculus of great powers as well as for the international trade, if one state, presumably China, takes it under its sovereign control. Therefore, any miscalculation on the part of China in and around the South China Sea can spiral into a conflict between the US and China.

One of the major reasons that any incident in the South China Sea could escalate into a much wider conflict involving the US, as both US and China have diametrically opposed positions on the issue. For the PRC, the South China Sea constitutes its ‘core interest’— that is, “it is related to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. In other words, the Chinese claim related to the Sea is not different from its inflexible position on Taiwan and Tibet. The US has stated time and again that “it considers freedom of navigation through the South China Sea as a matter of ‘national interest’ and would oppose the use or threat of use of force by any claimant” (Snyder, 2011). The invoking of “core interest” (China) and of “national interest” (US), coupled with China flexing its military muscle in the South China Sea, is another potential flashpoint for Great Powers war akin to the one around Taiwan.

## Conclusion

The phenomenon of the rise and fall of great powers can be observed in the recorded history. War has played a decisive role in the change: from the existing great power to the rising great power. Winds of change are blowing in today's international politics, too. The US, as the existing power, and China, as the rising power, are the movers and shakers of this change. The US and China are entangled in a complex geo-political, geo-strategic, and geo-economical competition around the globe. The United States and China have different political ideologies, economic orientations, and ideas for how the world should be organized (world order) which are incompatible with one another. This article argues that there will be tense, often conflictual relations, with a possibility of war, between the US and China in the future. This claim is based on the following reasons.

The US wants to maintain the existing world order— that is based on sovereign equality, no violation of the sovereignty of weaker states by powerful states, democracy, economic liberalism, human rights, international arbitration, and protecting world bodies such as the UN, IMF, World Bank, etc. China considers this rules-based order as “deeply-flawed,” and it has the intent and capacity to change it. Which is why, China is declared as a “revisionist power” and a “strategic competitor” by the US. As a revisionist power, China is trying to re-fashion the existing international order according to its vision, so that it can safeguard its vital geopolitical and geostrategic interests in the world.

The Chinese blueprint for the new world order includes a vision for a body like the UN that is based on respect for state sovereignty, the rule of law, and a wholesome cooperation. More importantly, sovereignty, rule of law, wholesome cooperation as defined and understood by China. In other words, China's design is: to reign the world by controlling the rules of the game. The Chinese vision for the world is thus a direct clash with the prevailing, US -led rule-based order.

This clash of vision for the international order has catapulted the two powers to strategic competition. This article has explored the nature and direction of this change and the possible shape of relationship between the two rival great powers. Keeping in view the phenomenon of power transition— from the existing to the rising power, which often leads to war, when coupled with the clashing visions of the two super powers for the world, little military-to-military communication, and their irreconcilable positions on issues such as Taiwan and South China Sea, there is a strong likelihood of a conflict-ridden relationship between the two super powers.

There is no evidence of direct military-to-military communication channel between the US and China. That means any minor incident can spiral into a wider conflict. This also shows trust deficit between the two super powers. This trust deficit affects other issues such as Taiwan and the South China Sea. Both have divergent positions on Taiwan. For China, Taiwan is part of its territorial sovereignty, and it can go to any extent, including re-unification by force. So, China is not ready for any “compromise” on the issue. For the US, Taiwan is not only a democracy, but

also a close strategic ally—the alliance goes back to the late 1940s. The US will, therefore, resist any use of force by China for re-unifying Taiwan with the mainland.

The case of the South China Sea is no different. Here again, China's claims are based on history and territorial contiguity. China claims about eighty percent of the Sea. Not only that, but it also wants exclusive control over fishing and navigation in the Sea. So, China's claims go against the international flow of trade through the Sea. Moreover, such claims have deeply annoyed regional states such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, etc. Some of these states are close allies of the US. The US has vowed time and again to intervene militarily if China attacks any of its allies—especially the Philippines.

Under these conditions, the likelihood of a peaceful transfer of power seems to be very low, and this is the case even if both major countries make strenuous attempts to place a higher priority on finding effective diplomatic solutions than engaging in armed conflict. This will allow them to resist the logic of history and prevent a disastrous end. It is necessary for the United States of America and China to engage in constructive communication, encourage mutual understanding, and look for common ground in order to develop a stable and prosperous global order for the benefit of the whole world. China needs to play by the rule of the prevailing world order, and make a positive contribution towards its betterment rather than giving the impression of revising it—without a tested alternative. Only through robust diplomacy and sincere cooperation and collaboration can the world expect to wade through this complex era of great power politics without war being inevitable.

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