

Global Power Struggle: Unfolding the Drift Towards Cold War 2.0

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Introduction

The history of International Relations has shown that with one power declining its international influence, another power rises and challenges the previous one. The scenario is similar in today's world politics. The United States, being the world hegemon, has not only been challenged militarily and economically but also in the cases of creating norms and ideologies by China. Several other regional and international players are also involved in this game, which may not play a direct role with their limited resources. Still, they are significant in the sense that they provide active support and geopolitical access to those major players. The question of hegemony exists in Asia internally with the growing challenges from India and Japan towards China. But the crisis of 2008 has set the tone for China on its way to surpass all the other powers of the region. In the Asia-Pacific, the strive for hegemony is bigger, and this bigger game can explain the rise of a new cold war more than any other event.



Source: Times Higher Education

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Rise of China: Impact on the International Hegemony

After the crisis of 2008, the stage for China to challenge the US-led system was set.² The country hiding its capabilities started to intervene in the global phenomenon. According to the Thucydides Trap, for a rising power to become the hegemon, it has to go through a conflict with the existing hegemon. However, according to Graham Allison, in this current situation, war between China and the US is not likely in the coming decades.³ But if not direct war, the Cold War is already there between these two countries. The trade war between these two countries is a glaring example of it. The unchallenged hegemony of the US since the fall of the Berlin Wall has suddenly come under pressure as China started exposing itself more to the international system. The US-based norms and order have been threatened because of the promotion of the China-led order.



Source: The Express Tribune

According to Mohan Malik, China's rise can have three consequences. China and the US may stay as 'competitors-cum-partners', a multipolar Asia may come into existence, or a new Cold War can

² Brantly Womack, "International Crises and China's Rise: Comparing the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the 2017 Global Political Crisis," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 10, no. 4 (2017): 383–401, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pox015>.

³ Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?," *The Atlantic*, June 21, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>.

arise in bipolar Asia.⁴ Although Mohan assumed it almost a decade ago, the situation has developed. In the current circumstances, a new Cold War has already come into the existence of the international system. Xi Jinping’s policies on the Indo-Pacific have indicated the existing polarization in the world; in the last ASEAN summit, China’s Premier, Li Qiang, suggested avoiding the ‘new Cold War’ in cases of cooperation in the ASEAN.⁵ So, the first probability Mohan explained in his research about competitors-cum-partners between the two countries cannot completely be overshadowed.

Implications of the New Bipolar World

The conflicts over the Indo-Pacific, the conflict over Taiwan, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, war on trade, military buildup- all these signify the existence of a polarized world. The two sides of the bipolar world focus on making allies from significant parts of the world. In the case of the struggle in the Indo-Pacific, Japan is providing the opportunity to the US to set up its military bases, the Philippines is promoting the US norms and principles in the Asia Pacific, and India is a significant ally of the US in Asia.



Source: Global North Korea

China, through various projects like BRI, Maritime Silk Road and various internal projects in many countries, is enhancing its influence in the global system and forming an anti-US international order. In the South China Sea, China’s claim of territories goes directly against the US. China also

⁴ Mohan Malik, “Alternative Asia-Pacific Futures in 2040,” ESCAP, accessed September 13, 2023, <https://www.unescap.org/projects/apdf-2040/futures>.

⁵ “China Warns against ‘New Cold War’ at ASEAN Summit,” Reuters, September 6, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asean-welcomes-world-leaders-china-us-rivalry-overshadows-region-2023-09-06/>.

seeks support for its norms and principles that do not follow the US. The scenario is not unfamiliar in the Russia-Ukraine war. While the US is in full support of Europe against Russia, China is supporting Russia against Ukraine and Europe.

Both of these events are quite significant, and also, these are ongoing events where countries of the world have been divided into two poles. Beijing's near-term vision of regional order is essentially bipolar (the US and China).⁶ Beijing is focusing on creating a monopolar hegemony in the Asia-Pacific, knowing that the dominance of the US and its allies is unignorable. That is why China has been focusing on ensuring that, except the US, no other power can rise in the region.

The last time the US faced this kind of challenge was against the former Soviet Union. Although the threats posed by China are not the same as the Soviets, the threats are real and something to be concerned about.

Same intensity but a different approach

Although the rivalry between China and the US can be termed a new Cold War, the approach towards this Cold War is not the same as that of the US and USSR. There are some core differences between these two. The US war against the USSR was an ideological one where both communism and capitalism wanted to dominate the global system. The US undertook the policy of containment, which, according to George Kennan, was necessary because the USSR considered the capitalist world a direct threat.⁷ However, China does not see democratic powers as a threat or does not want to impose its political ideology on others. Besides, the economies of the US and China are intertwined due to the effects of globalization. That is why, unlike the USSR, China does not want to destroy the US or their ways of life; instead, it wants others to appreciate their ways and become allies with them and follow their pathways. The reformed policy of China in the late 20th century, which took it closer to the US, resulted in an economic boom in the country.

⁶ Mohan Malik, "Alternative Asia-Pacific Futures in 2040," ESCAP.

⁷ David Dollar Ryan Hass et al., "Should the US Pursue a New Cold War with China?," Brookings, accessed September 13, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/should-the-us-pursue-a-new-cold-war-with-china/>.

For these differences, the United States is not looking forward to directly containing China, but rather a more ‘surgical and multidimensional approach’⁸ has been taken by the US. The military buildup of China can explain the situation better. The USA has the upper hand in terms of military. China does not want to replace the US in this aspect, but at the same time, China wants to ensure military superiority where it has its interests, such as Taiwan and the South China Sea.



Source: Baku Research Institute

Unlike the USSR, China played a passive role in gaining dominance in the international system. During the Cold War in the mid-20th century, there were proxy wars between the US and USSR, but in the case of the US and China, it is not quite the same. The issue of proxy war is not seen in the present days between the US and China. So, the approach of this competency between these two powers is different. China does have a very strong economy, which gives it leverage in other spheres. Even the issue of ‘De-dollarization’⁹ have become significant because of China’s strong economic advantage. Even in the cases of environment and other non-traditional aspects, China has been challenging the US to take the role of the global hegemon. So, the US is not only threatened in the traditional aspects; rather, China poses challenges in non-traditional aspects, too.

Conclusion

It goes without denying that the US has been feeling the heat of China for more than a decade now. The US has not faced such a rival since the breakdown of the USSR. Although the Chinese

⁸ David Dollar Ryan Hass et al., “Should the US Pursue a New Cold War with China?,” Brookings.

⁹ “De-Dollarization: The End of Dollar Dominance?” J.P. Morgan,” De-dollarization: The end of dollar dominance? | J.P. Morgan, August 31, 2023, <https://www.jpmorgan.com/insights/global-research/currencies/de-dollarization>.

approach towards the global hegemon is different, the threat is real. The shift in global power may not have been following Thucydides' Trap, but the existence of a new Cold War is quite significant, and the power struggle observed in the recent phenomena such as the issue in the Asia-Pacific or the Taiwan issue or the issue of the South China Sea ensure a drift towards Cold War 2.0.