

## *China and the West: A Cold War Brewing on the Horizon?* Subham Barua<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Following World War II, most nations across the globe experienced the ripple effects of the immense geopolitical tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. The height of friction came about during the Cuban Missile Crisis, where the world was split into two categories, along with the neutrals, with two polarizing ideologies: democracy and communism. However, recent times have seen a shift in focus from the Kremlin to China's growing influence. There is increasing strategic competition between Beijing and the US, seeing Western nations mobilize resources towards the Indo-Pacific. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)'s inclusion of rules-based maritime order in the Indo-Pacific in their ever-evolving scope of operations has raised many eyebrows regarding the possibility of the group's formation of a defence alliance to counter Chinese influence in the region. As such, some analysts argue that a militarized Asia-Pacific may see the light of day. However, a more difficult question looms behind these worries: is this the beginning of a new cold war? In this commentary, I will analyze the recent developments in strategic competition between the US, its allies and China to see if their interactions are truly compounding towards a state akin to 1962.

### **The Cold War Dynamic**

Professor Thomas Christensen, a professor from Columbia University, argued in his write up for *Foreign Affairs* that the current tensions between the US, its allies and China cannot be considered parallel to the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the US as it lacked three fundamental

---

<sup>1</sup> Subham Barua is a junior at the University of California, Riverside, pursuing his BA in Political Science (International Affairs). He is currently working at BIPSS as a Research Intern.

elements – an ideological struggle, formation of opposing alliance systems, and exclusive economic trading blocs<sup>2</sup>. His analysis, although compelling, adheres very strictly to the classical characteristics of the Cold War. It is more important to understand and observe if interactions between the US and China can give rise to a new form of a Cold War under contemporary geopolitical dynamics.

## **An Ideological Struggle for Governance**

Although the competition is not an acute struggle between capitalism and communism, it is indeed one comprising governance ideals. On the one hand, there is the west and its vision of a just form of democratic governance supplemented by inclusive institutions and adherence to a rules-based international order, and, on the other, there is the might of China which, through its almost authoritative nature of rule, has exhibited unparalleled growth and influence without much regard for international laws and human rights. These fundamental differences have made their way into consideration on the international stage, with both parties making public statements against the other. The West has been critical of China's actions and heavily criticized Beijing for its treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang, among others, and its aggression in the South China Sea. Similarly, the Chinese have accused the US of meddling in its internal affairs and labelled them condescending towards nations with different ideals.

Although an all-inclusive structure should be the most attractive form of government, democracy has lost its allure over the years. This is primarily due to the rise of far-right populism in Europe and Donald Trump's ascension to the US's presidency. Furthermore, developing nations were left astray during the pandemic, especially when vaccines were being rolled out, which left a significant question mark by developing countries about western multilateralism and their so-called inclusive institutions. Coupled by the fact that China and Russia came to the rescue of these struggling nations through means of vaccine diplomacy<sup>3</sup>, a dangerous acceptance of the

---

<sup>2</sup> "Is The US-China Strategic Competition A Cold War?" | Atlantic Council, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/is-the-us-china-strategic-competition-a-cold-war/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Vaccine Diplomacy: Soft Power Lessons from China and Russia?" | Leigh, Michael | Bruegel.Org, 2021, | <https://www.bruegel.org/2021/04/vaccine-diplomacy-soft-power-lessons-from-china-and-russia/>.

authoritative narrative may prevail. Beijing is not undertaking any means to export its form of governance. Still, their exponential growth and soft power make them a fine example for developing nations to adapt their governance model. Many governments in Asia have already exhibited their inclination towards authoritative properties, which will prompt the West to engage in more intense strategic competition.

## **Alliances and Partnerships**

The Cold War after World War II saw the world strictly divided into the western-capitalist bloc (the US and its allies), eastern-communist bloc (the Soviet Union and its allies) and neutrals and saw them adhere very exclusively to their alliances. Although such groupings may not be prevalent right now, specific alliances and relationships are certainly being bolstered. In the latest edition of the Munich Security Conference, Joe Biden addressed America's allies and the need for them to mend transatlantic relationships and stand up as a united front against China's influence. As mentioned before, the Quadrilateral security dialogue, consisting of Japan, India, the US and Australia, is also making moves to strengthen maritime security in the Indo-Pacific and the South China Sea<sup>4</sup>. The US, EU, Britain and Canada have also collectively put sanctions on Chinese entities and officials on account of the Uyghur situation in Xinjiang, with nations such as Australia and New Zealand professing support<sup>5</sup>. Essentially, the US is rallying like-minded nations and potential allies in favour of their cause.

However, they are not the only ones that are bolstering cooperation. Beijing has strengthened its strategic partnership with Russia and has signed a 25-year agreement with Iran. They've also undertaken lucrative investments into nations that are a part of the Belt and Road Initiative. As a result, these nations often end up turning a blind eye to possible human rights abuses by Beijing

---

<sup>4</sup> *"Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: "The Spirit of The Quad"* | The White House, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/>.

<sup>5</sup> *"West Sanctions China Over Xinjiang Abuses, Beijing Hits Back at EU"* | Robin Emmott, David Brunnstrom | Reuters., 2021, | <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-china-eu-sanctions-idUSKBN2BE2LF>.

for the sake of not deterring relationships. Since Beijing is a significant trade partner of many nations who are more inclined towards the West, they do not directly speak out against the mainland. The Asian powerhouse has not formed any formal security alliance directly against the West but deeply deplores any possible allies taking part in groupings such as the Quad. Conclusively, it would be impossible for either the West or China to make exclusive alliances against each other due to the regression that would occur to economies stemming from the interconnectedness of global markets and trade.

## **Economic Cooperation**

The most notable economic cooperation in the world today is undoubtedly China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Also known as the New Silk Road, the BRI is an ambitious infrastructure initiative stretching from East Asia to Europe. More than 60 countries have signed on to various BRI projects or have shown interest in doing so, consolidating Beijing's ubiquitous influence<sup>6</sup>. Apart from economic incentives, China also has political motivations behind the project. Against the backdrop of development, they want to garner support from nations without any opposition. The project will also help Beijing station itself in critical strategic locations - perhaps the biggest concern for the West.

The latest G7 summit hosted in Cornwall, England, saw the leaders of major western nations and others declare the launch of a new global infrastructure project to rival the BRI directly. The initiative has been named 'Build Back Better World' or B3W, and it looks to connect Latin America to Africa to the Indo-Pacific<sup>7</sup>. Many analysts have accused Beijing of using the BRI to induce debt among nations and using the creditor status to takeover key infrastructures in the country, such as ports. The G7 governments attempt to provide a more inclusive form of

---

<sup>6</sup> "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative" | Council on Foreign Relations, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

<sup>7</sup> "FACT SHEET: President Biden And G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership" | White House, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/12/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-launch-build-back-better-world-b3w-partnership/>.

infrastructure development, although realization may be far-off given no definite financing plan has been disclosed as of yet.

## **Conclusion**

Certainly, the competition between China and the West is not as severe as to prompt a nuclear war. Due to the nature of globalization and interconnectedness of economies, such an outcome would be unrealistic. This is largely down to the fact that unlike the Soviet Union, China's economy is robust and major western powers have inclination to not be completely hostile towards Beijing, despite rise in assertive behavior. Cold War or not, it is unlikely that the strategic competition between the forms of governance will decrease in the near future with a militarized Indo-Pacific still being a possibility. The blowbacks will most likely be economical in nature and only time will tell if one side will win out<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> The author was heavily inspired by Hung Tran's write-up, [\*Is the US-China Strategic Competition a cold war?\*](#), published by the *Atlantic Council*.