


The United States and China: Anatomy of a Strategic Competition

Alireza Samoudi^{1*}, Ali Nouripour² 

1. Corresponding Author, Institute for Security and Development Studies (ISDS), Tehran, Iran. Email: alirezasamoudi@gmail.com

2. Institute for Security and Development Studies (ISDS), Tehran, Iran. Email: alinooripour1372@gmail.com

Article Info

Article type:
Research Article

Article History:
Received 06 June 2026
Revised 23 June 2026
Accepted 28 June 2026
Published Online 28 June 2026

Keywords:
Strategic Competition,
United States,
China,
Thucydides Trap,
Churchill Trap,
Cold War,
Soft Power,
Belt and Road Initiative.

ABSTRACT

Since the Chinese Communist Party's rise to power in 1949, relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China (hereafter, China) have traversed approximately twenty-year cycles of hostility, cooperation, and competition. Since 2017, strategic competition has emerged as the dominant framework in American foreign policy documents, positioning the two states in direct confrontation across the domains of economics, technology, soft power, and geopolitical influence. This paper examines the central question of the nature assumed by the current strategic competition between the two powers and argues that, although the bilateral rivalry is comprehensive and multidimensional in scope, it does not constitute a new Cold War, owing to the profound depth of economic interdependence between them. Moreover, the probability of falling into the Thucydides Trap and of the outbreak of all-out war remains low, given the stabilizing effect of nuclear deterrence and the prohibitive costs of direct military conflict. By contrast, the Churchill Trap—a protracted confrontation defined by persistent enmity short of direct warfare—represents the most plausible and consequential scenario on the horizon. An analysis of bilateral competition across the domains of economics and technology, the Belt and Road Initiative vis-à-vis the Build Back Better World initiative, and soft power reveals that both parties are actively seeking to manage this rivalry. Nevertheless, the absence of robust crisis-prevention mechanisms and the persistence of regional flashpoints—most notably in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea—sustain the very real prospect of inadvertent escalation.

Cite this article: Samoudi, A. & Nouripour, A. (2025). The united states and china: Anatomy of a strategic competition. *Journal of Iran and Regional Studies*, 8 (2), 231-254. <http://doi.org/10.22059/jices.2026.416004.1114>



© The Author(s) retain the copyright.

Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22059/jices.2026.416004.1114>

Introduction

Since the Chinese Communist Party's rise to power in 1949, relations between Washington and the People's Republic of China (hereafter, China) have been marked by successive cyclical shifts, each lasting approximately twenty years. During the 1950s and 1960s, the two countries engaged in direct military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula. Following Nixon's landmark visit to China in the 1970s, nearly two decades of cooperation against the Soviet Union ensued. Thereafter, roughly two decades of engagement and economic cooperation came to bind the two states together. From 2015 and 2016 onward, however, the trajectory of both countries shifted decisively toward competition. Between 2018 and 2023, their relations entered a spiral of escalating tension. The United States' trade war against China, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, intensifying rivalry in the technological domain, mounting tensions in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, and divergent approaches to the war in Ukraine collectively fostered the perception that economic decoupling or open conflict was the inevitable destiny of these two powers. Nevertheless, the Biden–Xi summit, held on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) conference in San Francisco in November 2023, brought about a temporary stabilization of these tensions. These successive cycles pose a fundamental question for scholars of international relations: what is the nature of the current strategic competition between the United States and China? The Thucydides Trap, the Cold War framework, and the Churchill Trap—a protracted and attritional confrontation devoid of direct military engagement—each offer a distinct analytical lens through which the present state of affairs may be examined and assessed.

This paper is premised on the argument that Sino-American competition constitutes a strategic, comprehensive, and multidimensional rivalry which, despite bearing certain resemblances to the Cold War, does not replicate its essential character, owing to the profound economic interdependence between the two states. Simultaneously, the probability of falling into the Thucydides Trap and the outbreak of all-out war remains low, given the stabilizing function of nuclear deterrence and the prohibitive costs of direct military conflict. By contrast, the Churchill Trap — a confrontation defined by sustained enmity short of direct warfare — represents the most serious and plausible scenario on the horizon and constitutes a genuine threat to the international order. The United States and China — two powers each deeply convinced of its own exceptionalism and supremacy — have entered a geopolitical rivalry over institutions and political values that is actively redefining both global and regional orders in the twenty-first century. To substantiate this argument, the present paper first examines the dimensions of the two countries' strategic competition across the domains of economics, technology, and soft power, and subsequently, through a systematic analysis of the Thucydides, Kindleberger, and Churchill Traps, proceeds to assess the broader outlook for Beijing–Washington relations.

Literature Review

Strategic competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China has emerged as one of the most significant subjects in the fields of International Relations and International Political Economy in recent decades. On the one hand, China's rapid rise in

economic, technological, and geopolitical power, and on the other hand, the United States' efforts to preserve its dominant position in the international system, have generated multifaceted competition across security, economic, technological, commercial, and institutional domains. This competition has extended beyond the scope of bilateral relations and has increasingly influenced the structure of the international order as well as the configuration of global supply chains, thereby attracting considerable scholarly attention. Accordingly, a wide range of studies has examined the origins, dimensions, instruments, and implications of this rivalry through diverse theoretical and analytical frameworks. A review of the existing literature indicates that, while emphasizing the structural nature of U.S.–China competition, scholars have focused on the role of geopolitical, geoeconomic, and technological factors, as well as the mutual perceptions of elites in both countries, in either intensifying or managing this competition.

In his article, “The U.S.-China Strategic Competition: Clues from History,” Graham Allison (2020), drawing on the theoretical framework of the “Thucydides Trap” that he originally developed in *Destined for War* (2017), argues that China’s rapid rise vis-à-vis the United States as the incumbent power has generated a dangerous dynamic whose possible consequences are starkly illuminated by history. According to Allison, of sixteen historical cases involving confrontations between a rising power and a ruling power, twelve culminated in war. He identifies three principal drivers of this dynamic. At the material level, a tectonic shift in the balance of power in China’s favor is evident. The U.S. share of global gross domestic product (GDP) has declined from approximately one-half in 1950 to around one-seventh in recent years. Meanwhile, China has surpassed the United States in GDP measured by purchasing power parity (PPP) and has become the principal trading partner of most Asian countries. At the psychological level, the “fear” of the established power and the “pride” of the rising power create fertile ground for escalating misperceptions and miscalculations. At the political level, domestic competition in both countries encourages policymakers to adopt increasingly hardline positions toward the rival. Nevertheless, Allison does not regard war as inevitable. He maintains that nuclear deterrence and economic interdependence have raised the costs of direct conflict to such an extent that escaping the Thucydides Trap remains possible. At the same time, he identifies the Taiwan Strait as the most likely flashpoint for a crisis and warns that it could become the “Sarajevo” of the twenty-first century.

In their article “Contesting Coercion: U.S.-China Strategic Competition, the Middle Technology Trap, and Chinese Government-Guided Funds,” Pan Xuanming, Liu Aiwen, and Chen Zhenzhen (2024) employ the concept of the “middle technology trap” as an analytical framework for understanding the economic and technological dimensions of strategic competition between the United States and China. Inspired by the notion of the “middle-income trap,” this concept is based on the argument that China has successfully upgraded its position within the global value chain by following a “one-to-N” trajectory—that is, by absorbing, adapting, and localizing mature foreign technologies. However, to achieve genuine technological leadership, China must move beyond this stage and make the transition to a “zero-to-one” trajectory, shifting from imitative innovation to fundamental technological

creation. The authors demonstrate that the United States, by leveraging its dominant position within the global financial network, has employed three principal tactics to constrain China's participation in the global innovation system. First, it has mobilized American private and venture capital to deepen its own technological advantages. Second, it has pressured U.S. investors to withdraw from China's venture capital market. Third, it has encouraged advanced business services that support innovation to reduce or terminate their activities in China, thereby increasing the transaction and intermediation costs associated with innovation.

In "G7's Plan for Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment: An Alternative to the BRI?", Hong Yu (2024) identifies strategic competition between the United States and China as the most significant obstacle to the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and shows that this rivalry spans a broad range of military, economic, technological, and geopolitical domains. From Washington's perspective, policymakers in both the Democratic and Republican parties believe that China possesses both the geopolitical ambition and the economic capacity necessary to reshape the U.S.-led international order. This concern emerged during the Trump administration with the publication of the 2017 *National Security Strategy*, which labeled China a "revisionist power," and it continued under the Biden administration, which defined China as the "only competitor with both the intent and the capability" to challenge the existing international order. Beijing, by contrast, has expressed concern over the formation of alliance networks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) security partnership, and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), viewing them as mechanisms designed to contain and constrain China. Yu contends that the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy effectively pursues three objectives. First, the Quad and the IPEF seek to exclude China from global supply chains and to shape the rules of economic governance. Second, AUKUS is intended to counterbalance China's military power in the region. Third, the IPEF—with fourteen member countries representing approximately 40 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP)—seeks, particularly in the semiconductor sector, to reduce dependence on China and reorganize supply chains in favor of U.S. allies. In this context, the semiconductor industry has been identified as China's principal technological "bottleneck," and the U.S. CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 was explicitly designed to slow the development of China's semiconductor capabilities. Nevertheless, Yu emphasizes that, despite China's remarkable rise, it continues to lag significantly behind the United States in key areas such as advanced technology, military power, and higher education. Consequently, global infrastructure has emerged as one of the most important arenas of competition between the two countries.

In "Trump and U.S.-China Strategic Competition as the 'New' Normal," Jonathan M. DiCicco (2023) argues that the Trump administration's confrontational approach toward China, although distinct from that of previous administrations in both tone and method, did not represent a departure from the broader trajectory of bilateral relations. Rather, it accelerated a process through which overt strategic competition became the "new normal" of U.S.-China relations. In DiCicco's view, this rivalry is rooted in structural factors that

transcend any individual president. Elites on both sides regard the competition as inevitable, and Trump's unilateral imposition of tariffs on Chinese goods further intensified the competitive environment. Some Chinese elites interpreted these developments as confirmation of an emerging new bipolarity and used them to justify abandoning the long-standing strategy of "hiding capabilities and biding time." DiCicco further shows that the Biden administration not only maintained this trajectory but also intertwined competition with China with domestic political considerations. A "whole-of-government" approach toward China offered a means of restoring bipartisan consensus and mobilizing the nation around a common external rival amid the deep divisions generated by Trump-era politics. In his analysis, China's ambiguous response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 further intensified the rivalry and reinforced perceptions of Beijing as a disruptor of the international order. Drawing on the views of analysts such as Wang Jisi and Wu Xinbo, DiCicco ultimately concludes that U.S.-China strategic competition is structural in nature. However, it is not necessarily destined to evolve into an ideological confrontation akin to the Cold War. Rather, its future trajectory will depend largely on the mutual perceptions and interpretations of elites on both sides.

In "U.S.-China Competition, Global Supply Chain Restructuring, and Economic Security," Wongjae Hwang, Wooyeol Paik, and Hayeong Lim (2024) examine the restructuring of global supply chains within the context of strategic competition between the United States and China. Referring to recent shocks such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war, they explain how the dependence of national economies on global supply chains has generated significant vulnerabilities and disruptions. Within this context, U.S.-China rivalry has further intensified these vulnerabilities. The authors maintain that U.S. supply chain policies, aimed at reducing dependence on China, have produced changes at the level of the international system whose implications extend beyond economics alone. These developments, therefore, should be examined through the broader lenses of geoeconomics, economic security, geopolitics, and states' pursuit of strategic autonomy.

In "An Analysis of Strategic Competition between China and the United States in the New Cold War Era," Xiu Lu (2024) argues that China's growing financial, industrial, and commercial capabilities have consolidated its status as a major power while simultaneously eroding the effectiveness of U.S. economic and financial mechanisms. Lu contends that three interrelated factors have generated profound transformations in the international system. First, there has been a reformulation of U.S. industrial policies aimed at countering China's rise. Second, the phenomenon of "dual export" has enabled the United States to transfer economic and institutional costs to China, while China has used these same structures to strengthen its own position. Third, a new Cold War mindset has emerged that differs fundamentally from the characteristics of the original Cold War. According to Lu, these developments have had far-reaching implications for economic security, geoeconomics, and the evolution of the international order.

China and Strategic Competition with the United States

Over the past decade, extensive debates have taken place regarding the nature of Sino-American relations. Have the two countries fallen into the Thucydides Trap? Are they seeking a new type of great-power relationship, or are they in the midst of a new Cold War? Since 2017, when China was formally designated a strategic competitor in the U.S. National Security Strategy, this designation has been consistently employed. Historically, the concept was first introduced during the détente period of the 1970s, serving to denote intense great-power competition across military, economic, and cultural domains. In the early years of the new millennium, Bush administration officials invoked the term "strategic competition with China" to differentiate their approach from that of the Clinton administration, to signal a reorientation of post-Cold War foreign policy, and to forestall China's further empowerment. The tone of U.S. National Security Strategy documents has undergone a fundamental transformation over the past three decades. The 1999 document characterized China as a country seeking prosperity and operating within the bounds of international law, regarding its growth as aligned with American interests. The 2006 document similarly stated that the United States welcomed China's movement along the path of reform; yet by the 2015 document, the portrayal of China had turned distinctly negative, with emphasis placed on monitoring China's military modernization and its expanding footprint in Asia. The tone of the 2017 document changed entirely, noting that, contrary to Washington's aspirations for integrating China into the liberal international order, China had instead expanded its power and acted irresponsibly (Mousavi, 2023: 67).

The Biden administration likewise acknowledged global competition with China, while emphasizing the importance of managed competition. The Biden administration's 2022 National Security Strategy stated that America's strategy toward China must be grounded in responsible competition, aimed at defending American interests and shaping the future across the domains of technology, economics, politics, the military, intelligence, and global governance. The document underscored the imperative of managing competition with China in the following terms: "We will seek to reinforce strategic stability through a set of measures that reduce the risk of inadvertent escalation of military conflict, improve crisis communications mechanisms, enhance mutual transparency, and ultimately lay the groundwork for Beijing's participation in more formal arms control negotiations and efforts" (Biden White House, 2022: 24–25).

The most recent U.S. National Security Strategy document, published under Trump's second administration in 2025, while asserting that America's approach toward China over the past three decades had been built on mistaken assumptions, ultimately does not transcend the framework of competition with China. Trump's second administration document highlights the significance of the Indo-Pacific region in the twenty-first century and the enduring importance of this region as the primary arena of economic and geopolitical contest. The document states: "In order to achieve prosperity and flourishing at home, we must also compete successfully in that region — and we are doing so. During his travels in October 2025, President Trump signed a series of significant agreements that further strengthen the

United States' robust relationships with regional partners in the fields of trade, culture, technology, and defense, while reaffirming Washington's commitment to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific." The document further enumerates America's assets in successfully competing with China as its powerful economy and military, its soft power, and its network of allies and partners (White House, 2025: 19).

Strategic competition as a concept in political discourse originated in the late 1960s and acquired its meaning during the Cold War through such themes as the avoidance of nuclear catastrophe and the pursuit of *détente*. In the late 1990s, George W. Bush emphasized during his electoral campaign that China should be treated as a strategic competitor and that a firm posture must be maintained toward it (Baum, 2001: 192). Condoleezza Rice likewise characterized China in her electoral address as a security problem threatening Taiwan, calling for a realist management of the complex bilateral relationship (Baum, 2001: 202). During the Obama era, the term "strategic competition" was used considerably less frequently, with the primary focus placed on expanding cooperative engagement; the White House even explicitly stated that it did not regard China as a strategic competitor (Winkler, 2023: 347).

Nevertheless, the designation of "strategic competition" made a forceful return during the Trump era. The 2017 National Security Strategy asserted that the United States was engaged in strategic competition with revisionist powers — notably Russia and China — that sought to undermine American security and prosperity (White House, 2017: 2, 25). The overriding objective was to signal resolve *vis-à-vis* China and to bring the era of engagement to a definitive close. During the Biden period, bilateral relations reached their nadir, and China was identified as Washington's most formidable competitor; Secretary of State Blinken invoked the framework of strategic competition, while Secretary of Defense Austin called China America's foremost challenge. CIA Director William Burns similarly characterized China as an authoritarian rival of the United States (Winkler, 2023: 350).

According to Rush Doshi, China's leadership perceives multiple opportunities to diminish American influence and expand its own, including the erosion of U.S. financial hegemony, the assumption of global leadership in advanced manufacturing and key emerging technologies, and the development of a world-class military capable of projecting power and conducting operations on a global scale (Grano and Fei Feng Huang, 2023: 7). Chinese officials similarly perceive their country as engaged in a state of permanent competition with the great powers. During the first three decades of the People's Republic — which coincided with the height of the Cold War — official Chinese discourse placed strong emphasis on the intensity of strategic competition; however, following Mao's death in 1976, Beijing concluded that strategic competition had subsided and that an era of peace and development had arrived. Following the Tiananmen Square events of 1989, the United States became Beijing's primary strategic concern, as Chinese leaders grew increasingly convinced that Washington was actively seeking to contain and weaken the Chinese Communist Party (Wasser et al., 2022: 10).

In terms of capabilities, China is currently closer to the United States in latent power than the Soviet Union was to the United States during the Cold War. Projections indicate that China will hold a demographic advantage of 3.7 to 1 over the United States by 2050. Should

China succeed in attaining three-fifths of U.S. per capita GDP by that point, it would potentially become 2.3 times wealthier than the United States. Unlike the Soviet Union, which maintained costly allies across Eastern Europe, China has relatively few formal allies. Nationalism also plays a pivotal role in the current rivalry; whereas in the Soviet Union it remained overshadowed by communist ideology, Chinese nationalism has grown markedly more pronounced since the 1990s, and a century of perceived national humiliation has rendered it considerably more volatile — as exemplified by the anti-Japanese protests of 2012 and 2013 (Mearsheimer, 2021). Furthermore, unlike the Soviet Union, which was broadly satisfied with the status quo in Eastern Europe, China is actively seeking to revise the regional order in East Asia, particularly with respect to Taiwan.

A substantive debate persists over whether the current competition can legitimately be characterized as a Cold War. This rivalry lacks two essential features of that conflict: first, there is no globe-spanning ideological competition for the allegiance of third-party states; and second, today's deeply interconnected world cannot be partitioned into wholly separate economic blocs. The depth of economic linkages — exemplified by \$434 billion in U.S. imports from China in 2020 — simply had no equivalent during the Cold War era (Grano and Fei Feng Huang, 2023: 8). Nevertheless, current tensions harbor the potential to escalate into a full-blown systemic rivalry, with two competing blocs taking shape — one led by the United States and the other constituted by a China-Russia coalition.

Despite these tensions, certain stabilizing factors exist that militate against maximal escalation, and these may be identified across three structural dimensions. First, mutual military deterrence, reinforced both by China's growing capabilities and by the enhancement of American credibility through the Quad, AUKUS, and sustained support for Ukraine. Second, the deep embeddedness of both countries in an extensive network of complex interdependence which, despite the relative stagnation of bilateral trade, has substantially elevated the anticipated costs of open conflict. Third, the post-pandemic resumption of people-to-people exchanges, Track II dialogues, and formal official consultations, which have given rise to numerous bilateral working groups and communication channels.

The United States' China Policy after the Cold War

Following the end of the Cold War, American policymakers harbored few particular concerns regarding China; they regarded Beijing as a weak and impoverished country that also possessed a history of cooperation with the United States against the Soviet Union. Although indicators of potential risk were present — most notably China's fivefold population advantage and the onset of its economic reforms — both the Democratic and Republican parties pursued a policy of engagement grounded in liberal assumptions, premised on the expectation that China would become a "responsible stakeholder" in the American-led international order and that integration into the global economy would transform it into a responsible and constructive actor.

Clinton, who had adopted a confrontational posture toward China during his 1992 electoral campaign, followed a markedly different course upon entering the White House. In 1994, he declared that engagement with China would foster economic growth, political maturity, and

the observance of human rights, and that the best path toward advancing freedom lay in the expansion of relations (Clinton, 1994). George W. Bush similarly maintained that trade with China would promote freedom, and that both parties should work to establish China as a normal trading partner (NY Times, 2000). In his first year in the White House, he signed the proclamation granting China permanent normal trade relations status, and the final steps toward China's accession to the World Trade Organization were taken under his tenure. Barack Obama likewise affirmed in 2015 that China's growth and the lifting of its population out of poverty were consistent with American interests, since a prosperous, stable, and peaceful China could serve as an effective partner for the United States in addressing international challenges (Obama, 2015). Even when the "Pivot to Asia" policy was introduced, a broadly favorable disposition toward China was maintained, and American business associations, academics, and publications voiced their support for China's accession to the World Trade Organization.

During the Trump era, however, this strategy was abandoned entirely and replaced by a policy of containment. Trump initiated a trade war against China in 2018, pursued the weakening of Huawei and other Chinese technology firms deemed a threat to American technological supremacy, cultivated closer ties with Taiwan, and challenged China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. Traditionally, two distinct schools of thought on China have existed within the United States. The first, the liberal perspective, holds that China's economic growth will spill over into the political and human rights domains — much as the United States, by applying liberal institutional models, successfully transformed Germany and Japan from its most formidable adversaries into its closest allies. From this standpoint, China's economic liberalization and the resulting mutual interdependence would pose no threat to the United States; on the contrary, Washington should actively facilitate China's growth. The second perspective is that of the realists, led by Mearsheimer. They contend that China's economic growth will inevitably translate into military power, and that the United States should never have assisted in this trajectory. In the realist view, liberals, through their own agency and by means of expanding trade relations, prematurely elevated China to a position of global standing, and the country has now slipped beyond manageable control (Mousavi, 2023: 67). Mearsheimer regards the engagement policy toward China as "the worst strategic blunder" in history, and can identify no precedent of a great power that actively facilitated the rise of a peer competitor (Mearsheimer, 2021). From the realist standpoint, China's rise as an economic colossus not only heralds the end of the unipolar era, but a powerful China will inevitably convert economic power into military power — as wealthy and populous nations have invariably followed this path.

On the broader question of China's empowerment, it is argued that America's strategic errors began in the 1980s, when successive U.S. presidents granted China Most Favored Nation status, extending to it the most favorable possible trading conditions. This error was compounded in 2000 with the permanent normalization of this status, which substantially diminished America's leverage over China. The following year, China's admission to the World Trade Organization opened global markets to the country, rendered its exports more

competitive, and further augmented Beijing's strategic power. Realists maintain that the United States should have imposed far more stringent controls on the export of its critical technologies, in addition to restricting China's access to the international trading system; yet in practice it permitted China largely unimpeded access to American technologies. Washington's post-Cold War policy was grounded in liberal ideas and systematically overlooked China's immense latent potential as a country with a population exceeding one billion. China in the early 1990s was an impoverished state incapable of challenging the United States; yet three decades of sustained economic growth have transformed it into a formidable and threatening rival. In the realist assessment, American governing institutions bear responsibility for this outcome through their persistent disregard of realist warnings, and the current tensions represent the logical consequence of that policy combined with the natural growth of Chinese ambitions. China is geopolitically compelled to seek hegemony in East Asia, while the United States seeks to prevent any power from projecting dominance over the Eurasian landmass — and this structural contradiction intensifies the inherently adversarial character of the bilateral relationship (Mgimo University, 2021).

The approach of the United States and its allies toward China has hardened considerably in recent years. Beijing's hopes for a reduction of external pressure under the Biden administration were dispelled by that administration's stringent policy posture, and China arrived at the assessment that it was confronted with a protracted, long-term competition. The evaluation by China's leadership of their country's external environment between 2021 and 2022 — particularly in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine — indicates that this environment has grown markedly more hostile and constraining.

Competition in the Economic and Technological Domains

Since joining the World Trade Organization in 2001, China has emerged as a major trading partner of the United States, constituting a key export market for American goods valued at \$575 billion (see Figure 1). China currently ranks as the fourth-largest destination for U.S. exports (\$147.8 billion) and the second-largest source of American imports (\$427.2 billion). In 2023, bilateral merchandise trade declined by 17 percent, driven by a slowdown in China's economic growth and the realignment of supply chains away from China (CRS, 2024). The total value of merchandise trade between the United States and China in 2025 is estimated at approximately \$414.7 billion. Of this total, U.S. merchandise exports to China amounted to \$106.3 billion, representing a decline of 25.8 percent (\$36.9 billion) relative to 2024. Conversely, U.S. merchandise imports from China reached \$308.4 billion, reflecting a contraction of 29.7 percent (\$130.4 billion) compared to the preceding year. These figures indicate a significant reduction in the volume of bilateral merchandise trade between the two countries in 2025 (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2026).

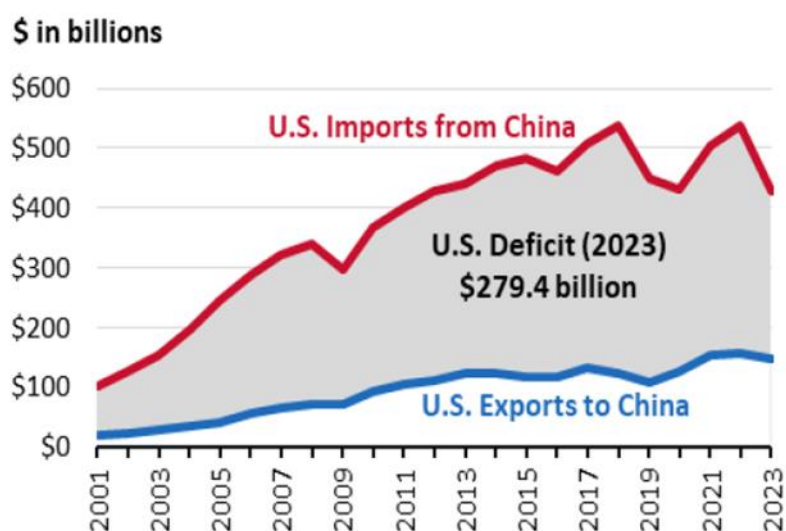


Figure 1. China–U.S. Bilateral Trade Volume, 2001–2023
Source: (CRS, 2024)

Over the past several years, the strategic competition between China and the United States has shifted from a trade war to a technology war, with Washington imposing bans and restrictions on a number of Chinese companies, including ZTE, Huawei, and Tik Tok. Simultaneously, Washington has been critical of China's policies with respect to Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and the South China Sea. As a notable example, the Trump administration in July 2020 abruptly demanded that China close its consulate in Houston on security grounds, prompting China in turn to demand the closure of the American consulate in Chengdu (Wang et al., 2020, 2022: 34). According to a 2023 Pew Research Center survey conducted across 24 countries, 72 percent of respondents rated American technology as advanced, compared to 69 percent for China (Silver et al., 2023).

In the domain of artificial intelligence, both countries constitute the principal actors. China, following an initial emphasis on the production of low value-added goods, began investing in this sector in 2006 with the publication of the National Medium- and Long-Term Plan for the Development of Science and Technology, and through subsequent initiatives — most notably the "New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan" of 2017 — set itself the goal of achieving global leadership in artificial intelligence by 2030. China's share of research publications in this field rose from 4.26 percent in 1997 to 27.68 percent in 2017. Nevertheless, the United States retains a decisive lead in terms of research quality and citation impact; American publications are cited at a rate 40 percent above the global average, while Chinese publications fall 20 percent below it (Kanaani & Ahangari, 2023: 75).

The pursuit of technological leverage to challenge American hegemony within China's military strategy is not a new phenomenon. Since the late 1990s, China has pursued the "Shashoujian" (assassin's mace) doctrine — an approach that, rather than seeking direct conventional confrontation, relies on the development of asymmetric capabilities designed to confer decisive military advantage in wartime and to function as an effective deterrent in peacetime. This strategy is conceived to exploit unconventional technologies against an

adversary's structural vulnerabilities in order to seize the operational initiative. Former Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin emphasized this approach, prioritizing the development of technologies that the adversary fears most. Xi Jinping, in his address to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party, similarly underscored the role of artificial intelligence in strengthening China's military and committed to accelerating the development of an "intelligentized" armed force. The Chinese government regards artificial intelligence as an opportunity for a "military leap" — a technology that simultaneously provides asymmetric advantages over the United States and is more readily deployable within China's own institutional context (Asgarian, 2024: 265–267).

Financial markets have equally reflected China's technological ascendancy. Whereas six years ago only two of the world's twenty most valuable internet companies were of Chinese origin, by the end of 2021 seven of the global leaders bore Chinese provenance. The "Seven Giants of the AI Era" — Google, Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft, Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent — are now distributed across both sides of the Pacific. Of every ten dollars of venture capital invested in artificial intelligence in 2018, five went to Chinese startups and four to American companies; yet of the world's top ten AI startups, seven were American and three Chinese (Kanaani & Ahangari, 2023: 75). In this broader context, the emergence of the DeepSeek R-1 artificial intelligence model generated considerable alarm in the West; this low-cost Chinese model, which operates independently of NVIDIA's H100 chips, erased \$593 billion from NVIDIA's market capitalization in a single trading day, while Microsoft and Google sustained market declines of 2.1 and 4.2 percent respectively (Reuters, 2025). In *The Art of War*, the timing of action is identified as one of the decisive determinants of success in battle — a principle that China appears to have systematically applied in the competition over artificial intelligence development. China's strategic acuity in entering this competitive arena is exemplary; over the past two decades, it has advanced in a highly deliberate and measured fashion through carefully formulated plans and long-term strategies.

The Belt and Road Initiative versus Build Back Better World

In 2013, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative with the dual objective of consolidating its economic influence and converting it into political leverage — a strategy broadly analogous in conception to America's Marshall Plan. In 2015, the addition of the "Digital Silk Road" to this initiative provided the institutional groundwork for the deployment of technological and smart-city projects in target countries through companies such as Huawei, underwritten by the political and financial backing of the Chinese government. Nevertheless, Fukuyama raises serious criticisms of this initiative. According to Fukuyama, many Chinese-financed infrastructure projects have failed to generate tangible economic benefits, and participating governments have been saddled with substantial debt burdens that have precluded the financing of subsequent development projects; Sri Lanka, Argentina, Kenya, Malaysia, Montenegro, Pakistan, and Tanzania are among the countries most notably affected. In the perception of many developing countries, China has emerged as an inflexible and predatory creditor functionally indistinguishable from Western lenders and multinational corporations. China's major projects have yielded disappointing outcomes, and some have

encountered significant resistance from local communities; moreover, the risk of replicating the Latin American debt crisis of the 1980s looms over contemporary emerging markets (Bennon and Fukuyama, 2023). These accumulated debt burdens have led many countries to turn to the International Monetary Fund rather than seeking debt restructuring through negotiations with China.

In direct response, Joe Biden at the G7 Leaders' Summit in 2021 advanced the "Build Back Better World" (B3W) initiative with the explicit objective of providing a systemic alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative. Through this mechanism, Washington promotes its foundational principles and values in opposition to those of China by mobilizing its allied partners, and by multilateralizing the initiative has enhanced its international legitimacy — thereby raising the strategic costs of competition for Beijing. By formally launching this initiative, the United States has recognized the Chinese challenge as more consequential than previously acknowledged (Daheshiar & Pourbagher, 2023: 32–33). In light of Washington's concerns regarding the geopolitical implications of the Belt and Road Initiative and the attendant risk that the international order may increasingly gravitate toward China's preferred institutional model, the United States has, in addition to Build Back Better World, placed the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) on its strategic agenda.

On the sidelines of the G20 Leaders' Summit in New Delhi in September 2023, Joe Biden announced that India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, France, Germany, Italy, and the United States were committed to establishing the IMEC corridor. This initiative represents the most recent American effort to integrate its partners in the Middle East and South Asia into a shared geo-economic architecture, while simultaneously countering China's growing influence in the Persian Gulf. The rail-maritime route of IMEC — encompassing fiber-optic cables, clean hydrogen pipelines, and special economic zones — traverses India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel before terminating at the port of Piraeus in Greece. The project comprises two distinct corridors: an eastern corridor linking India to the Arab nations in the Persian Gulf, and a western corridor connecting the Arab states to Europe, with its principal axis being the construction of an integrated network of railway lines and maritime ports designed to enhance logistical efficiency and reduce both transportation costs and transit times.

The United States, which has encountered considerable difficulties in its relations with regional partners in recent years, seeks through this corridor to arrest and reverse this deteriorating trajectory. IMEC is built upon the diplomatic frameworks established over the preceding five years, including I2U2 and the Abraham Accords, and unlike prior American initiatives, constitutes a broader coalition of both regional and trans-regional partners that explicitly prioritizes infrastructure development over trade policy instruments. Although IMEC possesses significant potential to transform trade dynamics on the Arabian Peninsula, its ultimate success remains contingent upon a complex interplay of domestic and international political variables. Taken as a whole, the Biden administration has deployed this initiative as a multifunctional instrument for containing Iran, constraining China's regional influence, and reassuring Persian Gulf state partners of Washington's enduring strategic

commitments — a corridor that serves as a structural complement to existing mechanisms such as I2U2 and the G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment.

The Soft Power of China and the United States

Joseph Nye defines soft power as the capacity to attract, engage, and elicit cooperation rather than to compel. One of the principal arenas of competition between China and the United States is the sustained effort of both countries to consolidate their soft power across various states. Nye concurs with the Talleyrand dictum that counseled Napoleon: "You can do anything you like with bayonets, except sit on them" (Dobell, 2024). The implication is that while military power can advance policies through coercion and economic power can purchase compliance, soft power operates through persuasion and subtle influence. Since 2018, China has allocated ten billion dollars annually to the augmentation of its soft power, a portion of which is directed toward Confucius Institutes worldwide — centers where students not only acquire proficiency in the Chinese language but also develop familiarity with Chinese culture. Most branches of these institutes result from a tripartite partnership between Hanban (the principal Confucius organization), a Chinese university, and a foreign university, with Hanban typically providing between \$100,000 and \$150,000 in startup funding. Nye regards Confucius Institutes as a quintessential manifestation of soft power, although critics characterize their activities as ideological propaganda on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party (Maleki & Hosseini Yazdi, 2023: 61). The Belt and Road Initiative equally constitutes a form of soft power investment that progressively ties the economies and societies of the Global South to China (Hochberg, 2024). In 2024, China attained third place in the Global Soft Power Index for the first time, with a score of 71.2 (compared to 65 in 2023), and of the world's top 100 universities in 2023, 34 were American and seven Chinese (Silver et al., 2023). China's upward trajectory in the Global Soft Power Index continued into 2025. According to Brand Finance, concurrent with the progressive erosion of American soft power, China has consolidated its position as the second-ranked country in this index. China is the only national brand among the top ten countries to have recorded an increase in its soft power score in 2025, with its rating rising by 0.7 points to reach 73.5 — a development that has narrowed the gap between China and the United States, which continues to hold first place, to less than 1.5 points (Brand Finance, 2026).

Nevertheless, China does not perform particularly well in attractiveness surveys conducted across Europe, North America, Australia, and Asia (Ma, 2024). China's most consequential soft power liability is its ongoing territorial disputes with neighboring states in Asia. A 2023 survey of 1,308 elites across ASEAN member states found that, while China was recognized as the most influential actor in the region, the majority of citizens — with the exception of Brunei — expressed apprehension over its growing influence, and elites in seven of the ten member states indicated a preference for the United States as an alliance partner. The 2023 Pew Research Center survey conducted across 24 countries reveals that only 28 percent of respondents hold a favorable view of Beijing and 23 percent believe China contributes to global peace, compared to figures of 60 and 61 percent respectively for the United States. Furthermore, fewer than two percent of business leaders and experts in Southeast Asia regard

China as a benevolent power, while nearly half perceive it as a revisionist power intent on transforming the region into its sphere of influence (Economy, 2022).

China confronts two serious structural impediments to expanding its soft power: its territorial disputes with neighboring states and the Chinese Communist Party's stringent control over civil society. The exile of artists such as Ai Weiwei and the imprisonment of human rights lawyers diminish China's appeal across other regions of the world (Nye, 2024). In the Pew Research Institute survey of 24 countries conducted in November 2023, the majority of respondent countries found the United States considerably more attractive than China; African countries were the only ones in which competition between the two powers in this domain was relatively close (PEW, 2023). The same institute's spring 2025 survey indicates that, while China has succeeded in narrowing the gap with the United States in terms of global favorability, it continues to trail the United States in this metric. Based on survey results across the countries studied, favorable views of the United States stood at 49 percent, compared to 37 percent for China — indicating that across the surveyed countries, the proportion of respondents holding a favorable attitude toward the United States remains consistently higher than those expressing a positive view of China (PEW, 2025).

The 2020 Afrobarometer survey revealed that 63 percent of African citizens believe China exerts a positive external influence, although only 22 percent regard it as the most desirable development model. In Latin America (2021, across 23 countries), 78 percent of respondents rated China's influence as significant, yet only 35 percent held a favorable view of it (Economy, 2024). According to Gallup, American soft power declined from 59 percent in 2022 to 56 percent in 2023, while China's soft power in Africa increased by six percentage points — from 52 to 58 percent — thereby surpassing that of the United States in the region by two points (Vigers, 2024). Over the years, America's soft power has undergone considerable fluctuations: it declined markedly during the Vietnam and Iraq wars and during the Trump era, while recovering during the Obama and Biden administrations.

The attractiveness generated by soft power is of particular significance for the preservation of long-term alliances. A Norwegian scholar characterized the Cold War by observing that the United States, in contrast to the Soviet Union which relied primarily on military power, was "the empire that was invited" into Europe — and that its influence was correspondingly deeper precisely because it aligned more closely with the will of local populations (Lundestad, 1986: 263).

The Thucydides Trap, the Kindleberger Trap, and the Churchill Trap in Beijing–Washington Relations

In assessing the outlook for Sino-American strategic competition, three traps are invoked as plausible scenarios. The Thucydides Trap refers to the possibility of all-out war between a rising power and a hegemonic power — a prospect whose probability is low in the contemporary era. The Churchill Trap denotes a long-term confrontation between superpowers, analogous to the Cold War, and constitutes a genuine and serious threat. The Kindleberger Trap refers to the catastrophic decade of the 1930s, when the United States succeeded Britain as the leading world power but failed to adequately discharge the role of

global public goods provider, with the consequence that the international system descended into depression, genocide, and war.

Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian, demonstrated some 2,400 years ago how the rise of Athenian power provoked the fear of Sparta, rendering war between the emerging power and the established order virtually inevitable. Graham Allison of Harvard University examined this historical metaphor quantitatively in 2012 and concluded that in the overwhelming majority of historical cases the confrontation between a rising power and the incumbent power ended in war, with only four instances — including the Cold War — in which states managed to navigate their conflicting interests without resort to armed conflict (Fu, 2022: 118). According to this analytical framework, the challenge posed by the rising power and the incumbent hegemon's fear of displacement can generate structural dynamics that ultimately culminate in open confrontation (Yanzhong, 2017). Nevertheless, the applicability of the Thucydides Trap in the contemporary era is subject to considerable skepticism. The most significant transformation in modern international politics is that since 1945, war among great powers has become an exceedingly rare occurrence; the probability of inter-state war between 1816 and 1945 stood at 0.296, while from 1946 to 1992 this figure declined to 0.089 (Yang, 2018: 196). Nye likewise cautions against falling into this trap and exaggerating China's power, though Allison reminds us that 12 of the 16 great-power confrontations since 1500 have culminated in major war (Nye, 2023: 162).

Scholars broadly point to the observation that great-power war has become a phenomenon of the past. The principal factors accounting for the increasing rarity of such conflicts include the evolution of international politics and the gradual escalation in the costs of war; the catastrophic consequences of the two World Wars; economic interdependence, which has effectively eliminated the relative utility of war; and nuclear deterrence and the logic of mutually assured destruction (Yang, 2018: 196–197). An academic consensus has accordingly formed that great-power war occurs only in exceptional circumstances. In this era in which direct great-power conflict is largely absent, both the rising and the dominant power lack objective incentives to initiate war against each other. The risk of falling into the Thucydides Trap is therefore lower than is commonly suggested, though this possibility cannot be entirely discounted. Charles Kindleberger, one of the principal architects of the Marshall Plan, emphasizes that the catastrophic decade of the 1930s occurred when the United States succeeded Britain as the preeminent global power yet failed to adequately perform the role of global public goods provider. At the international level, great powers supply public goods such as climate stability, financial stability, and freedom of navigation. Smaller states have little incentive to bear the costs of providing these goods, whereas great powers both feel the impact of their own actions and benefit from the resulting order. When Britain was weakened after the First World War and could no longer fulfill this function, an isolationist United States continued to free-ride on the international system, with catastrophic consequences (Nye, 2023: 162). Some analysts are concerned that China, as its power grows, may similarly free-ride on an international order it did not itself construct. Nye warns that an isolationist and

disruptive China that proves unable to provide global public goods — while its power continues to expand — risks drawing the world toward the Thucydides Trap.

The critical distinction between the Kindleberger Trap and the Thucydides Trap lies in the fact that the former attributes the dysfunctions of the international system to a deficit in the provision of global public goods rather than to the ambitions of a specific power. Given America's withdrawal from certain international commitments, the international community has increasingly turned toward China, which has shown a degree of interest in filling this leadership void (Yanzhong, 2017). In response, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated in 2017 that the two countries would not fall into the Thucydides Trap, since no single state can provide all global public goods unilaterally, and international cooperation represents the only viable path forward (Xinhua, 2017). Xi Jinping similarly declared in Seattle in September 2015 that the Thucydides Trap does not exist inherently in the world, but that erroneous strategic assessments can give rise to such traps (Fu, 2022: 119). Over time, however, the Chinese president's tone on this question appears to have shifted somewhat, suggesting a heightened sense of the trap's potential. During Trump's visit to Beijing in May 2026, Xi stated: "The transformations occurring on an unprecedented scale over the course of the past century are unfolding with accelerating momentum across the globe, rendering the international environment increasingly fluid, complex, and turbulent. In such circumstances, the question arises: will China and the United States be able to transcend the Thucydides Trap and forge a new model of great-power relations? Can the two countries collaborate in addressing global challenges and provide greater stability for the international system? And will they be able to chart a brighter horizon for bilateral relations in the interest of the well-being of both peoples and the future of humanity?" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2026).

Following the Second World War, the relationship between the two superpowers shifted from wartime cooperation to sustained enmity, and in March 1946 Churchill delivered his celebrated "Iron Curtain" address in Fulton, Missouri. Throughout the Cold War, the two superpowers employed every available instrument in their competition for hegemony, save for direct armed conflict. The Churchill Trap refers to precisely this configuration: a protracted confrontation between two great powers defined by the simultaneous presence of "enmity" and "the absence of direct war" (Yang, 2018: 200). A broad consensus currently prevails in academic circles and public discourse that China is the actor most proximate to challenging American hegemony and ranks as the second most consequential power in the world; avoiding the repetition of Cold War-style systemic rivalry is therefore of vital importance for the stability of the international order.

China and the Prospect of War with the United States

Some analysts observe that contemporary China exhibits the same signs of hubris and strategic anxiety that Germany displayed after 1890. Many Chinese leaders regard the 2008 financial crisis as emblematic of a global leadership transition in China's favor, and the country's regional policies toward its neighbors have grown increasingly assertive (Arne Westad, 2024). The United States, by contrast, combines deterrence with limited engagement

— a posture broadly analogous to British policy toward Germany in the early twentieth century. The Biden administration's National Security Strategy (October 2022) explicitly states that "the People's Republic of China harbors both the intent and the capacity to reshape the international order in its favor," while noting that the United States will cooperate with China where interests converge (White House, 2022: 3).

Christopher Layne identifies two significant parallels between Anglo-German relations up to 1914 and the contemporary Sino-American relationship. First, both relationships are most meaningfully understood within the analytical framework of power transition — a rivalry in which Germany's rise had constituted a direct challenge to the British-led international order. Second, the "spiral of perception" through which Britain's liberal ideology enabled it to portray Germany as a dangerous adversary is a dynamic that the United States is equally capable of replicating in its framing of China. Layne contends that the principal challenge to the "American era" is the conversion of China's economic and financial power into parallel multilateral initiatives that progressively erode the American-built institutional framework. Geir Lundestad similarly emphasizes that China's rise will intensify the anxieties of America's political elites, and that the image of China as an "enemy" will be gradually reconstructed within mainstream discourse (Zare & Chegeni-Zadeh, 2024: 17, 20).

Nonetheless, three critical structural conditions characterized Anglo-German relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that ultimately paved the way for the transformation of bilateral enmity into open warfare. First, the Germans had become increasingly convinced that Britain would under no circumstances permit Germany to emerge as a hegemonic power. At the same time, German leaders had proved unable to clarify to Britain and the other great powers whether Germany's rise would entail a fundamental transformation of the world order. The second condition was that both sides feared the erosion of their own leadership positions — a dynamic that could incline certain leaders toward the conclusion that war was sooner or later unavoidable. The third condition was the absence of adequate channels of strategic communication (Arne Westad, 2024). All of these conditions appear to be substantially replicated in the China-US relationship: Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party have become convinced that Washington's objective is to prevent Beijing's rise; China's international ambitions are perceived as strategically opaque; bilateral strategic engagement remains limited; and claims have emerged that China is developing contingency plans for a military assault on Taiwan — a scenario directly analogous to the Schlieffen Plan that precipitated the Anglo-German war.

Michael Beckley, in his work *Unrivaled* (2018), argues that the United States continues to possess three times China's wealth and five times its military capability, and that even under persistently unfavorable conditions, the closure of this gap will require several decades. Demographically, the United States is the only nation that is simultaneously large in population, relatively young, and highly educated, while China is projected to lose two hundred million workers from its workforce over the next thirty years (McNeil, 2019).

Nye, in his assessment of the balance of power between China and the United States, identifies five long-term structural advantages that favor the United States. The first is

geography: the United States is flanked by two oceans and two friendly neighbors, whereas China shares borders with fourteen countries, including several with which it maintains unresolved territorial disputes. The second is energy: China is considerably more dependent on energy imports than the United States. The third is financial and monetary power: the United States derives substantial structural leverage from the international reserve role of the dollar and from its dominance of major financial institutions. The credibility of a reserve currency rests on its free convertibility and penetration of global capital markets — attributes that China's currency has yet to attain. The fourth is demography: the United States is the only major developed nation to have maintained its third-place standing in global population rankings, and its workforce is projected to grow, whereas China's workforce peaked in 2014 and has been declining since. The fifth is technology: the United States occupies the leading edge of critical and emerging technologies. China has admittedly invested heavily in research and development; nevertheless, its universities continue to lag behind their American counterparts in the technological domain (Dobell, 2024).

Conclusion

Three discernible trends characterize China's policy toward the United States. First, foreign policy decision-making in China has become increasingly centralized under Xi Jinping's leadership, with Xi and the Chinese Communist Party playing a determinative role in shaping China's posture toward the United States. Priorities such as comprehensive national security and technological self-reliance have exerted a significant and deepening influence on the conduct of bilateral relations. Second, China's leaders have effectively downgraded the stabilizing drivers — the so-called buffers in the bilateral relationship — such as trade and investment. The principal advantages of Beijing–Washington relations, namely trade and investment, have diminished owing to factors including intensifying commercial competition, and China has undergone a fundamental structural shift away from low-end, export-driven growth. China's rapid advancement in electric vehicles and semiconductors, and its focus on the final consumer market, have become sources of competition and friction between the two countries rather than sources of stability. China harbors a profound commitment to advancing in high technologies and innovation capabilities, and has been explicit about the imperative of technological self-reliance and becoming a leading nation in select technological sectors and domains.

The third trend emanates from regional flashpoints and centers of geopolitical tension. Beijing harbors concerns regarding American efforts to link issues in the South China Sea with the Taiwan question. At the same time, China's relationship with Russia has further strained Beijing's ties with Washington. Taiwan remains the most sensitive issue in the bilateral relationship. China is also actively seeking to create the structural conditions necessary to supersede the United States as the dominant force in the Asia-Pacific region. By proclaiming that the Asia-Pacific constitutes one large family, and asserting that the region cannot flourish without China and China cannot flourish without the region, China's leaders portray the Asia-Pacific as a zone of deep integration through shared civilizational and cultural bonds, infrastructure connectivity, technology, and China-centric trade. Xi has been notably successful in consolidating China's position as the region's pre-eminent economic

leader — China is now the largest trading partner of virtually all Asian countries. In late 2020, negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), comprising China, ten Southeast Asian states, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, were successfully concluded. With China's prospective accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), China would become the dominant economic actor across both of the region's most significant trade agreements, to some degree marginalizing the United States. Nevertheless, Beijing's military posture in the region has the potential to challenge the broader credibility of China's regional leadership.

Taken as a whole, the constituent elements for the emergence of a direct confrontation between the United States and China are potentially present. Nevertheless, both sides are actively engaged in managing the situation. The same dynamic applies to the South China Sea, where China is pursuing the consolidation of its sovereign claims. Beijing and Washington have yet to develop any concrete crisis prevention mechanism. Consequently, even a localized incident involving Chinese fishermen and the Philippines could conceivably trigger a conflict between the two great powers. China's policy toward the United States is ultimately a product of its own assessment of internal and external developments. The overriding objective is to ensure that the deterioration of bilateral relations does not impede China's economic growth. China's strategy is to engage with the United States in order to minimize the adverse effects of American actions, through the simultaneous maximization of its political and economic influence, particularly across the Global South. An examination of U.S. National Security Strategy documents over the past two decades reveals that Washington's perception of China has undergone a fundamental transformation — from a responsible stakeholder to a formidable and challenging rival. The content of these documents on China in the 1990s was, in stark contrast to today, markedly positive in tenor. Although in the early years of the new millennium the United States sought to integrate China into its liberal-based international order, the mutual perceptions of the two countries have undergone a fundamental transformation in recent years.

American policy toward China underwent a decisive shift during Trump's first administration, transitioning from a strategy of engagement to one of comprehensive competitive relations. Former President Biden similarly continued Trump's hardline posture toward China, and the Biden administration equally regarded China — on account of its growing economic and military power — as a rival posing a direct threat to American primacy. For China, which witnessed the severe deterioration of bilateral relations during Trump's first presidential term, the return of Trump to the White House could hardly constitute welcome news. During his first term, Trump launched a trade war against China in July 2018. Although efforts were undertaken to reduce trade tensions, the COVID-19 pandemic eliminated any realistic prospect of reconciliation, and when Trump applied the label "Chinese virus" to the pandemic, bilateral relations deteriorated further. The argument has also been advanced that Xi's assertive actions tend to occur precisely when the United States is engaged in a policy of cooperation. For example, it was after Xi's 2015 visit to the United States that Beijing proceeded to militarize the South China Sea. Similarly, the

escalation of military tensions in the Taiwan Strait and the surveillance balloon operations over the United States all occurred in the aftermath of former President Biden's engagement policy toward China, and Beijing's confrontation with Manila likewise materialized following the reopening of bilateral military communication channels.

It is indeed argued that whenever the United States pursues its interests with firmness and resolve, China's response has been measured and it has not sought escalation, even if it may engage in retaliatory actions. There is a prevailing assessment that the new trade war between the United States and China will prove more severe than during Trump's first term, and in light of the intensification of trade hostilities under Trump's new tenure, Beijing is actively seeking to mitigate its consequences. The isolationist "America First" approach resulted in the widespread weakening of America's alliances globally during Trump's first administration. Should Trump pursue the "America First" posture in foreign policy as in his first term, China will be strategically positioned to operationalize its three flagship global initiatives — the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative. If the decisive contest of the twenty-first century is defined as a bilateral competition between Beijing and Washington, China will hold a structural advantage; if, however, the decisive contest is between China and the West as a collective bloc, the West will prevail. In conclusion, issues such as Taiwan, China's political trajectory and governance structure, human rights and democracy, and China's broader development path constitute China's fundamental red lines — and any action by the United States that crosses one of these four red lines risks culminating in a serious and potentially unmanageable confrontation between Washington and Beijing.

References

- Allison, G. (2017). *Destined for war: Can America and China escape Thucydides's trap?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Allison, G. (2020). *The U.S.-China strategic competition: Clues from history*. Aspen Institute & Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School. Available at: <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/us-china-strategic-competition-clues-history>. (Accessed on: 1 February 2020).
- Asgarian, H. (2024). The battle of algorithms: China-US competition in military artificial intelligence. *Ravayat-e Abrar*, 3(Special Issue on Intelligence and Technology). Institute for Security and Progress Studies.[in Persian].
- Baum, R. (2001). From strategic partners to strategic competitors: George W. Bush and the politics of U.S. China policy. *Journal of East Asia Studies*, 1(2), 191–220.
- Bennon, M., & Fukuyama, F. (2023). China's road to ruin: The real toll of Beijing's Belt and Road. *Foreign Affairs*. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/belt-road-initiative-xi-imf>. (Accessed on: 2023, September/October).
- Biden White House. (2022). *National Security Strategy*. Available at: <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>. (Accessed on: 2022, October).
- Brand Finance. (2026). *Global Soft Power Index 2026: A global mood shift*. Available at: <https://brandfinance.com/insights/global-soft-power-index-2026-executive-summary>. (Accessed on: 2026, January 20).
- Clinton, B. (1994). *President Clinton press conference on human rights in China*. USC US-China Institute. Available at: <https://china.usc.edu/president-clinton-press-conference-human-rights-china-1994>. (Accessed on: 1994, May 26)
- Congressional Research Service. (2024). *U.S.-China trade relations*. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11284>. (Accessed on: 2024, August 8).
- Daheshiar, H and Pourbagher, M . (2023). U.S.-China Strategic Competition in Build Back Better World and Belt and Road Initiative. *International Relations Researches*, 13(1), 7-50. doi: 10.22034/irr.2023.354756.2241. [in Persian].
- DiCicco, J. M. (2021). Trump and U.S.-China strategic competition as the “new” normal. In R. Jervis, D. N. Labrosse, S. E. Goddard, & J. Rovner (Eds.), *Chaos reconsidered: The liberal order and the future of international politics* (pp. 310–324). Columbia University Press.
- Economy, E. C. (2018, May/June). China's new revolution: The reign of Xi Jinping. *Foreign Affairs*, 60–74.
- Economy, E.(2024). China's alternative world. *Foreign Affairs*. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-alternative-order-xi-jinping-elizabeth-economy>. (Accessed on:2024, May/June).
- Fu, Y. (2022). *The world as China sees it*. Trans by: M. R. Majidi & A. R. Samoudi, Research Institute for Strategic Studies. [in Persian].
- Grano, S. A., & FengHuang, D. W. (2023). *China-US competition impact on small and middle powers: Strategic choice*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hochberg, F. P. (2024). America's global soft power strategy is aging poorly—Especially compared to China. *The Hill*. Available at: <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4406297-americas-global-soft-power-strategy-is-aging-poorly-especially-compared-to-c>. (Accessed on:2024, January 13).

- Hwang, W., Paik, W., & Lim, H. (2024). The U.S.–China competition, restructuring the global supply chain, and economic security. *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 24(3), 324–342. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2024.17>
- Kanaani, F., & Ahangari, S. S. (2023). China’s lead over the United States in the AI marathon. *Asian Diplomacy*, 13(China Special Issue), 75–76.
- Lu, X. (2024). Analysis of strategic competition between China and the United States in the New Cold War era. *Advances in Economics, Management and Political Sciences*, 124(1), 219–226. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2754-1169/2024.17733>
- Lundestad, G. (1986). Empire by invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945–1952. *Journal of Peace Research*, 23(3), 263–277.
- Maleki, & Hosseini Yazdi. (2023). Confucius Institutes and China’s cultural diplomacy. *Asian Diplomacy*, 13(China Special Issue), 61–62.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2021). The inevitable war: America, China, and the tragedy of great-power politics. *Foreign Affairs*. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-10-19/inevitable-rivalry-cold-war>. (Accessed on: 2021, November/December).
- MGIMO University. (2021). *John Mearsheimer on U.S.-China relations*. Available at: <https://english.mgimo.ru/news/mearsheimer13-12-21>. (Accessed on: 2021, December 13).
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. (2026). *President Xi Jinping holds talks with U.S. President Donald J. Trump*. Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202605/t20260514_11910330.html. (Accessed on: 2026, May 14).
- Mousavi, H. (2023). America’s view of China’s rise in the international system. *Asian Diplomacy*, 13(China Special Issue), 66–68.
- Nye, J. (2023). The Kindleberger trap. In J. Nye, *Soft power and great power competition: China and globalization* (pp. 161–164). Springer.
- Nye, J. (2024). America still retains a soft power advantage over China. *The Hill*. Available at: <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4678820-america-still-retains-a-soft-power-advantage-over-china/>. (Accessed on: 2024, May 22).
- Office of the United States Trade Representative. (2026). *The People’s Republic of China*. Available at: <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/china-mongolia-taiwan/peoples-republic-china>.
- Pan, X., Aiwen, L., & Zhenzhen, C. (2024). Contesting coercion: U.S.-China strategic competition, the middle technology trap, and Chinese government-guided funds. *Asian Review of Political Economy*, 3, Article 13. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44216-024-00034-4>
- Pew Research Center. (2023). *Comparing views of the U.S. and China in 24 countries*. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/11/06/comparing-views-of-the-us-and-china-in-24-countries/>. (Accessed on: 2023, November 6).
- Pew Research Center. (2025). *Views of the U.S. have worsened while opinions of China have improved in many surveyed countries*. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/07/15/views-of-the-us-have-worsened-while-opinions-of-china-have-improved-in-many-surveyed-countries>. (Accessed on: 2025, July 15).
- Reuters. (2025). *DeepSeek sparks AI stock selloff; Nvidia posts record market-cap loss*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/technology/chinas-deepseek-sets-off-ai-market-rout-2025-01-27/>. (Accessed on: 2025, January 28).

- Silver, L., et al. (2023). *Comparing views of the U.S. and China in 24 countries*. Pew Research Center. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/11/06/comparing-views-of-the-us-and-china-in-24-countries/>. (Accessed on: 2023, November 6).
- Vigers, B. (2024). U.S. loses soft power edge in Africa. *Gallup*. Available at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/644222/loses-soft-power-edge-africa.aspx>. (Accessed on: 2024, April 26).
- Wang, J. (2022). China in the international order: A contributor or a challenger. In C. Pan & E. Kavalski (Eds.), *China's rise and rethinking in international relations theory*. Bristol University Press.
- Wasser, B., et al. (2022). *Crossroads of competition: China, Russia, and the United States in the Middle East*. RAND Corporation. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA325-1.html. (Accessed on: 2022, February 2).
- Westad, O. A. (). Sleepwalking toward war. *Foreign Affairs*. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/sleepwalking-toward-war-united-states>. (Accessed on: 2024, July/August).
- White House. (2017). *National Security Strategy of the United States*. Available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>. (Accessed on: 2017, December 1).
- White House. (2022). *U.S. National Security Strategy*. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>. (Accessed on: 2022, October 12).
- White House. (2025). *National Security Strategy of the United States*. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>. (Accessed on: 2025, November).
- Winkler, S. C. (2023). Strategic competition and U.S.-China relations: A conceptual analysis. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 333–356.
- Xinhua. (2017). *FM: China, U.S. can avoid Thucydides Trap, Kindleberger Trap*. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/20/c_136143525.htm. (Accessed on: 2017, March 20).
- Yang, Y. (2018). Escape both the Thucydides Trap and the Churchill Trap: Finding a third type of great power relations under the bipolar system. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 1(2), 193–235.
- Yanzhong, H. (). *The four traps China may fall into*. Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/four-traps-china-may-fall>. (Accessed on: 2017, October 30)
- Yu, H. (2024). G7's plan for partnership for global infrastructure and investment: An alternative to the BRI? In *Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative* (pp. 141–151). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-9633-9_8.
- Zare, M. and Chegnizadeh, G. (2024). The revival of China from the perspective of the theoretical approach of Realism. *Journal of Asian Regional Order Studies*, 1(1), 1-36. doi: 10.22099/JAROS.2024.50410.1004. [in Persian].