

GREAT POWER COMPETITION AND THE RISING US-CHINA RIVALRY: POWER, INTERDEPENDENCE, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF GLOBAL ORDER

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Abstract

The escalating rivalry between the United States and China has arisen as the defining feature of contemporary great power competition, reshaping the dynamics of international politics in the 21st century. This paper examines the strategic, economic, and technological dimensions of US-China relations, interrogating whether the current trajectory reflects a transition toward a new bipolar order or a more complex, interdependent form of competition. It explores how both powers deploy military modernization, trade policies, and technological innovation, particularly in areas of artificial intelligence and semiconductor production, to expand influence and secure strategic advantage. The paper analyzes the paradox of “competitive interdependence,” where deep economic ties coexist with escalating geopolitical tensions. The paper is qualitative, utilizing secondary sources of data collection, anchored on power transition theory, relying on content analysis. The paper found that the US–China rivalry cannot be adequately understood through traditional Cold War analogies, as it is characterized by multidimensional competition embedded within globalization rather than ideological isolation. The paper recommends that the US and China should prioritize strategic stability through sustained dialogue.

Keywords: *power, competition, strategic, rivalry, US-China*

Introduction

The contemporary international system is increasingly shaped by the resurgence of great-power competition, particularly the strategic rivalry between the United States and China. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has enjoyed a period of unipolar dominance characterized by liberal internationalism, economic globalization, and the expansion of multilateral institutions. However, the rapid economic, technological, and military rise of China has fundamentally altered the balance of global power, leading scholars and policymakers to describe the emerging era as one of strategic competition and systemic transition (Mearsheimer, 2014; Allison, 2017). This rivalry has increasingly become the defining feature of international politics in the twenty-first century, with profound implications for global governance, economic interdependence, security architecture, and the future of world order. The rise of China from a developing state to a global economic powerhouse represents one of the most significant geopolitical transformations in modern history. Following the economic reforms initiated under Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China experienced unprecedented economic growth, transforming into the world’s second-largest economy and a central actor in global trade and manufacturing. This rise challenged the long-standing dominance of the United States in economic and strategic affairs.

As China expanded its influence through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, technological innovation, military modernization, and institutional diplomacy, concerns emerged in Washington over the possibility of a shift in the global balance of power (Ikenberry, 2018). Consequently, the United States adopted policies aimed at containing or balancing China’s growing influence, particularly in areas such as trade, technology, cybersecurity, and military presence in the Indo-Pacific region. The rivalry between the United States and China is rooted in both traditional power politics and contemporary economic interdependence. Realist scholars argue that great-power competition is an inevitable consequence of shifts in relative power. According to power transition theory, rising powers often challenge the dominance of established powers, thereby increasing the likelihood of rivalry and conflict (Organski, 1958; Gilpin, 1981). In this context, China’s rapid ascent threatens the strategic primacy of the United States, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, where both states compete for influence, alliances, and military superiority. The United States views China’s growing military capabilities and regional assertiveness as threats to the liberal international order, while China perceives

American alliances, military deployments, and containment strategies as attempts to obstruct its national rejuvenation.

Despite these tensions, the relationship between the two powers is also characterized by deep economic interdependence. Liberal theorists maintain that globalization and economic integration create mutual dependencies that reduce the likelihood of outright military confrontation (Keohane & Nye, 1977). The United States and China are closely connected through trade, investment, supply chains, financial systems, and technological exchanges. China remains one of the largest trading partners of the United States, while American companies rely heavily on Chinese manufacturing and consumer markets. This interconnectedness has produced what scholars describe as “competitive interdependence,” where rivalry coexists with cooperation in areas such as climate change, global finance, health security, and scientific research. However, recent developments suggest that economic interdependence is increasingly being weaponized as part of strategic competition. Trade disputes, sanctions, export controls, restrictions on semiconductor technologies, and concerns over technological dependence have intensified the process of economic decoupling between the two powers (Wang, 2020). The trade war initiated during the administration of Donald Trump marked a significant escalation in U.S.–China tensions, reflecting broader concerns about unfair trade practices, intellectual property theft, and technological competition. In response, China accelerated efforts to achieve technological self-reliance and reduce dependence on Western markets and technologies. This evolving dynamic demonstrates how globalization has transformed from a source of cooperation into a domain of geopolitical contestation.

The U.S.–China rivalry extends beyond economics and security into ideological and institutional dimensions. The United States promotes a liberal democratic order based on human rights, free markets, and multilateral governance, whereas China advocates principles of state sovereignty, non-interference, and alternative development models. This ideological divergence has contributed to competing visions of global governance and international norms (Wu, 2021). China’s increasing participation in international institutions, coupled with the establishment of new financial and development institutions, has challenged the dominance of Western-led institutions in shaping global rules and standards. Scholars argue that this contest represents not merely a bilateral rivalry but a broader struggle over the future character of the international order. Furthermore, technological competition has become a central arena of great-power rivalry. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, 5G networks, biotechnology, and cybersecurity are increasingly linked to national security and geopolitical influence (Zhao, 2021). The competition over technological supremacy reflects broader concerns about strategic dominance in the digital age. Both the United States and China are investing heavily in innovation, research, and technological infrastructure to secure leadership in the global economy and military affairs. This technological race has contributed to the securitization of global supply chains and intensified geopolitical tensions across multiple regions.

Similarly, the transformation of global order resulting from the US–China rivalry has significant implications for other states and regions. Middle powers, developing countries, and international organizations are increasingly compelled to navigate the pressures of alignment, economic dependence, and strategic uncertainty. Regions such as the Indo-Pacific, Africa, Europe, and Latin America have become important arenas where both powers compete for influence through investment, diplomacy, military partnerships, and development assistance (Zhu, 2020). At the same time, global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, terrorism, and economic instability require cooperation between the two powers despite their rivalry. This duality of competition and cooperation underscores the complexity of contemporary international relations. Consequently, the contemporary global order is undergoing a profound transformation driven by the strategic competition between the United States and China. While realism emphasizes the inevitability of rivalry arising from shifting power distributions, liberal perspectives highlight the restraining effects of economic interdependence and institutional engagement. The interaction between power politics and globalization has produced a complex international environment where competition, cooperation, and interdependence coexist simultaneously. Understanding the dynamics of the US–China rivalry is therefore essential for explaining the evolving nature of global order, international security, and the future trajectory of world politics in the twenty-first century. Therefore, this paper examines the strategic, economic, and technological dimensions of US-China relations, interrogating whether the current trajectory reflects a transition toward a new bipolar order or a more complex, interdependent form of competition.

Great-Power Competition and the Transformation of Global Order: The US-China Rivalry

The resurgence of great-power competition has become one of the defining characteristics of contemporary international relations, particularly with the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China. Scholars increasingly argue that the post-Cold War unipolar order dominated by the United States is gradually giving way to a more contested and multipolar international system shaped by the rise of China and the strategic responses of other global actors (Ikenberry, 2018). This transformation has generated extensive scholarly debate on the nature, causes, dimensions, and implications of US–China rivalry for the global order, international institutions, economic globalization, and international security. Realist scholars explain the US–China rivalry

primarily through the lens of power transition and balance-of-power theories. According to realism, great powers naturally compete for influence and security in an anarchic international system (Mearsheimer, 2014). The rapid economic and military rise of China is viewed as a direct challenge to the long-standing hegemonic position of the United States. Organski's (1958) power transition theory suggests that periods of instability emerge when a rising power approaches parity with a dominant power. In this regard, China's growing economic capabilities, technological advancement, and military modernization have heightened American concerns about the erosion of its global supremacy. Recent studies emphasize that the rivalry reflects structural tensions inherent in shifting distributions of power within the international system.

Mearsheimer (2014) argues that China's rise will inevitably produce intense strategic competition because great powers seek regional dominance and attempt to prevent rivals from achieving a similar status. From this perspective, the United States seeks to contain China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region through alliances, military deployments, and strategic partnerships such as the Quad and AUKUS. China, on the other hand, seeks to expand its regional and global influence through military modernization, economic diplomacy, and strategic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative. Scholars such as Degterev, Ramich, and Tsvyk (2021) describe this development as an emerging form of "conflict bipolarity," where the international system increasingly revolves around two dominant powers competing across multiple domains.

In contrast, liberal scholars emphasize the role of economic interdependence, international institutions, and globalization in moderating great-power rivalry. Keohane and Nye (1977) argue that complex interdependence creates mutual vulnerabilities that reduce the likelihood of direct military conflict between states. The U.S. and China maintain extensive economic ties through trade, investment, global supply chains, and technological cooperation. This economic interconnectedness has led some scholars to argue that the rivalry differs significantly from the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Rather than complete ideological and economic separation, contemporary rivalry involves simultaneous competition and cooperation. Mahbubani (2020) contends that although tensions have intensified, both countries remain deeply embedded within the same globalized economic system. However, recent literature suggests that economic interdependence has increasingly become a source of strategic vulnerability rather than cooperation. Wang and Zeng (2020) observe that U.S.–China economic relations have evolved from cooperation toward strategic competition, especially following the 2008 global financial crisis and the escalation of trade disputes during the Trump administration. Trade wars, export controls, sanctions, and technological restrictions have demonstrated how economic instruments are increasingly weaponized in geopolitical competition. The concept of "weaponized interdependence" has therefore emerged to explain how states exploit global economic networks for strategic advantage.

Technological competition has also become a central dimension of the rivalry. Scholars argue that emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum computing, cybersecurity, and 5G infrastructures are now closely linked to national power and global influence. Zhao (2020) notes that technological supremacy has become a critical component of strategic competition because control over technology shapes economic growth, military capabilities, and international influence. The rivalry between the United States and China has therefore expanded beyond military and economic competition into a struggle over innovation, digital infrastructure, and global technological standards. This has contributed to the securitization of supply chains and the fragmentation of global technology networks. Another important strand of literature focuses on the ideological and normative dimensions of the rivalry. Some scholars argue that the competition reflects a broader contest between liberal democratic values promoted by the United States and the state-centred authoritarian model associated with China. Perthes (2021) contends that the rivalry is multidimensional, involving not only power politics but also competing visions of governance, development, and international norms. The United States continues to defend a liberal rules-based international order based on democracy, free markets, and human rights, while China promotes principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and alternative development pathways. This ideological dimension has contributed to debates about whether the world is entering a "new Cold War."

Nevertheless, some scholars reject the characterization of the rivalry as a new Cold War. Mahbubani (2020) argues that, unlike the U.S.–Soviet rivalry, the U.S. and China remain economically interconnected and cooperate in areas such as climate change, public health, and global finance. Similarly, He and Feng (2025) emphasize that the competition involves both conflict and cooperation and should be understood through multiple theoretical perspectives rather than purely ideological confrontation. Their study integrates realism, liberalism, and constructivism to explain why the rivalry continues to intensify despite mutual economic dependence. The literature also examines how the rivalry is transforming the global order. Ikenberry (2018) argues that the liberal international order established after World War II is increasingly under strain due to shifts in global power and dissatisfaction with Western dominance. China's growing influence in international institutions, infrastructure development, and global governance initiatives has challenged the traditional dominance of Western-led institutions. Scholars note that China is not merely integrating into the existing order

but is also attempting to reshape aspects of it in ways that reflect its national interests and governance preferences.

Recent studies further highlight the emergence of a more fragmented and multipolar international system. Paul (2026) identifies systemic, institutional, and regional transitions as key dimensions of contemporary global transformation. According to this perspective, the international system is undergoing gradual restructuring characterized by competing centres of power, weakened multilateralism, and increased geopolitical uncertainty. This transformation affects global governance, trade systems, regional alliances, and security arrangements. The rivalry between the United States and China has therefore become a central driver of changes in the international order. The implications of great-power competition for smaller states and regions have also received considerable scholarly attention. Many countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe are increasingly pressured to navigate between the competing interests of the United States and China. Scholars argue that middle powers and developing states are not merely passive actors but actively pursue strategies of balancing, hedging, and selective alignment to protect their interests. Emerging literature suggests that countries such as India, Singapore, and South Korea play significant roles in mediating aspects of the rivalry, especially in technological governance and economic diplomacy.

Furthermore, scholars warn that intensified rivalry could undermine global cooperation on transnational challenges such as climate change, pandemics, terrorism, and economic instability. At the same time, some analysts maintain that managed competition and institutional engagement may still prevent direct military confrontation between the two powers. The literature, therefore, reflects competing interpretations regarding whether the US–China rivalry will lead to conflict, coexistence, or a restructured form of international order. Overall, the literature demonstrates that the U.S.–China rivalry represents a multidimensional struggle involving power, ideology, economics, technology, and institutional influence. While realist perspectives emphasize inevitable competition arising from power transitions, liberal approaches stress the importance of interdependence and cooperation. Constructivist scholars further highlight the role of identity, norms, and perceptions in shaping the rivalry. Collectively, the literature suggests that the transformation of the global order is closely linked to the evolving dynamics of great-power competition between the United States and China, making it one of the most significant issues in contemporary international relations.

Theoretical Framework

This paper employs the Power Transition Theory (PTT) developed by A. F. K. Organski in his seminal work, *World Politics*, published in 1958, as its framework of analysis. Organski challenged the assumptions of classical balance of power theory, arguing that stability in the international system does not necessarily emerge from an equal distribution of power among states. Instead, he maintained that international order is shaped by the hierarchical distribution of power, where a dominant state occupies the apex of the global system (Organski, 1958). The theory was later expanded by scholars such as Jacek Kugler and Organski himself in *The War Ledger* (1980), where they refined the relationship between power shifts and major wars. Their contribution emphasized the conditions under which rising powers challenge dominant powers, particularly when dissatisfied with the prevailing international order (Organski & Kugler, 1980).

Power Transition Theory has since become an important framework in the study of international relations, especially in explaining great-power rivalry, hegemonic stability, and conflicts arising from shifts in global power distribution, including contemporary debates surrounding the rivalry between the United States and China. Power Transition Theory assumes that the international system is not anarchic in the way classical realists describe it, but rather hierarchical. According to Organski (1958), states are arranged in a pyramid-like structure with a dominant power at the top, followed by great powers, middle powers, and smaller states. The dominant state possesses overwhelming political, military, and economic capabilities and establishes the rules governing the international order. Consequently, the dominant power shapes global institutions, norms, and economic arrangements to reflect its interests and values. For example, after the Second World War, the United States emerged as the leading global power and played a central role in establishing institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.

Another assumption of the theory is that power among states is distributed unequally. Some states possess greater economic strength, military capability, technological advancement, and political influence than others (Tammen et al., 2000). The dominant state enjoys a significant advantage over other states, enabling it to maintain order and influence global affairs. However, the theory recognizes that national power is dynamic rather than static. Economic growth, technological innovation, industrialization, and population expansion can alter the balance of power over time, allowing weaker states to rise and challenge established powers. Power Transition Theory also assumes that states develop at different rates. Some states experience rapid economic and military growth, eventually narrowing the power gap between themselves and the dominant state. This process is referred to as “power transition” (Organski & Kugler, 1980). The argument here is that when a rising state approaches parity with the dominant state, the likelihood of competition and tension increases. The theory suggests that periods of transition are often unstable because the existing hegemon may seek to preserve the

status quo while the rising power may demand greater influence in international affairs. This assumption is frequently used to explain the growing strategic competition between the United States and China in the twenty-first century.

A major assumption of the theory is that war is most likely when a rising power becomes sufficiently strong and is dissatisfied with the existing international order (Lemke, 2002). Dissatisfied states may perceive the international system as unfair or biased toward the interests of the dominant power. According to Power Transition Theory, peaceful transitions are possible when the rising power is satisfied with the prevailing order and seeks integration rather than revision. However, when dissatisfaction combines with increasing capability, the probability of major conflict rises significantly. Thus, the theory links the outbreak of major wars not merely to shifts in power but to the interaction between power parity and dissatisfaction.

Unlike the balance of power theory, which argues that equilibrium promotes peace, Power Transition Theory contends that stability is best maintained when one dominant state possesses overwhelming superiority over potential challengers (Organski, 1958). Peace exists when subordinate states accept the legitimacy of the dominant power and the international order it sustains. Consequently, instability emerges when the dominant state's superiority declines and a challenger approaches parity. The erosion of hegemonic dominance creates uncertainty and intensifies strategic rivalry. The theory further assumes that major wars are often mechanisms through which international hierarchies are reorganized. When a challenger defeats a dominant power, a new international order emerges under the leadership of the victorious state (Gilpin, 1981). Historical examples often cited include the transition of global leadership from the United Kingdom to the United States after the Second World War. Scholars applying Power Transition Theory argue that contemporary global politics may be witnessing another possible transition associated with China's rise.

Theory Application

Power Transition Theory (PTT) is highly suitable for explaining contemporary great-power competition and the growing rivalry between the United States and China because it provides a systematic framework for understanding how shifts in global power generate strategic competition, tensions, and the possibility of conflict. The theory explains the dynamics between a dominant power seeking to preserve the existing international order and a rising power aspiring to expand its influence and reshape aspects of that order (Organski, 1958). One of the major strengths of Power Transition Theory lies in its emphasis on the hierarchical nature of the international system. The theory argues that global politics is organized around a dominant state that establishes and maintains the rules, institutions, and norms governing international relations. Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has occupied this dominant position through its military superiority, technological leadership, economic power, and influence over international institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Power Transition Theory helps explain why the rise of China is perceived by the United States as a challenge to the existing international hierarchy (Tammen et al., 2000).

Indeed, the theory is also suitable because it explains how differential economic growth leads to shifts in power. Over the past four decades, China has experienced rapid industrialization, technological advancement, military modernization, and economic expansion, transforming it into the world's second-largest economy. According to Power Transition Theory, such rapid growth narrows the power gap between the dominant state and the rising challenger, thereby increasing strategic rivalry and uncertainty (Organski & Kugler, 1980). The theory accurately reflects the current geopolitical environment in which the United States and China compete in areas such as trade, technology, military influence, global governance, and regional security. Furthermore, Power Transition Theory is useful in explaining the intensification of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region. China's growing military presence in the South China Sea, its territorial claims regarding Taiwan, and initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative are often interpreted as efforts to expand its geopolitical influence and reshape aspects of the international order. At the same time, the United States has strengthened alliances and strategic partnerships such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, AUKUS, and the Quad to counterbalance China's growing influence. Power Transition Theory effectively explains these competitive actions as part of the struggle between a status quo power and a rising challenger (Lemke, 2002).

Another important reason why the theory is suitable is its focus on dissatisfaction with the international order. Power Transition Theory argues that conflict becomes more likely when a rising power is dissatisfied with the prevailing system dominated by the hegemonic state. China has frequently criticized aspects of the Western-dominated international order, including global financial governance, trade structures, and security arrangements, arguing that they disproportionately favour Western powers, especially the United States. China's promotion of alternative institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank reflects attempts to increase its influence in global governance. The theory, therefore, helps explain why the US-China rivalry extends beyond military competition to ideological, institutional, and economic dimensions. In addition, Power Transition Theory is relevant because it highlights the possibility of instability during periods of power parity. The closer a rising state comes to matching the dominant power's capabilities, the greater the risk of confrontation and miscalculation. Scholars applying the theory to US-China relations warn that the international

system may be entering a dangerous transition period similar to historical rivalries between established and emerging powers (Allison, 2017). Issues such as trade wars, technological restrictions, cyber competition, and military tensions around Taiwan illustrate the competitive dynamics anticipated by the theory. The theory is also suitable because it explains why the United States seeks to preserve the status quo while China seeks greater recognition and influence. The United States aims to maintain its global leadership and the liberal international order it helped create after the Second World War, whereas China seeks reforms that reflect its growing power and national interests. Power Transition Theory, therefore, provides a useful framework for understanding the strategic calculations, foreign policy behaviour, and geopolitical competition between the two states.

However, despite its usefulness, some scholars argue that the theory has limitations. Critics contend that it places excessive emphasis on military and economic power while underestimating the importance of diplomacy, economic interdependence, international institutions, and nuclear deterrence in preventing war between great powers. Unlike previous historical rivalries, the United States and China are deeply interconnected economically, which may reduce the likelihood of direct military confrontation. Nevertheless, Power Transition Theory remains one of the most influential frameworks for analyzing contemporary great-power politics and the transformation of the global order.

Analysis of the US–China Rivalry

The rivalry between the United States and China represents one of the most significant geopolitical developments of the twenty-first century. The competition between the two powers spans economic, military, technological, ideological, and diplomatic dimensions, and has profound implications for global order, regional stability, and international institutions. Scholars argue that the rivalry reflects a broader struggle over power, influence, and leadership in the international system (Allison, 2017; Ikenberry, 2018). Historically, the United States emerged as the dominant global power after the Second World War and the end of the Cold War. It established a liberal international order based on free trade, democratic governance, military alliances, and multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. However, China's rapid economic growth since the late 1970s has transformed it into a major global actor capable of challenging American dominance in several strategic sectors (Shambaugh, 2013).

The economic aspect of the US-China rivalry is central to understanding their competition. China's economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping enabled the country to transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented economy integrated into global trade networks. China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 accelerated its economic rise, turning it into the "world's factory" and a leading global exporter (Naughton, 2018). The United States increasingly viewed China's economic expansion as a threat to its industrial base, technological leadership, and global influence. This tension became more visible during the presidency of Donald Trump, who launched a trade war against China in 2018 by imposing tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of Chinese goods. China retaliated with tariffs on American products, including agricultural exports such as soybeans. The trade war demonstrated the deep economic competition between the two states and reflected concerns about trade imbalances, intellectual property theft, and industrial espionage (Lighthizer, 2023). Another concrete example is the competition over global supply chains and technological manufacturing. The United States has restricted China's access to advanced semiconductor technology and pressured allies to limit cooperation with Chinese technology firms such as Huawei. The US government argued that Huawei's involvement in 5G infrastructure posed national security risks, while China viewed these restrictions as attempts to contain its technological advancement.

Similarly, technology has become a major arena of rivalry between the United States and China. Both countries compete for dominance in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cybersecurity, telecommunications, and semiconductor production. Scholars describe this technological rivalry as a struggle for strategic superiority in the digital age (Segal, 2021). A tangible example is the competition over semiconductor production. The United States imposed export controls preventing Chinese firms from accessing advanced microchips and semiconductor manufacturing equipment. In response, China intensified domestic investments aimed at achieving technological self-sufficiency. This technological contest reflects broader concerns about national security, economic competitiveness, and future military capabilities. Another example is the rivalry over social media and digital platforms. The United States raised security concerns regarding Chinese-owned applications such as TikTok, alleging that user data could be accessed by the Chinese government. China, on the other hand, accused the United States of politicizing technology and restricting fair competition.

The military dimension of the rivalry is especially visible in the Indo-Pacific region. China has significantly modernized its military, expanded its naval capabilities, and increased defense spending over the past two decades. The United States perceives these developments as challenges to its strategic influence in Asia (Mearsheimer, 2014). One major flashpoint is the South China Sea, where China has constructed artificial islands and military installations in disputed waters claimed by neighbouring states such as the Philippines and Vietnam. The United States has responded through "freedom of navigation operations," sending naval vessels

through contested waters to challenge China's territorial claims. Another important example concerns Taiwan. China considers Taiwan a breakaway province and has not ruled out the use of force for reunification. The United States, while officially recognizing the "One China" policy, continues to support Taiwan through arms sales and diplomatic engagement under the Taiwan Relations Act. Military exercises conducted by China near Taiwan, especially following visits by senior American officials, have heightened tensions and raised fears of potential conflict.

The United States has also strengthened regional alliances to counter China's influence. Initiatives such as AUKUS, involving the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia and the Quad partnership involving the United States, India, Japan, and Australia, reflect efforts to balance China's growing regional power. The US-China rivalry also has ideological dimensions. The United States promotes liberal democracy, human rights, and open societies, whereas China advocates a governance model emphasizing state sovereignty, political stability, and economic development under centralized authority (Zhao, 2019). Issues relating to human rights have intensified diplomatic tensions between the two countries. The United States has criticized China over allegations concerning the treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang and the erosion of political freedoms in Hong Kong. China rejects these criticisms as interference in its domestic affairs and accuses the United States of hypocrisy and double standards.

Diplomatic competition is also evident in global development initiatives. China's Belt and Road Initiative seeks to expand infrastructure, trade, and investment links across Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. Critics in the United States argue that the initiative enhances China's geopolitical influence and creates economic dependency among participating states. In response, the United States and its allies have introduced alternative infrastructure and investment programs to compete with China's expanding influence.

Implications for Global Order

The US-China rivalry has significant implications for global politics and international stability. It contributes to polarization in international relations, influences global trade patterns, and shapes the strategic choices of smaller states. Many countries attempt to maintain economic relations with China while relying on the United States for security cooperation, creating complex diplomatic balancing strategies. The rivalry also affects international institutions and global governance. Competition between the two powers has complicated cooperation on global issues such as climate change, cybersecurity, trade regulation, and pandemic response. Nevertheless, scholars argue that despite intense competition, both states remain economically interdependent, which may reduce the likelihood of direct military confrontation (Ikenberry, 2018). In the final analysis, the US-China rivalry is multidimensional and reflects broader transformations in the global distribution of power. Economic competition, technological rivalry, military tensions, ideological differences, and diplomatic contestation collectively shape the evolving relationship between the two powers. The rivalry is likely to remain a defining feature of international politics in the twenty-first century and will continue to influence the structure of the global order.

Conclusion

The rivalry between the United States and China has emerged as one of the defining features of contemporary international relations and a major factor shaping the transformation of the global order. The competition reflects broader dynamics of great-power politics characterized by struggles for economic dominance, technological superiority, military influence, ideological projection, and strategic control of global institutions and regions. China's rapid economic and military rise has challenged the long-standing dominance of the United States, thereby intensifying tensions within the international system.

The paper established that the rivalry is multidimensional, extending beyond traditional military competition to include trade wars, technological restrictions, cyber competition, diplomatic influence, and ideological contestation. Concrete issues such as the trade disputes initiated during the Trump administration, tensions in the South China Sea, the Taiwan question, restrictions on Chinese technology companies such as Huawei, and competition surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative demonstrate the depth and complexity of the rivalry. The analysis further revealed that Power Transition Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the dynamics of the US-China rivalry. The theory explains how shifts in the global distribution of power generate competition between a dominant state seeking to preserve the status quo and a rising state seeking greater influence within the international system. The United States aims to maintain the liberal international order it helped establish after the Second World War, while China increasingly seeks reforms that reflect its expanding economic and geopolitical capabilities.

Despite the growing tensions, the study also found that the deep economic interdependence between the two countries creates incentives for restraint and cooperation. Both states remain closely connected through trade, investment, and global supply chains, making direct military confrontation highly costly. Nevertheless, continued strategic mistrust, military buildup, and ideological differences could heighten instability if not properly managed. Overall, the US-China rivalry represents both a challenge and a defining transition in global

politics. The way the two powers manage their competition will significantly influence international peace, security, economic stability, and the future structure of global order in the twenty-first century.

Recommendations

On the strength of the findings, this paper recommends that:

1. The governments of the United States and China should strengthen diplomatic engagement and strategic dialogue mechanisms in order to reduce mistrust, prevent miscalculation, and manage tensions in sensitive areas such as Taiwan and the South China Sea.
2. Both countries should promote economic cooperation and avoid excessive protectionist policies that could destabilize the global economy. Trade disputes should be resolved through negotiation and multilateral frameworks such as the World Trade Organization.
3. Both powers should establish clearer military communication channels and confidence-building measures to minimize the risk of accidental military confrontation, especially in contested maritime regions and airspaces.
4. China and the United States should prioritize responsible technological competition by developing international regulations on cyber activities, artificial intelligence, and digital governance in order to prevent technological rivalry from escalating into broader conflict.
5. The two countries should recognize the importance of mutual coexistence in an increasingly interdependent world and pursue competition within acceptable international norms rather than confrontation capable of undermining global peace and development.

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