

US-Chinese Relations: A Study Of Tension Factors After The Year 2000

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Abstract

American-Chinese relations are extremely complex due to their ramifications in various fields and the competition and contradiction they contain. They are a relationship between prevailing powers that are keen to limit any party that threatens their influence and compete with their interests and aspires to reach their global status and rising powers that aim to build themselves, enhance their influence, and formulate their roles in a way that enhances them. In its interests, this relationship has become tense in more than one area. The study adopted the analytical approach to interpret and analyze the research data and is based on a central question: What are the sources of tension in US-Chinese relations and what is their nature? A research hypothesis states: China's economic rise and the resulting advanced military capabilities in terms of quantity and quality and effectiveness in political performance were the cause of an exacerbation of the state of tension in its relationship with the United States of America, which sees what is happening in China and what it is doing as a threat to its interests and global influence.

Keywords: *tension, cybersecurity, security environment rising powers, prevailing powers.*

Introduction

One of the factors that contribute to the escalation of conflicts in international affairs is the emergence or rise of powerful nations. These nations often pose a threat to the interests and international standing of the dominant powers on the global stage.

Today, the world is witnessing an increasing state of disagreement between the United States of America as the dominant global power and emerging or major powers due to their rapid economic, military, and operational capabilities at both regional and international levels. Moreover, these powers possess a human capacity exceeding 1.25 billion people, a vast geographical area, and a stable and successful political system that effectively manages this human potential, leading it in accelerated economic development projects that are globally the most growing. Today, the world has become centered around China, as it has entered various fields of industry, investment, and production, infiltrating most countries worldwide. Its activities have extended beyond the familiar economic and military aspects, as it now holds a position in the field of space and the virtual world, which other countries, specifically the United States of America, have recognized as a challenge to them.

The importance of this study lies in its description and analysis of the factors of tension between two countries, despite their unequal power, as they dominate the international scene. The nature of the outcomes of this tension affects the course of international relations, which is worthy of study by specialists and researchers in international affairs.

Moreover, it has become a matter of interest for decision-makers in most countries worldwide, as it is not a matter between two small or even larger countries.

The aim of this study is to address the causes of tension in the relations between the United States of America and China, classified according to their nature into economic, political, and military security factors.

The study poses a fundamental question that forms the core of the study's problem: What are the causes of tension in US-China relations and what is their nature?

The hypothesis of this study is that China's economic rise and the resulting advanced military capabilities, in terms of quantity, quality, and effectiveness in political performance, have contributed to the escalation of tension in its relationship with the United States of America. The US perceives China's actions and developments as a threat to its interests and global influence.

The analytical method was employed to study the negative factors affecting the course of relations between China and the United States of America.

The structure of the study consists of an introduction, three sections, and a conclusion. The study divided the factors of tension in US-China relations, according to their nature, into economic and technological factors in the first section, political factors in the second section, and security and military factors in the third section.

The first issue: Economic and Technological Factors

There are multiple factors that contribute to the tension in US-China relations, each with varying levels of importance. In this discussion, we will divide them according to their nature as follows:

1- Trade Exchange

According to Alsharqbusiness, the growing concern of the United States of America regarding the expansion of the Chinese economy is the increasing trade deficit with China. This deficit has been continuously rising and reached around \$300 billion in 2021. It is widely held that China utilizes inequitable trade practices, such as currency manipulation to devalue its currency, in order to inundate American markets with inexpensive goods and impede American exports. This concern has intensified owing to the sustained rapid growth of China's economy and its substantial surplus in productivity across multiple product categories (Elwell & Labonte, 2007).

2- Technological and Cybersecurity Factor

China has become a technological competitor to the United States in the field of technology. One of the main reasons for China's economic progress is its strong focus on growth, scientific advancement, and technology to reach a global level. (Abdul Hay, 2005, p. 51). The domain of artificial intelligence has emerged as a prime arena for heightened competition between the two factions, owing to China's strides in 5G network development and its consequential influence on communication and information technology (Connolly, 2020, p. 7).

Another field that has gained increasing international attention is the field of cybersecurity. Securing cyberspace and information is closely linked to the national security of countries. This has led many countries to seek to build an effective technological system for "network security" in an environment where cybercrime is thriving. China views cyberspace and the electronic domain as important areas for strategic deterrence and has become a field of strategic competition between nations. As a result, expenditures on information security in China have increased from \$527 million in 2003 to around \$8.2 billion in 2011. Since the establishment of China's Electronic Space Warfare Unit known as "Unit 61398" in 2003,

the United States has been subjected to the worst cyber espionage attacks, including the attack on Lockheed Martin and the US Space Administration, which often aim at information piracy (Rashid, 2018, p. 120).

3 – Competition in the Space Field.

Space represents another arena witnessing international competition, particularly between the United States and China in collaboration with the Russian Federation. An article published on Arabic.com highlighted that in 2018, there were 40 space launches, signifying a significant increase compared to 2012, which saw 22 space missions. This positions China as a frontrunner in space exploration. While the United States predominantly leads its space endeavors independently, China and the Russian Federation are striving to consolidate their collaboration in this domain, with both parties characterizing this partnership as nearing an alliance. In response to Chinese advancements, the Pentagon enacted a decision in 2011 prohibiting NASA from engaging in space-related cooperation with China. Nevertheless, China remains undeterred by this restriction, as it leverages its collaboration with the Russian Federation to bolster its space initiatives. Although precise data on Chinese expenditure in this sphere remains undisclosed, estimates suggest it reached approximately \$8.9 billion in 2020, encompassing 35 launches. This places China in second position after the United States, which allocates \$48 billion to its space program. Meanwhile, Russian expenditure in this realm amounted to \$2.7 billion. The competition in space encompasses two focal points: short-term military applications and long-term exploration and investment in space resources.

4 – Software Applications and Communication Technology.

In 2022, the US government imposed significant restrictions on advanced semiconductor types and chip-making machines exported to China. This is another field of dispute between the two countries. Furthermore, companies connected to China, such as the social media application TikTok, the coordination application WeChat, and the wholesale clothing stores Shein, face regulatory pressures regarding their labor practices and their use of American customer data, as well as the methods by which they import products into the United States. Furthermore, during the Trump administration, the United States imposed sanctions and trade restrictions on the Chinese technology giant Huawei, a competitor to American companies in the telecommunications field (Al-Manshawi, 2024).

2. Political Factors – Disputes over areas of influence and the nature of the political approach.

These include the most prominent contentious issues, which are:

1- Disputes over the South China Sea

The South China Sea is part of the Pacific Ocean, located in the south of China and west of the Pacific Ocean. It holds a significant strategic position, with an approximate area of 3.5 million square kilometers. Its importance lies in its geographical location as it connects the Pacific and Indian Oceans, stretching from Singapore to the Taiwan Strait. The most dynamic and powerful countries (China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei), as well as the United States, compete for control over it. These countries play important regional competitive roles in controlling it, extending to the Southeast Asia region, and serving as a maritime gateway to the Western world. It is connected to the East China Sea after passing through (Thailand, the Philippines, Brunei), and it contains numerous small islands such as Spratly, Dongsha, Xisha, Zhongsha, and Nansha (Majid, 2018, p. 8). This is further discussed by Mardan (2022).

The South China Sea holds significant strategic and economic importance for numerous regional and international powers due to its abundant resources, including vast reserves of

oil and natural gas estimated at 23-30 billion tons and 16 trillion cubic meters, respectively. Featuring numerous maritime passages and straits, it ranks as the world's second busiest global passage. Dubbed the "Pulsating Heart of Trade," it sees approximately 300 commercial ships and 200 oil tankers traversing its waters daily, constituting roughly 70% of the commercial ships and oil tankers traveling from the Middle East and Africa to the Pacific. Key passages include the Sunda Strait linking Southeast Asia to Australia and the Lombok Strait connecting to Indonesia. However, the most critical passage remains the Malacca Strait, serving as the vital link between the Pacific and Indian Oceans (Abdul Razzaq, 2018, p. 257). This is further discussed in the Annual Report to Congress by the (Office of Secretary of Defense, 2018, p. 13).

From the Chinese leadership's viewpoint, the South China Sea is viewed primarily through the lens of its crucial maritime transportation routes, serving as a vital conduit for the Chinese economy and playing a pivotal role in ensuring China's energy security. Conversely, the United States and its allies harbor mounting apprehensions regarding China's assertive control over the airspace and maritime domains within the South China Sea. The United States is actively backing competing nations in the South China Sea islands in a bid to encircle and constrain China's influence in the region (Xuang, 2017, pp.16-18).

2- The issue of Taiwan's recovery.□

Taiwan, officially recognized as the Republic of China (ROC), is an island situated across the Taiwan Strait from mainland China. It has governed itself independently from mainland China (the People's Republic of China) since 1949. This separation occurred following the success of the communist revolution in China, leading to the retreat of Chiang Kai-shek's government and a faction of the army to Taiwan, where they proclaimed the establishment of their republic. However, the People's Republic of China views the island as a rebellious province and asserts the notion of a unified "One China." For more detailed information, consult: (Maizland, 2021). Taiwan has strategic importance because its Strait and the Iasi Channel represent the two main sea lanes that connect Northeast Asia with Southeast Asia and the Middle East. The United States of America finds that it has distinct interests with Taiwan after it is an important partner for it and one of the important trading economies in the region, and it has also become A model for Asian democracies according to the American vision. In this regard, American General MacArthur stated, "Taiwan is an unsinkable aircraft carrier in the middle of the Chinese coast" (Matar, 2018, p.113). As a result, it receives American political, military and economic support, and China finds this a threat to its security and sovereignty and demands By re-annexing Taiwan as part of it.

3- Democracy and human rights

The human rights situation in the People's Republic of China has long been a central issue in relations between the United States and China, especially since the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. The Tiananmen Square protests, a series of demonstrations that occurred in the People's Republic of China in 1989, centered around Tiananmen Square in the capital city of Beijing. Led by university students demanding democracy and reform, these events cast a shadow over Sino-American relations. This is further discussed by Sharaawi (2017, p. 40). The two countries' different perceptions of human rights are a fundamental source of mutual misunderstanding and mistrust. Disagreements over human rights issues affect other issues in bilateral relations, including those related to the economy and security, as the United States of America often accuses China of its continuous violations of human rights, especially the rights of minorities (Uyghurs) and often views it as an authoritarian political regime (Sharawi, 2017, pp. 147-138). The Uighurs, an ethnic Muslim group, maintain stronger cultural ties to Central Asia. With a population of roughly 11 million in China, they constitute approximately 45% of Xinjiang's populace, while Han Chinese make up around 40%. Xinjiang, formerly referred to as East Turkestan, was incorporated into China in 1876 and subsequently renamed Xinjiang, meaning "New Frontier." Despite possessing nominal autonomy akin to Tibet, substantive self-governance

remains elusive. The region shares borders with India, Afghanistan, and Mongolia. Further details can be found in: (Weber & Lum, 2021, pp. 11-12).

In 2021, the US State Department concluded that the Chinese government's actions towards the Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in the East Turkestan region (Xinjiang) amount to crimes against humanity and genocide. This judgment is based on accounts of widespread arbitrary imprisonment, torture, forced birth control policies, family separation, and other human rights abuses (Department of state, 2021).

4 – Environmental Issues and Pollution

With the accelerating pace of climate change, the world's attention is turning towards China due to the growing concern over the environmental threat it poses. This is primarily because China is the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in the world, accounting for approximately a quarter of global emissions. This is mainly due to its manufacturing processes, which heavily rely on coal. Since the adoption of the Paris Climate Agreement in late 2015, China has been under pressure from the United States regarding its climate policies (Fakhri, 2022).

The third issue: Military security factors.

These factors include arms sales and regional influence issues, which will be explained as follows:

1- Chinese arms sales.

China views arms sales as a significant economic asset, whereas the United States perceives them as a threat to its interests and endeavors to obstruct China from engaging in weapon transactions, whether conventional or unconventional. This concern is amplified by China's acquisition of military technology from the United States, prompting increased scrutiny over the destinations of such sales. Particularly noteworthy is the United States' apprehension regarding China's collaborations with countries deemed rogue states by the US, such as North Korea, Iran, and Sudan (Thornton, 2009, p. 48). While the United States seeks to prevent China from selling weapons, it employs China's political influence in North Korea to prevent it from harming American interests, especially in the field of nuclear capabilities, and the United States is keen on obligating China to ban arms sales (Salama, 1998, p. 208). At the same time, China tries to use this issue – arms sales to countries like Iran and Sudan – as a tool to pressure the United States regarding its arms cooperation with Taiwan.

2 – The security environment in areas of influence.

This factor contributes to the strained relations between the US and China. The United States regards its crucial interests in Asia as preventing any adversarial nation from exerting dominance in the area, securing stability on the Korean Peninsula, maintaining commercial, political, and military influence in the region, and curbing the proliferation of nuclear weapons and missile technology (Al-Dasuqi, 2000, p. 181, Marr & Lewis, 1997, p. 265).

The United States aims to deter the formation of international or regional polarization among major global players, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, which is home to significant powers like China, Japan, and Russia, possessing substantial capabilities to assume such roles. As highlighted by Dick Cheney, there are escalating or developing challenges, which he views as the ambitions of these powers (Al-Rubaie, 2002, p. 15; Wolfarth, 2001, pp. 36-37). As for China, the rising power, it seeks to exercise its sovereignty over all its territories, including Taiwan, and to play a larger role in regional security balance, which makes it strive to build its various capabilities and expand its regional influence, as well as seek to achieve strategic regional partnerships that enable it

to play this role (Al-Dasuqi, 2000, p. 181). Therefore, the dispute continues over the developments in this relationship due to the differing visions of both parties.

Overall, Sino-American relations are complex and prone to tension and volatility rather than stability and consistency. They will range between conflict and cautious cooperation due to their different issues, and each party will try to direct them in a way that maximizes its interests, taking into account its available sources of power and its ability to mobilize and employ them, considering the weaknesses that the other party can use to achieve its interests and goals.

Conclusion:

The rise of China's economy and the increasing effectiveness of its regional and international role have become a source of tension in its relationship with the United States, which found in this rise a challenge to its global status and influence. Many issues have emerged as sources of disagreement between the two parties, affecting the nature of the relationship. Areas of influence have been the most prominent contentious issues, Moreover to security, military, and competition in the fields of information technology, software, cybersecurity, and space. These issues are of great importance and danger as they will determine the nature of the future relationship between dominant and rising powers. The study has answered its question and proved its hypothesis through what has been discussed in the study, and it has reached two main conclusions:

1. It is natural for a certain level of tension, which cannot be ruled out from escalating, to occur between powers that want, seek, and strive to maintain their global status and rising powers that build and enhance their comprehensive power and international role.
2. The causes of tension between the two parties are not limited to economic and technological issues, but also take a cultural and civilizational path that the United States sees as a threat to Western liberal values from a civilization that differs from it and from a country governed by a totalitarian communist regime.

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