

U.S.-China Relations in Reminiscent: Towards A Realistic New Model of Major-country Relations

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Abstract. This paper analyzes U.S.- China relations since the 2000s by critiquing realism, liberalism, and constructivism, and introducing the Chinese “Theory of International Symbiosis”. It argues that Western theories, while insightful, are often limited by conflict-oriented, Western-centric assumptions. In contrast, the Symbiosis School, grounded in relationality and pluralism, offers a transformative framework for conceptualizing major-power relations. Examining the shift from strategic engagement to overt rivalry, the study concludes that a pragmatic “New Model of Major-Country Relations” is achievable through long-term engagement. This necessitates leveraging symbiotic interdependencies to transcend zero-sum dynamics and foster stable, managed coexistence amidst inevitable competition.

1 Introduction

History shows that great-power rise and decline are shaped by technological change, geopolitics, and shifting power balances. Classical Chinese thought similarly stresses long-term strategic vision, a lesson relevant for the United States and China today. Growing rivalry has produced increasingly pessimistic forecasts, including warnings of a possible “New Cold War.” Scholars across theoretical traditions debate the consequences of China’s rise. Liberal, constructivist, and defensive realist perspectives emphasize the pacifying effects of interdependence, institutions, and status-quo preferences. Offensive realism and power transition theory predict intensified rivalry or even conflict as China challenges U.S. dominance. This study reviews these major frameworks to assess how U.S.–China relations have evolved since the 2000s, focusing on strategic behavior and policy choices. It argues for a realistic and pluralistic approach that reduces hostility, manages competition responsibly, and supports a more stable trajectory for the future international order.

2 Revisiting Theoretical Debates on the U.S. - China Relations

This study resort to an integrated review methodology to synthesize current viewpoints to produce theoretical insights. This study employs a holistic approach, presenting a literature

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review that is not comprehensive but exemplary, concentrating on research articles, books, and other texts produced from the mid-1990s to contemporary regarding U.S.-China relations.

2.1 Offense-Defense Balance, Hegemonic Power Shifts, and Regime Security Paradox in U.S.-China Relations

Structural realism has consistently influenced views of great-power rivalry, however it presents a very negative perspective on international collaboration. Waltz argues that self-help systems “make the cooperation of parties difficult.... Rules, institutions, and patterns of cooperation ... are all limited in extent and modified from what they might otherwise be [13].” Whereas Grieco summarizes the perspectives of realists by stating a pessimistic assessment of realism regarding the potential for international cooperation [11]. Critics caution that realism suggests order can solely be established by hegemony, a result that renders global nuclear conflict unavoidable, while collaboration in an anarchic environment is fundamentally fragile and marginal (i.e., Keohane and Weber). Glaser contend that this pessimism is unjustified [1]. The prevalent tendency for adversaries to compete is not an unavoidable logical outcome of the fundamental tenets of structural realism. Such ideation, when accurately interpreted, posits that adversaries can most effectively attain their security objectives through cooperative strategies rather than competitive ones.

The importance of this conflict escalates when assessing China’s rise. Offensive realists assert that anarchy necessitates states to augment their power. Mearsheimer contends that survival imperatives compel large countries to pursue regional hegemony, limited solely by the “stopping power of water. [12]” From this view, China's expanding military and economic might suggests a fundamentally revisionist path, enabling it to challenge U.S. supremacy in Asia. On the other side, defensive realists present a more prudent perspective. Although they recognize the inevitable competition between the United States and China, but also shares a belief that it may be tempered via mutual restraint and pragmatic cooperation. China's increasing regional influence and its focus on "national rejuvenation" have prompted studies on the alignment of its behavior with aggressive realist predictions. Both streams of realism are constrained by their dependence on Western-centric assumptions and their relative disregard for Chinese intellectual traditions in assessing Beijing's aims.

Power transition theorists introduce an additional dimension of pessimism, indicating two phenomena in accordance to China's ascendance. The initial concern is the potential for hegemonic conflict. As Gilpin argued, the international political landscape typically mirrors the ambitions of the most dominant states within the system [15]; a phenomenon emphasized by Allison’s concept of the “Thucydides Trap”: the assumption of China being a revisionist nation and prepared to bear significant expenses to alter the current system [10]. The second concern pertains to the paradox of regime security, suggesting that defensive actions could be interpreted as hostile due to mistrust in between state actors. Jervis's spiral model and Booth and Wheeler's research on misperception highlighted such dangers of unintentional escalation. And scholars like Huntington, Mearsheimer, and Yang make comparisons between China and historically strong nations, including Germany and Japan, predicting analogous patterns of expansion which eventually leads to direct conflicts.

However, power transitions are not destined in violence. The tranquil transition from British to American dominance illustrates that systemic transformation can occur without conflict. This paper argues that the U.S.–China relations display structural tensions and competitive motivations, however conflict is not a inevitability. Through continuous communication and established restraint, coexistence within a reformed and more pluralistic world order is attainable.

2.2 A Rising China and Changing Liberal International Order

The conclusion of the Cold War converted the limited postwar order into a liberal international order dominated by U.S. hegemony, lauded by liberal thinkers as the victory of liberalism. Fukuyama proclaimed the dissolution of the Soviet Union as “the end of history,” signifying the ultimate phase of ideological development and the global adoption of Western liberal democracy.

However, history transpired in a distinct manner. The predetermined universality and permanence of liberalism have been contested by nationalist and populist movements. Continental Europe, formerly regarded as the emblem of liberalism's success, is now a diminishing area indicative of liberalism's decline, “consigned to kids' table” in Ukraine peace talks, as commented by Armin Papperger, the chief executive of Rheinmetall. While Donald Trump's triumph substantially undermined liberal principles in the United States, directing policy towards protectionism and isolationism, while the emergence of new powers exposed the U.S.-led system to heightened scrutiny.

In this evolving context, China's ascent - while not aimed at dismantling the system - presents a tangible challenge to the Western-conceived liberal internationalism. The gap arises from conflicting conceptions of international order: China stresses adherence to institutions while dismissing the need for liberal domestic standards; the West promotes values and regards liberal principles as indispensable underpinnings of global administration. Consequently, China and Russia are normatively marginalized from the Western community, which increasingly perceives the order's ‘enlargement’ as having incorporated an excessive number of governments considered illiberal or inadequately open. This is partially contributed by the U.S. strategists failed attempts to influence China's development. The National Security Strategy of the Trump administration in 2017 explicitly rejected previous engagement assumptions, stating that China “has not become more liberal”. Consequently, U.S.-China tensions both mirror and expedite the deterioration of the liberal order.

Liberal researchers, in contrast, maintain an optimistic perspective, contending that China has gained from and is thus inclined to sustain the current order. Intense economic interconnectedness renders conflict excessively expensive, whereas China's incorporation into global institutions promotes adherence over revisionism [1]. They assert that the liberal system can integrate China's ascent and that Beijing will operate within, rather than dismantle, the current framework. Notwithstanding enduring asymmetries, China has emerged as a significant power with a political-economic model that markedly contrasts with that of the United States. The structural divides generate friction; nonetheless, both powers remain profoundly integrated into the current order. Thus, the Trump administration's “decoupling” strategy emerged within the context of both competition and interdependence. Decoupling may be regarded as a “rejection response” to externalize fundamental issues within the current interdependent framework. The United States has concentrated its retaliatory efforts on economic sanctions, while China has enacted national security legislation to counteract alleged foreign interference. These actions demonstrate institutional defensiveness between both powers in political economic exchange.

In a relationship characterized by interdependence, increasing parity, and systemic heterogeneity, limited decoupling may be an inevitable response. The peril resides in escalation. Complete decoupling would result in parallel, incompatible international systems, propelling the globe towards a new Cold War. This eventuality, however improbable, necessitates proactive prevention via measured, reciprocal management of U.S.-China ties.

2.3 National Identity Positioning and Socialization: The Constructivist's Uncertainty

From a constructivist viewpoint, U.S.–China relations are not inherently controlled by structure but are influenced by ongoing interactions. Wendt contends that anarchy lacks a definitive logic and can develop into Hobbesian, Lockean, or Kantian cultures; current U.S.–China relations predominantly function under a Lockean framework characterized by competition and mutual acknowledgment [9]. However, strategic contacts since the early 2000s indicate that realist positioning considerations continue to be substantial. Waltz contends that alterations in relative capacities influence the security conduct of states. Grieco defines states as “positionists,” whereas Schweller emphasizes that positional strength is a finite resource that fosters rivalry [11]. Mearsheimer applies this argument to hegemonic rivalry, stating that powerful nations strive to prevent relative decline, hence risking violence and undertaking balancing measures [12]. Opponents argue that “positional determinism” is overly rigid and neglects substantial changes, such as the inconsistent U.S. policy towards China from Bush’s post-9/11 moderation to Obama’s competitive engagement suggests that structural variables alone are insufficient.

Constructivists addresses this deficiency by emphasizing norms, identity, and socialization. Similar to people adapting to social contexts and governments’ assimilating collective norms via interactive dynamics[14]. Identity is defined as “who we are” and how we are perceived by others [9], which influences interests and dictates whether states regard one another as adversaries or allies. Epistemic communities exert influence through recognized competence, whereas “acculturation” refers to the process by which states align with prevailing norms due to social constraints, resulting in institutional isomorphism in domains such as environmental or financial governance. “Legal embeddedness” further connects nations to international norms by integrating international accords into domestic law. Empirical research substantiates that engagement in international organizations yields socializing effects. China's incorporation into the UN, IMF, and WTO exemplifies the capacity of international law to transform a sovereignty-centric entity; some scholars contend that China has assimilated aspects of the liberal order as a facet of modernization (i.e. Goodman and Jinks, Kent and Steinfeld).

On the other hand, Chinese scholars, such as Qin’s relational “processual constructivism” emphasizes that identities arise from dynamic interactions rather than predetermined characteristics, presenting a non-linear perspective on great-power relations [6]. Nevertheless, constructivism possesses limitations: it frequently overemphasizes self-identity while underappreciating how states formulate the concept of the “Other.” For example, the U.S. National Security Strategy documents consistently categorize China as a competitor, or threat, corresponding with such categorization of “status anxiety”, as dominant powers experience a heightened fear of relative decline compared to ascending states, resulting in aggressive conduct, which significantly influences its opinions of China.

Consequently, U.S.–China relations cannot be elucidated exclusively through structural transformations or identity development. They arise from a dynamic interaction of positional competition, changing views, and continuous indoctrination, making the future neither predetermined nor immutable.

3 A Narrow Path in Possibilities: The Chinese Narrative of International Symbiosis

In recent years, the swift ascent of the Symbiosis School has emerged as a fundamental element of the nascent “Chinese School” of international relations theory. This school, mostly established by experts from Shanghai, attacks the shortcomings of Western International

Relations theories and the resultant policy failures. Chinese theorists aims to re-frame global order through the concept of "symbiosis" and the traditional Chinese principle of "harmonious coexistence".

3.1 The Deficiencies of Western International Relations Theories in Contemporary Global Politics

The rise of the "Symbiosis School" arises from the critique to inherent limitations of Western international relations theories. Following end the Cold War and the rapid advancement of globalization, the global political and economic environment saw substantial alteration. Not only emerging powers like China have capitalized on new opportunities and progressively influenced global governance. Simultaneously, globalization have also generated unconventional security issues, including climate change, economic coordination, and terrorism, which all necessitates collaborative responses and exposing the weakness of Western theoretical frameworks.

At the theoretical level, western philosophies, such as realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism, are fundamentally based on binary oppositional thought and a tendency towards monism. Their intellectual roots are found in the historical experiences of modern Europe. European multipolar systems have consistently devolved into bipolar structures characterized by hegemonic struggle, a trend that has influenced theories prioritizing power-based divides and the balance of power as the fundamental principle of international politics. Power transition theory, hegemonic stability theory, offshore balancing, and offensive realism all stem from this logic. However, this experience represents only a regional perspective. Pre-modern East Asia exhibited a more harmonious and symbiotic order distinct from balance-of-power dynamics [2, 7]. Overgeneralizing European history risks creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of enmity.

Western IR theory also demonstrates a strong monistic tendency. Conceptualizing liberal democracy as the singular model of political modernity, the belief that democratization automatically produces effective governance and international peace has been contradicted by the failures of the post-Cold War "transition paradigm" and the premature "end of history" thesis. Excessively privileging one universal value leads to intellectual rigidity and institutional stagnation.

This theoretical inclination towards division and conflict has resulted in detrimental policy effects in practice. The Bush administration's strategy after 9/11 demonstrates such inwardness, the United States endorsed unilateral aggression, associated terrorism with autocratic governance, and initiated the "Greater Middle East Democracy Initiative" to facilitate regime change, expending over \$3.7 trillion and suffered approximately 40,000 military fatalities; nevertheless, this did not mitigate terrorism; rather, it exacerbated tensions with the Islamic world. America's liberal ideology ironically produced illiberal instruments, while its unmatched post-Cold War power enabled the unchecked diffusion of these policies.

3.2 The "Symbiotic" Perspective of International Relations: Theoretical Construction and Foundational Principles

The question of how humans should coexist with all things has long shaped philosophical and religious traditions. Early forms of symbiotic thinking appear in Confucian "Zhong He," Taoist notions of harmony between humanity and nature, Christian universal love, and Buddhist compassion. The contemporary notion of 'symbiosis,' initially articulated by deBary as extended coexistence among diverse creatures, subsequently permeated the humanities and social sciences. Hu introduced the notion of international symbiosis, conceptualizing the global system as a symbiotic entity whose development is propelled by

interactions among actors [3]. Enhancing internal and international symbiotic interactions can promote human development.

Hu's work stimulated broader interest within Chinese IR scholarship. Jin was the first to apply symbiosis to international society, arguing that global socio-economic interdependence strengthens a worldwide symbiotic network [4]. He identified four key dimensions: subjectivity, connectivity, principles, and cohesion. Scholars such as Yang Jiemian, Ren Xiao, and Su Changhe subsequently developed the theoretical foundations of the Symbiosis School, arguing that China's changing global role requires an IR theory distinct from Western paradigms, and called for peaceful coexistence, peaceful symbiosis, and harmonious symbiosis [7].

The Symbiosis School holds that pluralistic coexistence is the natural condition of global civilization and should not be artificially unified. Forced unification produces hierarchical judgments and antagonism. Symbiotic thinking, on the other hand, reflects a trait of the "Fei Xiaotong Principle," which stresses mutual appreciation of different civilizations. Second, civilizations are equal, and participants should learn from each other to achieve higher development. Third, all systems must be assessed within their specific historical and social context; externally imposed norms often fail, as shown by U.S. democracy promotion in the Middle East.

Hence, Symbiosis does not eradicate conflict; but, in a highly interdependent environment, entities must account for one another's interests, establishing a "symbiotic baseline" even within competition [3, 7]. While the globalization has established the material foundation for transnational symbiosis, characterized by plurality, equality, and contextuality, symbiosis fosters mutual respect, complementarity, and enhanced collective advancement.

3.3 Implications of Conceptual Symbiosis on Global Affairs

Symbiosis theory has been extensively applied to the research of major-power relations and regional order, particularly in analyses of China–U.S. Relations, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Central Asia. Xia Liping and Yang Qinglong apply symbiosis theory to analyze China–U.S. relations, interactions, arguing the global system necessitates a transition from power-centric interactions to interdependence and ultimately to a cohesive global order. In this context, establishing a "new model of major-power relations" is crucial for reducing strategic disparities and promoting a cooperative framework. The symbiosis idea has also been utilized in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Central Asian regional framework. Jin Yingzhong, Zhang Yanlu, and He Jinke contend that the Belt and Road Initiative is a collaborative development plan, derived from the ancient Silk Road and based on mutual interests, notwithstanding past conflicts, propping a "composite symbiotic relationship" stemming from the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union; the possibility of a "reciprocal community" formation in Central Asia.

The Symbiosis School constitutes a fundamental element of the Chinese School of International Relations by proposing a framework focused on pluralistic cohabitation. However, this study contends that its evolution must transcend merely providing a "Chinese version" of U.S.–China relations. Whereas a more comprehensive theoretical structure is needed through engaging with classical Chinese epistemological groundings of order. Further comparative analyses of Eastern and Western ideas and empirical case studies are also required to exemplify its practical implications for the U.S.–China Relations.

4 U.S.-China Relations Since the 2000s: The Changing Patterns of State Actors

The strategic rivalry between China and the United States commenced during the Bush administration and further developed throughout Obama's presidency. This antagonistic dynamic was fully evident under the Trump administration. Hence, to reach a full comprehension of behaviors of China and the United States as state actors, it is essential to conduct an in-depth critique and synthesis of the perspectives of the two regimes on rivalry across each of these periods.

4.1 Implications of Conceptual Symbiosis on Global Affairs

Since the 2000s, U.S.–China relations have experienced substantial shifts. The early 2000s were characterized by “strategic engagement,” during which both parties collaborated on counter-terrorism, the Six-Party Talks, and crisis management following events such as the Belgrade embassy bombing and the 2001 EP-3 collision. This era formalized high-level discussions, like the Senior Dialogue, Strategic Economic Dialogue, and subsequently the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, which sought to enhance constructive engagement.

From the Bush to the Obama, both administrations re-evaluated the equilibrium between collaboration and rivalry. The former originally accentuated competition but then minimized it, while maintaining heightened vigilance on China's military ascendancy. Scholars in both nations generally concurred that competition was there but did not negate the possibility of collaboration. The latter transitioned from engagement to rivalry, while both parties pursued “healthy competition,” however they disagreed on whether escalating tensions originated from China's aggressiveness or the United States' policy adjustments in response to China's swift rise.

Professor Yan Xuetong describes this fluctuating dynamic as “false friendship,” indicating a bilateral relationship in which both parties publicly claim cooperation while secretly prioritizing their own interests. Each party may pursue unilateral benefits, potentially harming the other, thereby leading to cycles of disillusionment, revenge, and potential decline [8], while exhibiting friendliness might momentarily alleviate tensions and enhance expectations of collaboration. The relational nature of “false friendship” creates instability, yet its strategic function promotes superficial stability, leading to a cyclical cycle of improvement and subsequent deterioration.

Throughout the Bush and Obama regimes, competition mostly centered on military and Asia-Pacific domains. In the economic realm, rivalry had not escalated to a strategic level. Collaboration advanced and at times exceeded rivalry, resulting in a relationship that was competitive rather than wholly antagonistic.

4.2 Strategic Competition with China: The Trump Administration

Strategic rivalry between China and the United States became explicit under the Trump administration, which, unlike its predecessors, identified China as the primary strategic challenger to U.S. power and interests. Rejecting the post–Cold War engagement policy, it adopted a comprehensive strategy of competition shaped by economic nationalism and hegemonic ideology. Following the 2017 National Security Strategy, the United States launched a wide-ranging competitive agenda across economic, political, diplomatic, cultural, and institutional domains. Emphasis on economic, geopolitical, and political competition reveals the administration's strategic perceptions of China and its behavioral orientation in U.S.-China rivalry.

4.2.1 *Economic Rivalry*

The prospect–institutional balance concept posits that profound economic interdependence in a globalized context motivates states to seek security via multilateral organizations. Consequently, China prefers inclusive institutional balancing over exclusive confrontation with the United States, especially in the economic domain. Since 2018, the main driver of tension between the U.S. and China has been spheres of economic interests. In 2017, U.S. policy documents rejected the classification of China as a market economy and condemned its state-led model as inconsistent with WTO standards, thus reinforcing Washington's viewpoint that systemic inequities provide unjust advantages to China.

These structural differences have become increasingly intolerable to Washington, inciting demands for ‘decoupling.’ Numerous U.S. policymakers contend that interdependence currently produces asymmetric advantages for China; therefore, the U.S. must either compel China to implement systemic reforms or diminish mutual reliance. The tariffs imposed by the Trump administration in 2018 were a significant move towards economic separation, which triggered decoupling in more aspects in U.S.-China interactions. This is evidenced by FIRRMA, stringent immigration regulations, restrictions on Chinese investments, and diminished military collaboration. These measures arise from increasing U.S. apprehensions that economic and technological exchanges enhance China's strategic capabilities.

Trump's China approach integrated three economic paradigms. He is a economic nationalist promoting unilateral tariffs to cut deficits and repatriate manufacturing. He is a economic realism emphasized relative gains and aimed to curtail China's technological progress via export restrictions, investment scrutiny, and supply chain reconfiguration. He is also a economic liberalism advocated for enhanced intellectual property protection and increased market access in China. However, the true characteristics of President Trump's doctrine is hard to define.

4.2.2 *Struggles in Geopolitical Interests*

The Trump administration characterized U.S.–China ties as a revitalized great-power rivalry, designating China as Washington's foremost geopolitical adversary globally. The 2017 National Security Strategy claimed that China aimed to supplant U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific, proliferate its state-driven development model in the Western Hemisphere, and intensify economic and military infiltration in Africa via clandestine loans, elite capture, and domination of extractive industries. China is identified as a revisionist and increasingly assertive power, prompting Washington to launch the Indo-Pacific Strategy, which amalgamated the Pacific and Indian Oceans into a united geopolitical sphere and framed regional competition as a contest between opposing orders. The strategy promoted “freedom and openness,” incorporated India to counter China, strengthened quadrilateral and trilateral security cooperation, and advanced economic initiatives to challenge the Belt and Road Initiative.

The South China Sea has emerged as a significant theater of conflict. The Trump administration, in contrast to the Obama administration's prudence, embraced a more confrontational strategy by intensifying freedom-of-navigation operations, augmenting military drills, deploying Coast Guard vessels, and urging China to dismantle missile systems from contested features.

Taiwan emerged as an additional strategic pillar. Supported by pro-Taiwan factions in Congress, the administration intensified official interactions via the Taiwan Travel Act, expedited arms transactions and transitioned towards asymmetric and technology-transfer-oriented defense collaboration. Furthermore, the U.S.–China geopolitical rivalry has

extended to encompass Africa and Latin America. High-ranking U.S. officials cautioned that Chinese finance jeopardized sovereignty and stability of the so-called the America's 'backyard', while Washington aimed to mitigate increasing Chinese trade and investment in Latin America through the "Growth in the Americas" project.

The Trump administration shifted U.S. gesture on China from engagement to explicit strategic competition. The transition was influenced by structural elements, including China's ascent and increasing ideological and institutional divergence; however, the intensity and confrontational approach were significantly molded by Trump's ideological nationalism and individualized decision-making. The ensuing strategic rivalry embodies both historical inevitability and the unique influence of the Trump administration.

5 Constructing a New Model of Major-power Relations

China and the United States have nurtured an intricate symbiotic relationship across various domains. This creates a conducive environment for establishing a novel major-power relationship between the two nations, aiding in the mitigation of the decline in bilateral relations. Nonetheless, the adverse facets of U.S.-China ties cannot be disregarded. The rise of China has escalated competition between the two parties inside the international framework. Nonetheless, the historical specter of the "Thucydides Trap" prevail, with certain political groups exhibiting animosity and profound skepticism towards China's growing influence. In summary, China and the United States continue to exist in a non-symbiotic condition for political and security relations, mostly entrenched in a conventional zero-sum game characteristic of great power rivalry.

Building on the traditional theories of realist, liberalist, constructivist schools and the symbiotic narrative of international relations, this critique offers a incorporated view on the prospective trajectory of the U.S.-China relations in the midst of changes on a scale unseen in a century, for which a new model of major-power relations can be constructed, grounded in realistic national geopolitical interests, the multi-polar context of liberal international order, the mutual respect of re-positioning of national identity, and the symbiotic nature of U.S.-China relations.

5.1 The Realistic Conditions for Building a New Model of Major Power Relations Between China and the United States

The U.S.-China relationship possesses intrinsic components of conflict that are more fundamental and persistent than their cooperative aspects. The United States' goal to sustain global dominance, coupled with significant ideological disparities and the inherent friction between an established hegemon and an ascendant power, produces enduring tensions rooted in the realist principles of great-power competition. Consequently, hostility in political and security spheres has escalated.

U.S. foreign policy has historically focused on maintaining dominance in the international system by thwarting the emergence of regional adversaries. The rise of China inherently contradicts this purpose. Washington sustains a hub-and-spoke alliance framework in Asia, specifically intended to curtail China's expansion. Obama's 2012 "Asia-Pacific Rebalance," aimed at reallocating 60% of U.S. Navy assets to the area. The United States has fortified relationships with Japan and South Korea, enhanced military collaboration with regional partners, and promoted Japan's engagement in a more proactive security role—factors that exacerbate China's security apprehensions. These dynamics have rendered bilateral interactions more vulnerable to external influence and volatility.

The ascent of China has exacerbated increasing skepticism towards the United States. Numerous U.S. political figures persist in analyzing China's rise within the traditional

western realist presumption, arguing that all major nations inherently pursue hegemony. But more importantly, ideological diversity exacerbates structural difficulties. The U.S. has demonstrated little tolerance for ideological alternatives and continues to uphold its dedication to promoting liberal democracy globally. This “democratic fundamentalism,” coupled with entrenched political biases, sustains the ideological confrontation that has persisted since the normalization of relations. Despite growing interconnectedness, the inertia of American ideology and its global leadership role continue to cultivate antagonistic opinions of China.

Beyond material capabilities, U.S.–China relations are shaped by identity formation, threat evaluations, and the differentiation between rivals and allies. The convergence of power may provoke competition; but, conflict is not unavoidable. Historical examples illustrate that large nations can prevent conflict despite changes in relative power dynamics. The current relationship is characterized by intensified objective rivalry due to subjective misrecognition from both parties, hence reinforcing strategic distrust.

Tensions in the Asia-Pacific in the past decade indicate a transition towards interest-based pragmatism from both parties, fluctuating between collaboration and rivalry according to national interests, mirroring conventional “balance of power” dynamics. Mutual nuclear deterrence has significantly diminished the probability of direct military confrontation. Even problematic matters: Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula, and the South China Sea, serve primarily as strategic negotiation tools rather than catalysts for conflict. Offensive realism interprets these dynamics as hegemonic suppression of an ascending power; yet, a full-scale battle is improbable due to prohibitive costs.

Despite the Trump administration's extreme stance, it concurrently recognized the fundamental security issue and the transition from asymmetric to more symmetric reliance. The U.S. willingness to deal with Russia throughout the Ukraine conflict demonstrates a wider trend towards non-traditional, interest-driven foreign policy, while the Chinese diplomats also acknowledge that competition is a persistent and typical feature of international relations, notwithstanding China's promotion of “constructive competition.”

The worldview of China also influences the bilateral relationship. Beijing characterized the past two decades as the “strategic opportunity period”, which has transitioned into a more intricate era, defined by the U.S. strategic reclassification of China as a strategic opponent, despite the fact that Beijing continues to emphasize positive-sum competitiveness within the current international order and a multi-polar global framework. As stated by the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi: “neither party can nor should endeavor to alter the other's political system.”

In summary, U.S.–China relations exhibit a persistent, interest-driven “tit-for-tat” strategic dynamic. This pattern is indicative of defensive realism, while suggesting the necessity of a fully formed symbiotic relationship that may reduce tensions in regional security. Although interdependence fails to address structural challenges, ideological discord is increasingly giving way to realistic evaluations of national interest. The presence of structural parity restricts the capacity of either side to overpower the other, hence enhancing the prospects for a more stable and pluralistic coexistence.

5.2 Economic Interdependence and Mutual Constraints in the International Order

The United States and China are intricately linked through trade, banking, and investment, establishing a historically unparalleled degree of integration between a dominant and an emerging economic power. This economic interdependence has historically functioned as a stabilizing influence. The United States' advantages in technology, finance, and human resources enhanced China's manufacturing capabilities and extensive markets, fostering a

community of shared interests. However, during the Trump administration, economic relations were politicized through tariffs, decoupling techniques, and pressure on allies, exemplifying realist theories that assert economic interactions are fundamentally governed by political factors. Geopolitical challenges, such as Western sanctions on Russia, the Indo-Pacific Strategy, and Pelosi's 2022 visit to Taiwan, have exacerbated the erosion of strategic trust, highlighting interdependence as both a stabilizing and conflict-inducing element.

Trump's foreign policy was a significant divergence from U.S. endorsement of the liberal international order. His critiques of NATO, withdrawal from the TPP and the Iran agreement, tariffs implementation, NAFTA renegotiation, while undermining of WTO dispute resolution signified a shift towards bilateralism and transactional nationalism. By leveraging U.S. structural advantages, such as the dollar hegemony, advanced supply chain leadership, and technology preeminence, the Trump Administration inflict costs on China. Rivalry is therefore focused on economic and scientific spheres, whereas military confrontation is limited by interdependence. The 2018 trade conflict illustrated that profound decoupling results in substantial reciprocal losses. Despite China's potential to exceed the United States in GDP, the United States will maintain its advantages in innovation, finance, education, and military prowess. China's ascent is improbable to adhere to past hegemonic shifts; rather, a dual-power structure will materialize wherein both entities augment their impact without supplanting each other.

However, China's rise cannot be examined through a solitary theoretical lens. China exhibits neo-mercantilist traits domestically while participating as a player in the global system. It seeks to modify the existing system rather than dismantle it, partly due to the absence of a universally attractive alternative, with the goal of diminishing U.S. dominance. China revisionist stance aims to expand influence while avoiding a direct confrontation to U.S. global supremacy, its dedication to peaceful development and non-hegemony also signifies its intention to expand regional influence via economic and institutional engagement.

This intricate blend of rivalry and dependency establishes the foundational framework for a novel major-power relationship. However, the progress is inconsistent: China vigorously advocates this paradigm, while the U.S. exercises caution. The fundamental argument pertains to "mutual respect," especially with essential interests. China emphasizes principles including sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference, whereas U.S. authorities perceive these domains as possibilities to secure strategic advantages. Contradictory paradigms - symbiotic multipolarity and hegemonic liberalism - obscure the formation of sustainable connections. Both states must recognize their interdependence and global issues, adapting to coexist within a shared international framework.

5.3 A Gradual and Long-Term Endeavor

The notion of a "new model of major-power relations" arises from and progressively supplants conventional great-power politics as global circumstances change. Its progression is incremental rather than instantaneous, reflecting natural historical trends. While the current international system shows elements of symbiosis in economic interdependence, the political and security spheres are remain dominated by zero-sum paradigms. In this dynamic system, states perpetually select ideas and behaviors. Through inter-subjective socialization, they eliminate costly activities and adopt those that correspond with wider developmental tendencies. Negative learning necessitates adaptation to external stimuli, while positive learning disseminates internalized standards among other participants. When zero-sum activity results in losses, states will progressively recognize the benefits of conforming to a symbiotic order.

The development of a pragmatic new framework for China–U.S. relations will necessitate sustained strategic engagement and reciprocal adaptation. As China and the United States

become increasingly equivalent in strength, and as China forges analogous relationships with other significant entities, the symbiotic model will gradually solidify into an international political culture, supplanting conventional great-power rivalry.

6 Conclusion and Limitations

This paper examines key theoretical frameworks regarding the evolving U.S.-China relations and contends that no singular paradigm adequately encapsulates their intricacy. A further reference was undertaken from the Chinese symbiosis School, critiquing Western theories while promoting a pluralistic coexistence perspective. In the contemporary globalized and interdependent framework, conventional great-power competition is becoming increasingly unfeasible. A new model of major-power relations, defined by co-evolution, shared interests, and conflict avoidance, emerges as both essential and attainable, drawing on insights from western and non-western theories.

Nonetheless, the analytical framework of this research is still somewhat confined by the epistemology of Western IR traditions. This poses a considerable limitation: by predominantly evaluating China's rise through paradigms rooted in Western imperial histories, the study risks perpetuating a West-centric intellectual hierarchy.

Future research shall transcend this binary approach by actively integrating non-Western epistemologies, not only as reactive alternatives but as independent paradigms capable of re-narrating international relations. Additionally, this study does not sufficiently engage with the role of imperialism in shaping contemporary global order. A more extensive approach would examine how global hierarchies have been established through centuries of colonial brutality and extractive capitalism. Future studies ought to explore alternative paradigms of international order, including decolonial perspectives in Islamic, Latin American, or African theoretical groundings. These perspectives can facilitate the transcendence of existing limitations imposed by great power rivalry and foster avenues for more inclusive and fair frameworks of global governance.

If you are interested in this research or related fields, please read the full article [15].

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