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## THE CONCEPT OF ‘CHINA AS A THREAT’ AND ‘PEACEFUL CHINA’ IN TERMS OF CONTEMPORARY WORLD ORDER AND HEGEMONY OF THE UNITED STATES

**Key words:** China, United States, threat, containment policy, international relations, world politics, regional security, global hegemony, global governance.

**ABSTRACT:** The relationship between the two countries has been a complex and diverse subject of investigation and contemplation. The interconnection between the two countries can be described by the following central notions, such as economic cooperation, rivalry in terms of status acquisition of global hegemonic power, particularly in the Pacific region and beyond controversy mutual suspicion over each other’s intentions. Therefore, it is clearly justified that each state has elaborated and adopted a specific manner of conduct and attitude regarding each other as a potential adversary but has meanwhile maintained an extremely strong economic partnership. It is fair to state, that the relationship between both countries has been described by multiple world leaders and academics as the world’s most significant bilateral relationship of the 21st century.

Due to the fact that Chinese economy has started to develop increasingly fast and PRC has strengthened its positions on the world’s arena, the United States started to perceive the Middle Kingdom as a direct threat to the established world order in its drive for regional hegemony in East Asia now as well as future aspirant for global supremacy. Beijing, by contrast rejects these notions, and continues its assertive policies and its quest for allies.

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## INTRODUCTION

*The rise of China as a new power is another great challenge for the US. Our failure to properly handle Germany and Japan earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century cost us and the world dearly. We must not make this same mistake with China*

Hu Jintao (General Secretary of the Communist Party of China from 2002–2012 and President of China from 2003–2013)

A strong and viable quotation from ex-Chinese President Hu Jintao is relevant in order to emphasize that nowadays the post-cold war system of international relations is experiencing a crisis of reality, which in fact resulted in consequence of two major reasons. Firstly, the emergence of new centres of power and associated stagnation of Western political thought. An equally important reason remains in the fact that the lack of resources of new centres of power constraint them to obtain global leadership.

As the new centres of power (PRC, BRICS, MIKTA) logically disagree with the existing world order, there is a strong background and inconsistency of worldview among the key actors in world politics. Therefore, the great powers of the ex-world order do not know how to deal with the new challenges of global order. The COVID-19 pandemic has become just such a catalyst for global transformation. Slowly but gradually, the EU is consolidating, which was almost cracking under the blows of Brexit; the role and place of the UN has been reordered, in particular the WHO was modified. The transition from the US-China-Russia geopolitical triangle to a new bipolar world is becoming a contemporary reality, which was described by a pro-Kremlin ideologist S. Karaganov as an ‘uneven process of formation of two technological, geoeconomic and geopolitical centres – “China Plus” and “USA Plus”’ (Karaganov, 2019). It is worth to think and take into account that geopolitical transformations are not usually accidental, they represent the result of collisions that have been accumulating in the international arena for a long time, but in times of crisis, time is tight.

Over the last past decades, the Transatlantic region became one of the most significant locations in contemporary world both in economic and

political matters. In this context, a special role in world's politics and global economic climate is allocated to People's Republic of China. Nevertheless, China has tight economic connections with the United States, it is still demonstrating a certain kind of neutral position regarding some issues evolving in the international agenda. It is relevant to note, that in 1945 China's statement concerning independence in the West was a so-called "Chinese loss" in comparison to the fact that in 2016 Chinese yuan was assumed as a reserved international currency. The fact of Chinese economy constant growth generates the necessity to analyse the perspectives of development of Chinese international relations and international rivalry with the United States in terms of international hegemony and regional predominance.

Therefore, the central argument of this essay is to analyse to which degree it is relevant assume that China can be regarded as a threat or as a peaceful actor in contemporary world order. By now, there were built a significant number of various arguments whether People's Republic of China can be estimated as a disaster to the American hegemony. In this context, it is still a long path to go through in order to thrive a challenge to American hegemony.

First of all, before my analysis will take the floor it is essential to outline China's valuability in terms of an actor in contemporary world. Nowadays, People's Republic of China is one of the most influential powers in international politics and economic world order. By its constant growth as an economic and military power, China seeks to play a role in global governance which is commensurate to its growing prestige. Generally speaking, the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be characterised by the terms of structural update which will continue for due to the formation of non-Euro-Atlantic economic centres, political, scientific and technical, military, demographic and cultural centres of power. The number of significant actors on the geopolitical arena, such as China, Russia, India, Mexico and Brazil are increasing the degree to which hegemony of the United States will be tested. It is worth to note that anti-American sentiment is also projected to increase world's attention and pressure.

One of the first challenges which are on the agenda is the increasing rivalry between US and China in terms of global leadership. Washington

is motivated more by its ideological principles (democratic distribution) and geopolitical (governing and executing power on the other nations and states) motives, whereas Beijing is moved by its economical motives, as county's modernisation requires a trade-economic expansion, access to energy resources and conquest of distribution markets (Northolt, 2016). This expansion requires military and political support, what provides China with reason to build up strategic potential. Nowadays, it is more than evident that the balance of power is changing to China's advantage, while the United States unwilling to accept the loss of hegemony are counteracting towards China's rising potential. At the same time, we observe that China is strengthening its total national power by enlarging their ambitions in the same vein. These factual reasons provide us with the right to consider China as a threatening actor to the US hegemony in current circumstances.

The reason for American concern mainly arises from its hegemonic status in the world politics and the ideological incompatibility of China with the Western value system. China's stunning economic growth has convinced the West that it is just a matter of time until China becomes a world superpower. But its ideological orientation makes China a revolutionary power that is threatening both to the United States' status and global structure.

Three different logics have been constructed to substantiate the "China threat" thesis. Firstly, *ideological and cultural factors present PRC as a threat to the United States* and moreover to the contemporary world order. For *neo-conservatives* the mere factor that China still sticks to communism makes view it adversely. According to *Samuel Huntington* (Huntington, 1996), a cultural factor should be also considered at this point: in the 'Clash of Civilizations,' he stated 'unholy alliance between Islamic and Confucian civilizations is the most fundamental threat to the West'. For people using this logic, the sensible response from the U.S. is, in the short run, a *containment policy*, and confrontation is possible if needed; in the long run, the *promotion of a peaceful transformation within China*.

Secondly, *geopolitical and geoeconomic factors pose a serious concern to US hegemony*. For many realists, even China has shed off its ideological straitjacket, as a great power in size (territory, population, and economy),

China has to pursue its own interest and respect. Nationalism may still drive China into a course of clash with the United States if the latter refuses to accommodate or share the leadership with China as a rising power. Some scholars fear that democracy can unleash strong nationalism and popular nationalism can make China even more aggressive toward the United States.

Thirdly, *"theoretical" collapse of China*. Opposed to the previous two perspectives, a great number of scholars are concerned that if China suffers a Soviet-style collapse, it can create an even worse scenario for the whole world. The sheer size of the population constructs a new degree of a refugee problem, the failed state, and the followed crises (warlordism, civil war, crime, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, etc) impossible for the U.S and the rest of the world to deal with. Due to these three different considerations, the U.S often oscillates from demonization to romanticization of China, from containment to engagement. The U.S. – China relationship has shifted from conflict to confrontation, to competition, and back to conflict, but so rarely features cooperation.

Nevertheless, the U.S is not the only one which is concerned by China's advancement and recognizes its development as a treat to global order's security. I am convinced, that it is more than relevant to refer to a more regional actor in the Transpacific region, e.g., Japan. There is a great asset of reasons why Japanese government is concerned about China's rise. One of these factors is also connected to *ideology*, as Japanese have developed some kind of patricide against its cultural patron. In the ancient decades, Chinese nation had suffered to a great extent from Japan in terms of their cultural aggression. Japan, in its terms disposed a strong military support from the U.S. and was deeply engaged without any embarrassment in Taiwan conflict. In a compound with aggressive and negative attitude towards PRC, these factors became devastating for China. For these reasons China started to change its attitude on the international arena. Chinese nationalism began to be constructed and developed around the idea of anti-Japanese sentiment, what has turned Japan into an easy target. China has totally modified its attitude and was aimed to turn the popular anger towards the local tyrants or to the international bullies (here it is more that relevant to adhere to Japan as a regional actor and U.S as an

international). Nowadays, Japan and China still have many points at which some framework needs to be resolved regarding their territorial disputes and their relationship has reached a low point. The Chinese often suspect that U.S. and Japan are the originators of a variety of “China threat” arguments.

In addition to the ideological threat, many other neighbouring countries have more stakes in China’s new move. For Southeast Asian nations, the presence of a sizeable and extremely rich Chinese ethnic group and their increasing dependency upon China’s economy for growth forced them to be very careful in handling their relationship with China. With a continental size (China has almost two times the territorial and population sizes of all other Asian Pacific countries combined), *China consumes a tremendous amount of foreign direct investment and pops out huge volume of exports*; other countries feel the competition from China. At this moment, no government in the Asian Pacific region has adopted a clear anti-China policy; but sporadic anti-Chinese riots have occurred in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines.

It is an undeniable fact, that the combination of stunning economic growth and unpredictable political governance causes deep concerns and a cluster of negative attitudes towards China among the nations in the world today. This is one of the reasons, why the Chinese leadership has realized the urgency to calm down these concerns and to build a supportive international environment regarding Chinese development. To make its rise less a threat, the Chinese government has sponsored many cultural events, exhibitions in foreign countries, promoting Chinese language programs and etc.

Most importantly, Wen Jiabao (PM) has put forward the thesis of “China’s peaceful rise” in his speech to a Harvard University audience in December 2003 (Xinhua News Agency, 2003). Under this thesis, there were several points which should be considered in the matter of our analysis:

- 1) China’s development depends upon and in return will contribute to the world peace.
- 2) PRC will resort to peaceful means for development.

- 3) The country's development will rely more on its own resources and market.
- 4) China is prepared for a long-term process of hard work, even several generations, for economic prosperity.
- 5) Finally, even as PRC has achieved its economic development, it will not seek hegemony in the world or come out as a threat to any country.

Under the guiding principle of "China's peaceful rise," the Chinese government has conducted actively diplomacy at four various levels in order to change Chinese image and world's attitude (The China Journal, 228–230):

- 1) PRC has become actively engaged in the creation of strategic partnerships with the second-tier powers. By this matter, China has signed a series of strategic partnership treaties with the European Union, Russian Federation and India with an aim to strengthen their relationships as well as to balance the American power.
- 2) China found that there is a lack of trust and gap of misunderstanding between PRC and other actors in the region. In this context, China has strongly decided to restart the promotion of "*good neighbour policy*" in the Asian Pacific region. This policy was basically a trigger in terms of amelioration of China's relationships within the region. By increasing trade with the Asian-Pacific region and also letting these countries enjoy trade surplus with China, PRC has positioned itself as an important trading partner with these countries. Besides, China has entered into various mechanisms of regional cooperation with other significant actor in the Pacific Sea aquatorium. The 1997 Asian financial crises were in fact China refrained from devaluing the Chinese yuan currency, what in the final result assisted in stabilising the regional economy by mobilisation of its foreign currency reserve. This particular way of strategic approach has won Chinese government a great number of positive reactions from the Transpacific region and the U.S.
- 3) By application of the "China's peaceful rise" approach, the middle Kingdom was configured to seeking cooperation and avoiding confrontation with the United States. What was intended to do was

a straight notification of the Chinese side to Washington in a way that China is representing a conservative power and has no intentions to upset and impoverish the status quo of the contemporary world order – namely the U.S. as the sole superpower in the world.

- 4) The final stage of the peaceful approach envisaged neglect of Japan. As China has successfully managed to review and restate relationships with the sole superpower (US), the second-tier strategic partners, and neighbouring countries, China considered itself to afford to ignore Japan and occasionally show some toughness on the regional scale.

For the past five years, the Chinese leadership has been cautious and successful in managing the internal nationalism and American unilateralism, to some degree, thanks to the anti-terror war. During the administration of ex-US President D. Trump, the main foreign policy vector was orientated to deteriorate Sino-American relations, due to the fact that the United States actively perceived China, not just as a state that declared itself *'responsible for global governance'*, but as a *'direct threat'*, not only to the economic dominance of the greatest capitalist power, but also as a purposeful contender for the role of global hegemony which can conquer a challenge to USA's global leadership.

## CONCLUSIONS

*To conclude*, I am wholeheartedly convinced that according to the aim of this essay, neither affirmation about People's Republic of China, whether it is threat, nor a peaceful actor cannot be considered as a sole and central ideological confirmation in terms of contemporary international agenda. Today, China could be estimated more as a rival to the Great World powers in the modern world order. Moreover, we should consider that there is a long list of international unresolved issues in the bilateral relations of the two states, which in reality cannot be sorted via diplomatic resolution: it is relevant to apply to a continuous conflict in South and East-Chinese Seas, North Korean conflict, untransparent character of military modernisation of People's Republic of China, especially in spatial and cyber-weapon areas.



*In terms of global thinking*, Donald Trump's aggressive approach and rhetoric towards PRC was a continuous element of communication between the two superpowers, which has deteriorated international diplomacy and general level of mutual understanding even to greater extent. Ex-President of the United States was more than convinced and truly believed that it is America's duty to reanimate the concept of "Chinese threat" and bring back PRC's containment policies. By the US decree to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, D. Trump has ended the Great Agreement, which embodied B. Obama's Atlantic policy approach. This agreement was extremely important to the whole world's economy, provided a tariff reduction for 12 countries and was covering at least 40% of the world's economy. The main feature was that the exit of China, gave the reason to estimate the project as a weapon of containment regarding economic dominance of Beijing. In reality this has even more pushed China to develop, as the project "Belt and Road Initiative" represent a sort of contra-balance between the Transpacific partnership and is a clear sign of economic integration around China. For this matter, China has successfully founded and is constantly developing the Asian Bank of Infrastructure and Investments in order to target the institution for long-term tasks, the main aim of which will be a clear alternative to World Bank.

Regarding the current American administration, based on the first 100 days of rule, the following conclusions can be drawn. Official Washington is conceiving China clearly as a rival, not as a treat in the contemporary discourse, in comparison to D. Trump's approach. Moreover, the American President is looking forward to getting into a fair competition, where the red lines will not be crossed by PRC and so-called American 'interest' will be protected, 'I told him, that we are ready to compete, and we don't want a conflict to evolve. But I have also a clearly stated. That we will unitedly protect American interests' (Biden, 2021), via addressing the Chinese President on the recent phone call.

During the first hundred days the official Washington has clearly stated and proved its position by actions. The Ministry of finance has launched a series of sanctions in order to implement protectionism against a series of Chinese officials and bureaucrats on account of Uighur's persecutions in the Xinjiang region. The White House officially criticised the People's

Republic of China for unfair trade policies, as well as for intimidating its neighbours' states with military means.

In order to make a final conclusion, it is obvious that nowadays a great number of signs have indicated that the honeymoon between the United States and China in the aftermath of September 11 attack and anti-terrorism coalition has arrived at its end. If the United States shifts its policy to a hard-line toward China, the cyclical turbulence in the Sino-American relationship may soon resurface. This might jeopardize China's plan of a peaceful rise. At the micro-level, the U.S. seems to have been more provocative toward China, the latter has been more on defensive; but if we look at the Sino-U.S. relationship from the macro-level, it seems that China can take back initiative if it can remove the thorn of communist ideology and authoritarianism, because the Americans tend to believe that under the doctrine of democratic peace, democratic countries do not fight war against each other.

Therefore, to create long-term internal and external stability, the CCP has to learn how to play the card of democracy. Does this amount to ask a leopard to change its spots?

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