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# The Sino-American Competition: Any Room for Others? The Case of France

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January 2024



**SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, ARTS AND  
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**DEPARTMENT  
HISTORY, POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL  
STUDIES**

**THESIS TITLE**

**The Sino-American Competition: Any Room for Others?  
The Case of France.**

**KUMAR SAURABH**

**JANUARY 2024**



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**This thesis was submitted for distance acquisition of a  
postgraduate degree in International Relations, Strategy, and  
Security at Neapolis University.**

**KUMAR SAURABH**

**JANUARY 2024**

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The Denotation

Kumar Saurabh

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This Master's Thesis was prepared during the studies for the distance master's degree at Neapolis University and was approved on..... [date of approval] by the members of the Examination Committee.

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## **Acknowledgments**

I want to thank Mr. George Tzogopoulos, Senior Fellow at CIFE, who served as my dissertation advisor. He was a great assistance and source of support during

the entire research and writing process. In the course "Strategy and Decision Making," I was exposed to the Grand Strategy by Mr. Papatotiriou Haralambos, a professor at Panteion University and Neapolis University Pafos, for which I am very grateful. His in-depth knowledge of the subject and approach to instruction gave me the tools I needed to do research for my dissertation.

My sincere gratitude goes out to Mr. XU Xin 徐昕, a visiting professor at Peking University and Program Manager for the China and Asia-Pacific Studies program (CAPS) at Cornell University. He provided invaluable knowledge about Chinese history while I was in Beijing for the Peking University summer program. My perception of China has been dramatically influenced by the knowledge I acquired during my summer program, which also greatly aided my dissertation research.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends Umang Goel and Bashir Abdel Wahed, who reviewed my dissertation despite their busy work schedules. I could not have finished this dissertation without their help and encouragement.

## **Abstract**

This study aims to delve into the Sino-American competition and explore if there is a space for another power in this competition with the case study of France. For this research, I used qualitative research methods, primary data such as official government publications and strategic documents from China and France, secondary data such as academic writing from Chinese scholars, and other sources such as journals, news articles, scholarly papers, and think tank publications. Moreover, I used IR theories such

as defensive realism, liberalism, and Thucydides Trap as a theoretical framework to conduct the research.

At the end of the research, I found that France is indeed a player in the Sino-China competition and has been active in the Indo-Pacific not only out of interest but out of necessity as well. France has overseas territories and millions of citizens living in these territories. France has been increasing its military presence in the region to protect its citizens and regional interests. Furthermore, evidence suggests that France has been trying to play a balanced role in the region to maintain peace and security. France has been trying to build alliances with like-minded nations in the region to achieve its goals.

As prominent scholars Allison Graham and Kevin Rudd suggested, the conflict between the US and China is highly possible; it is not inevitable if both nations develop a strategy to reduce the hostilities and avoid unexpected triggers that can lead to a direct conflict. Moreover, a third player such as France, which holds military, economic, and diplomatic strength both in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific, can play a significant role while working with the European Union and other like-minded nations that have similar interests in “an inclusive, multipolar, and rules-based Indo-Pacific” and have nothing to gain from conflict between two superpowers.

**Keywords:**

Rise of China, Chinese Grand Strategy, US-China Competition, France in the Indo-Pacific

## Chapter 1- Introduction

The rise of China and its aggressive policies in recent years have led to growing hostilities between China and the powerful nations in the West, especially the United States. China, which the United States once helped to integrate into international economic institutions such as the IMF and WTO, which led it to become the second most powerful economy today, threatens American hegemony in the region and the world. Moreover, smaller South China Sea nations feel threatened due to the Chinese military buildup and aggressive behavior. Taiwan and the growing threat of China's use of force to achieve reunification is another reason the Indo-Pacific is the subject of discussion among scholars and political leaders. According to Mearsheimer's defensive realism and Allison Graham's theory of the Thucydides Trap, a direct conflict between the United States and China is highly possible. What the world faces today has never been seen in history due to the sheer military and economic size of two superpowers and the impact it would have on the globalized world if these scholars proved right. After the end of the Cold War, the world is again seeing a great power struggle where most big and small powers are at odds with one another. In such circumstances, we need to ask whether there is any space for other players in this power competition.

Many nations in the Indo-Pacific, such as India, Australia, and Japan, have been developing strategies and building alliances to counter the rise of China and its security and economic implications. However, a European nation, France, holds massive overseas territories and a military presence in the region and has been working on gaining strength and influence in the region. However, so far, France has not given any indication of having hegemony in the region; instead, it has been playing a role of balanced power and following the policy of nonalignment, which attracts many nations in the global south who also want to avoid being in the middle of a great power struggle. Due to military setbacks around the world and political crises at home, the United States is having a hard time maintaining its supremacy and providing leadership to the world when it comes to global crises. In such a situation, nations are looking at the middle powers, who give priority to peace and security over self-interest.

## 1.1 Aim of Dissertation

This dissertation examines China's ascent, its Grand Strategy, and how it contributed to the escalation of hostilities between the US and China, the world's two most significant economies and militaries. Additionally, it examines the motivations behind the competition and its effects on Europe and the West. This dissertation also investigates France's status in the US-China struggle and its potential involvement in the Indo-Pacific region.

## 1.2 Research Question

To determine if France can compete with the US and China in the Indo-Pacific and what role it can play in preserving regional peace and security.

- What led to the rise of tension between the US and China?
- How does the competition between the US and China affect Europe?

## 1.3 Literature Review

Kevin Rudd<sup>1</sup>, the author of the book *The Avoidable War: "The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China,"* is an ex-prime minister of Australia and China scholar who has decades of experience working with the Chinese government, first as a bureaucrat in the foreign office and later as a leader of Australia. Due to his Chinese language skills, unlike other Western leaders, he has been interacting with Chinese policymakers, bureaucrats, and presidents in their native language, thus having a better and more profound understanding of them. Rudd's book *The Avoidable War* covers many aspects of China-US relations and gives the reader deep insight into a Chinese leader's worldview and strategy.

Kevin Rudd starts his book by discussing the history of US-China relations, the rise of distrust between the two nations, and the reasons behind it. He explains that the relations

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<sup>1</sup> Rudd, 2022

between the two nations had been through many difficulties due to American realpolitik while dealing with China, whether it was about American support for China during World War II, choosing between the CCP and KMT during the Chinese Civil War, or the recognition of Communist China to open a third front during the Cold War. American policy toward China after the end of World War I was a significant turning point and inception of distrust between the two nations, which only grew further later after the Korean War and the American approach towards Taiwan, which China saw as an American effort to contain China and remain a dominant power in the South China Sea.

Rudd breaks President Xi's worldview into ten chapters, calling them "Ten Concentric Circles of Interest." These ten chapters discuss contemporary Chinese strategy and foreign policies under Xi's leadership, a massive shift from his predecessors. These policies highlight the future of the Communist Party, the importance of economic development and prosperity, and military transformation.

Due to Chinese aggressive policies and hostility between the two superpowers, a direct conflict is becoming more realistic. To avoid such a situation, Kevin proposes a theory of "managed strategic competition." The idea of managed strategic competition is to continue to compete with each other in terms of economy, geography, and security while keeping red lines in mind to avoid a crisis that can lead to direct conflict without a way to stop. Despite not being too optimistic about adopting this approach from either side, Rudd challenges the critics of this idea to provide an alternative that can help avoid a potential conflict and maintain long-term peace and security.

Rush Doshi<sup>2</sup> is the founding director of the Brookings China Strategy Initiative and previously was a member of the Asia policy working groups for the Biden and Clinton presidential campaigns. He wrote a book, "The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace the American Order." The book differs from others because Doshi speaks fluent Chinese and uses primary sources for his research, which makes a huge difference when researching the Chinese Communist Party, especially related to its grand strategy. Doshi

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<sup>2</sup> Doshi, 2021

rejects the mainstream theory of the origin of Chinese aggressive policies towards the United States and the West due to Xi Jinping's election as the president of China by the National People's Congress. Instead, as per his research, since the end of the Cold War, China's grand strategy has been consistent to weaken the United States and replace its leadership in Asia and the world. Although the approaches of Chinese leaders have been different, while Deng Xiaoping adopted the policy of "hide your strength and bide your time," Xi Jinping's strategy has been "big changes have not been seen in a century" to achieve the same goal.

Doshi suggests that the United States can't compete with China symmetrically, in "dollar against the dollar, ship, against ship and loan, against loan" due to the size and strength of China. Instead, the United States should adopt a competitive strategy to counter and weaken China. Three major historical events- the Tiananmen Incident, the Gulf War, and the Fall of the Soviet Union - shifted the perception of China against the United States. After these three significant events, China saw ideological, military, and geopolitical threats. Despite American assurances, Chinese leaders criticized the United States in their speeches at different times. Despite these, China continued to be defensive throughout the 2008 financial crisis, the Invasion of Iraq, and the Afghanistan War, which highlighted American weakness and China's realization. As a result, China rapidly advanced in multiple directions, such as the economy, military, and geopolitics, undermining American influence through incentives such as launching the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. In addition, China has made tremendous growth in its military, especially in the Navy and Air Force, and has the ambition to transform it into a world-class military. Other events, such as Brexit and the election of Trump, also embolden Chinese leadership in its mission.

Graham Allison<sup>3</sup> In his book "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides Trap", talks about the theory that if a rising power threatens to displace an established power, a war is inevitable. This theory is based on the Peloponnesian War,

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<sup>3</sup> Allison, 2018

where Athens was the rising power, and Sparta was the established power, and both ended up fighting a war that changed the course of Greek history. In his detailed research, he found out that throughout history, 12 out of 16 times when a rising power challenged an established power, both ended up fighting a war, but in four cases, they did not. The competition between rising and ruling powers does not necessarily get them into the conflict. Still, it is the circumstances and conditions that force two sides into a war despite all the efforts to avoid it by the leaders from both sides. In such a power struggle, the relationship between two powers is so hostile that a minor crisis can lead to a direct conflict.

Allison's book comes at a time when US-China competition is at its height and tensions are high. In the case of US-China competition, China is a rising power threatening the hegemony of established American power in the region and the world. Graham writes that Britain, which the United States replaced as the established power after World War II, didn't lead to a war because both shared similar values. In the case of the US and China, there are more differences than similarities. Thus, both nations see each other as existential threats. However, Graham suggests in his book that, while war is likely, it is avoidable if two sides accept the realities and are ready to make concessions that are in the interests of both sides.

John Mearsheimer<sup>4</sup>, in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, talks about offensive realism theory, which can help understand the power politics of the two superpowers, the US and China. Mearsheimer writes that since the international world order is anarchic, that is to say, no higher authority can provide security to the states; states strive to gain more power, primarily military strength, so that they can defend themselves against a hostile power. However, as per Mearsheimer's offensive realism, the ultimate aim of a state is to have hegemony over its region and the world and, at the same time, make sure there is no other powerful rising hegemon present, either in its region or any other region, who can challenge the established power one day. If American grand strategy is seen through the lens of offensive realism, one can understand why the

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<sup>4</sup> Mearsheimer, 2014

US demolished the European sphere of influence in the Americas following the Monroe Doctrine and ensured no foreign power had enough influence in its region to challenge the United States. The United States could demonstrate its leadership and hegemony over other parts of the world because its own region had been secured. The United States, after enjoying a unipolar world for three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union today, is being challenged by another regional superpower, China, which is also following the same offensive realism to gain hegemony over its region and eventually become a world hegemon by replacing the United States.

Mahima Duggal<sup>5</sup>, in her journal, talks about France's place in the Indo-Pacific and its strategy in the region. Duggal starts by discussing French overseas territories and military presence in the Indo-Pacific and explains why this geography is significant for France. Furthermore, Duggal talks about French objectives in the region, such as protecting its territories and citizens, maintaining peace and security, safeguarding trade routes, and maintaining a balance of power.

Due to the rise of China and growing hostilities between China and the United States, a direct conflict between the two superpowers is highly likely. Duggal suggests that in such a situation, siding with the US or China is not in France's interest; instead, France should act as a "balancing and stabilizing power" in the region. To achieve this objective, France needs to work with middle powers in the region, such as India, Japan, and ASEAN nations, to achieve an "inclusive, multipolar, and rules-based Indo-Pacific," which is in the interest of both France and other nations in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, France can play a leadership role in the European Union while dealing with China. To achieve this, France needs to stay united with the EU, solve the differences within the Union, and come up with a consensus that syncs with "France's strategic outlook on China."

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<sup>5</sup> Duggal, 2022

## 1.4 Theoretical Framework

### 1.4.1 Realism

Realism is an international relations theory developed throughout history by intellectuals and philosophers such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes. The theory developed by these early realists remained dominant for the majority of the time until the end of the Second World War when scholars like Kenneth Waltz reformed the theory into neorealism or structural realism to suit the challenges of the time. Later, neorealism further expanded to defensive and offensive realism.

Realism theory has four main principles:

- 1) States are the primary actors in world politics.
- 2) States are rational actors, and their behavior is based on self-interest.
- 3) International politics is anarchic; that is to say, there is no higher authority in the international system.
- 4) Due to the anarchic nature of the global system and the state's self-interest, world politics is dominated by the struggle for power to achieve maximum security.

Structural realism doesn't deny the existence of "human nature" but believes that the behavior of the states is driven by an anarchic international system and the distribution of power among the states. Systems in the world, such as unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar, are defined by the number of great powers. Alliances between states depend on the threat they face. For example, a state may refuse cooperation with its neighbor, fearing it will one day threaten its security. On the other hand, states may cooperate and form alliances to maintain a balance of power and counter a more powerful state that may threaten the existing world order.

The dominant forms of contemporary realist theories are defensive realism, offensive realism, and neoclassical realism, which have been discussed and used by scholars and political decision-makers. Scholars from defensive and offensive theories differ primarily

on the states' aim. Defensive realists believe most states, with some exceptions, believe in a balance of power and don't want to provoke other states by maximizing their military strength. On the other hand, offensive realists believe that it is the fundamental nature of a state to enhance its power to become the hegemon. In the end, neoclassical realism scholars believe in the combination of classical and structural realism due to the latter's lack of consideration of state behavior.

#### 1.4.2 Liberalism

Liberalism theory, like realism, also has a long history but came to mainstream in the 17th and 18th centuries. Philosophers such as Emmanuel Kant, Voltaire, and Adam Smith played an important role in shaping the theory. Later, after World War I, Woodrow Wilson expanded and promoted the theory of idealism that led to the establishment of a rule-based international order, which we experience even today with principles such as “self-determination, freedom of speech, free trade, and peaceful resolution of issues with the help of international institutions such as the United Nations.”

Contrary to realist thinkers, liberalist scholars believe the system of governance and non-state actors play an essential role in shaping a nation's foreign policy despite the anarchic nature of the international system. Liberalism theory suggests states that are democratic and have trade relations have less chance to use force to solve disputes. Moreover, trade relations and cultural exchange are other factors that enhance the harmony between states. Furthermore, international institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the International Court of Justice play an essential role in resolving disputes between states that otherwise could become a reason for an economic and military conflict.

#### 1.5 Research Design and Methodology

To understand and analyze the competition between the United States and China, we need to use international relations theories such as offensive and defensive realism and

liberalism, which give us insight into great power competition. Moreover, to understand these theories correctly in the specific case of the US and China, we need to understand the history of China and look at the events that shaped the relationship between these two nations. Furthermore, a nation's grand strategy gives us a better idea and helps us understand its long-term strategy and foreign policies. It helps us understand why a nation and its leaders make certain decisions. In the end, to explore France's role in the power struggle between the US and China, we can use similar theories and methods while considering the impact of this competition on France and Europe and their economic and geopolitical interests.

### Data Selection

Due to the nature of the subject, much has already been written and discussed by scholars and policymakers. However, when it comes to China, not all research data can be given equal significance due to the secrecy of its government, lack of published strategic documents, and language barriers. However, scholars such as Kevin Rudd, Henry Kissinger, and Rush Doshi have extensive experience and understanding of Chinese politics and strategy. Thus, their writings give us detailed insight into the causes and potential consequences of the competition between the US and China. On the other hand, when it comes to the US, there are enough foreign policy and strategic documents available in the public domain that can be used to understand its goals in the Indo-Pacific. Still, when it comes to France, there is a lack of strategic updates, especially in recent years. Without such official documents, we must rely on the leaders' speeches, joint declarations, and journals written by scholars and experts.

For this research, I used primary and secondary sources of data. For primary sources, I used documents published on the official websites of the Chinese and French governments. Moreover, I used a book called "The Governance of China," a collection of speeches and writings by President Xi Jinping. Since this book is available in English and published by a China-owned publication, it reduces the chance of translation inaccuracy, eliminates biases, and provides the closest possible perspective on Chinese governance.

For secondary sources, I used books written by Chinese scholars such as Kevin Rudd, Henry Kissinger, and Rush Doshi, and international relations, political science, and defense scholars such as John Mearsheimer, Graham Allison, and Michael Pillsbury on their writing related to US-China competition and a potential conflict. In addition, I used numerous journals, scholarly papers, news articles, and think tank publications related to the research subject.

#### Method of Analysis

RQ1: To determine France's potential involvement in preserving regional peace and security and its status in the US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific.

The primary question is rather broad and requires first delving into the secondary questions to understand the causes and consequences of the US-China competition and the rise of tension between the two nations. Once I have enough details about the subject, I will come to the primary question and analyze the impact of the US-China competition on Europe, especially France. After that, I will look into French interests in the Indo-Pacific and its strategy, especially about China. To analyze the primary research question, I will use IR theories, especially liberalism. Moreover, I will examine the previous research on the subjects and use data such as government publications, academic journals, and news articles.

*SQ1: What led to the rise of tension between the US and China?*

This question examines the history of US-China relations and the events that led to the rise of tension between the US and China. To research this subject, I will use IR theories such as offensive/defensive realism and liberalism. In addition to that, I will use academic writings by Chinese scholars and academic journals.

*SQ2: What is the impact of US-China competition on Europe?*

To evaluate the impact of US-China competition on Europe, I will examine Thucydides' Trap theory and compare different aspects of the realist theories about US-China

competition. In addition to that, I will also use academic writings and news articles to have a contemporary view on the subject.

The question hypothesizes that there is a space for a third player in the Sino-American competition, and France will fit perfectly as a significant power in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, France, being a significant European power and having a historical approach to neutrality in the past's great power competitions, will play a substantial role in the Indo-Pacific and Europe.

## **Chapter 2 - Analysis of the United States and China Competition**

### **2.1 Rise of China**

For many years, the Great Wall of China, inexpensive goods, and delicious food were the first things that came to mind when people thought about China. However, within the past decade, this viewpoint has quickly evolved globally. When it comes to history, civilization, philosophy, and invention, China is a nation that defies all conventions. Unlike other countries, China's continuous rise cannot be quantified by a rigid chronology. In his book "On China," Henry Kissinger cites the nineteenth-century missionary and adventurer Abbe Regis-Evariste Huc.

*"Chinese civilization originates in antiquity so remote that we vainly endeavor to discover its commencement. There are no traces of the state of infancy among these people. This is a very peculiar fact respecting China. We are accustomed in the history of nations to find some well-defined point of departure, and the historic documents, traditions and monuments that remain to us generally permit us to follow, almost step by step, the progress of civilization, to be present as its birth, to watch its development, its onward march, and in many cases its subsequent decay and fall. But it is not so with the Chinese.*

*They seem to have been always living in the same state of advancement as in the present day; and the data of antiquity are such as to confirm that opinion.”<sup>6</sup>*

Many who know Chinese history would agree with the above statement. Historically, China has advanced economically, politically, militarily, and culturally, despite not being much influenced by the other civilizations. China gave the world compass, printing, paper, gunpowder, and many more. However, the Western industrial revolution during the 19th century changed the balance. It pushed it into the abyss during the so-called “*Century of Humiliation*,” which continued until the Chinese saw their renaissance under different Chinese leaders during the last three decades, starting with Deng Xiaoping. Each Chinese leader during different eras contributed according to the situation and challenges of that time. After Mao’s revolution and the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party, China saw many setbacks due to Mao’s Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. However, Mao’s successor, Deng Xiaoping, understood the need for reforms to recover from the crisis China was facing due to Chinese economic policies. Deng’s policy of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”<sup>7</sup> put the Chinese economy on the right track, and further efforts by Deng’s successors transformed other parts of the state’s crafts, such as military and diplomacy.<sup>8</sup>

The IMF, in 2014, announced that the size of China’s economy (\$17.6 trillion) exceeded that of the American economy (\$17.4 trillion)(refer to Diagram - 1). Moreover, in 2005, the Chinese economy was half that of the US economy, and now, in 2023, it is 25 percent bigger than the US.<sup>9</sup> There are different methods to compare two economies, but most economists prefer purchasing power parity (PPP) because it is a better and more consistent indicator when comparing two economies. Measuring economies in PPP is also necessary because it directly affects states’ capabilities to grow militarily and reflects states’ capabilities to buy military equipment such as missiles, ships, drones, and aircraft. Another essential factor in the Chinese economy is the resistance to handling economic

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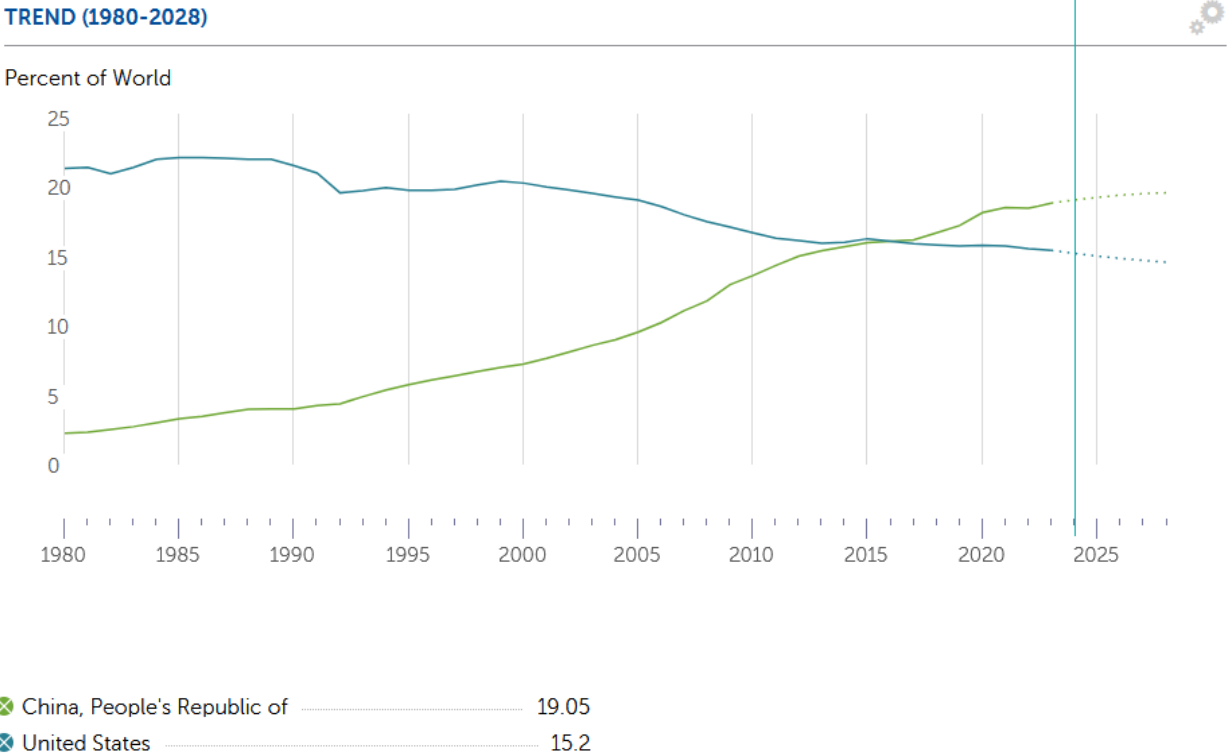
<sup>6</sup> Kissinger, 2011 p.6

<sup>7</sup> Mahoney, 2022

<sup>8</sup> Rudd, 2022 p.34-37

<sup>9</sup> Allison,2018 p.10

shocks. After the 2008 financial crisis, when we look at the recovery of nations, China has recovered the fastest compared to other major economies such as the US and Europe.<sup>10</sup> While China grew 6–7 percent yearly after the financial crisis, the United States rose an average of 2.1 percent, the EU 1.3 percent, and 40 percent of all the combined global growth belonged to one country, China.<sup>11</sup> However, after Xi Jinping became president, he implemented his “Xi Jinping Thought or Xi’ism” doctrine. Under this doctrine, China introduced tighter regulations and a “dual circulation strategy” to achieve Xi’s three economic goals of economic strength, security, and common property.<sup>12</sup> However, many Western economists see this as a setback for decades of economic prosperity China experienced due to its less conservative approach under previous leadership. China’s Zero COVID policy and crackdown on private companies have been other reasons behind the slowdown of Chinese growth.



**Diagram - 1 GDP based on PPP, share of world**

<sup>10</sup> Baker, 2023  
<sup>11</sup> Allison, 2018 p.12  
<sup>12</sup> Kuo, 2023

**Source:** [International Monetary Fund \(IMF\)](#)

When comparing China's cities and villages from three decades ago to today, most sinologists, policymakers, and entrepreneurs are at a loss for words. The country with bamboo houses and Soviet-style apartments changed to skyscrapers; Beijing's empty streets are now covered with six million automobiles, and the time most developed countries take to repair their infrastructure is equivalent to when China finishes building a new skyscraper. Another area where China has made fantastic progress is cashless shopping. Nowadays, it is rare to see people withdrawing and paying in cash. It takes a few seconds to buy a bottle of water from vending machines using facial recognition and another few seconds to pay in a shop using WeChat barcodes. Moreover, the incredible digital integration allows WeChat users to do everything from booking a concert ticket to booking a flight to paying for laundry with a few clicks using the same application. In the past decade, China has constructed the world's most extended high-speed rail network, which runs 180 miles per hour. The speed of construction doesn't necessarily mean compromise with quality; anyone could compare the train station of a small Chinese town to the train station of a developed Western capital and won't be disappointed.

China's per capita income grew from \$193 in 1980 to \$12,000 today. The World Bank president noted in 2010 that China lifted more than half a billion people out of poverty between 1981 and 2004. These changes improved the education system and the population's life expectancy, from thirty-six in 1949 to seventy-six in 2014. Moreover, in recent decades, China has produced countless millionaires and billionaires. Compared to China, the United States' per capita income is much higher, but this is a significant achievement when considering the Chinese population. Another area where China has made tremendous progress is education. The Chinese leadership understood the value of research and innovation and invested in the education system. Results are visible today; Chinese universities are not only in the top ten best universities but are also competing against American universities when it comes to technologies. The number of graduates per year in STEM is 1.3 million, compared to 300,000 in the United States, without counting Chinese students studying at foreign universities. These results

contributed to the rise of manufacturing. China's ranking in the R&D sector also grew exponentially, which can be easily observed by the increase in patent applications. While China has one of the most significant human workforces, it has invested heavily in automation and using robots in industries and their everyday lives. Of course, China is also known for stealing the intellectual property of other nations, especially the United States. These thefts cost the United States billions of dollars, adding to China's rapid technological growth. China has a more significant number of five times faster supercomputers than the United States. China launched the first quantum communication satellite, which will provide Chinese hack-proof communication, which is ironic. These successes demonstrate China's robust planning and execution techniques, which many lack in other parts of the world.

Mao's statement that "*Power grows out of the barrel of a gun*" is well understood in the Chinese Communist Party despite not being used much after the Chinese Cultural Revolution, wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Tiananmen Square protests. However, the Chinese leadership understands the military's significance for security and stability well. The primary reason behind China's "*Century of Humiliation*" was a lack of military strength and modern warfare skills. Therefore, China invested slowly but heavily in transforming its armed forces, especially its navy, air force, and space. China launched a massive military reform program starting in 2016, which analysts call "forward defense."<sup>13</sup> This program aims to "integrate data and intelligence with the fighting forces" across different military domains and expand operations beyond their seas. Due to China's intellectual property theft and foreign graduates, it didn't necessarily invest equal amounts of time and money to develop defensive and offensive weapons compared to the United States. Still, the capabilities of those weapons are well recognized in the United States, as published by RAND Corporation in 2015 called "The U.S.-China Military Scorecard."<sup>14</sup> The report highlights that China will be better, or at least equal, in six new areas for conventional capabilities. China made all these progress in defense while keeping its military budget much lower than the United States. However, after President Xi

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<sup>13</sup> Rudd, 2022 p.155

<sup>14</sup> Heginbotham et al., 2024

announced the increase in the defense budget, it will be much closer or even more significant than the United States.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2 Chinese Grand Strategy

Grand Strategy is a nation's state theory to achieve strategic objectives by political, economic, and military means. To successfully complete the goals of a grand strategy, nations require short-term tactics and strategies that may or may not change while achieving long-term goals. While many great powers have such grand strategies, it is rare to see a successful implementation. The United States had a grand strategy under the leadership of US President Woodrow Wilson, who decided when to enter World War I and the aims he wanted to achieve with his fourteen points, which led to a new world order after the end of World War I. Similarly, the US and Soviet Union had a grand strategy that both nations used against each other to win the Cold War without causing World War III. However, America's containment policy against the Soviet Union was successful in the end, and the Soviet Union collapsed due to its weak economic and political system. On the other hand, American policies of helping Western Europe with the Marshall Plan and spreading liberal democratic ideology helped it build long-term allies who, despite having different leadership in the White House, continued to be loyal to the United States because they were not driven by one factor but by many material and non-material aspects.

One must understand its rival's grand strategy to develop and implement a successful grand strategy. Without such understanding, one can never develop short-term tactics and techniques that can lead them to successfully achieving long-term goals. Since the United States became a strong power in the world, no other country has posed such a threat as China today. All major rival nations, including the Soviet Union, never came so close to posing a threat to American hegemony. Historically, no significant US adversaries

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<sup>15</sup> Robertson, 2023

crossed 60 percent of US GDP, whether it was the Second Reich during World War I, Japan and Germany during World War II, or the Soviet Union during the height of its economic might. Still, China did that, too, back in 2014.<sup>16</sup> China's \$14 trillion economy is doing precisely what the United States did after World War II. It is using its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) program to build alliances, spread its system of governance, and convey a message that, unlike Western nations, it doesn't interfere in the internal matters of a country, such as a lack of democracy and human rights violations. Apart from this, it is building a world-class military and broadening the trade deficit with the Western nations, and while doing all these things, countering the United States in international institutions such as the United Nations.

Such a shift in Chinese strategy forced the United States to rethink its policy against China. However, there is still a significant disagreement among American scholars, policymakers, and allies in Europe and other parts of the world on the Chinese grand strategy.<sup>17</sup> These groups are divided into two camps: skeptical and believers. Some believe China is to replace the United States as the world hegemon, while others believe China's ambitions are limited to its region. Many also disagree on the timeline on which China plans to achieve its aims. Still, both sides agree that China is a potential threat to the rule-based world order created by the West under the leadership of the United States. Thus, understanding the Chinese grand strategy should be based on both sides of the perspective.

Understanding the grand strategy of a nation is always a difficult task. Still, when it comes to China, it is even more difficult due to state secrecy, the language barrier, and the old Chinese strategy of deception.<sup>18</sup> Luckily, Western scholars such as Henry Kissinger and Kevin Rudd have decades of experience working with the Chinese Communist Party and a first-hand understanding of Chinese long-term and short-term strategies. When we read the immense literature available on this subject, we get an insight into the strategies China

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<sup>16</sup> Doshi, 2021 p.6

<sup>17</sup> Doshi, 2021 p.7

<sup>18</sup> Pillsbury, 2015 pp.34-36

is following to bring back its old glory, which President Xi calls “the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” to redeem the nation from centuries of humiliation. The biggest obstacle China has to achieving this milestone is the United States of America.

During the last three decades, under its leaders Deng, Hu, and now Xi, the Chinese have followed the same grand strategy of displacing American order in the region and later in the world. To achieve this, the three leaders followed different approaches of *blunting*, *building*, and *expansion* regarding the economy, military, and politics.<sup>19</sup> These strategies were shaped by events such as the 2008 financial crisis, Brexit, and Trump’s election. These events undermined Western economic and political strength and boosted Chinese efforts toward achieving its Grand Strategy’s goals. Under Deng’s leadership, China followed a *blunting* strategy and built military, economic, and political strength at the offensive level without provoking or alarming the United States by investing in cheaper asymmetric denial weapons and joining regional institutions such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum (ARF) to contain American influence, which they were reluctant to join before. Despite American sanctions after the Tiananmen protests, China followed the defensive approach. While doing this, it continued negotiating to remove the sanctions and successfully pursued the path towards joining the WTO. Later, during the Hu period, this changed to a *building* where China continued to be defensive but actively pursued its grand strategy. The 2008 global financial crisis helped China move from a defensive strategy to an offensive one, which is displayed in building aircraft carriers, marines, and overseas bases and launching the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Other events, such as Brexit, Trump’s isolationist policies, and the US COVID response, were other reasons that turned the Chinese strategy of *building* into *expansion*. It led China to expedite its efforts toward transforming the PLA into a world-class military, outweighing America in terms of GDP, and replacing the American rule-based international order with its autocratic order by 2049.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Doshi, 2021 pp.20-21

<sup>20</sup> Doshi, 2021 ch.3-11

## 2.3 History of US-China Relations

Throughout its history, China has lived as a nation with self-reliance in all prospects. Throughout the centuries, China developed its philosophy, political system, and robust economy, accounting for 40% of global GDP under the Qianlong Period (1735–1796), despite having the slightest connection to the rest of the world. Even the Silk Road trade couldn't penetrate China's rich culture and tradition and did not add more than 25% of GDP to the trade sector.<sup>21</sup> While it allowed China to preserve its rich culture and tradition and keep a relatively stable political system, it came at the cost of lagging in terms of military innovation and modern warfare techniques, which pushed China into the so-called “Century of Humiliation.”

When the British merchants faced resistance from China on the sale of opium, Britain waged a series of naval expeditions called the Opium Wars and forced the government to allow the sale of opium to Chinese people, got access to ports, and imposed unequal treaties. The war spoils were not limited to trade; they allowed Britain to establish Christian missionaries in the country, followed by American protestant missionaries. Other nations, such as Russia, Japan, and France, followed in Britain's footsteps and gained control over other Chinese territories and their tributary states. The central turning point came with the Boxer Rebellion, when a group of Chinese, many of whom were practicing Chinese martial arts, revolted against foreign occupation and Christian missionaries. They besieged foreign diplomats, soldiers, and missionaries. Eight nations, including the United States, stormed the Dagu Fort in Tianjin, China, to free them. The Empress chose to side with the Boxers, but due to a lack of unity among the military leaders, imperial forces lost against the eight-nation alliance. It weakened the Qing Dynasty's hold on power and became the beginning of the end of the Chinese imperial system.

The aftermath of the Boxer rebellion left China in even more unstable conditions, where the Emperor faced revolutionaries who wanted to transform China into a republic and

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<sup>21</sup> Rudd, 2022 p.20

warlords who wished to gain control over territories. Compared to other allied nations, the policy of the United States was based on a combination of moral and economic interests. Unlike other allied countries, it didn't cede Chinese territories or take control of a province. Still, it made it clear to other allies that it wouldn't tolerate any resistance for its traders, investors, and missionaries in the country. In addition to that, the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment in the US led to the "question of race" and the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 for ten years, which barred Chinese laborers from entering the United States. The act was renewed with the Geary Act and made permanent. It remained in the palace until 1943 when it was repealed to improve relations with a wartime ally<sup>22</sup> China.

China faced another betrayal from the United States when the newly formed Chinese government agreed to help the United States and its allies in World War I in the return of German-occupied territories in the Chinese province of Shandong. During World War I, hundreds of thousands of Chinese laborers were sent to the Western front to dig ditches, work in hospitals and French factories, and deliver ammunition. Thousands of them died during the war. But when the Allies were victorious, they turned their backs on their commitment during the Treaty of Versailles. Chinese vital demands, such as abolishing unequal treaties and collecting its customs revenue by itself, were rejected, too. To make things worse, American President Woodrow Wilson decided to cede the Shandong Territories to Japan to keep the Japanese on their side and make the League of Nations successful. This led to mass protests and anti-American sentiment in China. Many Chinese, including young Mao, who greatly respected Wilson, saw the United States as a "bunch of robbers" who "cynically championed self-determination."<sup>23</sup> However, realpolitik trumped ethics, and the United States lost another opportunity to turn China into a democratic nation and instead planted a seed of distrust for the coming generations. The first missed opportunity was not fully supporting Alexander Kerensky, which led to Lenin overthrowing the provisional government and establishing the communist Soviet Union.

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<sup>22</sup> Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute USA, n.d

<sup>23</sup> Rudd, 2022 p.25

One nation that benefited the most politically from this betrayal was the Soviet Union. The Communist Party of China was formed in July 1921 in Shanghai in the presence of two of the Kremlin's commissars. Moscow provided support to both the Nationalist Party (KMT) and the newly formed CCP to fight together against the warlords. All efforts by the KMT to get support from the United States to protect the young Chinese republic failed; instead, the US decided to provide diplomatic recognition to many warlord commanders who controlled Beijing. This left KMT with no other option but to continue to receive support from the Soviet Union until 1927, when KMT, under the leadership of Chiang, decided to eliminate the Communists. KMT continued to request American support, but the United States didn't want to pull itself into the war and restrain itself. It didn't provide support to China until the 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria, which was also a civilian mission to train the Chinese air force. The United States didn't see it in its interest to get into the war between Japan and China. By the time the United States entered World War II in 1941, China had lost more than three million troops and eleven million civilians during their fourteen-year war with Japan.<sup>24</sup> By that time, 80 percent of all aid to China came from the Soviet Union. However, the United States eventually helped end the war by dropping two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Post-World War II, when the civil war between the KMT and CCP started, the United States supported the KMT, but at the same time, the US was not confident about the KMT's success. The US was aware of the immense corruption inside nationalist parties and was unsure about the support between the KMT and CCP. Mao used deception to give the United States an indication through interviews that it was not a Soviet proxy and that the communist government would be "politically democratic and economically pragmatic" and would work with the US on trade and investment.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, Mao's writing at that time indicates that he deeply distrusted Americans and their policies. American betrayal after World War I, the number of American missionaries in China, the import of American liberal values by Chinese-educated students in America, and American foreign policy towards China were the biggest threats to the Communist

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<sup>24</sup> Rudd, 2022 p.28

<sup>25</sup> Rudd, 2022 p.29

system. With limited American support and a lack of support from the Chinese people, the KMT lost to the Mao-led CCP and retreated to Taiwan. The CCP's support from the Soviet Union during the fight against warlords in Japan and later in the Chinese Civil War brought Mao and the Chinese communist party closer to the Soviet Union.

After the communist victory for the next quarter of the century, while China experimented with policies such as the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution under Mao's leadership, the United States struggled with developing a policy towards China. While the US continued to support the Chiang-led KMT in Taiwan, it was more of a moral support than military help to retake the Chinese mainland. On the other hand, the CCP stayed low and avoided provoking the United States with any significant action. For example, in support of North Korea, China sent hundreds of thousands of troops as volunteers rather than as the PLA army to avoid officially declaring war. On the other hand, China promoted anti-American propaganda on the home front. American high losses in the Korean War forced the US to rethink its policy against China, which led to the development of a post-war alliance involving major players Australia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, and South Vietnam with the name South-East Asia Treaty Organization of 1954.<sup>26</sup>

During the Korean War, the US recognized the geostrategic importance of Taiwan, which could be used as a frontier to contain the spread of Communism in East Asia. As a result, the United States committed support to Taiwan with its Seventh Fleet, and to make it legal, it signed the Treaty of San Francisco in September 1951 with Japan without both the Republic of China (ROC) and People's Republic of China (PRC) and decided that the fate of Taiwan would be resolved after peace is restored in the Pacific region under the supervision of the United Nations. The Treaty of San Francisco and the Treaty of Taipei (April, 1952) talk about Japan renouncing its rights to the annexed islands, including Formosa (Taiwan), without mentioning the party to which it was being transferred. Such an ambiguous approach made Taiwan an unsettled territory.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Rudd, 2022 p.31

<sup>27</sup> Ho, 2003

Under US president Eisenhower relation between US and ROC lead Taiwan improved which received both financial and military aid. In addition to that ROC attempted to increase military presence on its controlled Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu islands, two of which were located at the shores of PRC controlled mainland China. Such a tense situation lead PRC's shelling of Kinmen and Matsu islands in 1954 in an unsuccessful attempt to capture Taiwan from ROC. This lead to United States providing security guarantee to Taiwan while keeping the sphere of the geographical support unclear. PRC started another shelling of the two islands in 1958, which was repelled by the ROC and American demonstration of support for the ROC. The Taiwan Strait Crises were significant in terms of the future strategy of both the United States and Mainland China. On one hand, the United States demonstrated its commitment to support to its allies at the expense of a wider conflict. On the other hand, It was the beginning of the deterioration of the relation between Moscow and Beijing which later called Sino-Soviet Split. Moreover It led mainland China to start its nuclear program to boost its strength.

Since then, the PRC has signed numerous agreements with Japan and the United States, all recognizing the PRC's view of China. However, none of the agreements accepted the PRC's claim that Taiwan is an integral part of mainland China. The PRC and ROC cited the Cairo and Potsdam declarations to claim Taiwan's rights. Still, the United States and Taiwanese independence movement factions don't accept this argument and believe that Taiwan, using United Nations Article 77 of the trusteeship system, should have the right to self-determination to become an independent country. China condemned such an approach towards Taiwan and wrote in "The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era," published in August 2022, "What they are attempting to do is alter Taiwan's status as part of China and create two Chinas, or one China, one Taiwan, as part of a political ploy—using Taiwan to contain China."<sup>28</sup>

While relations between the United States and China stayed low, on the other side, relations between China and the Soviet Union deteriorated after the death of Stalin. This

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<sup>28</sup> China State Council, 2022

was a perfect moment for China and the United States to rethink their relationship. On one hand, the United States wanted to contain the Soviet Union by breaking China from its sphere of influence. On the other hand, China wanted to build its economy, which suffered heavily during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. Moreover, China lost its financial support from the Soviet Union and was experiencing armed clashes at the border with the Soviet Union. On the other side, the United States wanted to have leverage in arms control negotiations with the Soviets and wanted to end the Vietnam War. In the meantime, the PRC was gaining international support in the United Nations to replace ROC as the only “legitimate representative of China to the United Nations”. In addition to that, both US and China had the intention to improve the relations, and then US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's efforts made it possible. However, the United States didn't give up its support to ROC, and despite American efforts toward a “two China”<sup>29</sup> solution that would seat the PRC while letting ROC remain, failed in the United Nations on 25th October 1971 when the United Nations General Assembly recognized the PRC as the sole representative of the China and removed Chiang Kai-shek led ROC from United Nations. Moreover, the major hurdle between China and US diplomatic normalization over Taiwan, resolved by multiple communique signed between the two nations. At the same time, by signing the Taiwan Relations Act, the US also kept some cards in its hands. While the US achieved its goal of containing the Soviet Union and getting strategic arms control signed, China killed two birds with one stone. Improving relations with the US allowed it to not worry about the American threat. On the other hand, American intelligence on the Soviets and Vietnam and arms sales from the US and its allies resolved the danger from the powerful neighbor, the Soviet Union. In addition, on the economic side, allowing China to trade with the US and its allies gave a kickstart to the road toward financial success, which would one day threaten American hegemony.

Under Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, China saw swift reforms to move the country forward economically. In addition, foreign-educated Chinese graduates brought back different political ideas that were not compatible with the Communist system of government. Together, both proved deadly and led to the Tiananmen Square protest in

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<sup>29</sup> Carter, 2020

1989. It was not only students who were the driving force of the protest; party leadership, such as Zhao Ziyang, the general secretary of the CCP, was also found to be on the side of Chinese liberals. He spent the rest of his life under house arrest. Many in China and outside regarded him as a “lost hope for democratic China”. The movement was swiftly suppressed by force, and American sanctions against China due to the use of force didn't last too long<sup>30</sup>.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was another central turning point in Chinese geopolitics. On the one hand, it caused a great shock to China and forced it to reflect on how a powerful communist nation collapsed without a single shot fired by the adversary. On the other hand, it was also relieving that a powerful neighbor no longer caused a security threat to China. However, in the next two decades, the Soviet Union's successor state, Russia, regained its strength under Putin's leadership, and China again revisited its relations with Russia. China-US relations started to reach a tipping point where economic benefit could not be the only reason for a close relationship. Therefore, China began to disburse its weapons purchases from the desperate Russian weapon manufacturing industry. Moreover, clashes with the United States grew further over Taiwan and the American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade further deteriorated the relation. On the other hand, rapid NATO expansion made Russia uncomfortable, but it could not do much except expressing dissatisfaction. But these events brought both China and Russia even closer.

By this time, the Chinese market had already grown exponentially. American business and leadership continued to develop the trade relationship with China, hoping that trade and economic reforms would lead to political reform and that one day, China would become a democracy.<sup>31</sup> On the other side, Deng ensured that Chinese conservatives were not blocking the efforts to implement capitalistic political reforms in China. After lengthy negotiations, China finally got admission to the World Trade Organization (WTO)

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<sup>30</sup> Rudd, 2022 pp.36-37

<sup>31</sup> Rudd, 2022 pp.39

in 2001, which resulted in sharp economic growth and improved living standards. GDP per capita tripped within a decade and boosted the trust and control of the Chinese Communist Party. The US kept the Tiananmen instance and human rights violations on the sidelines, which allowed both nations to avoid tension and keep their focus on the economy. It was on the agenda of George W. Bush Jr. when he became president of the United States to rethink US-China relations. Still, before his administration could work on it, two significant incidents happened: the collision of American and Chinese aircraft jets and the 9/11 attack. 9/11 turned the focus of Bush administration to the Middle East. China provided its support and cooperation to the US in its fight against terrorism and voted in favor of the allied invasion of Afghanistan but was against the Iraq invasion. This distraction proved favorable for China since it could focus on strengthening its economy and military without worrying too much about resistance from the United States.

## 2.4 Rise of Tension between the US and China

Many scholars believe that the trigger point of Chinese assertive policies was 2008 financial crisis because it exposed American economic weakness. Moreover, this was the first time China took the world stage and showed leadership in the economic recovery. It allowed China to challenge the American-led economic model of a free market economy and institutions such as the IMF. China quickly took the lead and proposed what later became known as Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralism (CMIM), which extended the previous Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) created in 2001 with the lessons learned from the 1997 Asian financial crisis. CMIM combines ASEAN with China, Japan, and South Korea to promote regional economic cooperation through “currency swap agreements” and “diversification of available currency.”<sup>32</sup> China did all these while criticizing but not making any effort against existing Western economic institutions, which China was also a part of. Despite all these criticisms from the US about its efforts, China continued to build new institutions to counter the West, such as the New Development Bank under BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. In addition to that, China worked toward public

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<sup>32</sup> Oba, 2019

relations as well to display its soft power. One such significant effort was the 2008 Olympics. China spent \$43 billion hosting the event and put great effort into displaying China's rich history and culture to the world. Despite numerous criticisms from the West about China's human rights violations, it didn't make much difference to the Chinese Communist government. Instead, China used the event to tell the world that its time has come.

After Obama became the US president, his approach to China was more diplomatic. The Obama administration did not see China as an *"inevitable American adversary but a potential partner in resolving critical global challenges."*<sup>33</sup> The Obama White House stated, *"China's rise should be respected if China follows international rules and norms and doesn't threaten the security of US allies."* During this period, China and the US worked together on multiple issues, such as the Iran Nuclear Deal and the G20 collaboration on stabilization of the international market and growth of the global economy, while having much less success with North Korea. The Obama administration also improved the communion between the two nations based on the Strategic Economic Dialogue (SED) developed by the Bush administration. The goal was to have twice the annual meeting to discuss strategic and economic issues.

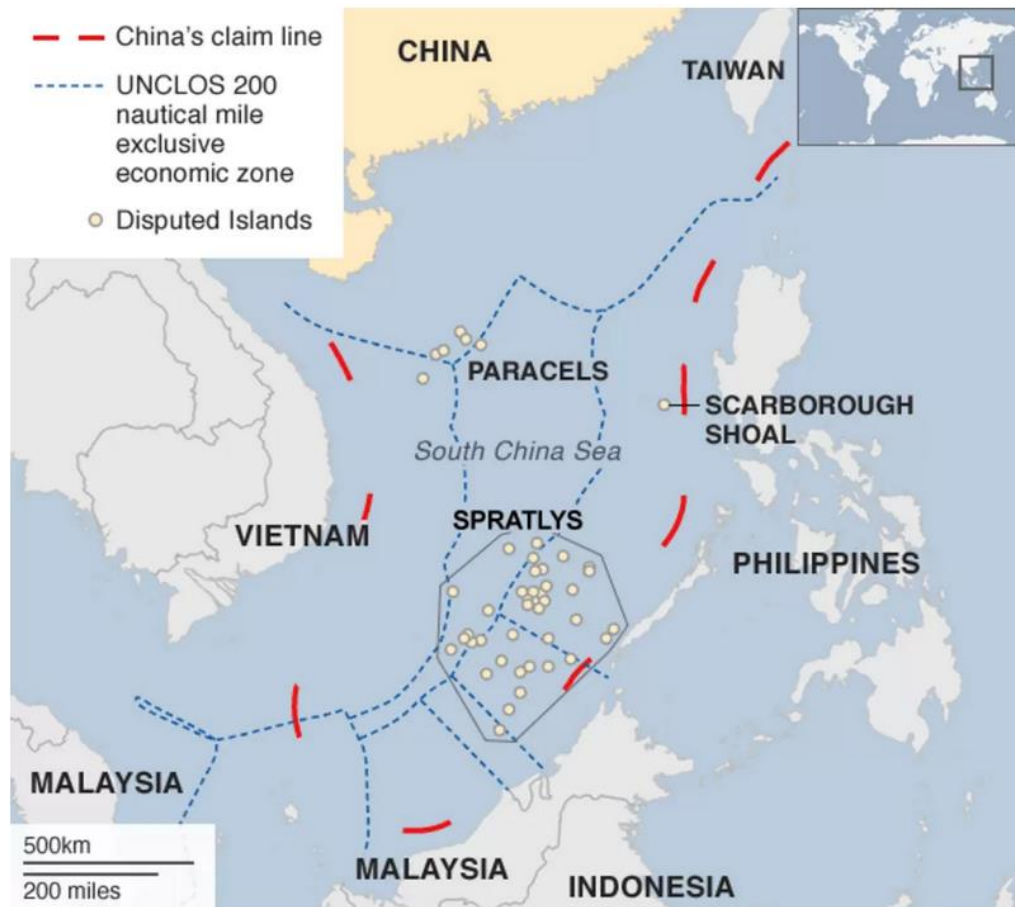
The warming relations between the two nations brought up the idea of the G2, where the US and China would strengthen the G20 even further, being two of the most powerful economies. While it seemed like a good idea from the US side, it was not well received on the Chinese side, which saw this as an attempt to encircle Chinese foreign policy. It was against China's long-standing advocacy of a multipolar world, and by accepting this, China would end up being a junior partner of the United States. In addition to that, recent events such as the 2008 financial crisis and US disaster campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq displayed American economic and military decline, and all China had to do was wait for the right moment to launch its assertive ambition. However, China didn't reveal its idea outright and used delaying tactics. Moreover, the idea of G2 was not well received by the

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<sup>33</sup> Rudd, 2022 p.49

US opposition party, which saw it as an attempt by the Obama administration to accommodate Communist China.

Another major event that raised the tension even further was China's aggression in the South China Sea. Since the time of the Nationalist Party in 1947, China has claimed almost the whole South China Sea with its nine-dash line (refer to diagram-2).<sup>34</sup> China has long been upset by American naval surveillance ships and aircraft passing in the South China Sea. According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), foreign vessels and aircraft can't use sovereign water without the permission of the nation that has sovereignty over that water. Still, the United States never ratified the law and instead claimed "freedom of navigation" to sail through the South China Sea, which it treats as international water.



**Diagram - 2 China Nine-dash line**

<sup>34</sup> BBC, 2023

Source: [BBC](#)

These events led the US to develop serious strategies to contain Chinese economic and military aggression, such as deploying several naval, air, and marine forces in the Pacific and diverting troops from other parts of the world. Furthermore, the US Developed military alliances with Chinese neighbors who felt threats due to Chinese assertiveness and developed the free trade agreement Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), consisting of twelve Asia-Pacific economies that represent one-third of global trade.<sup>35</sup> This sudden turn of events caused a rise in hostilities between the US and China and between China's allies in the Pacific. After Japan nationalized the disputed island of Senkaku, China froze its relations with Japan for seven years. Australia and Singapore both deteriorated their diplomatic and political ties with China as well after allowing the United States to host its marines and helicopters on its territory. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's efforts in Asia indicated that the US is not ready to lose its influence in the region to China.

This is when Xi Jinping became the president of China, known for his confidence and assertive approach. After Xi became president, relations with China and the US deteriorated even further. However, as one can observe from history, it can't be put entirely on Xi; a lot of blame goes to previous leaders who brought the two nations to this situation where there was no easy path forward.

Ideology is another major factor behind this tension. China believes that, like the past, the United States will not stop trying until China turns into a democracy. It might not be accurate for all American allies, such as Saudi Arabia. Still, when we talk about significant American competitors, it is always easy for the United States to compete with like-minded democracies rather than autocracies. On the other hand, China, as displayed in the past, can significantly protect its Communist party and system of governance. China sees the alternative as chaos and instability, which China suffered for centuries when the nation was not united and suffered constant fights between warlords and emperor. China's leaders believe that the future of China lies in unity, which can only be achieved under

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<sup>35</sup> Rudd, 2022 p.54

the Communist system. Moreover, despite accepting the role of the free market in the success of the Chinese economy, China is in no way ready to adopt the capitalist system of markets and will continue to follow "Socialism with Chinese characteristics." President Xi said in the Fifth Session of the 13th National People's Congress, "Socialism with Chinese characteristics is the only path to national rejuvenation. As long as we remain committed to this path, we can meet our people's aspirations for a better life and achieve common prosperity for all".<sup>36</sup> Capitalistic nations, including the United States, also have economic challenges and a system where big corporations and a few individuals hold more power and assert themselves over the rest of the population, and they also influence government decisions. The 2008 financial crisis was a significant example that shook the world and the thinking of Chinese leaders, too.

Lack of trust is another reason behind the decline of relations between the two nations. Both sides have very different understandings and expectations of each other. China believes the US efforts toward building the relationship were based entirely on self-interest, first to counter the Soviet Union and then for its economic benefits, and they should not expect any more from China. On the other hand, since the beginning, the US has hoped to transform China into a liberal democracy by opening it to the world and adding it to Western institutions such as the IMF, WTO, and World Bank.<sup>37</sup> When the US saw this was not happening, it decided to make China a junior partner with G2, which could have been much better for the US than having China as a competitor or rival. This effort also failed, and the US began to understand Chinese ambitions to control the region and replace the United States as a hegemon first in the region and later in the world.

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<sup>36</sup> Jinping, 2022 p.41

<sup>37</sup> Rudd, 2022 pp.59-75

## Chapter 3 - Realism and Thucydides Trap

### 3.1 Realist view on the US-China competition

To understand the rising China and the established superpower United States' strategies towards each other, one can use the Offensive Realism theory given by John Mearsheimer.<sup>38</sup> According to this theory, the international system is anarchic; that is, there is no supreme authority that can protect a weak nation against the aggression of a stronger nation. Hence, each nation strives to gain more power than its neighbors or competitors so they can either avoid being attacked or protect themselves in case they are attacked. In addition, countries try to become regional hegemon. When they succeed in doing so, they ensure there is no other competing hegemon in their own or other regions. A nation cannot prevent other countries from becoming hegemons in their respective regions unless they first deter competing powers or threats in their own region.

This explains the century-long American effort under the Monroe Doctrine to eliminate external powers in Western Hemisphere to maintain its influence. Moreover, the United States became so powerful that no other nation in the Americas could think about attacking it. In addition to that, as seen in the 20th century, the United States made sure no additional regional power could succeed in holding regional hegemony, whether it was Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, or the Soviet Union. The United States played a crucial role in their defeats and fall in all four cases. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was no other power anywhere in the world that could compete with the United States in its region until China's sudden rise brought back the threat.

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<sup>38</sup> Mearsheimer, 2014 p.363

Like the United States, China has the same ambition. It wants to become a regional hegemon using its robust economy and military power. First, it ensured that it didn't have any threats from its neighbors. Now that it has succeeded in doing that, it is trying to replace the United States in the region as a superpower, so it can't threaten China's hegemony in the Asia-Pacific. This offensive realism brought China and the United States so close to the conflict that many scholars in the world believe a war between two superpowers is unavoidable.

However, unlike the United States after independence, China's size is much bigger; therefore, China might not need military power or territorial expansion. Instead, it will use its economic power to coerce its neighbors to accept its hegemony. The Chinese approach to most of the conflicts in the region proves this theory. China avoids a military confrontation at all costs and, at the same time, continues to strengthen its military and economy. China's territorial claims in the South China Sea and muscle flexing in the East China Sea highlight its ambition to control these regions. So far, China is not strong enough to force the US Navy and Air Force out of the area, but that is China's ultimate aim.

China requires weaker powers in the region to gain hegemony in the neighborhood. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia became a pariah state that most probably would be a junior partner but a close ally of China. On the other hand, the rise of India would be a significant threat to China's ambition. An American effort to bring India to their side would help India economically and militarily. Still, at the same time, India's long-time neutral stance on world politics remains to be seen. Even during the Russia-Ukraine war, despite immense pressure from the West, India refused to condemn Russia and continued the trade relationship. However, India's relations with China are very different from those with Russia, and its historical territorial disputes make it difficult for India to stay neutral regarding the security threat from China. China's efforts will not be limited to Asia but to other parts of the world, such as South America, Africa, and the Middle East. China's BRI program and vaccine diplomacy<sup>39</sup> are two examples of how China wants to

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<sup>39</sup> Lin, Funairole et.al, 2021

improve its diplomatic, economic, and political relations with the global south, which is going to play a significant role in the competition between the US and China and is critical for China's sea routes for its trade.

Chinese economic coercion is another major threat to China's neighbors and distant nations such as Latvia. Due to the sheer size of China's trade and economy, trade can be used as an offensive tool to bend a nation to its knees. China's neighbors, such as Japan, Australia, South Korea, and Taiwan, are big trade partners with China despite being allies of the United States for security guarantees. Sometimes, it becomes a dilemma for nations that must choose between their economy and security. But security prevails almost always over economic interests because security threatens a nation's survival. This is why major American allies in the South and East China Sea allow the United States to host its military infrastructure and perform joint military operations in the region despite the risk of affecting trade relations with China. To reduce China's strength to coerce its trade partner, the United States and the West started the policy of economic containment with so-called decoupling and de-risking. Leaders and scholars in the West are still debating the advantages and consequences of decoupling vs. de-risking. Still, almost all of them agreed on reducing trade dependency on China after it started its assertive economic policies.

Containment of China, either economically or militarily, can't be done by the United States alone; instead, it requires full support and cooperation from its allies in Asia and other parts of the world that are major trading partners of China. The first step towards this is to recognize China as a security and economic threat and then find a common approach to contain this rising threat. Regarding military threats, the United States has been forming individual alliances with smaller and less powerful nations in the South and East China Sea and a NATO-like alliance called Quad in Asia with Australia, Japan, and India. Furthermore, NATO proposed to open a liaison office in Tokyo, which was seen as forming a NATO-like alliance in the Indo-Pacific and didn't go without criticism from China and NATO member France.<sup>40</sup> This alliance aims to allow more American military

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<sup>40</sup> Gray and Irish, 2023

infrastructure in the region and equip its allies with modern weapons and technologies, such as nuclear submarines, under AUKUS.

While these efforts will help reduce the growth of China and force China to pursue military strategy carefully, they will also give rise to an arms race between the US and China. And since the Russia-Ukraine war, China and Russia are getting even closer, which will make the military balance between the US and China/Russia alliance even more difficult. Moreover, we can see Cold War-like proxy wars and regime changes in different parts of the world to have pro-China or pro-US governments. The arms race and hostility between the US and the Soviet Union only came down after the disastrous Cuban missile crisis, which, if not handled properly, could have caused the inhalation of a large chunk of the world population. Therefore, the containment efforts of China and military alliances among alliances should be handled carefully while keeping communication channels open between the US and China.

At last, there are two counterarguments against the realist view on the rise of China and the consequences of US-China competition. First is ideology: one of the primary reasons for competition between the US and the Soviet Union was ideology. Both nations believed in their respective ideologies, i.e., capitalism and communism, which both nations wanted to protect and expand outside their nation's borders, and led to military and political competition. On the other hand, China is a communist country with a mix of capitalism. No evidence suggests the role of ideology in the tension between the US and China. However, in the case of China, instead of ideology, it is nationalism (Hong Kong and the reunification of Taiwan) that is the driving force behind China's assertive policies.<sup>41</sup> In addition to that, the Chinese leader's reminder to their people and world of the "Century of humiliation" and the Chinese dream of "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" are other significant factors that make conflict between the two superpowers more likely. President Xi, in his speech at a meeting marking the 110th anniversary of the Revolution of 1911, said, "The Taiwan question arose as a result of weakness and chaos in our nation, and it will be resolved as national rejuvenation becomes a reality. The Taiwan

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<sup>41</sup> Mearsheimer, 2014 pp.400-401

question is an internal matter that brooks no external interference. No one should underestimate the resolve of the Chinese people. The complete reunification of our country can and will be realized.”<sup>42</sup> The second argument is the economy. Unlike the US and Soviet Union, in today's globalized world, all nations are interdependent. It becomes even more critical when it comes to the US and China, two major economies. A war will cause not only economic catastrophe for the two superpowers but for the whole world. However, there is also evidence from the past when, despite having economic dependency, nations went to war, such as in World War I.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the current trade war and the Western efforts of decoupling will reduce economic dependence, increasing the chances of conflict.

### 3.2 Can China and the US escape the Thucydides trap?

One of the most quoted texts in international relations is “It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made the war inevitable.” from *The History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides. Thucydides trap is a term developed by Graham Allison that describes war as inevitable when a rising power challenges the hegemony of an established power. In this context, war is not certain but highly likely. After the Peloponnesian War and Thucydides' writing, there were many such power struggles in which twelve out of sixteen ended the war while four did not. Under the definition of Thucydides Trap, these wars are driven by three significant factors: interest, fear, and honor, and despite sometimes the leaders of the nations not being in favor of the war, due to the circumstances, nations got pulled into a direct conflict. The most famous one is the First World War, which was so deadly and devastating that historians had to create a new category and call it the World War. It was the shift in the balance of power due to the rising Second Reich Germany and the fear it caused to Britain, France, and Russia that led to direct conflict in which other numerous nations got sucked in and resulted in millions of deaths and casualties. However, the rising power of the United States in the Western Hemisphere threatened established British power dominance, which didn't result

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<sup>42</sup> Jinping, 2022 pp.478-479

<sup>43</sup> Mearsheimer, 2014 p.408

in a war because Britain and the United States shared common values. Britain saw the United States as a future partner and ally rather than a threat.<sup>44</sup>

Three decades later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, another nation, China, whose rapid economic and military growth is threatening the established power of the United States, is making many wonder if these two superpowers will get into a direct war like many other powerful nations in the past. This question is even more critical because of the sheer size and dependence of the two superpowers on the rest of the world, and the war's outcome will affect not only these superpowers but the whole world. But as history tells us, the Thucydides trap was averted by rising and established powers in the past, so there is hope that it can be achieved in the case of the US and China as well. But to do this, both sides have to accept reality and work in the direction others have done with success in the past.

While the Thucydides trap explains the reality of the power struggle between rising and established power, it does not say the outcome is inevitable.<sup>45</sup> Instead, the result depends on the choices leaders make on both sides. They have options to take direction, leading them to peace or war, as the Spartan and Athenian leaders had. It was their choices that led them to war. The economy's growth is directly related to military strength, thus it causes fear on the other side. While keeping in mind that the sixteen conflicts Graham researched have immense differences when compared with Chinese civilization, history, and strategy. Chinese leadership and military strategists are greatly influenced by the historical military strategy of the Warring States and follow great Chinese strategists such as Sun Tzu and Cao Cao.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the goal of China will be to defeat the enemy without fighting and instead use different means, such as the economy and following “the long game” of “blunting, building, and expansion.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Allion, 2018 p.200

<sup>45</sup> Allion, 2018 p.187

<sup>46</sup> Pillsbury, 2015 pp.34-36

<sup>47</sup> Doshi, 2021 pp. 10-14

## Chapter 4 - Impact of US-China Competition on Europe and the Role of France

### 4.1 Consequences for Europe

Europe, primarily Western Europe, which shares liberal values and democracy with the United States and benefited from its Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe from the ashes of the Second World War, has been on the side of the US ever since and stayed united during the Cold War against the Soviet Union and other authoritarian regimes. However, Europe is facing “the biggest player in the history of the world,”<sup>48</sup> which is not only powerful in terms of economy and military but also possesses a unique strategy to deal with its adversities not seen in other countries. This led to many Western scholars and policymakers developing a plan to deal with this rising power.

However, despite being on the side of the United States, Europe is not united like it was against the threat of the Soviet Union, and it doesn't want to pull it into another Cold War or Hot War between the present-day two superpowers, the United States and China. There are two primary reasons behind this. First, in today's globalized world, all nations, developed or developing, are dependent on each other in one way or another. China is one of the most traded countries in the world.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, choosing a side when it comes to the competition between the US and China is not easy. Second, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has ruled the planet as a single hegemon, and in the name of protecting democracy, security, independence, and humanitarian support, its military interventions around the world haven't gone well numerous times, especially in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. Moreover, there were consequences of these wars that were felt not only in the United States but throughout Europe in the form of terrorism and refugee crises. Due to this, the United States has been losing its reputation, and Europeans have been considering these when developing their foreign policy and geostrategy to deal with countries that don't share the same values and system of

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<sup>48</sup> Allion, 2018 pp-4-24

<sup>49</sup> Global Times, 2023

governance, such as China. The election of Donald Trump as US president also forced Europe to reflect on its policy of living under US leadership and its reliability. Trump might be the first of such US leaders in the recent past, but he might not be the last. Therefore, European leadership has been working on reducing its economic and defense dependency on the United States. Not only politicians but also European citizens share the same view of reducing military dependence on the US, as reflected in the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) poll.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to that, Europe faced economic consequences due to high energy prices after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Due to the high energy cost, European companies felt the need to migrate to China and North America, where energy costs are managed due to Chinese imports of Russian oil and gas and American green subsidies. In such a scenario, Europe feels isolated and betrayed when it comes to managing its economies. While the EU and US stood together with Ukraine in their fight against Russian aggression when it came to consequences, the West didn't seem to stand united. Some examples are the United States spending bill for \$370 billion in subsidies for energy transition and tax cuts for electric cars and batteries for companies that no longer operate in Europe. Moreover, the US passed the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which benefited customers who buy American-manufactured electric vehicles, promoted the narrative of America's first attitude, and worked against US-Europe unity.<sup>51</sup>

European policy towards China shifted during the Trump presidency, which took an aggressive approach towards China, leading to a trade war. During this time, Europe designated China as a systemic rival, and later, the European Union and its member nations followed the de-risking policy to reduce their dependence on China. This approach accelerated after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in which Europe, especially countries like Germany, realized their enormous dependency on Russian oil and gas, and many of them accused Russia of weaponizing it. Europe has been trying to develop a swift strategy towards China to avoid a similar situation. EU Commission President Ursula

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<sup>50</sup> Vela and Camut, 2023

<sup>51</sup> Le Monde, 2023

Von Der Leyen pointed out in her speech in 2023 that Chinese assertive policies pose a challenge to rule-based international order. Moreover, Chinese trade practices, economic and trade coercion, and data privacy issues are significant for European businesses. However, the EU president reiterated that Europe doesn't want to decouple it from China, which would be disastrous for both sides; it intends to de-risk, reducing its dependency on China. She also highlighted the need for security considerations while trading in critical sectors such as quantum computing, artificial intelligence, and biotech.<sup>52</sup> To achieve this, European companies must be more competitive and resilient when dealing in essential cyber, space, defense, and health sectors. The European Critical Raw Material Act is a significant progress in this direction.<sup>53</sup> The threat Europe faces from China is diverse, and powers such as “compulsory, institutional, and ideational” are used against it, which has never been seen before. To counter such a threat, Europe must stay unified to identify and remediate the threat to its economy and democracy.<sup>54</sup>

The United Kingdom's warm relations with China led to President Xi's visit to the UK in 2015, the UK joining China's New Infrastructure Investment Bank as a founding member, and Chinese investment in different parts of the economy. However, the relationship started to deteriorate in the next few years. In 2021, the UK government passed the National Security and Investment Act, which gave the UK government power to scrutinize and intervene in foreign investment. China protested by calling it “discriminatory actions” against the Chinese firm.<sup>55</sup> In addition to that, MI5 head Ken McCallum, during his conference with other allies, warned about the risk of having intellectual property stolen from British businesses. He added that more than 20,000 people have been contacted in the UK by Chinese spies.<sup>56</sup>

In the US-China power struggle, while powerful Western European nations are playing carefully, Eastern European countries are ready to go head-to-head with China because

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<sup>52</sup> European Commission, Sep 2023

<sup>53</sup> European Commission, March 2023

<sup>54</sup> Pelaudeix, 2021

<sup>55</sup> Reuters, 2023

<sup>56</sup> Corera, 2023

of their smaller trade relations. One example is the Baltic nation. When it comes to containing China geopolitically or standing tall against Chinese might, it's rare for a small country like Lithuania. However, Vilnius didn't back down after China put a ban on the import of beer, beef, dairy, and rum from Lithuania for building relations with Taiwan. China put another ban on European automobiles on the use of Lithuanian-manufactured parts. While the first ban didn't cause much harm, it later made a significant impact and worked against European unity, leading to Vilnius' effort to normalize its relations with China. Moreover, Lithuania is an EU member, which makes it hard to go too far outside the European Union's Chinese foreign policy.<sup>57</sup> Margarita Šešelgytė, professor of international relations at Vilnius University, explains the strategy behind Vilnius's efforts to build ties with Taiwan. She explains that since Lithuania is an ex-Soviet country that shares a border with Russia and lives under a constant security threat, it wants to broaden its foreign policies, which are more compatible with the United States, and improve its security partnership with the US.<sup>58</sup> Vilnius is not alone in making itself relevant in the power struggle between superpowers.

#### 4.2 France's place in US-China competition

For three decades, the United States has enjoyed a unipolar world and has led the world unchallenged. It is changing with the rise of China. While in other regions of the world, there is no peer competitor of the US, in the Indo-Pacific, China's growing military strength is forcing the US and its allies to rethink its China policy. When it comes to dealing with aggression and threats in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, it is only the United States that its allies look up to. But when it comes to the Indo-Pacific and the threat from China, there is another significant power that has not only displayed its intention but also demonstrated its efforts in the region, such as the French nuclear submarine patrol in the South China Sea,<sup>59</sup> the French navy patrol in the East China Sea to enforce UN sanctions on North Korea,<sup>60</sup> and an amphibious navy group sailing in the Indo-Pacific to

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<sup>57</sup> Zubriūtė, 2023

<sup>58</sup> CBC, 2022

<sup>59</sup> Zheng, 2021

<sup>60</sup> Kusumoto, 2021

demonstrate its intention of not staying behind the American leadership but working side by side to protect its own and western interests and demonstrate itself as a significant player in the Indo-Pacific.

#### 4.2.1 French Overseas Territories in the Indo-Pacific:

French overseas territories stretch from the “eastern coast of Africa to the western coast of the Americas,”<sup>61</sup> where 1.6 million French citizens reside. This gives France geopolitical power in the region not only out of interest but also out of necessity.<sup>62</sup> These overseas territories represent “9 out of a total 11 million square kilometers of French Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ),”<sup>63</sup> which is only second to the United States and constitutes ninety-three percent of France’s total EEZ, with fourteen percent of exports and seventeen percent of imports going through the region.<sup>64</sup> It also makes France a neighbor to five countries in the Indian Ocean and twelve in the Pacific Ocean.<sup>65</sup>

#### 4.2.2 French trade in the region

French trade in the Indo-Pacific has risen exponentially in the last few years. French one-third of non-EU exports go to the Indo-Pacific. French direct investment saw a 75% rise between 2008 and 2018. More than 7,000 French companies operate in the region, and trade growth between 2008 and 2018 was 75 percent, Euro 320 billion in FDI.<sup>66</sup> These numbers highlight how France sees the Indo-Pacific as a growing market that will be a significant trade partner in the coming decades and thus require robust economic partnerships with the major players in the region.

#### 4.2.3 French military presence in the region

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<sup>61</sup> Duggal, 2022 p.3

<sup>62</sup> Ministere des Armees, 2019 p.14

<sup>63</sup> Ministere des Armees, 2019 p.7

<sup>64</sup> Duggal, 2022 p.3

<sup>65</sup> Macros, 2021

<sup>66</sup> Duggal, 2022 pp.3-4

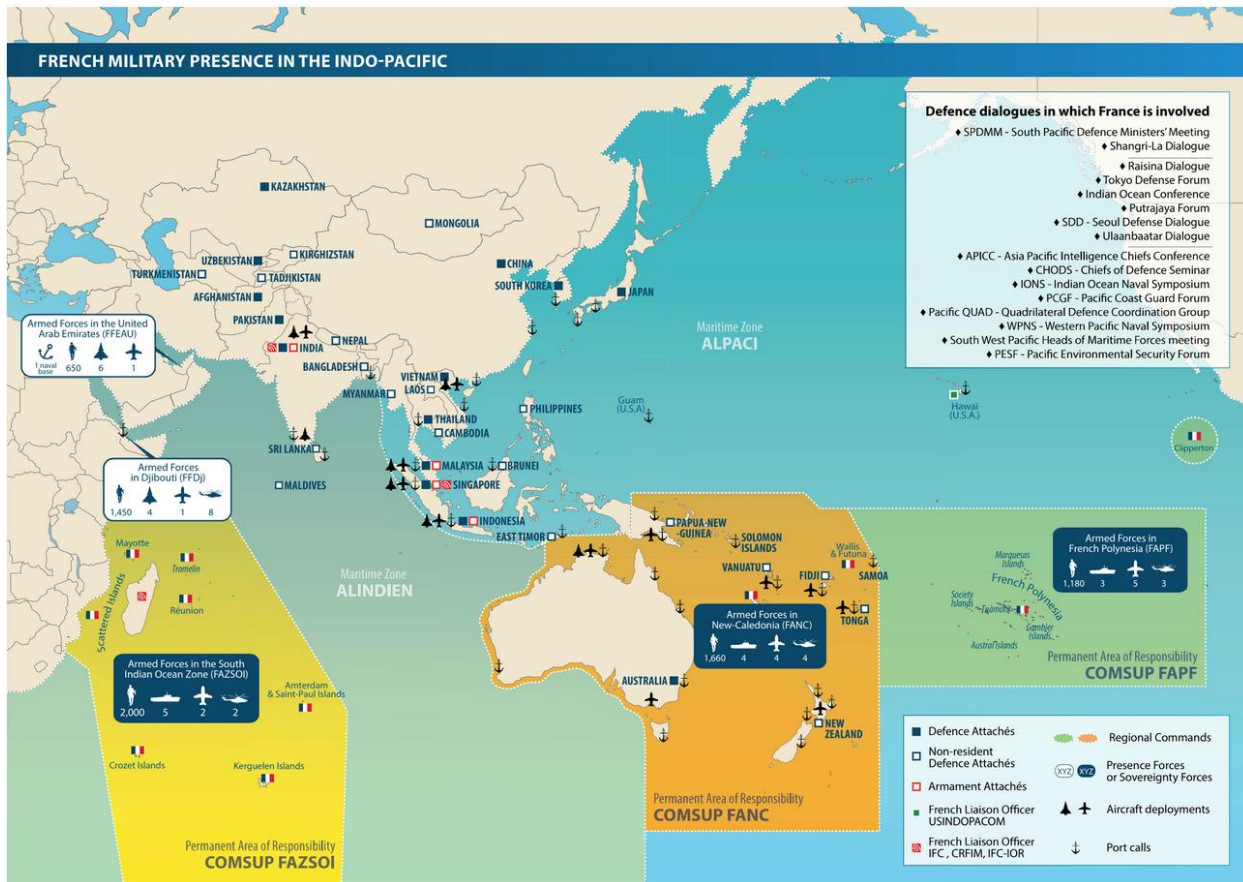
France's territorial and economic interests led to its heavy military presence in the region, around 60% of the French permanent overseas military force.<sup>67</sup> This military presence aims to provide its citizens safety and security from adversary power and natural disasters in the region. In addition, they keep the sea lanes of communication open by ensuring trade routes are safe and uninterrupted. They also help implement the law of the sea and stop illegal trafficking.<sup>68</sup> France has around 4000 military personnel across Indian Ocean territories and about 3000 in Pacific Ocean territories (refer to Diagram 3). However, it is minimal in number compared to the United States, which has 375,000 military and civilian personnel in the Pacific Ocean territories.<sup>69</sup> However, the United States lacks armed forces in Indian Ocean territories, which gives France leverage regarding the broad geographical waters of the sizeable Indo-Pacific region. It also highlights the French lack of security guarantees for the smaller nations in the region; however, it reflects the approach toward dealing with the challenges in the area, which focuses less on military strength and more on the balance of power and diplomacy.

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<sup>67</sup> Duggal, 2022 p.4

<sup>68</sup> Ministere des Armees, 2019 p.13

<sup>69</sup> Pajon, 2022



**Diagram - 3 French Military Presence in Indo-Pacific**

Source: [Ministry of Armed Forces of France](#)

After the AUKUS security partnership between the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom and Australia's cancellation of the French nuclear submarine deal, both the US and French presidents tried to repair their relationship and called for deeper collaboration between the two nations in the Indo-Pacific to reduce the challenges caused by the rise of China. Moreover, the United States called France an “Indo-Pacific Partner, a security provider to a free and open Indo-Pacific.”<sup>70</sup> However, the United States and France left each other out of their Defense Strategy Report while adding other regional partners.<sup>71</sup> Despite these, no one can reject that while the United States is the established power in the region, France is the second most potent Western player in the region when we count China as a systemic rival and competitor of both the United States and France.

<sup>70</sup> Pajon, 2022

<sup>71</sup> Pajon, 2022

While the United States and France share the same goals in the Indo-Pacific, their approaches are different when dealing with China. While the United States sees China as a direct threat to its hegemony in the region and wants to contain it, France, being a smaller power compared to both the US and China, wants to play a balanced role in the region where it wants to see a multipolar power balance where neither China nor any other power has supremacy over the other while maintaining Western liberal values such as human rights, freedom of speech, and territorial integrity. In his speech in 2019, Macron called France a “balancing power” that doesn’t want to choose between the US and China in their competition. Instead, France preferred “strategic autonomy” in the Indo-Pacific, an idea supported by other major powers in the global south, such as India, and similar to what France promotes in Europe.<sup>72</sup> France has been working in this direction since the 1990s by conducting military exercises and participating in meetings with regional security alliances, such as the “Indian Ocean Naval Symposium,” to discuss maritime issues and security cooperation in the region. France has been a significant weapon supplier to India as an alternate buyer to the Soviet Union since the Cold War. These arms sales grew after the Chinese assertive policies in the region and brought the two nations closer on the military partnerships. Since India is seen as a rising power in the Indo-Pacific and a significant player to have as a counterweight against China, this decade-long relationship between France and India will prove to be a substantial boon, especially when both nations share the ideology of non-alliance when it comes to power struggles between two superpowers.

It is also vital for other major players in the Indo-Pacific, such as India and Australia, to balance their partnerships with the United States and France, given the political division seen after the election of President Trump. While both sides of the aisle in US politics see China as a threat, a constant division between Democrats and Republicans on policies can lead to delays in the case of crises in the region, as seen in the American support for Ukraine. In such a scenario, France can compensate and provide needed leadership and economic support being a significant political and economic power in the European Union.

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<sup>72</sup> Pajon, 2022

France leads the European Union on the Indo-Pacific platform, such as ASEAN. Moreover, France helped draft the European Union Indo-Pacific Strategy, which “promotes security and peace, effective multilateralism, and an international order founded on the rule of law, economic prosperity, and the promotion of global common goods”.<sup>73</sup> In addition, France conducts naval patrols in the Indo-Pacific with other EU partners such as Italy, Portugal, and Denmark.

Multipolarity in the Indo-Pacific is not limited to defense and security, but it can also be reflected in trade and the economy. France and other EU members can enhance trade with the Indo-Pacific nations to reduce dependency on Chinese imports and exports. Indo-Pacific nations with more significant economic relations with Europe can help in this direction by widening economic relations and diversifying the supply chain to fight against economic coercion and avert geopolitical crises.<sup>74</sup> France can work in this direction with other EU members and reach out to its regional partners to diversify their trade with China in critical sectors.

Macron's visit to China in April 2023 was a significant milestone in France-China relations, which displayed France's alternate approach to dealing with rising China. However, some meetings during Macron's visit to China were trilateral with EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen—such an approach aimed to play good cop/bad cop. Even before the visit, Von der Leyen criticized President Xi's stance on the Ukraine war and supported the European de-risking approach. While in Beijing, Von der Leyen continued her stance and raised issues such as unfair trade practices.<sup>75</sup> Many scholars see this as against European and Western unity, which China could exploit to weaken the Western alliance. However, this meeting was also seen by many as an effort to improve relations between China and the European Union, which have been deteriorating since 2019 due to Western containment efforts. China sees France as a significant power that greatly influences EU

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<sup>73</sup> French Embassy, 2021

<sup>74</sup> Duchatel, 2022

<sup>75</sup> Tamponi, 2023

foreign policy and appreciates the French policy of strategic autonomy in the Union with less American influence.<sup>76</sup>

### 4.3 French Indo-Pacific Strategy

#### 4.3.1 French Grand Strategy Post WW2

To understand the French Indo-Pacific strategy, we have to go back and look at French policy toward the United States and other major powers in Europe post-World War II. France always had a distinct view of Europe, which they envisioned as less influenced by the United States and its principal ally, the United Kingdom, whom America replaced as the established power. France viewed itself as the leader of Europe and wanted to play a vital role in shaping its future. This French policy was reflected when France vetoed the United Kingdom's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1963, its effort toward building alliances with West Germany, leaving NATO (later joined with an independent nuclear weapons policy), and voting against the European Constitution in 2005. French ambition under its leader, Charles de Gaulle, could only be achieved if it could build a neutral alliance of nations against two Cold War superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union.

This ambition of France was not limited to Europe but to Southeast Asia as well, where it held colonies (French Indochina, 1887–1954) and had influence until 1954. De Gaulle was convinced that forming alliances with other neutral nations in Southeast Asia was impossible without China.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, the Sino-Soviet split allowed France to build ties with China; together, the two could expand their influence in Southeast Asia. Hence, de Gaulle negotiated secretly with Communist China to establish diplomatic relations. With the recognition of the PRC in 1964, de Gaulle wanted to bring France onto the world stage as a significant player at the height of the Cold War while promoting multipolarity in the world in the hope that others would follow China's path as well. It also highlights the French Realpolitik, where it was ready to sideline its ideological differences and upset

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<sup>76</sup> Tamponi, 2023

<sup>77</sup> Martin, 2008 p.54

close allies to form a new alliance, which scholars called the “weight of evidence and reason.”<sup>78</sup> De Gaulle's efforts towards improving relations with China were also paying off in its trade relations, where China’s imports from France doubled between 1961 and 1963 from \$34 million to \$74 million.<sup>79</sup>

One of the significant events that brought France and China even closer was the Cuban Missile Crisis. It stained the American image in Western nations, especially France. France understood that the United States would not enter into a nuclear war to defend Europe. On the other hand, China criticized the Soviet Union for placing its atomic weapon in Cuba, which it initially supported but later criticized for pulling back under threat from the United States. This event gave de Gaulle even more confidence in his strategy and path toward developing his independent strategy.<sup>80</sup>

In addition to that, due to American influence in Western Germany, France was losing its grip on European affairs. However, it allowed de Gaulle to look towards Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where France held historical ties. The relationship between France and the PRC was based on realism and self-interest in pursuing their grand strategies. On one side, France saw China as a gateway to regain its influence in Asia, while China saw France as an opportunity to improve relations in Western Europe. President de Gaulle instructed diplomats to keep communication with China under complete secrecy. Still, American and other Western diplomats were aware of the fact that France and China were in the process of establishing diplomatic relations, but they were not sure when. In addition to that, the CIA pointed out the numerous setbacks, such as deterring ties with West Germany and improving relations between the US and Soviet Union, have put de Gaulle’s “back against the wall” and will lead France to take desperate measures to remain relevant in Western Europe. Still, at the same time, they were not sure about France’s next move.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Martin, 2008 p.52

<sup>79</sup> Martin, 2008 p.57

<sup>80</sup> Martin, 2008 p.59

<sup>81</sup> Martin, 2008 p.71

However, after establishing diplomatic relations with China on January 27th, 1964, de Gaulle's effort partially turned the world order towards a multipolar world. It did not translate into political and economic success as expected due to the Chinese fear of exposing itself too close to a capitalist nation in the eyes of allies such as the North Vietnamese and ongoing domestic political shake-ups such as the Cultural Revolution. However, the impact of the French initiative to establish diplomatic relations with China had great importance in geopolitics, which built the confidence of the middle powers and challenged the system of the Cold War's bipolar order. Through decades under different French leaderships, the relationship between the two nations grew further despite some setbacks due to French weapons sales to Taiwan. In the last two decades, there have been numerous presidential visits from both sides, which have led to many bilateral agreements on improving "people-to-people exchanges, academic, scientific, and cultural interactions, and human rights".<sup>82</sup>

#### 4.3.2 A New Era of Sino-French Relations under President Xi and Macron

The rise of China and its assertive military and economic policies towards its neighbor and the West made relations between the two countries more difficult. France could no longer maintain ties with China only out of political and economic interest; instead, it had to strike a balance between national interest, western values, and European economic interests while dealing with China. This led to France publishing its strategic policy, "Defense and National Security Strategic Review," which called China "a systemic rival," "an economic competitor," and "sometimes an important diplomatic partner."<sup>83</sup> France became more vocal and united with Brussels when it came to criticizing China's unfair trade practices, human rights violations, use of force in Hong Kong, and repression in the Xinjiang region.

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<sup>82</sup> Duggal, 2022 p.6

<sup>83</sup> Duggal, 2022 p.8

France's approach could also be seen as a response to President Trump's isolationist policies. Trump's comments about NATO and the trade war with China allowed France to present itself as a mature power with both strength and strategy to deal with China's economic and military threat.<sup>84</sup> Chinese Influence Operations Report 2021 and updated versions of France's Strategic Review 2021 highlighted the threat against France and Europe and the need for a military presence in the Indo-Pacific to protect French interests. As a result, France stressed modernizing its armed forces "to build a coherent, agile, and innovative armed forces model."<sup>85</sup> In addition, France sent its nuclear-powered aircraft carrier into the Indo-Pacific to conduct joint naval-air drills and sent its nuclear attack submarine for patrol in the South China Sea.

For France to remain a significant power in the US-China competition, France is playing a balanced strategy. While criticizing China for economic policies and human rights violations, it continues working with China on trade and significant issues such as climate change, where success is impossible without Chinese participation and cooperation. While dealing with China, France needs to unite with the European Union to enhance its strength. Since China is also dependent on Europe, confronting China in a group will produce less damaging results than facing it alone, as seen in the cases of Australia and Lithuania. It was also reflected when Macron invited Angela Merkel and Jean-Claude Juncker to hold talks during President Xi's visit to Paris in 2019, and again in 2023, during his visit to Beijing, he brought Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, with him to display a united front despite their differences in their definition of so-called "de-risking."<sup>86</sup>

Macron's visit to China in 2023 was seen as a broader strategic shift between France and China and was discussed and analyzed by scholars and mainstream media. It is not new for French presidents to go to China with a large business delegation and sign multiple business and cultural agreements. However, this visit was somewhat different due to the

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<sup>84</sup> Pengelly, 2024

<sup>85</sup> Duggal, 2022 p.10

<sup>86</sup> Julienne, 2023 p.61

Russia-Ukraine war and the rise of tension between China and most of the Western nations.

China sees France as a partner who can help keep a communication channel open between China and the West in the current hostile situation and, simultaneously, prevent the EU from getting pulled back towards American influence after Trump's isolationist policies.<sup>87</sup> China also likes and supports the French policy of “strategic autonomy,” which, on the one hand, helps France explore its independent foreign policy to a great extent, contrary to EU policy. On the other hand, China sees a vulnerability of the EU that could be exploited in its favor. During the meeting, China also found a voice from the EU, which is more accommodating to China on the Taiwan issue.

When it comes to China, France and the US share the same Western liberal values, but the difference in approach is driven by the threat they are facing. For the United States, China is an existential threat that will replace it as the superpower. But for France, China is only an economic and military threat that requires it to “acquire greater independence and strategic autonomy by bolstering its defense capacity” to protect its interests without being too dependent on the United States.<sup>88</sup> Regarding China, France wants to show itself as a “constructive alternative, a policy that aims to be peaceful, inclusive, and based on multilateralism” compared to the American confrontational approach.<sup>89</sup>

However, the French balanced approach when dealing with China and the concept of “strategic autonomy” sometimes give conflicting messages to its partners on both sides of the Atlantic. They see French efforts to sideline the United States and NATO, which is not the case, as per Macron’s speeches. But due to a lack of strategic documents,<sup>90</sup> It is hard to interpret French intention when Macron comments on Taiwan: “The worst thing would be to think that we Europeans must be followers and adapt ourselves to the American rhythm and a Chinese overreaction” which many saw as an effort to go against

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<sup>87</sup> Lau, 2023

<sup>88</sup> Duggal, 2022 p.11

<sup>89</sup> Julienne, 2023 p.61

<sup>90</sup> Julienne, 2023 p.62

the Western alliance to appease China. Macron's statement was based on the French historical approach towards the EU first policy, where it doesn't want to push European nations into a war, which is not in the interest of Europe, thus France. In his speech, Macron adds, "Europeans cannot resolve the crisis in Ukraine; how can we credibly say on Taiwan, 'Watch out, if you do something wrong, we will be there?' If you really want to increase tensions, that's the way to do it."<sup>91</sup> Such a statement goes even further, complicating French policy interpretation in the eyes of its neighbors and allies and making France look like an appeaser to an aggressor (a very sensitive subject in Europe given the events following the Munich Pact in September 1938) and sees Macron on the path of Neville Chamberlain.<sup>92 93</sup>

## Chapter 5 - Conclusions

Throughout history, many nations rose to power; some became superpowers, then declined and became history. Many of them fell into the Thucydides Trap and destroyed one another. What is different this time is the size of the superpowers and the implications of a conflict due to the globalized world. A scenario of military confrontation between the US and China forces all the nations, small or large, developed or developing, to devise a strategy to either avoid such conflict or reduce the implications. One of the other reasons behind the urgency to react is the lessons from two World Wars and a Cold War that tell how nations are quickly sucked into a conflict between two major powers, and it is weak

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<sup>91</sup> Boyraz, 2023

<sup>92</sup> Saint-Paul, 2023

<sup>93</sup> Zelinsky, 2023

who suffer the most. In addition to that, this time, the threat is not only about losing soldiers on the battlefields but also the economy, which will hinder the lives of millions of civilians due to the economic dependency on the two major superpowers.

China's rapid rise and its assertive policies under President Xi's leadership made many in the West see China as a systemic rival and economic competitor and a security and economic threat. This led to the United States and European nations developing the policy of de-risking, which China calls a Western effort to contain its rise. While many Western nations share the concern related to China, not all agree with the solution to the challenge. One of them is France. Many other European countries, especially Germany, follow American policies towards China. On the other hand, France follows a balanced approach outside American influence that scares the United States and its allies in Europe and other parts of the world, such as Australia. Moreover, unlike other major European nations, France has displayed its strength in planning and execution when it comes to the Indo-Pacific.

France holds one of the most significant overseas territories, spanning from the east coast of Africa to the west coast of the United States. France's growing military presence in the Indo-Pacific is not only out of interest but also out of necessity to protect its territory and sea routes. France's ambition and growing economic and military presence in the Indo-Pacific bring it into the middle of US-China competition in the region, both of whom are having a power struggle to sustain themselves in the region as the hegemon.

French policy in the Indo-Pacific is not much different from that in Europe, where, for decades, it worked hard to reduce American influence in European politics. France has been playing the role of a good cop when dealing with countries like China and Russia. It also allows France to build an alliance to find a peaceful solution to the rise of China and its consequences. Unlike the United States, Europe, especially France, is not fighting for its survival to remain a world hegemon. Moreover, unlike the Soviet Union and Russia, China doesn't pose a direct security threat to Europe. Therefore, France can work with like-minded nations such as India, Japan, and other maritime nations in the Indo-Pacific and build an alliance to counter the AUKUS, which is open to confrontation with China if

needed. In this direction, France can continue to use the "Track 1.5" dialogue method to build trust and relations at the defense, political, parliamentary, and cultural levels.<sup>94</sup>

## 5.1 Recommendations

1. France is undeniably significant in Europe and the Indo-Pacific but is not as strong as China or the United States. As such, its diplomacy and balancing strategy will rely on the hard and soft power that goes along with it. Therefore, in addition to focusing on economic growth, France needs to strengthen its military position in the Indo-Pacific.
2. The global south, where many rising countries are concentrated—such as India, which is not only the second most populous country in the world but also possesses a high youth population—prefers France's non-alignment strategy. Moreover, several countries in the Pacific are not necessarily interested in the United States' containment strategy against China, which could result in direct hostilities between China and smaller countries like the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan. However, when forced to pick between the United States and China—both aggressive and unpredictable—they fail to see any other option. Along with other powerful nations in the Indo-Pacific, France can act as a counterweight to the US and provide these nations with a diplomatic alternative.
3. The European Union's most potent political member, France, can persuade its fellow members to pursue a diplomatic solution to the problems in the South and East China Sea and Taiwan. Europe knows the United States' decoupling policy against China is counterproductive. Still, it struggles to advocate for "managed strategic competition" between the two countries because of a lack of strategy and leadership.

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<sup>94</sup> Bruno et Duclos, 2021

4. When pursuing economic ties with China at the expense of the European Union and other strong nations like Germany, France must exercise caution. Many Eastern European countries, for whom the war in Ukraine represents a severe threat, do not subscribe to the French Realpolitik. Instead, they view China as an ally of Russia, which has similar objectives in the Pacific. The French policy of prioritizing economic advantages above Ukraine and Taiwan will undermine its efforts to be a European leader. At the same time, other member states find the French approach divisive. While it will be challenging for France to lessen American dominance in European politics and decision-making, France can cooperate with members of the EU that would suffer from a trade war or possible military confrontation between the US and China.

## 5.2 Suggestions for future research

The findings of this study can be used to investigate how France can help ease tensions between the two heavyweights, the US and China, in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, this study can examine if a third front in the Indo-Pacific prevents a direct conflict between two superpowers and whether France's status as an ally of the United States can be advantageous in this regard.

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