

THE MULTI-DIMENSIONAL IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON SINO-AMERICAN RELATIONS: A NEO-REALIST PERSPECTIVE

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Submission date: 10/10/2021 Acceptance date: 25/12/2021 Publication date: 31/12/2021

Abstract:

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic escalated the simmering tension and mistrust between the United States and China. The legacies of Barak Obama's 'pivot to the Pacific' and Donald Trump's trade war held Sino American relations into a confrontational imperative that continue to cast its long shadow on Joseph Biden's first term. The present paper attempts to analyze the multi-dimensional impact of the pandemic on Sino American relations. Politically, the pandemic emboldened China's revisionist behavior following the U.S. calls to hold it accountable over the global pandemic. Economically, the United States moved towards economic decoupling with China and launched, with its allies, the B3W initiative to counter the Chinese BRI project. Diplomatically, the two powers have engaged in vaccine diplomacy to capitalize on the global demand for vaccines and score more points on the scale of international leadership. Strategically, however, the United States is caught in between two chairs: continue its strategy of liberal hegemony or adopt a more nuanced and restrained strategy to balance China in the post-pandemic era. Through their alternative strategies of offshore balancing and restraint, neo-realists call the United States to curtail its security blanket across the globe, especially near the Chinese homeland, refrain from imposing its liberal values on other societies and narrow the spectrum of its national interests. For neo-realists, the framing of the rivalry with China into an ideological contest between 'democracies' and 'autocracies' will usher in a post-pandemic era marked by a zero-sum existential rivalry and a return to the decades of costly interventions.

Key words: *China; Grand Strategy; Neo-realism; Pandemic; United States.*

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Introduction

Since 1949, when Mao Zedong established the People's Republic of China in Beijing after defeating the government of Chiang Kai-shek, Sino-American relations have evolved from standoffs to an intricate combination of diplomacy, international rivalry and interwoven economies (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). This strange relationship started with the involvement of the two belligerent powers in the Korean War (1950-1953). It then evolved in the 1960s till the subsequent President Carter's full diplomatic recognition of mainland China's 'One China principle' in 1979. However, the relationship between the two countries was frozen following the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989. In October 2000, President Bill Clinton signed the United States-China Ties Act, establishing permanent trade relations with China and setting the door for China's entry into the World Trade Organization.

Sino-American relations drastically deteriorated in 2020 after three years of gradual declining under President Donald J. Trump administration. Among other issues, the United States and China remained locked in a trade war and exchanged intense public blame over the pandemic amid President Trump's calls for the accountability of China and demands for reparations (Trump, 2020). To divert attention away from the spike of COVID-19 cases in the United States and contain the protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd, Trump stated that China should be held responsible for the pandemic and accused the World Health Organization (WHO) of being "the public relation agency for China" (BBC, 2020). However, many observers like Sneider (2020) believe that Trump's anti-China decisions were mostly fueled by domestic politics, particularly the campaign for his re-election, and it seems that the dispute with China over the pandemic was more of a political maneuver than a strategic vision.

The dramatic failure of Trump's bid for a second term revived the academic debate about President Joe Biden's overarching policy towards China. Is the latter a confrontational strategy rooted in President Obama's interrupted doctrine of "Pivot to the Pacific" or is it a mild and pragmatic policy based on cooperation, disentanglement and containment? The available evidence seems to agree with the idea that the Biden administration is endorsing a confrontational approach to face

*'China's 'provocations' in cyber security, trade , technology as well as its alleged responsibility over the pandemic. The United States and its allies launched the Build Back Better World (W3B) in June 2021. It is a G7 partnership project engineered to counter the growing strategic influence of China and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through a package of investments, the W3B targets infrastructure improvements in spaces captured by China's BRI project. Moreover, the two powers are engaging soft power rivalry through what we can label as a positive-sum **vaccine diplomacy** to score more points on the scale of geopolitical relevance.*

Similarly to Obama's pivot to Asia, Biden's antagonist posture towards a 'revisionist China' could lead to its alienation from the world order, which is fraying at the edges. The outbreak of the pandemic revealed the inclination of nation states towards what international relations (IR) realists call "self-help politics" instead of reliance on international organizations. This behavior demonstrates the validity of the realist worldview. Realism holds that the international system is structurally anarchic to which states should react by maximizing their power for survival. Trading blames over the pandemic between the two powers amid a trade war would lower China's willingness to engage on other key global issues like the North Korean nuclear program, arms control, climate change and pandemics. The Biden administration is then trapped between the need to be combative with China and the risk of committing itself to a zero-sum existential rivalry. Alternatively, some IR theorists suggest more nuanced and balanced strategies to counter China. They advocate offshore Balancing (Layne 1997; Mearsheimer 2001) and Restraint (Posen 2014). Other IR analysts like Michael O'Hanlon (2021) advocate a strategy of "Resolute Restraint" in which the United States should avoid the dual hazards of 'overreacting and underreacting' to perceived threats. The Covid-19 pandemic represents a historical landmark not only because of the damage inflicted on global health but also because of its multifaceted effects on community security, economy, education, domestic politics and international relations. The available scholarships about US post-pandemic Grand Strategy may make the life of Foreign Policy analysts even harder in their attempt to clearly define Biden's strategy to confront of a mosaic of threats.

Theoretical framework

Pandemics and power dynamics

Despite its notoriously diverse nature, the different variations of Realism could however provide an explanatory reach and an understanding of the United States behavior towards what it perceives as threats to its national interests. Most realists would agree with Mearsheimer's emphasis on power as the currency of great power politics. In his words, "What money is to economics, power is to international relations" (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 26). Therefore, Sino-American relations represent an ideal case study for realists of all streams. realists, it must be recognized, do not place a high value on pandemics in terms of great power politics; however, the high mobility that defines today's world has made the spreading of pandemics a potential threat to states' security in all of its abstract dimensions.

Today's China is no longer a rising power. It has inexorably risen. China is displaying a successful model of a mono-party bureaucratic system that could economically challenge the Western model of liberal democracy. Buoyed by a thriving potent economy, China has embarked on a major expansion of its power projection capabilities. Conversely, the emergence of a new great power has always been a geo-politically destabilizing factor to an already existing order. This idea is as old as history itself. In the history of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides (460-400 B.C) wrote about Athens and Sparta's struggle for domination. His central argument relies on the inevitability of war because of Athens' growing power and the fear it instilled in Sparta. Thucydides is one of the prominent ancestral figures of political Realism. He wrote about the role of epidemics in the destabilization and decline of Athens. At the start of the Peloponnesian War in 430-426 BC, the Great Plague of Athens decimated the population, and contributed largely to the fall of classical Greece. Sparta, which was mildly affected by the plague, took advantage of the situation to dominate Athens and to eclipse its golden age. This lesson from history stresses the idea that pandemics/epidemics can have the potential to drastically influence power dynamics and can contribute to significant power shifts.

Revisionist state behavior: a dynamic or a static posture?

For neo realists, the challenge posed by emerging powers to a ruling power is inherently rooted in the anarchic international system. In the words of Mearsheimer "[I]t is a system populated with powers that have

revisionist intentions at their core” (2001, p.29). In this view, a revisionist state is one that is unsatisfied with its position in the international order and that strives to alter the system or "revise" it. Conversely, states with a status quo behavior strive to preserve the current international order as it is. Davidson (2006) uses a neo-classical realist framework to explain how periods of "concert" might arise when the majority of states are committed to maintaining the status quo. This would lead to the conjecture that revisionism and status quoism are not static state behaviors.

Paradoxically, there is a quasi-consensus among realists about the revisionist tendencies of China towards the international system (Huiyun, 2009), though the same system has bolstered its rise to a great power status. However oxymoronic, these two opposing realities have to be addressed in a more inclusive and flexible manner, one that puts aside the Manichean-like stringent polarization of revisionist state versus status quo state. Alternatively, it is safe to argue that the behavior of China would be more an amalgam of revisionism and ‘status quoism’.

On the one hand, China is more likely to exhibit less receptive behavior and hence act as a revisionist state when its interests are threatened. This includes US efforts to globalize the standards of human rights, challenge the “One China Principle,” or impose sweeping tariffs on Chinese trade. On the other, China would act as a status quo state in some issues such as the centrality of the United Nations for global governance, the global war on terrorism, peacekeeping missions in conflict zones, or the global mobilization to confront pandemics.

As Figure 1 shows, Revisionism and ‘Status-quoism’ can then be viewed as two opposite ends of a world order pendulum within which nation-states swing in response to events and circumstances that potentially influence their national interests and threaten their endeavors for survival in a non-benign international order.

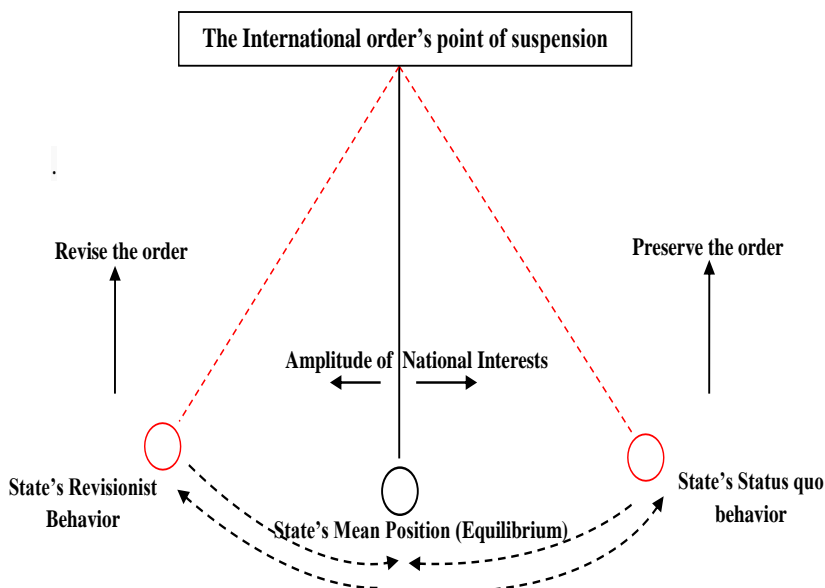


Figure 1 *The Pendulum of State behavior. By the authors.*

Figure 1 illustrates how states generally strike a balance between revisionism and status quoism. The amplitude of a state's interests triggers its power projection capabilities, the driving force that propels the ball from a position of equilibrium towards a position of status quo or a position of revisionism. For instance, the US unilateralist moves, notably the withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement and the Iran nuclear deal are two revisionist moves. When national interests collide with the requirements of the international system, even the leader of that system adopts a revisionist posture. US Presidents who adhere to Jeffersonian statesmanship reject making any domestic concessions or changes to accommodate the nation to any new order. Alternatively, they require the rest of the world to accommodate itself to the American values (Mead, 2001). Concisely, status quoism and revisionism may not be viewed as static but dynamic behaviors in Great Power Politics. Both represent a transient posture influenced by the threats posed to the national interests of a great power and the level of power projection capabilities that nation possesses, to change or sustain a particular order.

The pandemic as political instrument: 'democracies' versus

‘autocracies’

To divert attention from the failure to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, President Trump blamed China for under reporting the number of cases (Smith, 2020). China questioned whether the virus began in Wuhan and promoted the idea that the infection was first detected in China but the virus may not have originated in Wuhan. Chinese officials did not provide evidence about their allegations that the virus originated in the United States or Italy especially that the index case or patient zero remained a subject of controversy. Regardless of the virus's origin, China and the United States have engaged in non-constructive blaming rhetoric that has only served to prove the realist vision of an international order in which states prioritize local interests over a worldwide collaborative effort to combat pandemics. The dispute over whether "democracies" or "autocracies" handled the corona virus crisis better shaded the global response to the pandemic.

Despite the success of China in mobilizing a large number of resources to contain the virus, it was criticized for the lack of transparency and delayed preventive measures to curb the virus from spreading globally. Strong ‘autocracies,’ according to Ang (2020), excel at mass mobilization, especially when the ‘chairman of everything’ gives the green light. China’s centralized system of governance coupled with the iron grip of Chairman Xi Jinping played a major role in overcoming the pandemic. However, Ang (2020) contends that Beijing's response to the virus's outbreak had fatal flaws. This includes a lack of transparency and initial inaction, which contributed to the virus's spread across China and beyond. Ang believes that without wise leadership and state capacity, even democratic governments cannot ensure an efficient response to pandemics. However, he concedes that any government needs some minimal democratic qualities so that it can create “a climate that empowers not only civil society but also public officials to speak candidly about problems without fear of reprisals” (p.445). The political debate over the supremacy of autocracies over democracies, or vice versa, in handling the virus is misguided. The available evidence demonstrates that both systems of governance have displayed lethal deficiencies in their response to the pandemic. Instead of getting engaged in a joint global effort to efficiently handle the health crisis, the two powers have used the virus as an instrument for political dispute through the corrosive overtone of ‘China Virus’ and jingoist diplomacy of ‘wolf warrior’.

President Trump, who initially downplayed the virus and considered it

a minor nuisance, became rapidly involved in the politics of ‘othering’ by referring to the virus as “the China virus,” “the Wuhan virus” and “Kung Flu.” Sneider (2020, para.11) argues that President Trump pressed the US intelligence community “[T]o scour their files in search of anything which would lend credence to the idea that China was responsible for the pandemic”. This was probably an attempt to divert the public attention from his administration’s mismanagement of the health crisis in the United States, which suffered the highest death toll of 400.000 victims in eleven months. Beijing retaliated with its increasingly dominating ‘Wolf Warrior diplomacy’ (Zhu, 2020), providing an indication about its sensitivity for any inquiry into the origins of the pandemic. Named after Chinese Special Forces movies, wolf warrior diplomacy portrays offensives by Chinese diplomats in defending China’s national interests in confrontational ways. Chinese diplomats used social media platforms to attack external criticism of China’s handling of the corona virus especially that the growing international demands for reparation over the corona virus tantalizes the Chinese leadership. This diplomatic offensive demonstrates that China’s strident tone applies whether the issue is Xinjiang, Taiwan or Covid-19.

While Trump's political motive for blaming China for the pandemic was to secure his reelection (Sneider, 2020), President Biden's more cautious approach carries more credibility and foreshadows a highly polarized post-pandemic world in which rivalry will be intensified between democratic and autocratic superpowers. With a more assertive behavior, China is not expected to be less aggressive, especially when its economic interests in the United States will be no longer an incentive to control its behavior. The ongoing attempts for the alienation of China may lower its willingness to engage on important issues such as nuclear arms proliferation. The preservation of status quo in the South China Sea, arms control and cyber security hence open the door for a new era of tensions reminiscent of the Cold War era.

The economic implications of the pandemic: Build Back a Better World (B3W) versus Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

While the pandemic and lockdowns wreaked havoc on Western economies including US GDP, China's economy grew by 2.3% in 2020. It grew by 18.3% in the first quarter of 2021, and the World Bank predicts it will increase by 8.5% in 2021 (The World Bank, 2021). The pandemic caused a dramatic souring in relations between Beijing and Washington. In his re-election campaign, Trump and some hard line members of his

administration advocated an economic decoupling with China that many specialists view as a double-edged sword (Broadman, 2019). With the United States abusing the power to impose tariffs and sanctions, this may increase the incentive for China to circumvent the dominant US financial systems and create its own systems. China's alienation from the US markets will make it difficult for American policymakers to curb its revisionist behavior, especially if Beijing views it has nothing to lose by acting in that direction.

President Trump locked Sino-American relations in transactional terms. The belief that the United States has long been the victim of inequitable trade deals prompted President Trump and his administration to follow protectionist policies to bring down the deficit in bilateral trade balance (see figure 2). The trade war with China consumed the majority of Trump's one-term presidency, beginning with imposing sweeping tariffs on Chinese goods and culminating in a trade deal that included the relief of some tariffs on Chinese imports and increased Chinese purchase of US agricultural goods. Despite the tariffs, China's trade imbalance with the US grew once the pandemic was under control because of increased order for medical equipment and work-from-home technology (Bloomberg, 2021).

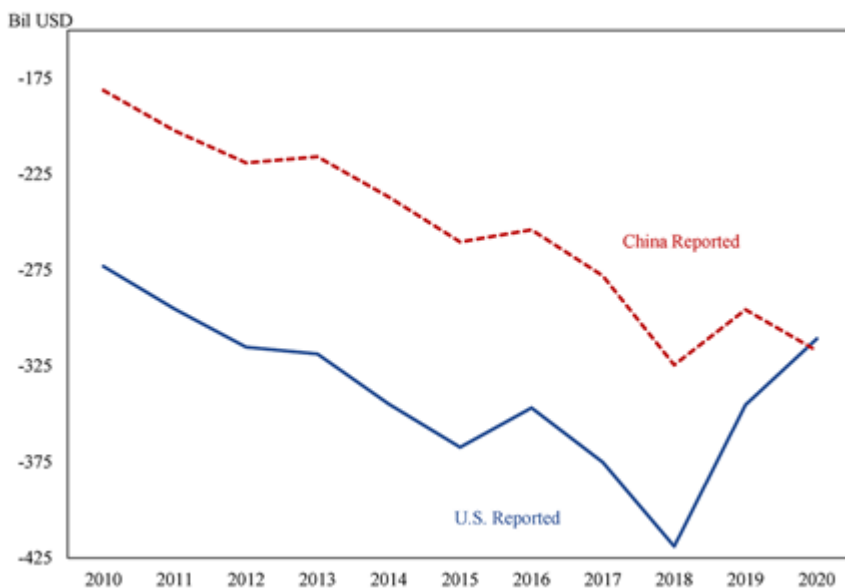


Figure 2 Reported U.S.-China Bilateral Goods Trade Deficit (Clark and Wong, 2021)

Amid the global decline in Covid-19 cases and in a late response to the

Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the G7 Cornwall summit adopted the US-backed spending plan: Build Back Better World (B3W) for the improvement of infrastructure in low and middle-income countries across the globe. The White house described the Project as “a values-driven, high-standard, and transparent infrastructure partnership led by major democracies to help narrow the \$40+ trillion infrastructure need in the developing world, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic” (The White House, 2021). Biden’s anti-China propensity in the economic sphere is not limited to the B3W project. President Biden maintained the previous administration's tariffs on Chinese goods and vowed to prevent Chinese acquisitions and investments in the United States. He also issued an executive order prohibiting Americans from investing in Chinese firms involved in military or surveillance technology. (The White House, 2021).

The Cornwall G-7 summit requested China to “participate constructively in the rules-based international system”. In contrast to the United States' pursuit of a "liberal international order," China is vocal about its rejection of what it considers as a violation of international relations standards in terms of state sovereignty. China claims that it was not at the table when the rule-making process began and that “the days when global decisions were dictated by a small group of countries are long gone” (Faulconbridge & Holland, 2021). China has continued, however, to follow a strategy of building an ‘empire without tears’ through the expansion of its economic reach across the globe while implementing gunboat diplomacy in the South China Sea due to its increasing dependence on sea trade. Beijing started ramping up its economic reach at the same time that the United States was scaling back. Besides its active involvement in infrastructure projects in Africa, China introduced its state-owned pharmaceutical companies Sinopharm and Sinovac to the international market through partnerships to produce and commercialize china-developed vaccines locally. Under the umbrella of South-South collaboration, it has capitalized on the global need for vaccines and the inertia that gripped American and western pharmaceutical firms to win the vaccine production licensing deals in Africa, Pakistan, Indonesia, Turkey, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and the UAE. Beijing presented its mono-party bureaucratic system as a ‘successful economic model’ not only for the countries of the South but also to U.S. partners and regional allies.

The soft power of the vaccine diplomacy

Although many neo-realists disregarded the importance of soft power, claiming that international players only respond to hard power and economic incentives, Nye's Soft Power analysis is acknowledged as a contribution to realist forms of power by including non-material forms. Nye (2004) defines soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments", he explains that "When you can get others to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction"(p.256). Vaccine diplomacy is a potential weapon of soft power that could be used on positive-sum interaction, considering that both powers are vaccine producers. It represents an opportunity for U.S. foreign policymakers to respond to the pandemic, by winning hearts and minds and by painting a better picture than the one of America's tainted interventionist adventures and unilateralist moves. For Beijing, soft power could be an instrument to reassure neighboring countries who are wary about its increased power projection capabilities and at the same time enhance its presence in the countries involved in the Belt and Road project.

The need for equitable access to vaccines in low-income countries prompted Beijing and Washington to instigate a vaccine donation diplomacy. China had donated vaccines to countries in Latin America, the backyard of the United States while the Biden administration pledged to donate 750.000 Covid-19 vaccine doses to Taiwan on top of half a billion doses worldwide as part of reasserting US leadership on the international scene (Klein, Sullivan and Vazquez, 2021). Although Beijing has not provided an overall figure for its vaccine donations, publicly available statistics, according to Reuters and Xinhua news agencies, show that at least 16.82 million doses had been donated by the end of June 2021 to 66 countries across the globe. China has also pledged to supply 10 million doses to COVAX, a worldwide initiative that aims at an equitable access to vaccines. China pledged to donate an overall 350 million shots via its "health silk road" initiative that targets essentially those countries, which participate in its BRI. Along similar lines, the United States pledged to donate half a billion doses of vaccine to the world's poorest countries, in addition to 80 million doses it has previously committed to donate by the end of June 2021 (see figure 3).

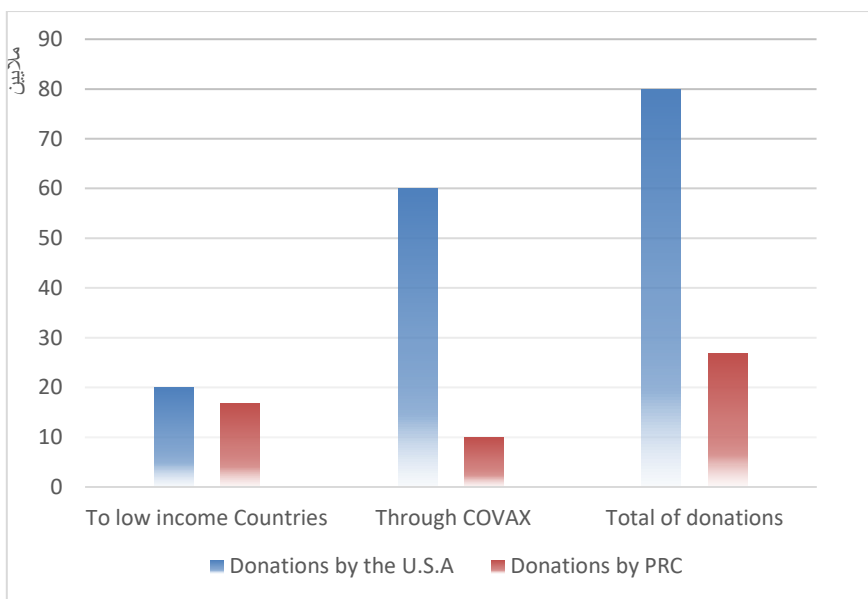


Figure 3 Vaccine donations/vows by the USA and China, as of June 2021. By the Authors.

Beijing and Washington are engaging soft power rivalry through vaccine diplomacy to score more points on the scale of international leadership and vaunt their economic and scientific achievements. Washington aims at filling the vacuum produced by the unilateral withdrawal from the international stage by the Trump administration and repair the damages inflicted on its international leadership. Beijing has capitalized on the global demand for vaccines to create a new image of China as a solution provider rather than a cause of the pandemic. It has also used the vaccine diplomacy to bolster its economic clout, particularly in the BRI countries.

Biden's post-pandemic alternative grand strategy

U.S. grand strategy and neo-realism

If the Covid-19 pandemic uncovered the flaws of the post-cold war international order, notably the self-interest nature of nation states, it may also raise questions about what Grand Strategy the United States will pursue in the post pandemic era. Should it abandon its strategy of liberal hegemony or adapt it through a synergy of strategies, the available scholarships have suggested. American IR scholars identified four major Grand Strategies for the United States: Neo Isolationism, selective engagement, primacy and cooperative security (Posen and Ross, 1997). The most recent scholarly taxonomy suggests a fusion of strategies

of primacy and cooperative security into a new strategy of liberal hegemony, and the fusion of neo isolationism and selective engagement into a new strategy of restraint (Posen, 2014). Other scholars proposed a third Grand strategy of offshore balancing (Layne, 1997; Mearsheimer, 2001) which advocates a significant reduction of overseas presence. Liberal hegemony and offshore balancing are rooted in offensive realist theory unlike Restraint, which is associated with defensive realist theory.

After the fall of the iron curtain, the United States pursued a consistent grand strategy of liberal hegemony with clear objective - to preserve the unipolar moment and the United States' preeminent global position. While denying any return to bipolarity or multi polarity, primacy holds that only through the preponderance of US power that peace could be achieved and maintained. The rise of illiberal peer competitors, according to proponents of liberal hegemony, represents one of the most serious threats to US-led international order (Mastanduno, 1997; Posen and Ross 1997; Posen, 2014). For realists, US foreign policy decisions are the consequences of external pressures arising from the distribution of power in the international system. With this in mind, the lack of higher regulatory authority above the state level in the international system foment the power-seeking behavior of states. Offensive realists like Mearsheimer and Layne (2016) consider that the erosion of the U.S. primacy could emerge from competing revisionist states like China and Russia. The current economic trends and military might of China have qualified the country to ascend to the top ranks of world powers and act as a peer competitor that threatens to exacerbate the cracks in the US-led international order and arguably eclipse three decades of American unipolar moment.

Despite its tainted success in some areas, the post-cold war strategy of liberal hegemony left the United States overstretched, weakened its budget and allowed rising powers to free ride on its economy. It helped regional powers to grow faster and outgrow the United States. Carpenter (2013) considers that the proponents of primacy are trapped in the "switch light" concept in which there are only two options: ON or OFF and failed to grasp that there are other alternatives to global interventionism and isolationism. Two of these alternatives are the strategies of offshore balancing and Restraint. In both strategies, the United States would refrain from significant involvement in overseas security unless it is necessary; however, they differ in the nature of circumstances in which the United States should intervene. Offshore balancing gives primacy to the preservation of balance of power in

Western Europe, Arab Gulf and Northeast Asia, whereas a strategy of Restraint considers Eurasia as the epicenter of balance of power.

The bottleneck of international liberalism

The legacies of previous Presidents played a major role in shaping Biden's confrontational strategy with China. In his memoir entitled A Promised Land, President Obama (2020) considers that China's GDP was expected to surpass America's, given China's growth rate and sheer size. To him, "When you added this to the country's powerful military, increasingly skilled workforce, shrewd and pragmatic government, and cohesive five thousand-year-old culture, the conclusion felt obvious." In line with realist predictions, President Obama concludes that "If any country was likely to challenge U.S. preeminence on the world stage, it was China" (p. 343). President Obama's first years were marked by a welcoming attitude toward China's rise based on win-win bilateral relations. However, "long simmering tensions and mistrust" lingered over a number of issues, including the Chinese gunboat diplomacy and its 'expansive' claims in the South China Sea, its reluctance to play a constructive role in the sinking of a South Korean navy ship by North Korea and its position towards the emission of greenhouse gases.

According to Jeffery Bader, an insider of America's Asia strategy and senior director for East Asia affairs on the National Security Council in the early Obama years, the most alarming event during the tenure of President Obama occurred in the South China Sea. It was the dredging and construction and militarization of artificial islands, and it proved to be a warning about China's ambitions to dominate the region. (Barboza and Bader, 2020). In his memoir, Bader (2012) gives an account of a closed-door session of the ASEAN regional forum annual meeting held in Hanoi in 2010. Then, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reaffirmed the US-long standing position of not taking sides on territorial disputes. She emphasized US vital interests, including freedom of navigation, freedom of trade, and that all rights in waters would need to be grounded in land-based claims that comply with the law of the sea convention. The answer of Chinese foreign Minister Yang Jiechi jolted the meeting out of its slumber by denying any problem in the South China Sea. Jiechi also warned ASEAN countries not to be involved in a cabal prearranged by an outside power. "China is a big country bigger than any other countries here," he asserted (p.105). For the United States, the message was clear. China's assertive diplomacy and intimidating tone aims to deter ASEAN countries from seeking multilateral support.

The United States reacted to China's moves with a rebalancing strategy in order to reassure its regional allies and revive America's relevance in the region. By the autumn of 2011 and well into the beginning of 2012, the Obama Administration started the implementation of its "Pivot to Asia" policy through new deployment of troops and expansion of American presence in the South West Pacific. According to Xue Li, a prominent Chinese foreign policy expert, the pivot's aim was to balance the rapidly rising power of China and reinforce American credibility in the region through strengthening its regional dominance. (Zhang, 2016). Along similar lines, many Chinese policy elites expressed concerns that the pivot represents America's latest attempt to contain China and its expansion in the South China Sea and revive the relevance of the United States in the Pacific. (Zhang, 2016). Chinese suspicions are justified especially after the American withdrawal from Iraq and the end of America's absorption by the embroilments of the Middle East and the great economic recession.

Although many Obama defenders like Kurt Campbell (2016) hailed the pivot as a success because it pulled the United States from the quagmire of costly interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the pivot failed to achieve its key goals. The deployment of additional military resources to the Pacific heightened tensions in the Asia-Pacific and emboldened China which viewed the pivot as proof of US hostile intentions and an attempt to encircle the country (Ford, 2017). Beijing continued to press its claims in the South China Sea and narrowed the gap between its military capabilities and those of the United States. It defended its model of development as a viable alternative to the 'tainted' western model.

After few months in the oval office, the race to identify a Biden's doctrine is already at all-time high. The decisions made during the terms of Presidents Obama and Trump have locked Biden within a combative imperative that stems from what they see as the threat posed by China to international liberalism. All signs seem to agree with the assumption that Biden's antagonist posture towards China will continue through constant economic decoupling and tense diplomatic pressure. Many columnists have focused on the concept of ideological rivalry between "democracies" and "autocracies" and the United States' escalating confrontation with China (Roggeveen, 2021; Lungu, 2021). While Biden's present policy against China is recognized as politically and economically justifiable, many analysts question its coherence with the tenets of liberal internationalism and doubt its strategic relevance and merits. Jackson (2020) explains how liberal internationalism, to which

President Biden ascribes, is caught in between four opposing chairs. The United States must be combative with china without committing itself to an existential rivalry. It must mitigate the risks of war and enhance Taiwan's defense capabilities. It must alleviate tariffs but continue to sanction China. It must follow the process of economic decoupling without impeding free trade. This sequence of binary contradictions would compel President Biden and his team to endorse a an eclectic strategy that combines a variety of policy instruments capable of curbing an assertive China from challenging status quo in regional waters while avoiding military escalation.

The neo-realist debottleneck: alternative competing visions

Mainstream realists including Mearsheimer and Layne agree that the twenty-first-century world will be multipolar. The US response suggested by realists would be to adopt a restrained policy of offshore balancing (Layne, 1997; Mearsheimer, 2001). This strategy would achieve two objectives: reduce the risk of US involvement in the embroilments of war with great powers (potentially a nuclear war) and enhance its posture in the international stage. This holds that the United States would be more secure and powerful as an offshore balancer by “circumscribing its overseas engagements” (Layne, 1997, p 87). Layne argues that a strategy of preponderance will become untenable because of the changing distribution of power in the international system and the rapid erosion of the US extended deterrence strategy. He asserts that the costs and risks of preponderance would rise to unacceptably high levels as the United States overstretches its military engagements. Alternatively, offshore balancing would allow the United Sates to withdraw and remobilize its military should a regional balance becomes under structural threat.

The realist position holds that casting the relationship with China in ideological terms is at odds with the core principles of great power competition. Besides, it risks alienating U.S. allies and involving the United States in unnecessary entanglements. A possible debottleneck strategy would be through the realist maxim which holds that national interests should be protected involving the exploration of all possible means including the discount of moral agency. In an imperfect world order, the promotion of American ideals could be nothing but a recipe for a return to the costly interventionism of the past two decades. Mearsheimer and Walt (2016) lambast the strategy of liberal hegemony as fundamentally revisionist. They argue that “instead of calling the United States to merely uphold the balance of power in key regions; it

commits American might to promoting democracy everywhere and defending human rights whenever they are threatened” (p. 71). Alternatively, they advocate a strategy of offshore balancing based on narrowed US interests and less ambition in imposing American ideals on other societies.

For Mearsheimer and Walt, offshore balancing involves the preservation of US dominance in the Western hemisphere and countering potential hegemon in three regions: Western Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Arab gulf. While the first two regions embrace key centers of industrial power and the other great powers, the third is the source of more than 30% of the world’s oil. The United States would delegate the responsibility to counter rising regional powers to its allies and partners, intervening only when necessary. In contrast to liberal hegemony, this strategy advocates for a much curtailed presence abroad, but contends that involvement is required in more cases than a strategy of Restraint (see table 1). Offshore balancing is largely based on the premise of geographical providence of the United States in terms of its location between two vast oceans coupled with abundant natural resources and unrivaled military might whereby the likelihood of an attack against the American homeland is very low.

	Offshore Balancing	Restraint
School of Thought	Offensive Realism	Defensive Realism
Geographical priorities	Western Europe – The Arab Gulf – Northeast Asia	Eurasia
Major challenge in international politics	The rise of potential regional hegemon	The physical security of the United States
Preferred world order	Balance of power	Distant balance of power
Promotion of liberal values	Selective	Refrain
Use of Force	Restricted	Self defense
National interests	Narrow	Narrow

Table 1 *Offshore Balancing versus Restraint. By the Authors.*

What policy instruments would the United States - as an offshore balancer - implement in the case of a risen regional hegemon is a very important question. The proponents of offshore balancing propose a first

line of defense based on local allies to maintain the balance of power in their environs. In the event that regional allies fail to deter or contain a potential hegemon, the United States should deploy the necessary means to tip the balance in its favor. In the case of China, a strategy of offshore balancing may not be successful considering that local regional powers are far less powerful than China. In this case, Mearsheimer and Walt suggest that the United States may have to throw its weight to back its allies. .

Unlike offensive realists, defensive realists argue in favor of a strategy of restraint as a new foundation for US grand strategy. Posen (2014) views US strategy of liberal hegemony as being “costly, wasteful and counterproductive” (p. 24). He adds, “The strategy makes enemies almost as quickly as it dispatches them. [It] encourages less-friendly states to compete with the United States more intensively” (p. 24). In line with the realist tradition, advocates of strategic restraint believe that the physical security of the United States should be the main goal of US strategy. Being powerful and geographically gifted, the only danger the country could face is a nuclear attack and this can be deterred. The long-term geopolitical goal of the United States is to preserve the balance of power in Eurasia while reducing its activism. Posen proposes a phased reduction of US political commitments and military deployments and a transfer of the responsibility for security to US allies until a strategic autonomy is achieved. Although offshore balancing and Restraint would allow the United States to curtail its defense budget, reduce its overstretching offshore military presence and delegate balancing of potential hegemons to its regional allies, there is a risk that an offshore balancer's absence will push local powers to fill the vacuum by acquiring nuclear weapons to deter China.

Along similar lines, O’Hanlon (2021) advocates for a strategy of “Resolute Restraint”. In his book “The Art of War in an age of Peace”, O’Hanlon considers that America’s interests are best served with a “strategy that should be resolute in its commitments to defend the core territories, populations and economies of U.S allies as well as the free and open skies and oceans....However America needs to show restraint” (p.15). He recommends that the United States should refrain fighting in zones that are near the Chinese or Russian borders and depend more on asymmetric defense and deterrence and employment of economic and military tools while avoiding “drawing first blood” in any superpower showdown. Resolute Restraint implies that the United States should not cover the globe with its military blanket, especially in areas near the

Chinese and Russian homelands. Alternatively, American forces should be used primarily to uphold the core of rules-based international order and deter major wars involving US allies or the United States itself. In terms of promoting liberal values in far-flung corners of the globe, the strategy advocates the cautious use of non-military means.

For Classical realists, the postwar order was not particularly benign. Latham (2021) argues that it was rather “less an artefact of benign liberalism than of great power assertiveness, imperial logic and mercantilism”. That said, the United States postwar Grand Strategy was not one of upholding a benign liberal order, but a strategy that imposed a system based on US national interests and imperial overstretch. Latham (2021) considers that the Grand Strategy of Resolute Restraint offered by O’Hanlon is less a third way between international liberalism and Restraint taking into account that both the liberal International Order (LIO) and the rules-based international order (RBO) are nearly identical. While the former advocates the overt promotion of liberal values and liberal forms of governance, the latter is based on free trade, diplomatic resolution of conflicts and cooperation on issues of common interest, all of them stem from the Liberal school of thought. Therefore, the two orders could be regarded as two variations of the western tradition of international liberalism rather than two distinctive orders.

Conclusion

The deterioration of Sino-American relations after years of stability and bilateral cooperation is partly due to America’s strategy of liberal hegemony that dominated the US foreign policy in the post-cold war era. For realists, the US interventionist trajectory is inherently revisionist. It aims at preserving the US unipolar moment through the projection of military power. After two decades of costly interventions, the United States finds itself in the midst of steep economic recession and fierce economic rivalry with a pragmatic China. According to the United States, China reaps the benefits of international trade ‘without abiding by the rules’. Washington views Beijing’s trade practices as unfair, and that perception prompted the Trump Administration to retaliate in 2018. President Trump launched then a trade war against what Washington labeled as ‘the free rider’ in order to reduce the deficit in the bilateral trade and limit Chinese access to American technology.

Even if Covid-19 has not literally triggered the current confrontational behavior of the United States towards China, yet it has increased the rift between the two powers through a renewed ideological rivalry between

'democracies and 'autocracies'. Both powers have resorted to soft power interactions of the vaccine diplomacy to gain geopolitical relevance across the globe. For the same purpose, Beijing and Washington have also been involved in competing economic initiatives after the implementation of the US-backed B3W project to counter the Chinese BRI. Besides, the ongoing economic decoupling process initiated by Washington may continue with an increased pace although it is criticized by many pundits as mutually detrimental. Economically, it may force Beijing to circumvent the dominant US led financial system and create its own, involving countries affiliated with its BRI initiative. Strategically, the decoupling may alienate China from the international order and thus makes the curbing of its revisionist behavior more difficult. Losing the American market for China will make it far less collaborative in key global issues.

The spectrum of nuanced grand strategies suggested by realists lay the foundation for a viable alternative to Biden's ailing international liberalism in the post-pandemic era. The preservation of US global leadership and the curtailing of its security blanket especially in areas near the Chinese homeland is at the core of these strategies. Offshore balancing, restraint and resolute restraint share three main tenets. First, the United States should either refrain or restrict its ambitions in imposing its liberal values on other societies. Second, American national interests should be narrowed to key regions. Third, the balancing of emerging hegemony should be entrusted to US local allies and partners. realists believe that the framing of the Sino American relations on ideological foundation between 'democracies' and 'autocracies' will only bring the United States back to the decades of costly and counterproductive interventions. Instead, the United States should set an example of governance that others would want to follow rather than imposing it on other societies through military interventions, economic sanctions, diplomatic coercion and social engineering. With the United States' hegemony giving way to shared multipolar supremacy, the world is on the pivot of power transition where muscular diplomacy of a single power is no longer a viable option.

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