

Assessing China's Hegemonic Ambitions Amidst the Eastward Shift of Global Power: An Analysis of Offensive Realism and Economic Growth

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Assessing China's Hegemonic Ambitions Amidst the Eastward Shift of Global Power: An Analysis of Offensive Realism and Economic Growth

Küresel Gücün Doğuya Kayması Ortamında Çin'in Hegemonik Hedeflerinin Değerlendirilmesi: Saldırgan Realizm ve Ekonomik Büyüme Üzerine Bir Analiz

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Abstract

Rising of China and gradual decline of United States (US) influence, coupled with the eastward shift of power has led some scholars to suggest that China will replace hegemonic position of the US. China-U. S rivalry is not a new scholarly topic. This study contributes to the existing scholarship on China-US competition by providing a comparative analysis of hegemonic pathways, comparing its current economic and geopolitical situation with the historical trajectory of US hegemony and offering insights into the limitations of China's protentional to be regional hegemon. Anchored on Mearsheimer's hypothesis, which posits that regional hegemony is a prerequisite for global hegemony, and the analysis of the relations between economic superiority and hegemony, this study seeks to answer whether China can become a regional hegemon amidst eastward shift of power and the ongoing rivalry with the US. It frames China's challenge to US hegemony as an attempt to take a hegemonic position within the existing order, rather than advocating for the new. Through qualitative and quantitative analyses this research suggests that while China may lessen US influence but won't replace US hegemony. Key reasons include are: 1) The US, along with its allies, aims to limit China's influence, and China's inability to exclude US influence in Asia; 2) The highest GDP does not guarantee hegemony; 3) Asia's traditional multipolarity.

Keywords: Hegemony, US-China rivalry, Offensive Realism, GDP, Multipolarity

Öz

Çin'in küresel arenadaki yükselişi ve ABD'nin etkisinin kademeli olarak azalması, gücün doğuya kaydığı bu süreçte bazı akademisyenleri, Çin'in ABD'nin hegemonik konumunu devralabileceğini öne sürmeye yöneltmiştir. Çin-ABD rekabeti akademik çalışmalar açısından yeni bir konu olmasa da bu çalışma, hegemonik güç yollarının karşılaştırmalı bir analizini yaparak ve Çin'in mevcut ekonomik ve jeopolitik konumunu ABD hegemonyasının tarihsel gelişim çizgisiyle karşılaştırarak bu literatüre katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, Mearsheimer'in bölgesel hegemonyanın küresel hegemonya için bir ön koşul olduğu hipotezini ve ekonomik üstünlük ile hegemonya arasındaki ilişkiyi analiz etmektedir. Gücün doğuya kayması ve ABD ile süregelen rekabet ortamında, Çin'in bölgesel bir hegemon olup olamayacağı sorusuna odaklanmaktadır. Ayrıca, Çin'in ABD hegemonyasına meydan okumasını, mevcut küresel düzeni değiştirmek yerine, bu düzen içinde hegemonik bir pozisyon elde etme girişimi olarak çerçevelemektedir. Nitel ve nicel analizler sonucunda, bu çalışma Çin'in ABD etkisini zayıflatabileceği ancak ABD hegemonyasının yerini alamayacağı sonucuna varmaktadır. Bu sonuca varılmasındaki temel nedenler şunlardır: 1) ABD, Çin'in etkisini sınırlama politikası yürütmektedir ve Çin Asya'daki ABD etkisini engellemek için yeterli güce sahip değildir; 2) Yüksek GSYİH, tek başına hegemonyayı garanti etmemektedir; 3) Asya'nın geleneksel çok kutuplu yapısı Çin'in bölgedeki hegemonya inşasını zorlaştırmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hegemonya, ABD-Çin Rekabeti, Saldırgan Realizm, GSYİH, Çok Kutupluluk

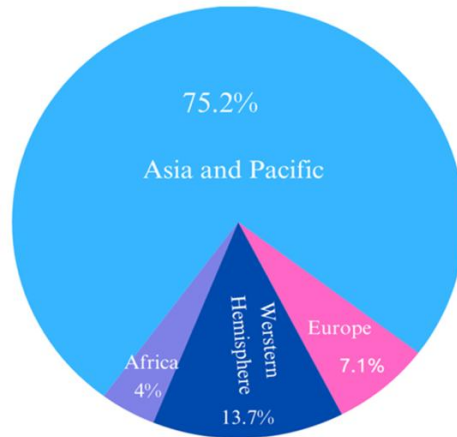
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INTRODUCTION

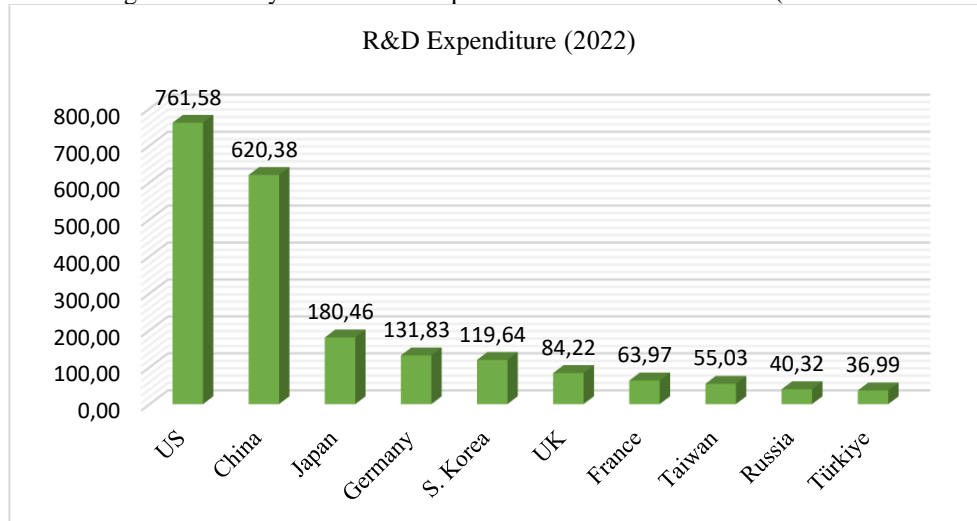
It is clear that a profound change in global power dynamics is in progress. Asia, representing all Asian countries and referred to as such hereafter, has been demonstrating its crucial role in determining the dynamics of the global order. To begin with, Asia's influence in the global economy today is undisputable and it is still upward trend. In 2024, Asia's GDP is \$38.4 trillion, constituting 35% of the world's GDP (IMF, 2024c). According to the International Monetary Fund (Figure 1), Asia and the Pacific region are projected to generate about 75% of global growth in 2023 (IMF, 2024) and projecting growth is 4.6% for 2024 and 4.4% for 2025 (IMF, 2024b). Moreover, the region hosts 18 of the world's 20 fastest-growing trade corridors and 13 of the 20 largest ones (McKinsey Global Institute, 2023). Asia, with 60% of the world's population housing 21 of the world's 34 largest cities (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023). Furthermore, the Brookings Institution's research projects Asia as the future home to half of the global middle-class population by 2024 (Wolfgang et al., 2022) and it is anticipated that the number of middle-class individuals in Asia-Pacific would reach 3.49 billion by 2030. (Statista, 2024d).

Figure 1: Share of Global Growth by Region In 2023



The influence of Asia extends beyond economics to encompass areas such as geopolitics, defense, finance, and technology. While four of the the five biggest spenders in defense in 2023, China, Russia, India, and Saudi Arabia, were Asian (Statista, 2024b), 14 out of 20 top military powers are in Asia, according to the Global FirePower 2023 (Global Fire Power, 2023). Also, among the top 10 highest R&D spenders of 2022 (Figure 2), six were Asian states (Statista, 2024e). Nearly half of all world-class patents in the clean energy space and nearly half of all new unicorns worldwide are from Asia (McKinsey Global Institute, 2023).

Figure 2: Leading Countries by Gross R&D Expenditure Worldwide In 2022 (in billion PPP US dollars)



In essence, every facet of global life is experiencing the phenomenon of "Asianization" (Khanna, 2019). China has historically been a great power in Asia and, without a doubt, is the driving force of the region, particularly in the economic sense. With three decades of continuous growth, China has secured the second-place position in terms of GDP and is now competing with the US in almost all fields. The rapid growth of Asia as a region and China as a country signifies two crucial changes underway: Asia is replacing the West as the power center, and China is challenging the US's global hegemony. This evolving geopolitical landscape naturally prompts a pivotal inquiry within academic circles: Will China's potential dominance in Asia, coupled with the ongoing power shift, lead to China displacing the hegemony of the US?

The scholarly discussion on this topic is not new, and studies on this particular subject have been approached from different perspectives. To look at some past academic debates, Gilpin and Modelski, drawing on theoretical ideas concerning the rise and fall of great powers and significant conflicts, predict that China's rapid development will soon surpass that of the US as the new global leader (Kim & Gates, 2015). By examining hegemonic competition between Great Britain and Germany between 1871 and 1914 and Anglo-American relations from 1865 to 1945, Zhu Zhiquan also argues that China was already progressing toward global hegemony (Zhu, 2006). Kishore Mahbubani, while not explicitly predicting a winner, hints at China's inevitable triumph in the competition. He attributes this prospect to perceived flaws in US policies, grounded in Liberal Hegemony, juxtaposed with China's strategic statecraft developed over a 2000-year history (Aslan, 2022; Baily, 2020). Denny Roy, on the other hand, explores China's incapacity to become a hegemon even if the U.S. were to permit it, and emphasizing the benign nature of U.S. hegemony (Roy, 2020).

Many studies have explored this issue within specific theoretical frameworks or from particular angles. As discussed below, international relations theorists identify different factors that can be categorized into material and non-material dimensions of power, which are decisive in this regard. This highlights the complexity and multidimensionality of the hegemonic race, emphasizing that establishing and maintaining hegemony requires the possession and management of a wide array of power resources (Schenoni, 2019, p. 509). Acknowledging this perspective, this paper examines the research questions through the lens of Offensive Realism and an economic perspective, contending that China is unlikely to replace the US as a hegemonic power. This argument is addressed in three sections. The first section establishes the theoretical framework, the second section explores whether China could become a regional power in Asia, and the final section scrutinizes the relationship between economic power and achieving hegemony.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to comprehensively address the question of whether China can supplant the US as a global hegemon amid the shifting power dynamics and the relative decline of Western influence. The theoretical framework is grounded in the principles of Offensive Realism, which posits that regional hegemony is a precursor for achieving global dominance. In order to investigate the connection between economic power and hegemonic position, the study also looks at the relationship between China's GDP and its capacity to subvert American hegemony.

For the qualitative analysis, this paper relies on authoritative theoretical sources within the field of International Relations, as well as pertinent research reports from respected institutions such as the US Department of Defense, the Chinese State Council, the Atlantic Council etc. In addition to extensively analyzing scholarly articles from peer-reviewed journals, this study also incorporates current news articles from reputable online magazines and the official websites of institutions.

Regarding the quantitative aspect, the study uses a great deal of data analysis, evaluating economic indicators using datasets from Statista and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Furthermore, survey data from the Central Asian Barometer, the Yusuf Ishak Institute and Central European Institute of Asian Studies, along with historical global economic data compiled by Maddison, are analyzed to identify trends and patterns that support the argument regarding China's ascent as a potential hegemon. Throughout the process, this study is committed to using up-to-date sources to ensure the analysis reflects the most recent developments in US-China relations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HOW COULD HEGEMONY BE ACHIEVED?

The supremacy of one state over another is known as hegemony (Schenoni, 2019). Hegemony encompasses owning and controlling a diverse range of power resources, which include both material and ideational aspects (Griffiths & O'Callaghan, 2002, pp. 137–139). In a similar vein, comprehending hegemonic competition necessitates identifying the factors that contribute to a nation's power and strategy through which that power can be exerted to achieve hegemony. In this regard, Kenneth Waltz believes that control of structure is the hegemony and change in distribution of the capability among the units in terms of military, economic, political, social or ideological resulted in the change of the structure (Waltz 1979, 79, 97). Thus, if a state can change the status quo of the structure through maximizing capability, it can be judged as hegemonic. Gramsci is one of the earliest thinkers contributes the debate and he underlines the significance of non-material factors. His concept of hegemony refers to the ideological dominance of cultural norms, values, and ideas, operating on an intellectual and moral level where the battleground for dominance is ideology itself (Woolcock, 1985).

The neo-Gramscian theorist Cox posits that hegemony is established through the alignment of material power, a shared image of world order with norms, and institutions that administer this order with perceived universality (Cox, 1981, p. 139). Building on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Nye underscores the significance of culture, ideology, and institutions as power enhancers while acknowledging the importance of economic and military might (Nye, 2004: 7). By connecting WWII and the Great Depression, during which Britain was incapable and the US was unwilling to stabilize the international economy, neo-realist Charles Kindleberger underscored the importance of military and economic capabilities as the most critical aspects of hegemonic power (Kindleberger, 1973, p. 305).

It is demonstrated that, regardless of various schools of thought, the factors contributing to becoming a hegemonic power can be broadly categorized into material and ideational dimensions. These include military strength, economic power, ideological influence, cultural values, institutional capacity, and the ability to garner consent among others. While this paper agrees with this perspective, it also emphasizes that, in addition to material and ideational power, the driving force behind both rising and hegemonic powers in hegemonic competition is their ambition and perception of the existing international order, which ultimately leads to hegemonic transitions. For example, China's unprecedented presence in Central Asia—traditionally Russia's sphere of influence—along with its significant economic and military strength (ranking second and third globally in these fields, respectively), does not pose a threat to Russia or induce geopolitical change until Russia perceives China's influence as a threat and takes action. However, the presence of the sole US military base at Manas International Airport in Kyrgyzstan was perceived as a threat to Russian interests, prompting Russia to pressure the Kyrgyz government, ultimately leading to the base's closure in 2014 (Hills, 2019). In the same vein, Great Britain's green light for the US to become the regional hegemon of the Western Hemisphere, despite having the capacity to thwart its rise, resulting in the erosion of British hegemony from the American Continent. Similarly, although Britain remained the most powerful nation globally, it failed to deter imperial Germany and Nazi Germany in the European Continent. Ignoring the US and appeasing Germany ultimately led to Great Britain losing its hegemony to the US.

Russia's response to the presence of two superpowers within its sphere of influence and the Great Britain's stance against the US reflects Alexander Wendt's famous assertion that "500 nuclear weapons of the United Kingdom pose less of a threat to the US than 5 nuclear weapons of North Korea," emphasizing that "amity or enmity is a function of shared understanding" (Wendt, 1995, p. 73). Furthermore, Great Britain's appeasement policy towards Germany, despite its capabilities, diminished its motivation, ultimately allowing Germany to dominate Europe until the end of World War II. These examples illustrate that the ambition of rising powers, as well as how that ambition is perceived by existing hegemons, are critical factors. Potential power alone is insufficient for a state to attain hegemonic status.

Consequently, rather than solely comparing the material and ideational dimensions of the two powers, this paper focuses on China's motivations and the US's reactions within the framework of regional hegemonic competition. In this context, John Mearsheimer's theory of Offensive Realism provides a simple yet effective framework for analysis. According to Mearsheimer, achieving regional hegemony is a stepping stone towards global hegemony, highlighting the significance of a rising power's ability to establish dominance in its own region and the hegemonic power's determination and capability to counteract it (Mearsheimer, 2007, pp. 77–94). Additionally, this paper examines the relationship between economic power and hegemony within the context of US-China rivalry. The primary reason for incorporating this analysis is that China's economic growth has led many to argue that it may eventually

replace the US as the global hegemon, which worth to examine. Before addressing the economic dimension, the following section will explore whether China can achieve regional hegemony in Asia and what insights can be gleaned from Asia's historical order within this framework.

COULD CHINA BE A REGIONAL HEGEMON IN ITS DOMAIN?

According to Offensive Realist theory, great powers pursue two goals: first, to achieve regional hegemony, and second, to ensure that no other state attains regional hegemony in its own domain (John Mearsheimer, 2021). Consequently, two exceptional factors have contributed to the success of the US: the absence of regional balancers in the Western Hemisphere and the European great powers' lack of strong incentives to actively limit or restrain the US (Mearsheimer, 2010, p. 389).

Mearsheimer states that the US has pursued regional super power since 1783 and has achieved several missions on its way to becoming a regional hegemon (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 232–252):

1. It expanded across the continent from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean with the goal of strengthening its position in the east and west.
2. To ensure its security in the north, the US invaded Canada in 1812.
3. In 1846, it marched into Mexico, eliminated the threat from south by successfully concluding the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.
4. After eliminating regional peer competitors, to expel European great powers from the Western Hemisphere and prevent their return, the US implemented the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, which asserted that any European intervention in the Americas would be viewed as a threat.
5. In 1898 the US defeated the Spain, expelled the Spanish influence from the Western Hemisphere and secured its position as regional super power.

In this way, the US finally achieved regional hegemony in the Western Hemisphere by the end of the 19th century. Then, the US has done its utmost to prevent other states from becoming regional competitors, either within its own region or elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere. The doctrine and support of Great Britain, the only great power with the ability to counter the US, against Spanish influence played a crucial role in securing the US regional hegemony in its region by the end of the 19th century, with no distant great powers possessing the military capability to pose a threat (Sexton, 2023).

Beside the rise of the US power and its ambitious to be a regional power, another crucial factor is the Great Britain's perception to the US and its policy accordingly. Examining researches on the subject shows that several reasons led Great Britain allow the US to be a hegemony in the Western Hemisphere:

1. Balance of powers. While the US was engaging in power competition in the Western Hemisphere, Britain was preoccupied with its own imperial interests in the Europe, Africa and Asia and was handling France and Russia. Realist school explained the Britain's policy towards US is a policy of balancing the power of other European nations in the American Continent, especially in the context of the Monroe Doctrine (Orde & Orde, 1996).
2. Threat perception. Great Britain recognized worldwide threats against its interest at the end of the 19th century. However, the British Empire gave its priority based on the geographical proximity of the threat because, as realist claimed, the main risk is the one closest in geographical proximity. As a result, it had to maintain stable relations with other nations like France and Russia as it became more and more active in European politics (R. Morrison, 2006). Later, Germany was recognized as a main challenger due to its proximity to the Great Britain (Friedberg, 1988, p. 168).
3. Preservation of the "status quo." According to A.F.K. Organski's "power transition theory," Great Britain tolerated the US assumption of the regional hegemony because during the power transition, in addition to the US respect Great Britain's international status, the US advocated protecting the status quo, and did not challenge the British-led international system. According to Organski, the US satisfied with the existing international system (Organski, 1968, pp. 363–377).
4. The ideological alignment. Constructivist approach explain that shared political value, historical ties and cultural background fostered amicable relations and a sense of collective identity that reinforced the idea that war between the two nations would be akin to fratricide (Yongping, 2006).

By concentrating its resources and attention on more important European matters, Britain was prepared to concede the US dominance in the Western Hemisphere. The national strength of the US, its

geopolitical ambitions, and Great Britain's support for its rise as a regional superpower—due to the reasons outlined above—positioned the US as the hegemon of the Western Hemisphere, laying the foundation for its eventual global dominance. Then, the US made a concerted effort to prevent other states from becoming regional competitors, either within its own region or in other parts of the world. Throughout the 20th century, it engaged in conflicts with four rival powers: Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union. In each case, the USA played a pivotal role in defeating and dismantling those aspiring hegemonies (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 252–264) because that is the way of guaranteeing its hegemonic position.

China should aim for regional hegemony in the Asia by neutralizing the U.S., thereby replacing it. This raises the critical question of whether China could implement its own version of the Monroe Doctrine to displace the US from Asia, and how the US, either alone or with its allies, view the rise of China and whether the US has the motivation and capability to counter China's rise in the region. Alternatively, in the context of the US-China competition, are there reasons similar to those that led Great Britain to allow the US to achieve regional hegemony? The following section explores this issue in detail.

Possibility for China's Monroe Doctrine?

Looking at the historical course of US-China relations and the current direction they are heading offers reasonable insight in economic, strategic and ideological relations between the two nations. The trajectory of US-China relations has undergone a tumultuous course since World War II. They were ideological enemy until deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations, which ended up with border conflict in 1966. Turning point in the mutual relations started since president Nixon's visit to China in 1978. Considering triangle relations, the US implemented different strategy to two communist countries. While the Soviet Union was perceived as an existential enemy to be eliminated, China was considered a state that could potentially transition to liberalism and democracy as its economy progressed (Zoellick 2005). Based on this assumption, the US, along with its alliances, invested China significantly as of 1980s as a new strategy to dealing with its potential rival.

Almost three decades were spent integrating China into the US-led international order, including actively supporting China's entry into the World Trade Organization and pouring foreign direct investment and technology into China. Prior to 2000s, China followed Deng Xiaoping's policy of "hide and bide" and supported the US hegemonic structure (Mastanduno, 2019). Then under Hu Jintao's "peaceful rise", the two nations underwent cooperative relations until 2012, albeit with some ideological frictions. As a result, China's GDP surpassed Japan in 2010 and the US in 2014 in purchasing power, sustaining an average annual GDP growth rate of 9.5% through 2018 (W. M. Morrison, 2019). Business activity between the two made them economically depend each other.

However, contrary to what had been expected, neither economic interdependence encouraged the US allow China to further expand its influence in Asia, nor made economic success brought democracy and liberal value to China. Conversely, Chinese authoritarianism get even stronger, China under the Xi Jinping became less democratic and liberal and more autocratic and revolutionary despite not revisionist (Mitter, 2022). Recognizing the disappointment of unrealized expectations, the US underwent a substantial shift toward adopting a more confrontational approach to China starting from 2015 (Blackwill & Tellis, 2015). In 2017, the US formally characterized China as a revisionist state (China-US Focus, 2017). In 2022, China was identified as the most "consequential strategic competitor for the coming decades" (The Department of Defense, 2022, p. 4) and correspondingly, bipartisan determination to contain China has become an unusual instance of consensus among American politicians despite the country's extreme political division (Carothers & Sun, 2023). In response to China's military buildup, the Department of Defense stated on October, 2023 that it has continued to prioritize updating its force posture in the region, creating fresh operational concepts, and strengthening ties with allies in the area (Joseph, 2023).

As if confirming the US narrative, China began to openly reject Western values and increasingly made it clear that China wouldn't tolerate the U.S. supremacy any more, especially in East Asia and has started to challenge the US hegemony (Schweller & Pu, 2011). Going even further, Chinese leaders today is attempting to justify that Chinese economic and political model could be alternative to the Western liberal counterpart (Bell, 2016). China has begun to shape a bloc against the West by supporting countries that are uncomfortable with the US hegemony, and the patterns of votes in the UN confirm this course of action. Considering China's economic dependence on the current liberal economic order and its adherence to several pillars of the present Westphalian system, such as territorial sovereignty, free trade, China may not

have intention to build alternative international system, rather it might reasonable to say that China harbors strong ambitions to supplant the US hegemony within the Westphalian system and would carry out reform based on its global interest. In this context, the critical question is whether China has the potential to implement its version of the Monroe Doctrine to diminish US influence in Asia or the Indo-Pacific region.

Aforementioned adversarial relationship between the two powers stands in stark contrast to the US-Great Britain relations, which were shaped by common geopolitical interests and similar ideologies and governance systems during the 19th and 20th centuries. The ideological disparities between the US and China, coupled with the US perception of China's rise, have motivated the US along with its allies in both the Indo-Pacific and Europe to block China's path to regional hegemony as we have been witnessing today. Reciprocally, China's dissatisfaction with the US presence in the Indo-Pacific, along with its motivation and potential capability to change the status quo, has made hegemonic competition inevitable.

To limit China's influence in the region, the US initiated building like-minded blocs in addition to NATO and G7. The U.S. has launched a new security framework with Australia and the United Kingdom (AUKUS), improved the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with Japan, Australia, and India, and sold a nuclear submarine to Australia as part of tangible actions to counter China. Additionally, the US has extended invitations to NATO nations like Germany and France to dispatch warships to the Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore, in January 2023, the White House reaffirmed the US commitment to Japan's defense under Article V of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, using all available means, including nuclear weapons, by explicitly naming China and North Korea as the primary threats to the Indo-Pacific region's stability in Joint Statement of the United States and Japan (House, 2023a). In September 2023, the U.S. Department of Defense declared its intent to prevent possible acts of Chinese aggression in the Taiwan and Indo-Pacific areas. This objective is pursued through the continuous presence of American military forces, including naval missions, strategic drills, and the deployment of advanced military capabilities. (Jim, 2023)

In response, China has made it clear that it will react to deter the US. As indicated in its White Papers, National Congresses, and meetings, China appears to be more assertive than the US and does not rule out the potential use of weapons (State Council Information Office, 2022). China is attempting to respond both through its individual capacity and by forming regional economic and security alliances, such as BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO functions as a balancing force against the US, mitigating its regional influence and deterring other regional powers from aligning with it. Additionally, it fosters shared norms and values to counter US hegemony and diminish external cultural influence (Kocamaz, 2019). The increasing influence of China in Central Asia both in organizational and bilateral level has led to a reduction in the US presence. For example, in 2014, US forces departed from the Manas base in Kyrgyzstan, marking the end of American bases in the region. This shift coincided with significant changes in the region's geopolitical landscape. China focused on investing in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative and Tajikistan permitted China to deploy paramilitary forces near its Afghan border starting in 2016 (Cooley, 2023).

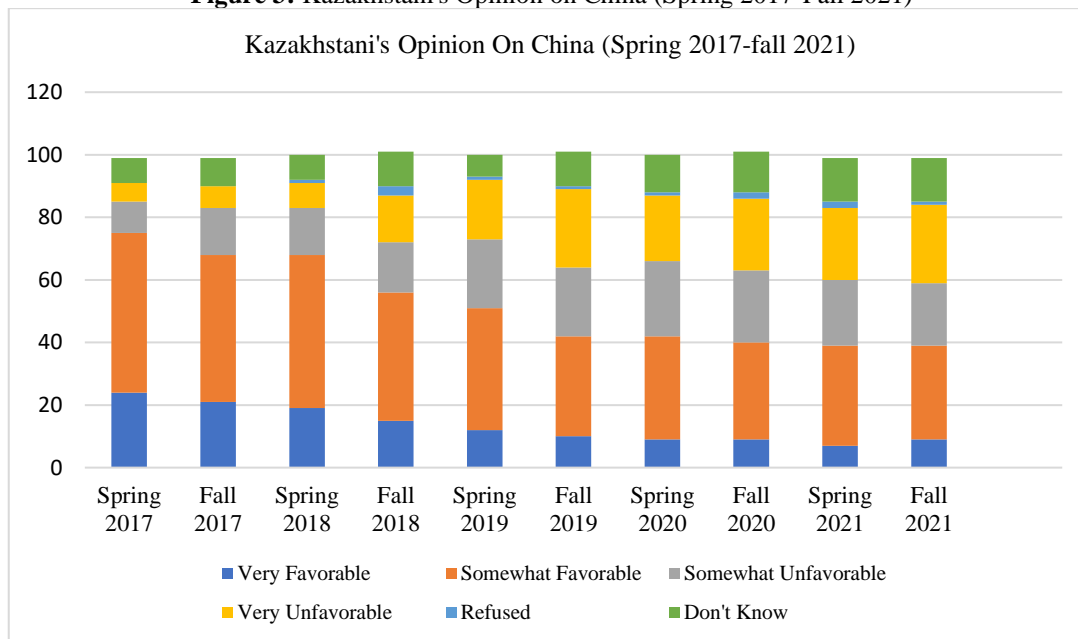
However, four factors below could potentially weaken the unity of SCO, making it less cohesive and comparatively weaker in contrast to US-led blocks:

1. Traditionally, the Central Asian nations follows "multi-vectored" diplomacy to bolster their sovereignty and to reduce dependence on a single external power (Giuliano Catalano, 2023). Within this foreign policy, nations have been developing their partnership with the US, EU, NATO (Christoffersen, 2024), Japan and India (Islam, 2024). Beside, Russian invasion of Ukraine caused fear among them and pushed the Central Asian nations to build security alliance with Türkiye and West (aozen, 2023). The US view Türkiye's engagement with Central Asians as a factor should be support in order to resist Chinese and Russian domination (Demir, 2022).
2. Formation of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) would also play role in balancing Chinese influence in the region and weakening SCO's ideological solidarity (Akcay, 2022).
3. Contrary to ruling elites, local communities harbor strong anti-Chinese sentiments (Akbota, 2020), resisting Chinese engagement and embodying the concept of "warm politics, cold public" (政热民冷) (Laruelle & Royce, 2020).
4. Adversarial relations of member states such as India and Pakistan curtain the visionary solidarity of the organization.

It is noteworthy that China's image in Central Asian countries, particularly among member states of the OTS and SCO, is generally unfavorable. Despite China's total investment in Central Asia being

valued at \$40 billion by the end of 2020 (Almaz Kumenov, 2022), public sentiment in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan toward China has declined from 2017 to 2021, according to over five years of surveys conducted by the Central Asia Barometer (CAB), a Kyrgyzstan-based research lab. In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, respondents have increasingly held negative views of China, while in Kyrgyzstan, sentiments have remained consistently negative (Central Asia Barometer, 2022).

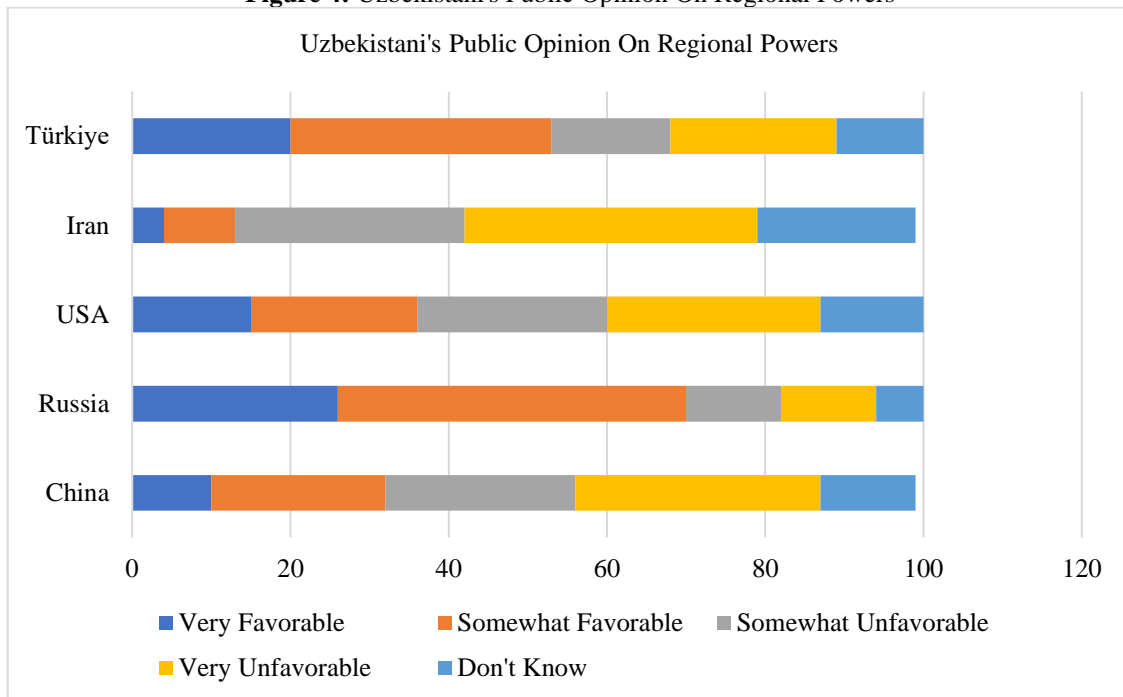
Figure 3: Kazakhstani's Opinion on China (Spring 2017-Fall 2021)



As shown in Figure 3, the data indicates a gradual increase in negative perceptions of China among Kazakhstanis over the five-year period. According to the CAB, this shift is primarily due to China's human rights violations in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region aka East Turkistan, where the treatment of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz has fueled growing public discontent. Large protests occurred in various cities, including Almaty, Nur-Sultan, Oral, Shymkent, and Aktobe, against the expanding Chinese influence and the mass detention of Turkic peoples in East Turkistan (Radio Free Europe/ Kazakh Service, 2021). Data from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan also reflect a similar trend.

Furthermore, comparative public opinion across Central Asian nations regarding regional powers - Russia, China, the U.S, Türkiye and Iran - shows that China is the least favorable, or sometimes the second least favorable, country, while Russia, Türkiye, and the US receive more public support. This is according to fieldwork conducted by the CAB in December 2022.

Figure 4: Uzbekistani's Public Opinion On Regional Powers



In Uzbekistan, for instance, only 10% of respondents reported having a very favorable view of China, while 31% viewed China as very unfavorable. As shown in Figure 4, China ranks at the bottom in this category compared to Russia, the U.S., and Türkiye(Central Asia Barometer, 2023). All these data indicate that citizens of SCO member states hold an unfavorable perception of China, even less favorable than that of the U.S., which could weaken the SCO's unity against the U.S. and its allied groups, NATO and the G7.

BRICS, with the capacity of 45% of the world's population, 25% of global trade, 40% of global oil production, and 28% of the global GDP could be a counterhegemonic bloc and play crucial role in de-dollarization if they successfully launch the common currency. Nonetheless, its “weakness” lies in lacking of unified mission and willingness to counter against regional foreign intervention(Andrew & Adam, 2023). For instance, Brazil and South Africa highlight BRICS is not meant to be a block against G7(EPIC, 2023) and India has tried to resist China’s efforts to turn the BRICS group into a support organization for China’s geopolitical agenda (jcookson, 2023). Besides, India, a pivotal member of both SCO and BRICS and a like-minded ally of the West, consistently underscores the importance of refraining from adopting an anti-Western rhetoric. However, it is a stark contrast that G7 at Camp David in August 2023 made a joint statement in which the group collectively opposed China's “unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the waters of the Indo-Pacific” by identifying China’s behavior as dangerous and aggressive(House, 2023b).

Considering the power and presence of the US in Asia today, it is not analogous to Spain's position in the American Continent during the 19th century. The key factors contributing to the US victory over Spain included Spain's poor military and economic performance in contrast to the modern warships and rising economic power of the US. The US Navy benefited from a fleet of modern warships, including armored cruisers and battleships, which significantly outclassed Spain’s aging fleet. Additionally, Spain's former colonies, particularly Cuba, were already struggling for independence, seeking to expel Spanish control. This allowed the US to gain diplomatic support and build coalitions against Spain. Spain at the time was a declining power, while the US was an emerging global force. However, the contemporary US is in a vastly different position. Without doubt, China’s military modernization reflects its ambition to rival and potentially surpass the US in global power projection. With significant advancements in technology, including military AI and emerging disruptive technologies, China aims to build an "intelligentized" force capable of dynamic warfare. Sustained defense spending and efforts to strengthen global partnerships enhance its strategic positioning(The Department of Defense, 2023). China’s navy is, by far, the largest of

any country in East Asia, and sometime between 2015 and 2020 it surpassed the US Navy in numbers of battle force ships. China's naval modernization includes advancements in ships, aircraft, weapons, logistics, doctrine, and training. Despite current limitations, China is addressing its weaknesses (Ronald, 2024).

Nevertheless, China faces notable limitations compared to the US, including reliance on foreign technology, gaps in nuclear power, advanced capabilities like stealth and integrated command systems, and limited operational experience. Also, despite China's robust military build-up, its defense budget is far less behind the US. In 2023, the US allocated \$916 billion to its military, solidifying its position as the world's highest spender on defense while China followed in second place, with military expenditures nearing \$296 billion (Statista, 2024c). In addition, the US is expected to maintain its top defense spending position, with budgets projected to exceed \$1 trillion by 2029 and continue rising through 2033 (Statista, 2024a). Moreover, the US holds a significantly larger nuclear arsenal, with 5,244 warheads compared to China's 500, creating a stark imbalance and leaving China vulnerable to a potential first-strike scenario. Furthermore, China's military struggles with technological gaps, such as in missile defense and advanced stealth aircraft, where the US maintains a qualitative edge (Li & Wu, 2024). On the top of that, in response to China's dramatic military build-up, the US Navy has shifted more of its fleet and advanced assets to the Pacific, maintains a decisive advantage through its extensive alliance network and global strategic coordination, underscoring the challenges China faces in achieving military parity (The Department of Defense, 2023).

As of June 2023, the Indo-Pacific region hosted more than 375,000 US military personnel across at least 66 distinct defense sites (Luke, 2023) including large bases in Japan and South Korea. US Indo-Pacific Command, headquartered in Aiea, Hawaii, encompasses 38 nations and more than half of the world's population within its scope. The US troops are in the Indo-Pacific to maintain strategic primacy, deter Chinese aggression, support allies like Taiwan, counter threats from North Korea, and strengthen regional security through partnerships with countries like India, Japan, and Australia. Additionally the US has substantial number of troops in dozens of bases in the Middle East, Africa and Europe (USAFacts Team, 2024). The last but not least, compared to the Chinese Liberation Army that has almost no actual combat experiences, the US has been fighting conventional and unconventional wars on every continent. It has war-fighting experience in World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Panama, Grenada, the First Gulf War, Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan, Syria and these military forces can be deployed at short notice anywhere on Earth (Mangesh, 2021). It is apparent that, while China's ambitions are transformative, overcoming these disparities will require continued investment and innovation.

In the context of China's quest for regional hegemony and the US deterrence strategy against it, as two of the most influential players in the region, India and Japan's perceptions of China's ambitions are also significantly important. Similar to how France's support for the US against Spain in 1898 contributed to the US victory and its path to regional hegemony, Japan and India's positions are crucial in the US-China rivalry in Asia. India perceives China as a significant threat due to its growing economic and military power, territorial ambitions, and assertive actions in the Indo-Pacific region. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which India views as infringing on its sovereignty, exacerbate these concerns. The relationship between China and Pakistan has also been seen by India as a strategic issue, particularly in light of China's backing of Pakistan and "iron brother" relationship in various fields (Swaim, 2023). Additionally, China's increasing presence in South Asia and its influence in neighboring countries such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives challenge India's regional dominance. Border tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), including incidents like the Galwan clash further underscore India's apprehension (Muskan, 2024).

In response, India has adopted a multifaceted strategy to counter China's rise. It has pursued limited hard balancing through internal military modernization and external partnerships. India has strengthened security ties with countries like the US, Japan, and Australia, notably participating in the Quad to counterbalance China's influence in the Indo-Pacific. Domestically, India is modernizing its military capabilities, enhancing surveillance, and adopting advanced technologies to address security threats. Bilateral deals such as a Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement with the US have bolstered intelligence sharing and defense coordination (Tanveer, 2023). On the top of that, its relations with Japan also worth mentioning. Japan-India relations have evolved significantly in response to the increasing tensions with China. In military field for instance, despite India had hesitated to include Japan in military exercises like the Malabar naval exercise due to China's protests initially, as India's relations with China soured, India took proactive steps to strengthen ties with Japan. This included inviting Japan

back to participate in the Malabar exercise in 2015, which marked a shift in India's approach to security cooperation with Japan. The two nations have signed agreements on various issues, including defense equipment transfer, sharing classified military information, and peaceful nuclear energy use. This partnership is further reinforced by India's engagement with Quad, which aims to counterbalance China's influence in the region (Mukherjee, 2022).

Furthermore, India is strategically reducing its economic dependence on China to mitigate vulnerabilities from supply chain disruptions and trade deficits. This shift is driven by three key approaches. First, through initiatives like *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-Reliant India), India aims to lessen reliance on a single foreign supplier, especially during crises. Second, India is positioning itself as a key player in global supply chains by refining industrial policies, introducing the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme, and improving the business environment. These steps are designed to boost exports, reduce trade imbalances, and generate employment. Lastly, India is strengthening regional trade agreements (RTAs) with developed countries, eliminating tariffs and trade barriers to improve market access and attract foreign investment, thereby fostering economic growth and stability (Debroy & Sinha, 2024).

As to Japan's perspective on China, Sino-Japanese relations today can be characterized as economically interdependent yet strategically opposed, largely due to China's security challenges. Additionally, lingering anti-Japan nationalism in mainland China, rooted in Japan's invasion and brutality during the 1930s and 1940s, has made bilateral relations fragile. This sentiment has been, and could continue to be, manipulated by the Chinese government to bolster national unity, gain public support for military actions over contested islands, and enhance domestic legitimacy by responding to anti-Japan sentiment. Considering such vulnerability, the Japan actually strategically decoupled from China as early as 2010, following disputes over territorial claims and China's restrictions on rare earth exports (Pohlkamp, 2023).

Japan views China as a destabilizing force in the region due to its growing military capabilities, assertive foreign policy and cybersecurity threats, which threaten the existing regional order and challenge the norms of the liberal international order. At the individual level, Japan is enhancing its military capabilities to counter growing threats from China, with a five-year, \$297 billion plan to double annual defense spending by 2027, making it the world's third-largest military spender. The 2025 budget request of \$59 billion prioritizes fortifying defenses in the southwestern islands, long-range strike capabilities, and advanced missile detection systems to address Chinese incursions near disputed islands and hypersonic missile threats. To combat declining recruitment, Japan is also investing in technologies like drones, AI, and automation. \$710 million is allocated for combat and surveillance drones, while \$2.17 billion will fund crew-efficient destroyers. AI systems and automated storage facilities are also planned to optimize resources (YAMAGUCHI, 2024).

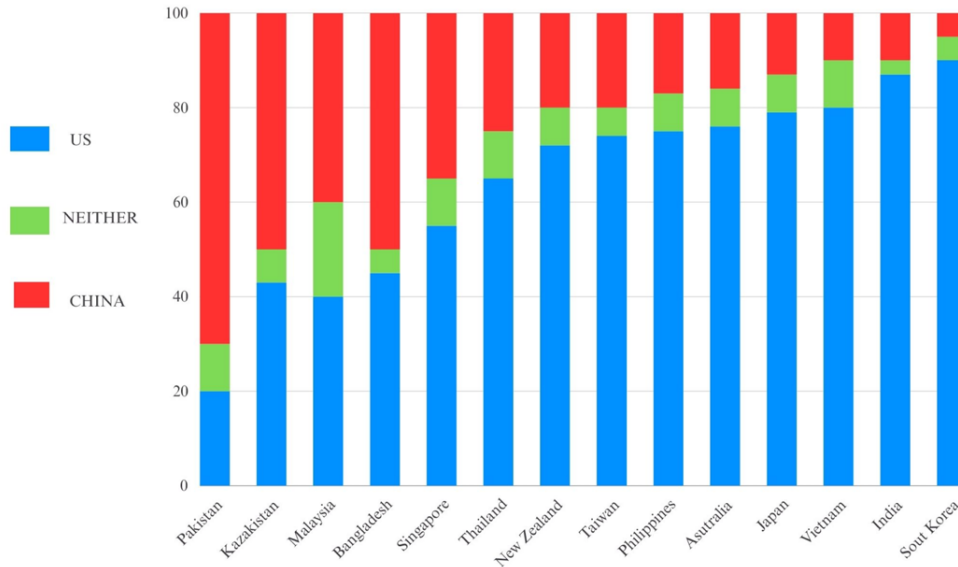
At the collective level, cornerstone of Japan's strategy regarding perceived threat by China is its alliance with the US, which shapes its foreign policy and underpins its approach to regional security. Japan is committed to sustaining the liberal order by promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, principles it deems essential for countering China's attempts to delegitimize Western norms. In order to jointly face the strategic threats posed by China, beside the Quad, Japan is also increasingly contacting other partners such as the Philippines and South Korea. Additionally, by leveraging its traditional influence, Japan actively engages with ASEAN, recognizing the organization as a critical institution-builder in the Indo-Pacific. By aligning its strategies with ASEAN and fostering stable US-ASEAN relations, Japan aims to ensure that ASEAN members support the liberal order led by the Western camp, reinforcing regional stability (YOSHIMATSU, 2024).

In a nut shell, unlike Spain, which faced the U.S. alone during their rivalry in the late 19th century, today's US enjoys strong alliances in the Asia-Pacific region and across the world. Its key allies in the Asia-Pacific—such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Taiwan—share common interests in containing China. It is also noteworthy that, other nations, like Vietnam, the Philippines, and most ASEAN countries, view the US as an ideal security partner, particularly in countering China's military threat.

To reduce the US influence in Asia Pacific region and present itself as peaceful and trustworthy neighbor, China has been trying to promote regionalism, as evidenced by Xi Jinping's statement: "It is for the people of Asia to manage Asia's affairs, resolve its issues, and safeguard its security." (Xi Jinping, 2014) Nevertheless, China's initiatives have not yielded desirable outcomes; instead, they have raised security concerns among neighboring countries due to China's disregard for international maritime law (Mastro, 2021) and ideological differences. Research conducted by Central European Institute of Asian Studies on

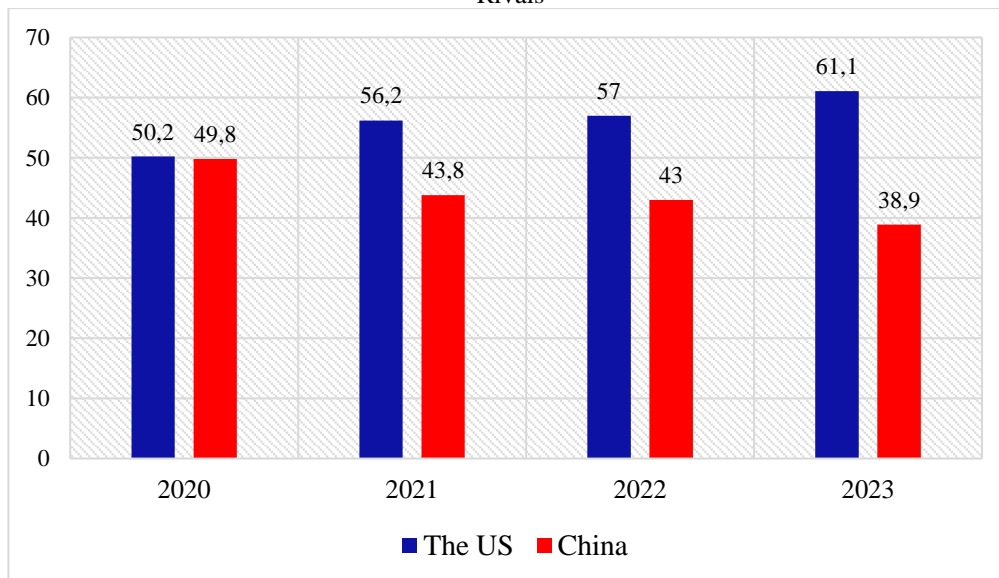
April 2022 indicates that (Figure 5), if it becomes necessary to choose a side between the China and US, the large majority of Indo-Pacific nations demonstrated an increasing inclination to side with the US (Tucsányi et al., 2022).

Figure 5: If You Had to Decide Between China and the US, Which Would You Choose to Align With? - April 2022



Similarly, the ASEAN nations' preference of US over China is clear and it gradually increasing, according to the public survey done by Yusuf Ishak Institute (Figure 6). In 2023, just 38.9 % of respondents selected China, while 61.1% indicated that ASEAN should stand with the US (Sue-Ann, 2023). This survey indicates a fundamental shift in views toward China's rise since 2005, coinciding with the inaugural East Asian Summit in Malaysia. Nearly 50% of respondents from 22 countries viewed China's influence positively, compared to 38% who expressed the same sentiment toward the US (Jr, 2005). Building blocks lacking universal values can only contribute to balancing US influence to some extent; however, they are unlikely to facilitate China's replacement of US-led Western ideas and values as it discussed above.

Figure 6: ASEAN Should Choose the US or China If Forced to Align with One of the Two Strategic Rivals



While the discussions above suggest that the great powers, particularly the US, would not allow China to establish dominance in Asia as Great Britain once permitted the US to become the hegemon in the Western Hemisphere, it is important to note that China itself, along with blocs in which it plays a key role, either lacks the motivation or is not strong enough to expel the US from Asia. Additionally, regional major powers like Japan and India have significant security problems with China, thus they view China's rise as a threat. What is more, China faces an image problem, particularly in Central Asia, due to its oppressive policies toward Uyghurs. Finally, many of China's neighbors view its rise as a security threat, even if they see economic opportunities in their relationship with Beijing. These countries perceive the US as an ideal balancer and security partner against China's growing influence. This suggests that there is little chance for China to implement its own version of the Monroe Doctrine by expelling the U.S. from the region.

Concerning the primary research question of whether China can attain regional hegemony, another aspect that should not be overlooked is the traditional multipolar nature of the Asian continent. The upcoming section will delve into this subject.

Asia: The Land of Multipower

Asia is the world's largest continent in terms of both population and land area. The continent consisted of different climates and landscapes which have historically constrained the influence of major Asian powers across the continent. For example, the vast desert between China and Inner Mongolia imposed geographical limitations on the power projection capabilities of both Chinese sedentary dynasties and the nomadic Turco-Mongol khanates. The formidable Himalayan Mountain Ranges served as a natural barrier, hindering military campaigns and interactions between China and India throughout history. Similarly, the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean has played a similar role, acting as a natural boundary between Chinese polities and their Japanese counterparts.

By taking China's international relation from the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC) to present-day into account, it is not difficult to see that there are always several nations that engages in power competition with China. As a result, both Chinese dynasties and other powers in Asia have not been able to be hegemon of Asia. In the Qin period (221-206 BC) the nomadic Xiongnu confederation in the north was a peer competitor and the dynasty had to send significant troops against the Xiongnu to keep its border safe (Twitchett & Loewe, 1986, p. 64). In the era when China was unified under the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD), the Xiongnu achieved their zenith of influence when they emerged victorious over the Han Chinese at the Battle of Baideng in 200 BC. In India in the same period, the Maurya Empire stood as the single unified power of the Indian subcontinent while Central Asia, Iran, and Mesopotamia were under the rule of the Seleucid Empire (Limited, 2007, p. 14; Smith, 1920, pp. 104–106).

During the period between 265 and 589, the political landscape of China was marked by a series of internal conflicts, power struggles, and external threats (Wolfram Eberhard, 1969, pp. 107–131). No political unit in China had the chance to unify China, let alone dominate Asia. Asia was ruled by the Rouran Empire in the north, the Tibetan Kingdom in Tibet, the Gupta Empire in India, and the Persian Empire in Central Asia and Iran (Bingham et al., 1964; Wolfram Eberhard, 1969, pp. 123–163). Then Tang Dynasty (618–907) witnessed one of the most prosperous and powerful periods in Chinese history. However, its influence was balanced by another four great powers in Asia which were the Gok Turks and Uyghur Khanate in the north, the Tibetan Empire in Tibet and the Abbasid Caliphate in Central Asia, Iran and the Middle East (Fairbank & Twitchett, 1979, pp. 32–37; Limited, 2007, p. 72; Zhenping, 2013, pp. 11–54). From the late 11th century to the end of the 13th century Chinese Song Dynasty was only able to control the south of the Great Wall and was regularly attacked by the nomadic Liao and Jin Dynasty in the north (Wolfram Eberhard, 1969, pp. 208–230). Other parts of Asia were shared by the Tibetans, Uyghur Idkut Kingdom, Karahanids, Seljuks, Ghaznavids, Mamluks, etc (Golden, 2011, pp. 64–75; Limited, 2007, p. 88).

Genghis Khan's Mongol Empire (1206-1368) stands as the most expansive land power in the world history. However, even at its zenith, notable regions such as India, the Arabian Peninsula, most of Russia, Southeast Asia, and Japan remained beyond its dominion. The empire disintegrated into four competing khanates by 1294, each pursuing distinct goals and interests (Barfield, 1992, pp. 187–222; Limited, 2007, p. 98–99). After the Mongols, China was ruled by the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), whose authority primarily extended to the southern side of the Great Wall (Lee & Chan, 2016, p. 2). Asia, again, remained as a geopolitical battleground, with rival empires including the Jungar Mongols in Mongolia, Chaghatais in the Turkistan region, the Mughal Empire in India, Tamerlane in Central Asia and Iran, the Golden Horde in

Siberia and Caucasia, and the Ottomans in Asia Minor and the eastern Mediterranean region. The nomadic Manchu Empire (1636-1912) emerged as another formidable power, controlling present day China, Mongolia and Sakhalin Island(Choi, 2016, p. 5). Nevertheless, like its predecessors, it could not establish hegemony over the Asian continent. Tsarist Russia to the north, the Safavids in Iran, the Mughals and Ottomans in their traditional domains, and Japan to the east coexisted within various relationships(Limited, 2007, p. 112).

Drawing parallels to the European Concert of Powers (1815–1870), which maintained a balance among Britain, Prussia, France, the Austria-Hungarian Empire, and Russia through a deliberate distribution of power, a comparable multipolar structure existed in Asia during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Major powers such as Great Britain, the US, Japan, France, Russia, and a weakened China—encompassing both the late Manchu dynasty and the early Republic of China—sustained this balance until China's partial colonization by Western imperial forces and Japan in the 1840s. Following World War II, the global geopolitical landscape shifted dramatically with the rise of the US and the Soviet Union as superpowers. Although the Cold War created a bipolar global order, Asia and the Indo-Pacific region retained multipolarity, with emerging regional powers like China, India and the sustained influence of Japan(J. Green, 2024). In recent years, the region has experienced a renewed multipolar order, driven by the dramatic rise of China and India, as well as the resurgence of Russia under Vladimir Putin. Additionally, the US's Asia pivot strategy and the gradual reemergence of Japanese military power, facilitated by easing military restrictions, have further reinforced Asia's multipolar structure. As previously discussed, both bilateral and bloc-level power dynamics among the US, China, Japan, Russia, and India illustrate Asia's enduring multipolar trajectory, which has characterized the region since ancient times.

Briefly stated, the Asian continent remains a bastion of diversity, a political arena marked by multipolarity. Throughout history, there has been no singular example of a single Asian nation achieving hegemony over the entire continent. The contemporary political landscape mirrors this historical pattern too. Despite China's formidable economic and military power, it finds itself surrounded by other major powers. While the US was bordered by the relatively weaker nations of Canada to the north and Mexico to the south and protected by the natural barriers of the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean on its path to the hegemonic power of its region, none of this applies to China. It is a powerful nation encircled by other powerful states.

Regarding the discussion, the Chinese economy is a persuasive factor that leads many to predict that China will replace the United States and emerge as the global hegemon in the near future(Herrington, 2011). Subsequently, the question arises: is economic power define hegemony? The upcoming part of the article examines China's economy and its value in this respect.

RELATIONS BETWEEN GDP AND HEGEMONY

The economy is one of the two essential components of global hegemony, along with military power(Kentor, 2015) and it could also be the source of both soft and hard power(Nye Jr & Jisi, 2009, pp. 18–23). Today China is the second-largest economy and it became a hub for global manufacturing. According to McKinsey Global Institute, in 2021, China accounted for 18 percent of both the world's population and GDP and China accounted for 25% of global GDP growth between 1991 and 2021(McKinsey Global Institute, 2023). China's ascent as a formidable economic force enables China to establish various institutional and economic initiatives, which demonstrates a willingness to reshape global norms and institutions in alignment with its interests. Initiatives such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), BRI, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), not only reflect China's dissatisfaction with existing Western-dominated institutions but also signify its ambition to establish institutions that amplify its influence and agenda-setting power(Lobell & Ernsten, 2021).

However, is the powerful economy sufficient to make China a global hegemon and replace the US? Statistical data and historical records of the GDP and global hegemonic powers provide significant insights in this respect. The table 1 illustrates the GDP of several powerful countries from 1st AD to 2003(Maddison, 2003, p. 259). Comparison between the total economy and global position of the UK, the US, China, and Japan since the 18th century shows that there was no correlation between having the highest GDP and being a regional or global hegemon.

Table 1: World GDP, 20 Countries and Regional Totals, 1-2003AD (Million 1990 International)

	1	1000	1500	1600	1700	1820	1870	1913	1950	1973	2003
France	2,336	2,763	10,912	15,559	19,539	35,468	72,100	144,489	220,492	683,965	1,315,601
Germany	1,225	1,435	8,256	12,656	13,650	26,819	72,149	237,332	265,354	944,755	1,577,423
Italy	6,475	2,2250	11,550	14,410	14,630	22,535	41,814	95,487	164,957	582,713	1,110,691
Netherlands	85	128	723	2,072	4,047	4,288	9,952	24,955	60,642	175,791	348,464
The UK	320	800	2,815	6,007	10,709	36,232	100,180	224,618	347,850	675,941	1,280,625
The US	272	520	800	600	572	12,548	98,374	513,383	1,455,916	3,536,622	8,430,762
Japan	1,200	3,188	7,700	9,620	15,390	20,739	25,393	71,653	160,966	1,242,392	2,699,261
China	26,820	26,550	61,800	96,000	82,800	228,600	189,740	241,431	244,985	739,414	6,187,984
India	33,750	33,750	60,500	74,250	90,750	111,417	134,882	204,242	222,222	494,832	2,267,136

Great Britain held an undisputed position as the strongest power until World War II, while the United States recently established itself as the most powerful nation in the America. Data indicates a significant economic leap for the US in the 1800s, and it almost catch up the Great Britain in 1870 in terms of GDP with the comparison of \$100,180m vs. \$98,374m. By 1913, the UK had already lost its economic dominance to the US, with a GDP of \$224,618m-less than half of the US GDP, which stood at \$517,383m. Although the US economy surpassed that of the UK in the 1870s, it truly replaced the UK's global position as a result of World War II and the Suez Crisis in 1956(Eichengreen, 2011). It took the U.S. almost 90 years and a devastating war in which the UK was at the forefront.

Likewise, it was not until the 20th century that the US surpassed China in GDP. Nevertheless, in March 1843 the Treaty of Wangxia, the initial of the unequal treaties forced by the U.S, was ratified with China. According to the treaty's conditions, the United States not only obtained equivalent privileges to those secured by Great Britain under the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 but also acquired extra advantages, such as favorable cabotage rights and an extension of extraterritoriality(Downs, 1997, pp. 10–12).

Making comparison between China and Japan, two regional powers, is also justify the insufficiency of economic superiority to be a hegemonic power. Japan became the modern industrialized nation after its Meiji Restoration1868. In 1870, Japan's GDP stood at \$25,393 million, significantly trailing China's \$189,740 million, accounting for less than one-seventh of China's total. Yet, China was miserably defeated by Japan in First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). By 1913, Japan's GDP had risen to \$71,653 million, still less than one-third of China's \$241,431 million during the same period. The statistics shows the Chinese GDP is overwhelmingly higher than that of the Japanese until 1950. However, during all this time, China had never reached a position comparable to Japan. It lost roughly 25% of its territory and more than a third of its population to Japan during the two world wars(Mark Witzke, 2017).

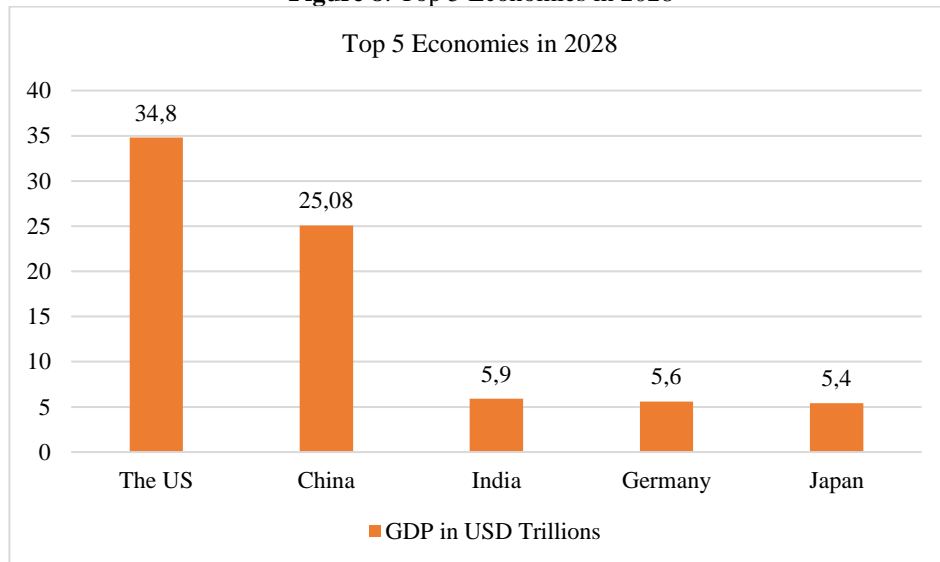
Historical power competition and economic data provided compelling evidence that economic growth or having the highest GDP does not automatically place a nation at the top of the international order. China was an economic giant for almost all the time of history, nevertheless, it lost the regional hegemony to the nations that were economically far less powerful than itself.

Figure 7: Growth Rate of Real GDP of China from 2012 to 2023 With Forecast Until 2029



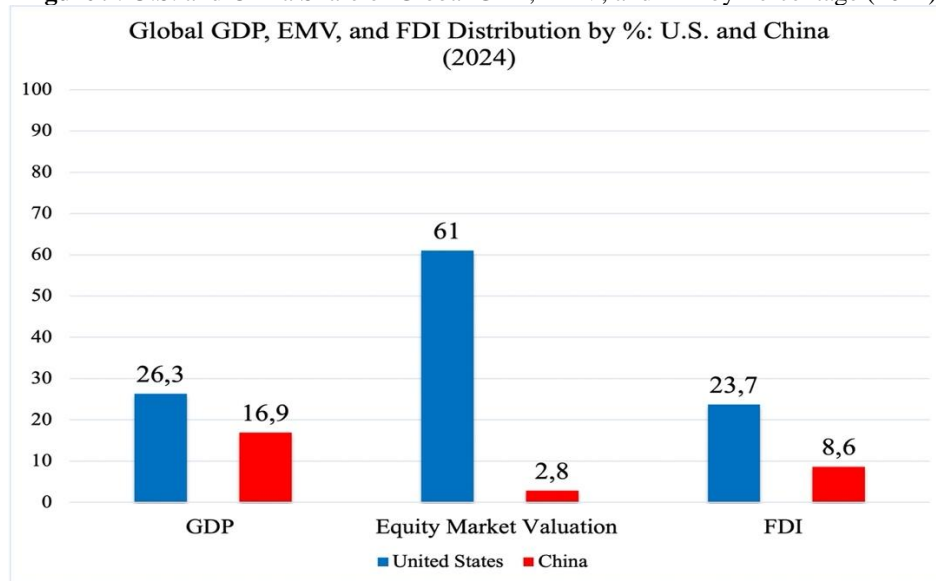
It is also worth mentioning that the economic miracle of China has been starting to fade away. IMF statistics in 2024 shows that (Figure 7) China's GDP growth rate entered into the period of gradual decline from 4.8% 2024 to 3.3% in 2029(IMF, 2024a). The GDP of the US however, is upward trend during the same period and FocusEconomic forecasted that (Figure 8) China's GDP in 2028 is 25.08 trillion, roughly 72% of 34.8 trillion of the U.S (IMF, 2024c). In this context, it is important to note that, China's economic reliance on exports makes it particularly vulnerable to global market fluctuations and trade tensions, especially with the US. China's deep integration into the global economy ties it closely to U.S. interests and the US and EU remain a crucial market for Chinese exports, meaning that any significant deterioration with both or with any of them could have serious economic repercussions for China(Prorokovic & Stekić, 2024). Furthermore, China's already slowing economy would likely face additional setbacks under a potential second Trump presidency. This administration aims to revoke China's Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status, a move supported by legislative measures such as the Restoring Trade Fairness Act and initiatives led by Republican Senators Marco Rubio, Tom Cotton, and Josh Hawley. This move, aligned with President-elect Trump's plan to impose a 60% tariff on Chinese imports, would result in 3.4% deflationary pressure on China's economy, reducing its export competitiveness in the US market and reshaping global trade dynamics(Jian, 2024).

Figure 8: Top 5 Economies in 2028



In comparing the performance of the two, it is also important to note that a recent comparison of the US and Chinese economies highlights differences in three key metrics: GDP, equity market valuation, and foreign direct investment (FDI). As illustrated on the Figure 9, data from the IMF's *World Economic Outlook* (April 2024) shows the US contributes 26.3% (\$28.8 trillion) and China 16.9% (\$18.5 trillion) to global GDP. The US's share has grown since 2021, partly due to its strong post-COVID recovery. In equity market valuation, the US dominates with 61% of global market capitalization (S&P Global BMI, Feb. 2024), compared to China's 2.8%. The disparity reflects differences in market maturity and governance. FDI data from *fDi Intelligence* (1990–2022) places the US first (\$10.5 trillion, 23.7%) and China second (\$3.8 trillion, 8.6%). Despite regulatory challenges, China's FDI growth underscores its appeal to global investors(Lu, 2024).

Figure 9: U.S. and China Share of Global GDP, EMV, and FDI by Percentage (2024)



Moreover, Supply chains have been gradually moving from China to Southeast Asia due to various factors such as geopolitical tensions and COVID-19 and China's share in global manufacturing likely further decrease thanks to US-China trade war and West's de-risking strategy(ASEAN Exchanges, 2024).

Finally, without doubt, financial institutions, like AIIB and economic projects such as BRI, as well as China's great achievement in EV and solar industry play crucial role in building economic and institutional blocs that counter the U.S.-led counterparts. However, ten years later, expectations and realities in the BRI differ. The first imprudent lending that resulted in poor loans caused the BRI's progress to slow down. With China's economic woes and growing international competition with the United States, Xi, has acknowledged the program's shortcomings and the country's current concentration on "small but high-quality" investments. Some nations, such as Italy, may decide to leave the BRI as they become wary of developing stronger connections with China(The Economist, 2023).

When it comes to EV sector, China is facing export ban from the U.S. under the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) due to China's widespread forced labor practice as of 2016(Groom & Groom, 2023). UFLPA is not limited to EV sector, currently it includes apparel, agriculture, polysilicon, plastics, chemicals, batteries, household appliances, electronics, and food additives sectors(Tomillo, 2024) and new Chinese companies in different sectors still have been adding. Furthermore, in April 2024, the EU was also approved new rules designated to ban importing Chinese products tainted with Uyghur forced labor(Mared Gwyn Jones & Paula Soler, 2024).

The last but not least, domestic consumption of China has faced problems as well. Investment is still weighed down by a crisis in the real estate sector that seems to have no end. In this environment, retail sales have less grown by 5% in 2023 compared to a rate of around 10% in 2015-2019, while investment has less grown at a rate of 3%. One of the most visible symptoms of this weakness in domestic demand is consumer confidence, which plummeted in early 2022 and has not recovered since. Besides, as of 2022 there have also been deflationary pressures as a result of structural and cyclical factors such as population decline real estate correction and overcapacity problems in manufacturing sector. These factors resulted in the decline in expenditure per capita that Chinese households' spending on housing has decreased while spending on food has accelerated. Due to the lack of confidence, high household savings of Chinese around 35%, far exceed levels in advanced or similarly developed economies(Luís, 2024).

Nevertheless, we shouldn't underestimate the problem-solving capacity of CCP leaders and Chinese institutions. As Kishore Mahbubani has noted, there have been ongoing negative predictions, particularly about the future of the Chinese economy. For instance, *The Economist* first predicted in 1990s "the coming collapse of the Chinese economy," yet Chinese economy is still performing very well (Rise of Asia, 2024) and China still remains a giant economic power. However, when it comes to hegemonic competition, the historical recodes shows there is no correlation between being top economic power and

achieving the hegemony. Also, China's economy has been in downward trend due to the reasons mentioned above, which contradicts to previous statistics and expectation.

CONCLUSION

The debate regarding China-US hegemonic competition is longstanding and the westward shift of global power is an unstoppable trend, with China playing a pivotal role in the rise of the East, particularly in East Asia. The West, especially Europe, has lost its vibrancy, enthusiasm, and energy in various domains. This shift has led some to speculate that China will soon replace the US as the world's dominant power. Many studies have explored this issue within specific theoretical frameworks or from particular angles. Some have analyzed how China's ascent or its leadership within organizations could counterbalance US hegemony in Asia or globally. Undoubtedly, China's rise has contributed to balancing US influence. However, a critical question remains: Can China potentially supplant the US as the hegemonic power?

In addressing this frequently asked question, this paper adopted John Mearsheimer's theory of Offensive Realism, compared the US's path to hegemony in the Western Hemisphere with China's potential for achieving hegemony in Asia, and analyzed the relationship between economic strength and hegemony. Through both qualitative and quantitative analysis, this study identified several factors that hinder China's potential as a regional hegemon. First, the US, along with regional great powers Japan and India, is committed to limiting China's influence, and China lacks the capacity to effectively counter it to the extent of neutralizing US power. Second, the traditional multipolar order in Asia poses significant challenges to China's pursuit of regional hegemony. Finally, although economic strength is essential for national power, it does not automatically confer hegemonic status. Furthermore, China's economic growth has been slowing and statistics shows that the US will remain as top economic power in the future.

The decline of the West's global influence and the geopolitical contraction of the US, alongside the rise of the East, particularly China, should not be interpreted as China replacing the US as the world's most powerful nation. Additionally, the phenomenon of the eastward shift of power should not obscure the complexities of hegemonic competition. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the rise of the East, including China, and the relative decline of the West will diminish the universal dominance of the US. Although the US will remain the strongest nation on the planet, its unchallenged power will be shared with other emerging powers such as China, Russia, India, Japan, and the European Union, leading to a multipolar world.

In this context, given China's growing influence in economy, military and global governance, future research should also focus on China's human rights violations against its non-Chinese populations, including Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Uzbeks, to assess the values China may project on the global stage. Additionally, China's "diplomacy with Chinese characteristics," which emphasizes non-intervention in internal affairs and prioritizes economic cooperation, should be analyzed within the framework of hegemonic competition.

Authorship Contribution

This research was conducted by a single author.

Ethics Committee Statement

Ethics committee approval is not required for this research.

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