



**UNIVERSITY
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**A systematic re-examination of The China Threat Theory
in a multi-polarizing world**

Alexandra. Jingsi NI

University of Turku

Faculty of Social Sciences
The CEAS
Subject: East Asian Studies
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Supervised by

Professor. Lauri. PALTEMAA
The CEAS, University of Turku, Finland.

Reviewed by

Professor. Matti. NOJONEN
University of Lapland, Finland

Professor. Mario. ESTEBAN
RODRÍGUEZ
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid,
Spain.

Opponent

Professor. Mario. ESTEBAN
RODRÍGUEZ
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid,
Spain.

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A systematic re-examination of *The China Threat Theory* in a multi-polarizing world

Abstract

The *China Threat Theory* has been vigorously resurfacing since early 2000s due to the dramatic rise of China in recent decades, especially after its accession into the WTO in 2001. China's seemingly miraculous rise has sparked provocative controversies, heated debates and harsh accusations of various kinds from a large number of competing stances of viewpoints in all parts of the world. My PhD thesis intends to provide a more holistic and systematic analysis of the so-called *China Threat Theory* from multiple angles in order to give my readers and audiences a clearer, more rational and in-depth understanding about China's true strengths and weaknesses as a rapidly transforming nation-state with strong sense of national pride and unfulfilled ambition and the uncertainties and challenges ahead of China's unique pathway of development and modernization and idiosyncratic mode of governance and statecraft.

My thesis introduces an original analytical model by the name of *the Strategic Filtration Model* with the theoretical and practical functionalities to guide sensible decision-making at the national leadership-level to ensure strategic priorities are secured and achieved under the twin pressures of the internal imperatives and external impacts. My arguments and analyses reflect my critical understandings and syntheses of the neo-realist, neo-institutionalist and constructionist theorizations in the fields of political economy and international relations. I appreciate reality and truth over idealism and rhetorical embellishment. I observe and evaluate political-economic discourses and phenomena in relation to *The China Threat Theory* through the lenses of power struggles over interests (of whatever self-defined or collectively defined forms and representations) at subnational, national and international levels and sophisticated strategic gaming among powerful state actors.

The inflammatory *China Threat Theory* is not a yes or no question to begin with. China's future success as a rejuvenating, ancient Eastern civilization is also not guaranteed. The complexities and intricateness that are intimately associated with the ramifications of the (continuous or interrupted) rise of China should be seriously recognized and treated with great intellectual and academic cautions and rigors. My thesis contributes in this regard with significant criticalities and ingenuities.

Key words: *The China Threat Theory*; Chinese political economy and China-related international relations; Sino-US competition and rivalry; multi-polarization and de- or re-globalization.

Chapter One: background, methodological choices and literature review

1.1 Introduction

Powerful nation-states, including the imperial China¹ in the ancient time, have risen and fallen throughout the entire course of human histories (Kennedy, 2010). Based on abundant historical data, it seems that no great power could rise twice. It is true in the sense that it would be highly unlikely for a major power like the United Kingdom to regain its hegemonic status in the 19th century again because the world has clearly moved on. Unfortunately, for those who support this view, it was a fairly premature conclusion that has been made before the miraculous reemergence of China in the recent decades (Fenby, 2008). Along with the vigorous rise of China, the so-called *China Threat Theory* or “中国威胁论” has forcefully re-emerged as a hotly debated subject roughly dating back to the early 2000s or late 1990s.

Over the years, numerous political theorists and practitioners, both Chinese and international, have proposed a large number of sharply contrasting arguments and greatly divergent speculations regarding the true ramifications of the continuous rise of China to the rest of the world, especially to the strategically insecure and increasingly vigilant hegemon and its (loyal and/or ambivalent) allies and alignments around the globe. In the original graph below, I have listed some of the more popular and fairly contentious arguments from various, credible authors over whether or not China is a threat and why that is the case. Please note that the list of arguments is impossible to be exhaustive. Those included are highlights I shall retouch upon and/or elaborate on in more detail in the main body of my thesis.

Pros:	Cons:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ China is not a morally righteous and responsible member in the international community (Zhang, 2022). ▪ The Chinese political regime is inherently undemocratic/antidemocratic due to its authoritarian, political nature (Friedman and McCormick, 2015). ▪ China demonstrates increasingly strong propensity to intimidate and punish weaker members of the international community through its growing economic weight and military might (Fabey, 2017). ▪ China’s defiance towards and manipulations of the international institutions and organizations to serve its own national interests (Men, 2020). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ China is constrained by its deep embeddedness in the still largely West-dominated international establishments and systems (Huang and Patman, 2013). ▪ China has a benign track record with no major imperialistic and colonialist histories and heritages (Hodzi, 2018). ▪ China’s much enhanced military might and its state-backed, methodical modernization of the People’s Liberation Army (the PLA) serve only defensive purposes rather than offensive purposes. China used to be a miserable victim of Western military invasions and occupations over long periods of time in its modern and contemporary histories. This is the ultimate motivation for China and the Chinese people to establish and develop a powerful military force,

¹ At least at sporadic points of time.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ China holds a very disconcerting human rights record (Biddulph and Rosenzweig, 2019) and practices highly incompatible values and ideologies in comparison with what the mainstream Western civilizations cherish and propagate (Shei and Wei, 2021). ▪ China's expanding ambition and appetite for more prestige, status and prerogative within the existing international systems (Paul, 2016). ▪ China's <i>de facto</i> leading roles in the so-called "<i>global authoritarian camp</i>" (Beckley and Brands, 2022). ▪ China's burning nationalism to unify with Taiwan through military take-over (Su, 2017) and defeat (hostile) foreign forces with the suspected, malicious intention to interfere with China's highly regarded "<i>domestic affairs</i>", especially in terms of ethnic minority policies and Special Administrative Region governance that relate to the country's controversial sovereign issues (Scobell and Nathan, 2014; Doğan, 2021). 	<p>The goal is invariably to protect and defend the country against foreign aggressions (Zhang and Lebow, 2020).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ China values cooperation and expedience much more than confrontation and conflict with both internal interest(s) groups and external forces and entities due to its strategic calculus to harvest maximum benefits from a functioning internal domain and a benign external environment so as to secure the political monopoly the CCP has enjoyed since 1949 (Ong, 2013; Wang, 2015). ▪ Both the Chinese authority and the members of the Chinese general public desire internal stability and economic prosperity rather than engaging in resource-consuming and mutually destructive power struggles with the US-led Western coalition (Brown, 2014; Kachiga, 2018). ▪ China faces major challenges within its own domestic domain at the current moment, such as social unrest and civil-government confrontation provoked by unjustified inequality, administrative malfeasance and rampant corruption (Ruckus, 2021); the pressure to upgrade the Chinese economy into a state of higher productivity, better sophistication and more sustainability (Teipen et al., 2022); and the sinking confidence in the future prospect of the Chinese economy among the multitude of Chinese consumers, international investors and foreign multinational cooperations alike (Bloomberg News, 2022; Singleton, 2022). ▪ China has a time-honored, pacifist Confucius culture and the Chinese are peace-loving people (Wang, 2011).
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(**Table One:** the pros and cons of the *China Threat Thesis*; **Source:** original from the author)

There are a series of quite obvious and convincing reasons why China is often depicted and regarded as a (potential) threat: **A)** China is a rising superpower based in East Asia with almost all the critical potentialities to achieve regional hegemony or even global hegemony, such as vast national territories with satisfactory natural endowments (even though, energy constraints do exist), enormous human resources, capable military might, and a colossal economy with improving productivity and sophistication, etc.; **B)** The undemocratic or antidemocratic nature of the Chinese political regime and its Communist political identity are the ultimate source of controversies and hostilities emanating from the Western Camp led by the vigilant and insecure US; **C)** China's national behaviors have strongly indicated its growing ambition to seek international prominence and to become a full-fledged peer competitor to the US or even end the US global hegemony. At the moment of writing, China's national interests have already extended far beyond the national or even regional boundaries, which was literally unthinkable just a few decades ago.

The notion of a “*China-centered global tributary system*” (quanqiu chaogong xitong: 全球朝贡系统) has gained increasing popularity thanks to a noticeable number of more sensationalist China watchers based in the West, notably in the United States, such as Paul Cobough (2020) from Asia Power Watch. To some extent, various signs do hint this seemingly far-fetched possibility (ibid.). China has a long cultural and ideological tradition to put itself in the center of the world due to its strong sense of national pride, sheer size and weight, (self-determined) moral and cultural superiority, sophisticated statecraft and resourcefulness, etc. (Zhang, 2012).

Some political historians, such as Youngmin Kim (2018) and David Kang (2012), have critically pointed out that the so-called “*Chinese centrality*” or a “*China-centered view*” has never really retreated or gone extinct in the Chinese political ecology. It is an inseparable constituent of the Chinese political DNA, which is exactly why China's national strategies as well as foreign policies almost always frame the country in a global context and place it in a desirable and morally righteous position in the international community (Zhang, 2010).

If the declaration of “*America first*” by the former Trump-Pence Administration was overly bold and outrageously provocative, then “*China first*” is an extremely low-profile strategic deliberation that has always been adopted by the Chinese political leadership without diplomatic acknowledgement. The *de facto* presence of this idea in Chinese politics is undeniable and its strong potentialities to shape specific policies or even overarching strategies in China are very significant.

Having said the above, the Chinese political authority has publicly opposed *The China Threat Theory* in numerous official and semi-official occasions, stating that the rise of China would be unquestionably peaceful (i.e. heping jueqi 和平崛起) and China has no intention whatsoever to dominate Asia (sometimes is also being referred to as Asia-Pacific (yatai: 亚太) or even Indo-Pacific (yintai: 印太) in a geographically enlarged sense), not to mention the entire world. The Chinese political authority has invested a great deal of efforts to vindicate its strategic position and reassure the rest of the world that China is a force of peace. The country's growing military capacity is reserved exclusively to defend its territorial integrity and ensure national security rather than offending other sovereign states. In other words, the state-backed modernization of the People's Liberation Army (the PLA) and the generous military expenditure to consolidate China's military power only serve defensive rather than offensive purposes.

According to the formal political discourse and diplomatic rhetoric available, the Chinese political authority has seriously and repeatedly refuted all kinds of speculations claiming that a more powerful China could and would (potentially) jeopardize the legitimate interests of other members of the international community. In other words, the Chinese political leadership wants to convince the rest of the world that China is a firm believer of the “*positive sum game* (zhenghe boyi: 正和博弈)” rather than the “*zero sum game* (linghe boyi: 零和博弈)” with regard to inter-state relationship. Publicly, China is very vocal about the political philosophy it has been enthusiastically promoting over the years, which favors “*win-win* (shuangying: 双赢)” situations and “*mutually beneficial* (huli: 互利)” cooperation in order to resolve and settle inter-state differences and frictions peacefully and amicably.

Wishful thinkers might deem that these official statements should end the *China Threat* debates once and for all. However, one thing we need to bear in mind is that there is a clear distinction between skillful diplomatic rhetoric and real-life political calculations and operations. The real story has always been the half-told or even untold one. For sophisticated political scholars and professionals, actions speak much louder than words, which means that publicly available diplomatic rhetoric tends to be persuasive yet unconvincing. It is almost universally true for all state actors around the world despite their varying national circumstances. Therefore, my PhD thesis intends to focus not entirely on diplomatic rhetoric and official political propaganda with conspicuous government sponsorship and endorsement. Instead, I choose to focus on factual evidences and first-hand or empirically oriented investigations conducted by a large number of researchers due to the reason that diplomatic and propagandist discourse tends to present a formalized embellishment of reality, not necessarily the reality itself. Intellectual criticality and authenticity based on facts and truth are highly prioritized in my own research of the *China Threat Theory*.

As an intellectual starting point, I observe and theorize political economy through the lenses of Realist interpretations as I do not appreciate Utopian idealism due to its unattainable nature. I intend to demystify and dissect the alleged threats posed by a more powerful and ambitious China by interrogating a series of interrelated research questions: **A)** Why China is regarded as a (potential or actual) threat and to whom; **B)** Through what measures the US has been deploying to methodically contain the rising China after its eventual disillusion to its initial strategic plan to assimilate and incorporate China into the US-led international community over the years (O’Brien, 2020); **C)** What are the strategic priorities and calculations of the Chinese political leadership and how the Chinese political regime sensibly responds to the domestic imperatives and external challenges during a turbulent time like the current moment; **D)** How China continues to expand and exert its influences in foreign territories beyond the confinement of its national borders to advance its own national interests; and **E)** How China has been shaping the post-Cold War power balance (i.e. the unipolar system dominated by the US after the finalization of the Cold War in the early 1990s) and world order(s) in incremental yet profound ways.

My thesis does not intend to settle the heating debates over the consequences and implications of the miraculous resurrection of China in the 21st Century once and for all. The very reason for this is that it is simply unrealistic for any researcher to successfully achieve this end and the on-going debates are likely to stay with us for an extended period of time in the foreseeable future. Instead, my thesis offers insights into China’s unique strengths and critical vulnerabilities in the fierce yet seemingly involuntary competition with the US and the strategic objectives and calculations of the current Chinese political leadership to win the ultimate battle of both the day and the future. I am fully aware of the ideological controversies and conceptual flaws associated with some of the more popular yet less rigorous ideas I have frequently referred to in my thesis, such as the “*East-West dichotomy*” (Maxwell, 2011) and the so-called “*undifferentiated West*” (Schülting, Müller and Hertel, 2016). I recognize and respect these criticisms for their critical merits. However, the essence of *The China Threat*

Theory rests precisely upon these quite persistent yet deeply problematic political ideas and views. Attacking the ideological basis of *The China Threat Theory* could be one of the more effective ways to dismantle the malignant inflation of this peculiar stream of political discourse.

At the current moment, the anti-China mentality literally dominates the strategic thinking of the US political leadership and it also has contributed considerably to the increasingly negative perception of China in the American society. In other words, *The China Threat Theory* is a powerful narrative with the strong ability to drive the Sino-US bilateral relationship into a more confrontational direction as it disseminates further and deeper by influencing the perceptions and attitudes of the elites and masses alike on both sides. China's continuous gain of national power and wealth has already captured the undivided strategic attention of the hegemon and provoked intense anxiety and sense of insecurity among both American political professionals and many members of the American general public.

In a general sense, my PhD thesis should not be regarded as a piece of comprehensive and elaborate critique of the Chinese political particularities and the authoritarian regime under the leadership of the CCP. But a truthful, accurate and critical reexamination of the national capacities, aspirations, and strategic priorities and calculations of China as a fast developing and rejuvenating ancient civilization and a sovereign entity. My thesis leans more towards a reflexive reinterpretation and reassessment of an abundant amount of publicly accessible data and information regarding the alleged threats China could possibly pose to the world, especially to the dominant global West. My thesis intends to present a critical strategic profiling of today's China and what strategies this emerging superpower intends to adopt when engaging in a new round of intense power struggles with the aggressive US and its anxious allies. Whether or not thinking out of the box of the traditional and classical "*hegemonic transition theory* (baquan gengdielun: 霸权更迭论)" (Böller and Werner, 2021), one thing for sure is that the unfolding competition between the US and China is happening and escalating. The short-term future of the world is likely to become more unpredictable and volatile as a direct result and consequence.

There are many urging questions awaiting to be answered, such as what could be China's strengths, advantages, weaknesses and vulnerabilities in the fierce competition and rivalry against other world-class major powers, even though, some very influential China-specialists do believe that China might be forced to fight an involuntary battle (Rudd, 2022)? How to correctly understand the strategic thinking and calculus of the current Chinese political leadership? How the Chinese political leadership strives to purposefully achieve internal and external sovereignty at the same time despite being subject to the dual pressures from domestic imperatives and international power politics?

To summarize the main purpose of my PhD research project, I try to maintain an unbiased and critical stance to fairly and truthfully present a holistic and multidimensional picture of the almost uncontrollable resurgence of *The China Threat Theory* over the recent years (especially since Donald Trump became the 45th president of the United States in 2016) by situating it in a macroscopic environment of the highly dynamic and inherently unpredictable, global power equilibrium. In other words, the escalating interactions and, especially, counteractions between the US and China are cautiously framed into a volatile and globally extended background of the state-of-the-art power politics in today's conditions.

I accept and respect the fact that a research subject such as *The China Threat Theory* is literally a "*slippery slope*" for all interested researchers due to its inherently controversial and speculative nature. The most explainable reason why there is so much controversies and contentions associated with *The China Threat Theory* is that the proposition itself is almost impossible to be proved or disproved. It is a matter of one's belief, just like many other

propositions in the realm of Social Sciences. Therefore, the seemingly endless debates over the alleged *China Threat* are never going to be satisfactorily settled by a simple “yes or no” answer. The intrinsic complexity and contentiousness of *The China Threat Theory* would continue to elicit numerous accusations and refutations in the years to come. The water is rather murky, which necessitates a piece of timely clarification of the intricate and perplexing China-related global political economy. My thesis should fill this gap reasonably well and I shall present my original findings and conclusions after methodical explorations of the following *four* packs of argumentation in the main section of the thesis:

- 1) *The China Threat Theory* is not merely a rhetorical artifact. It should not be reduced into a particular stream of political discourse because it is a serious strategic declaration and also one of the guiding principles of US domestic and foreign policies, i.e., beating the rising China in the fierce inter-state competition, thus, to preserve the American global domination indefinitely;
- 2) A multi-dimensional, comprehensive evaluation of China’s hard and soft powers will be given to truthfully and accurately estimate the country’s national capacities and competitive advantages versus its weaknesses (often due to systemic and institutional deficiencies and defects) and vulnerabilities;
- 3) How the strategic priorities and calculations of the Chinese political leadership could significantly shape, if not absolutely determine, the national behaviors of China and both its domestic and foreign policies is going to be discussed critically to argue the inconvenient fact that the tight control of the Chinese authority over anything and everything within its jurisdiction has been enhancing rather than retreating, especially into the controversial third-term of President Xi. As a rapidly emerging political and economic force, the impacts of the attitudes and mindsets of the Chinese political leadership matter critically. The strategic choices made by the Chinese political leadership could produce significant influences that extend far beyond the physical boundaries of China in a geographic sense. In other words, the ideological arrangements and strategic dispositions of the Chinese political leadership could contribute considerably to regional or even global geopolitics in profound ways; Despite being exceptionally powerful due to the monopolistic political status of the CCP in China, the Chinese political authority is constrained, in terms of political discretion, by the domestic imperatives for equality, accountability and fair access to scarce resources to benefit the majority of the Chinese people and support their livelihood rather than feeding the insatiable appetite of the rent-seeking elites.
- 4) The escalating power struggles between the US and China are seemingly inevitable and mutually destructive. The gradually deteriorating or even dissolving “*unipolar world* (danji shijie: 单极世界)” might be irreversible, and, so too is the relative decline of the hegemon. The insecure hegemon is determined to force the rising China out of the competition for global prominence through a full range of unusually tough measures, such as economic disentanglement, cyber and financial warfare, political shaming, and technology embargo etc. Therefore, I intend to reveal and discuss what could be the countermeasures from the ostensibly defensive China and how appropriate and effective they are to enable China to withstand and survive the perfect storm instigated by the US.

1.2. Methodological choices and justifications

My thesis deliberately prioritizes scope (guangdu: 广度) over depth (shendu: 深度) since my intention has always been presenting a holistic, multidimensional and multifaceted reexamination of the highly provocative *China Threat Theory* to well-informed and intellectually prepared audiences and discussing the true ramifications of the vigorous rise of China in relation to the dynamic power balance in Asia and even beyond. Detailed

elaborations do exist in my thesis, even though, they tend to be occasional. The ultimate rationale to prioritize scope is the extreme complexity of today's international power politics and political economy. A localized view does not yield much critical insights due to the sheer number of the multitude of agents and entities involved at all levels. These agents and entities are interrelated, interconnected and inter-coordinated in unprecedented ways to collectively drive the increasingly complex and dynamic global political economy in motion. In other words, the world we inhabit in is defined by the condition of inter-connectivity and interdependence, which has always been the theoretical focus for institutionalists.

Conventionally, state actors enjoy significantly more intellectual attention from the academia than other non-state actors. However, the emergence of a whole host of non-state agents, entities and forces (Susan Strange), such as activists, private corporations and not-for-profit organizations (the NPOs: fei yinglixing zuzhi 非盈利性组织), and civil rights movements (e.g. Black Lives Matter) etc., over time has almost fundamentally shaped the landscape of the global political economy as we traditionally know it. These agents, entities and forces now have been fully recognized and seriously considered by many political theorists and professionals alike. They do possess the considerable potentialities to complement or even compete, in some circumstances, with the state within different institutional arrangements. It has also been extensively observed that non-state agents, entities and forces could collectively form a “*constraining dynamism*” to limit the political discretion of the administrative power (on behalf of the state). Due to precisely this (in-) famous “*diffusion of power* (quanli liusan: 权力流散)” (Strange, 1996), a cross-level analysis with a much higher level of inclusiveness is not merely a preference on my part but almost a requirement for the sake of genuine knowledge production.

Inclusiveness is stressed in my thesis due to the fact that it addresses one of the most important aspects of complexity, namely the huge number of influencing agents, entities and factors that could possibly be involved at multiple levels. However, stressing on inclusiveness also has a problematic side. It poses significant methodological challenges for the reason that my thesis implicates extremely complex and complicated causal relationships and mechanisms. They are very hard to be convincingly established through conventional quantitative regressions (or other equivalents) and mathematical modeling, even with the assistance of the state-of-the-art computational automation. It is simply very difficult, if not completely unattainable, to achieve the goal of definitively establishing causality in the specific case of mine. Plus, the influencing factors involved in my thesis are intricately interconnected (with one another), and thus, they tend to form very perplexing non-linear correlations and/or causal relationships among themselves, not to mention a huge number of potential mediating variables that are also likely in presence, which complicate the situation even further.

Therefore, pursuing a qualitative approach could be a viable alternative to bypass the methodological challenges illustrated above (Petermann, 2006). Some critics tend to believe that qualitative research is less scientific and rigorous, hence less valuable and productive, than quantitative research (Knowles and Cole, 2008). Some hard-core positivists even insist that qualitative research is inherently ambiguous and logically weak in comparison with quantitative research (Palacios, 2020). They claim that the scientific legitimacy and theoretical productivity of qualitative research are limited and dubious from the standpoint of how researches in the field of natural science are systematically conducted (Williams, 2019). Nevertheless, the shared view among methodologists specialized in Social Sciences is that qualitative research could be equally effective and productive to uncover legitimate new knowledge according to their collective judgments (Sarantakos, 2013). For highly-trained social scientists, qualitative research methods are the ideal tools to push the boundary of knowledge further and they are a perfect match to study a great variety of extremely perplexing social phenomena in hugely varied social settings. In order to ensure the validity

and credibility of my research, I have carefully cherry-picked a significant amount of secondary data and information from credible sources to support my analyses, arguments and conclusions in the subsequent subsections. All the data and information presented in my thesis has been cautiously verified as authentic, accurate and up-to-date. In addition, a considerable proportion of the quoted data and information is of quantitative nature, such as various statistical reports, longitudinal polls and large-scale censuses. They tend to serve indicative functions, such as demonstrating the fluctuations of indicators and variables over time, in my thesis as they were recorded originally. This is a deliberate endeavor of mine to give my thesis a higher degree of balance in terms of the nature of the secondary data and information collected and cited so as to enhance the overall credibility and quality of my own research project.

1.3. Original contribution

The most significant academic contribution of my PhD thesis is an original model by the name of the “*Strategic Filtration Model* (zhanlue shaixuan moxing: 战略筛选模型)”. It is an analytical tool derived from the three major theoretical branches of political science, namely neo-realism, constructivism and neo-institutionalism. In the specific case of my research project, theoretical hybridization is not only necessary but also inevitable because it is almost the only viable approach to synergize the collective explanatory power of different theoretical schools and minimize their respective weaknesses in order to achieve optimal explanatory capacity. Overall, the *Strategic Filtration Model* has a solid theoretical foundation by design because it critically reflects the core assumptions and major intellectual contributions in the realms of political science and political economy. In addition to its strong theoretical footing, the model itself is a straightforward and parsimonious visualization, which is the beauty of it. This model could also be utilized to assist decision-making and strategic thinking in real-life political practice. In short, the *Strategic Filtration Model* could serve both theoretical end as well as practical end with a satisfactory degree of applicability and effectiveness.

1.4. Research approach and data collection

From a methodological perspective, my thesis is a piece of *inductive* research because it intends to theorize or theoretically explain certain observable political-economic phenomena with criticality and insight. My research primarily focuses on theory building or theory construction rather than theory application. Therefore, it is not deductive, fundamentally. My thesis is empirically supported and it is based on a solid foundation of verifiable facts and empirical evidences. My thesis also tends to be explanatory in nature. It provides convincing explanations and (re-) interpretations to well-documented political-economic phenomena and events through coherent and rigorous logical reasoning.

The primary purpose of my research is to critically understand the underlying global power shift behind the resurgence of the *China Threat* in both formal and informal political discourse and in the academic literature based on unarguable facts and convincing evidences. My thesis could be regarded as a piece of synthetic research because it is entirely based on preexisting researches and investigations conducted by other credible authors. No first-hand data has been collected and examined in my thesis. In other words, it is a piece of “*research of researches*” or a critical reinterpretation of secondary data and information.

1.5. The theoretical hybridization

The abundance of existing literature presents many theoretical choices to dissect *The China Threat Theory* from all kinds of equally valid angles. In my thesis, I choose to pursue an innovative approach of theoretical hybridization. There are three well-established theoretical branches in the discipline of political science and international relations, namely neo-realism, constructivism and neo-institutionalism and they tend to target different aspects of politics with their respective theoretical successes and limitations. I intend to combine all three of

them to leverage their collective explanatory power in order to better serve my own research purposes.

The multifarious political phenomena and events that happen all around the world on a daily basis might appear to be singular on the surface. However, one commonality they share is the time-honored realist assumption that “*politics always revolves around interests*” (Meier and Blum, 2018), be that self-defined or collectively defined. The reason why political theorists tend to stress so much on the importance of interests is that interests, regardless of their strategic natures and representational varieties, are the ultimate motive that drives politics of all kinds. Understanding how interests are defined, defended and achieved is unarguably the starting point to better comprehend different political behaviors dictated by different strategic thinking and calculations held by the multitude of political actors and entities to maximize interests. In short, pursuing interests is at the very core of all politics, be that inter-state rivalry at a macroscopic level or interpersonal social networking at a microscopic level.

Nevertheless, pursuing interest alone does not explain perfectly all the observable political behaviors. A large number of revisionist political theorists have long pointed out that other contributing factors, such as widely shared values and well-established norms, also possess the capabilities to considerably shape the behaviors of political agents and entities and influence the outcomes of political games (Pierre, 2011). This revisionist propensity in the field of political science is comparable to the “*new institutional economics*” (the NIE) that has been inaugurated by Ronald Coase in the 20th century in the field of economics (Bennett, 2018). To classical economists, maximizing interest has been the only default motive in the discipline of economics for many decades. However, the advent of a number of revisionist concepts, such as the “*bounded rationality* (lixing juxian: 理性局限)” (Routledge Handbook of Bounded Rationality, 2022) and “*sub-optimal choices* (ya zuiyouhua xuanze: 亚最优化选择)” (Inkina, 2017), have casted reasonable doubts on the presumptive “*perfectly rational*” economic beings (Zhang, Yu and Wang, 2021) and how they methodically behave to maximize intended interests whenever a particular economic condition is met or opportunity arises.

These aforementioned theoretical revisions are based on two improved discernments of the reality: **A**) a more critical and realistic understanding of the human psyche and its inherent limitations (Kale, 2020); and **B**) the restrictive potentialities of the intangible institutions, especially those are historically formed and very persistent to withstand the erosion of time, such as traditions, values and norms (Qayum, 2021). They could effectively shape behaviors committed by all parties subject to them. It is true that institutionalism has been actively filling the theoretical vacuums left by classical Realism over the recent decades by recognizing the irrational tendencies of the human mind and giving credits to the constraining capacity of both formal and informal institutions (O’Neil, 2017).

My thesis critically reflects these aforementioned theoretical revisions. My stance is that, even under the assumption that a political agent or entity is perfectly rational and self-interested, it could only optimize its intended gains within the wider institutional matrix of restrictive establishment, such as values, ethics, norms, and, of course, the legal framework etc. The theoretical modifications and adaptations implied in this revisionist approach, namely, acknowledging the limitations of any given actor’s rationality and discretion to make logically coherent, sensible decision, fit the reality more accurately and truthfully. To summarize, political-economic agents and/or entities are motivated in one way or another to conditionally maximize their intended strategic interests. However, their political discretion and strategic options are often constrained and limited by an array of conditions and factors, such as the availability of strategic resources at one’s disposal, the counter-actions from competing political-economic agents and entities and the inhibiting institutional arrangements in place, etc.

As mentioned above, neo-realism addresses the motive that drives all kinds of political behaviors and gives rise to multifarious observable political phenomena, whereas neo-institutionalism recognizes the constraining capacity of the various institutions in existence. However, it does not necessarily explain how perceivable political artifacts, constitutions and formations have come in to being across different institutional settings. In this regard, we need to turn to constructivism for answers. Constructivism explains how political structures, systems and institutions have formed over time and how they are sustained and function at international, national and sub-national levels to channel and mediate the constantly transforming political economy. In short, Constructivism is a critical theoretical school focusing on how things have become the way they are, notably, from a dynamic, temporal perspective. Constructivists consistently argue that history and factual existence, such as the highly cited “*status quo* (xianzhuang: 现状)” and “*world order* (shijie geju: 世界格局)” are neither predetermined nor inevitable. They believe, in one way or another, the world and everything within it are constantly and actively “constructed” and “reconstructed” by the aggregate inputs from all agents and entities involved in a collective manner. The criticality of constructivism is evident because it clearly has gone beyond the persistent and pessimistic “*historical determinism* (lishi jue ding lun: 历史决定论 or lishi su ming lun: 历史宿命论) (Hester, 2018)” in the fields of political history and international relations as well as elsewhere. It also has assigned more weight and importance to the multitude of (non-state) agents and entities other than political leaders and governments with the intellectual recognition they deserve.

In summary, politics is inherently dynamic and fluid by nature and it involves many factors, conditions and agents. Politics has never been rigid, isolated and static to begin with. The inter-subjective political reality that we collectively perceive is constantly constructed and reconstructed by the interactions and counteractions among an incredibly large number of agents and entities with the existence of an undetermined level of rules and boundaries. The level of the rules and boundaries in presence is hard, if not completely impossible, to be quantified or measured and their constraining capacities tend to fluctuate significantly on a case-by-case basis. In my thesis, I intend to critically dissect the provocative political thesis of *The China Threat Theory* from a number of carefully selected and cautiously balanced angles and standpoints. To what extent *The China Threat Theory* is truthful, reasonable or convincing will be tentatively discussed based on extensive and credible empirical evidences. With regard to the aforementioned rules and boundaries (both written and unwritten or formal and informal), they are actually the invisible strings attached to political-economic agents and entities, despite the unfortunate fact that these invisible strings sometimes have insufficient control over the arbitrary behaviors committed by powerful nation-states, especially when the perceived strategic interest at stake is significantly high. Combining multiple theoretical insights and contributions I have synthesized from the existing literature of international relations and political economy, my subsequent arguments lean more towards the “*rational choice institutionalism*” (i.e., actors use institutions to maximize utility), especially at the inter-state level.

Chapter Two: Literature review

In this chapter, a condensed literature review will be given to keep the audiences informed about the background facts regarding Asia and its geopolitics and geoeconomics; the up-to-date theoretical developments relating to my research subject and the knowledge foundation my thesis is based on. This chapter will inaugurate my systematic and critical arguments and critiques of *The China Threat Theory* in the later chapters of my thesis as a necessary prelude.

2.1. China and the Asian Continent

China is an enduring ancient civilization based in East Asia with an officially recorded history over more than four thousand years (Goodman, 2002). Certain archeological discoveries even suggested much earlier than the mainstream view. Due to China's miraculous development and modernization in the past a few decades along with the budding prosperity of Asia, the continent has received much more attention and interest from researchers across the globe. My thesis falls into the realm of area studies. An implicit geopolitical angle is embedded throughout my research. I believe the hotly debated *China Threat Theory* should be critically re-examined from the perspective of Asian geopolitics due to the following two facts:

A) It is impossible as well as intellectually counter-productive to separate China from the continent it is situated. Asia is the world's most tensely populated continent with a combined population size of 4.4 billion, roughly 60% of the global population (Zhao and Hayes, 2020) and China is the largest chunk of Asia as well as its largest economic powerhouse;

B) Asia is an emerging political and economic force with the coexistence of major regional or even global powers, such as Japan, South Korea, India, and, of course, the rising China (Fels and Vu, 2016; Tellis, Marble and Tanner, 2010). The traditionally conflict-ridden Asian continent and its bloody past marked by brutal Western colonialism and imperialism and chronic inter-state conflicts among the Asian countries themselves (Ganguly and Thompson, 2011) have led many to conclude that peace and stability have indeed always been a scarce public commodity in this much tormented landmass. Many have pointed out that the inconvenient coexistence of powerful and ambitious nation-states remains to be a dangerous source of inter-state tensions, frictions, or even armed conflicts for this thriving continent to this very day (Biscop and Whitman, 2013).

As the direct result of the vigorous rise of China in the region, power struggles of all the possible forms and varieties are likely to persist and escalate. A much more powerful China in East Asia has already disrupted the so-called *status quo* of the region, especially in terms of the power balance among the competing major players within close geographic proximity (Sutter, 2016; Thornton and Thornton, 2012). Some authors even have long predicted potential continental instability in the likely future (Ross and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1995), albeit this scenario is indeed a least favorable possibility that no shareholder wants to see. Taiwan is one of the seriously considered candidates for causing such regional instability due to the strategic concentration on the island by both the US and China and the heavy military involvement of these two fiercely competing superpowers in the Taiwan strait area. The strong presence of the Western coalition, also known as the "*quad*", in the region has significantly exacerbated the possibility of potential proliferation of (armed) conflicts in Indo-Pacific Region or Indo-Pacific triggered by incidents such as the intensely precarious "*Taiwan issue*" without a peaceful solution at the end of the day.

2.2. How politics is perceived and understood

The China Threat Theory is essentially a subjective political speculation, first and foremost. It is also a collective and shared perception of a specific sovereign entity from a rather narrow perspective. Therefore, how politics is perceived, understood and experienced by human social subjects is undoubtedly the starting point to begin my arguments and discussions.

Politics, by nature, is ubiquitous and pervasive (Vigoda-Gadot and Drory, 2017). It is intangible and relational. It could take almost any forms and representations and it manifests at all possible levels (of observations) in real-life situations (ibid.). By essence, politics is fundamentally a derivative of “*human sociality* (rende shehuixing: 人的社会性)”, which is an elevated and distinguished, defining feature of the human race according to philosophers living in the Middle Ages (Klein, 2011) or even earlier, such as *the Politics* written by Aristotle almost 2400 years ago (Saunders, 1981). Politics is originated from the simplest, the most mundane, day-to-day interpersonal interactions and it has gradually evolved into a huge bundle of extremely complex and highly sophisticated institutions and organizations that we currently have in highly developed, modern human societies (Fukuyama, 2012). This evolutionary view has been theorized and popularized by some of the leading political scientists of our time, such as Francis Fukuyama and William. R Thompson (2016). The reason why it deserves to be mentioned in the literature review is that: **A**) politics of all kinds share the same root and fundamental nature and **B**) politics evolves constantly (i.e. the dynamic and fluid nature of politics) and the complexity of politics and the entropy of political outcomes increase as time passes by.

2.3. Globalized public opinion and political discourse

We experience politics on a daily basis in our immediate social environment, sometimes even without realizing it. However, we also experience politics that is taking place far away in an indirect manner through mediated information reception, such as reading an editorial in a newspaper, watching live streaming on TV or receiving tweets from friends, acquaintances and opinion leaders (also known as the “*influencers*” based on social media). In the age of the digital, information travels and circulates at the speed of light between any two connected points in different spacetime. Political phenomena and events are documented and reported almost instantaneously at every moment in all parts of the world by the multitude of highly efficient media outlets. Digital technologies have contributed enormously to the globalization of political discourse (including *The China Threat Theory*) by disseminating the latest information, news events and ideological shifts to tens of millions of people with almost unimaginable efficiency and efficacy. No locality on Earth is an isolated island nowadays. People across the globe are connected by sophisticated information and communication technologies (the ICTs) to collectively experience digitalized politics of the 21st Century, often in the forms of “*global public opinion* (quanqiu yulun: 全球舆论)” and “*global narrative* (quanqiu huayu: 全球话语)” (Demirhan and Çakır-Demirhan, 2017). Therefore, *The China Threat Theory* does bear the striking signature of globalization, whether it is digital or economic or political.

2.4. The power of political narrative

The China Threat Theory is not merely a particular stream of the global political discourse. It is also a powerful narrative. *The China Threat Theory* has been propagated and promoted by various sources (some of them do have liaison or affiliation with foreign governments, in particular the US government), such as the conservative, right-wing media (news.cgtn.com, 2020), notably Fox News, or unfriendly think tanks (Rogelja and Tsimonis, 2020), with varying degrees of biases and distortions. The resurgence of *The China Threat Theory* in the recent years is nothing coincidental. It is the direct result of the shared anxiety and sense of insecurity in the Western world in the face of an increasingly powerful and assertive China based in East Asia. *The China Threat Theory* bears much richer strategic meanings and connotations than merely an artificially constructed narrative with the malicious intention to tarnish China’s national image and reputation; it is a legitimate and serious strategic concern about the waning position of the global West in the international community and the very real possibility for the global West to lose the dominant status to China as the competitive advantages of the West have been diminishing over time (Campion, 2016).

It is true that public opinion and narrative do not possess coercive capacity in any realistic sense. However, they could nonetheless form considerable pressure to compel state actors to behave in conforming ways. Negative narrative, such as *The China Threat Theory* is more than capable to ruin the credibility of China as an emerging superpower and weaken its moral position in the international community. The inflating *China Threat Theory* in the recent years has clearly embarrassed and worried the Chinese political leadership. The current Xi Administration is fully aware of its increasing popularity (notably outside China) and has been actively engaging in diligent damage control to prevent further detriments to occur (Ross and Tunsjø, 2017).

In order to hedge the negative impact caused by *The China Threat Theory*, the Chinese political leadership has invested tremendous efforts to proactively weave its own alternative narratives, from the “*peaceful rise* (heping jueqi: 和平崛起)” to the “*responsible major power* (fuzeren daguo: 负责任大国)” to the “*shared future of all mankind* (renlei mingyun gongtongti: 人类命运共同体)”. All these alternative narratives are intelligently and thoughtfully crafted and vigorously promoted to restore China’s righteous moral position and benevolent image in the international community. It has been extensively pointed out that, instead of remaining in a reactive and defensive position as China used to be, the country has become visibly bolder and more confident to (re-) present and market itself to the rest of the world through its own voices and with its own original stories (Hua, 2018).

2.5. The debates over the China Threat

In the previous subsections, I have justified my preference for theoretical hybridization and how politics is perceived and understood in today’s socio-technological conditions. In the following subsections, a well-balanced and comprehensive synthesis of the harshly contrasting views and arguments regarding the alleged *China Threat* shall be presented. I recognize the fact that any attempt to bring the two extreme ends of the spectrum together and foster a productive dialogue between them might be wishful and fruitless. Therefore, my intention has always been to present these arguments and debates as objectively and accurately as possible in order to keep my audiences well-informed and intellectually stimulated.

2.5.1. The East versus West dichotomy and antagonism

The first and foremost argument is that whether China is or will be a threat and to whom. Popular beliefs and the conventional wisdom claim that China has already become a strategic threat to the US-led Western alliance of democracies (the West or Western Camp in short hereafter). The East versus West dichotomy that is implied in this statement is not immune from its intrinsic problems because these two systems do not necessarily have to clash with each other, even though, historical records do suggest a long existing antagonistic relationship between the two.

Traditionally, the East, including the underdeveloped China in the modern and contemporary times, has almost always been portrayed as uncivilized, dysfunctional and poor with a much lower level of Western-style modernization and enlightenment. However, critics of the West-centric/Euro-centric Orientalism find this seriously concerning (Edward Said). They argue that the understanding of the East has been deliberately distorted by Western supremacy. Western imperialism and colonialism in the 18th and 19th centuries are the real reasons why the East had fallen far behind in the modern era (Barlow, 1997). Western invasion and occupation had caused prolonged turmoil and suffering in many Eastern countries, not to mention the colossal amount of national wealth that had been drained from them through the relentless use of ruthless military power and inexorable economic exploitation (Cope and Ness, 2022). Arguments along this line are reasonable because the advanced and prosperous

Western civilizations nowadays did have a very dark past marked by their immoral abuse of hard powers against Eastern civilizations.

China is an ancient Eastern civilization. The country has largely been in a segregated existence from the Western world, despite certain pioneering explorations occurred much earlier, until the 19th Century due to the rise of Mercantilism in Europe with the demand for inter-continental trade (Valentini, 2013). The People's Republic of China (the PRC) has gained independence and sovereignty in 1949, which marked a new era in China, and the ruling Chinese Communist Party (the CCP)'s open refusal to "*Western assimilation*" (i.e. "*Westernization*") to this very day has also contributed greatly to the "*otherness*" of China in the eyes of the West. It seems that China has been stubbornly sticking to its non-Western national identity and the country has kept the Western Camp at arm's length over many years. In this sense, China is doomed to be treated as a threat to the West, not entirely due to its increasingly defiant and audacious attitude, but due to the failure of the West to absorb China into the Western Camp over the course of decades. In short, China is not a second Japan, to put it bluntly, and China can never be tamed, despite enthusiastic efforts from the West Camp. China's cautionary political distancing from the West is also hardly subtle to many political observers and strategists. Not to mention China's conspicuous rejection of Western-style democratization and universal human rights protection.

All the empirical evidences are pointing to the same direction, China is determined to pursue its own path of self-realization and self-fulfillment under the authoritarian leadership of the CCP and the current Xi Administration. As long as the domestic stability, solidarity and unity are ensured, many believe that China is destined to reconstruct and reshape the existing world order at its will in the forthcoming future. The historically formed, East versus West stereotype and antagonism would also be dismantled completely to accommodate China's own agenda and ambition, as well as reflect China's national power, interests and status. This is a primary reason why the US-led West feels increasingly insecure and threatened by the continuous rise of China. The world is changing, but not necessarily to the advantage and benefit of the western powers.

2.5.2. The origin of The China Threat Theory and its resurgence in the recent years

It comes as no surprise that the inflammatory *China Threat Theory* is originated in the West, in particular the US. Historical researches have traced the alleged *China Threat* back to as early as the 19th Century when Chinese immigrants had migrated and settled down in the new world, mainly for economic opportunities (Lu, 2018). At the time, the allegation of *China Threat* was more of a racist and discriminatory treatment based on the non-white identity of the multitude of persecuted Chinese immigrants (ibid.). The derogatorily called "*yellow perils*" (hunaghuo: 黃禍) became a powerful and incriminating narrative against Asian, notably ethnic Chinese, residing in the Western world and its lingering effect can still be found in various forms and representations to this very day, unfortunately (Urbansky and Billé, 2018).

The painful legacy of the Cold War between the US and the USSR has reenergized the *China Threat* to a significant extent largely due to the self-proclaimed Communist nature of the Chinese political regime and its monopolistic power to rule the country since 1949 (Mearsheimer, 2003). However, what my thesis primarily focuses on is not so much the racial biases and ideological incompatibilities, but the ultimate political game for global prominence between the US and China in the 21st century. History presents waves of *China Threat*. So far, the current one is the most ferocious. It has vigorously reemerged both within the American society as well as its political circle and establishment.

According to longitudinal opinion polls over the recent years, *China Threat Theory* has gained wide popularity in the American society and the number of its disciples has been steadily going up over time. According to Gallup's latest poll results, "forty-five percent of Americans now say China is the greatest enemy of the U.S., more than double the percentage who said so in 2020" (Younis, 2021). It is true that the relationship between the US and China is probably the most important bilateral inter-state relationship on Earth due to the sheer weight, power and importance of these two superpowers. Unfortunately, many political observers and strategists believe the Sino-US relationship is inherently antagonistic because these two powerful forces are inevitable competitors to each other, just like it was the case between the US and the former Soviet Union during the highly hostile and mutually confrontational Cold War period.

Over the years, the US has cautiously re-evaluated the potentialities of China and concluded that China has already replaced the age-long political adversary, now the Russian Federation, to become the top strategic target with the highest priority and urgency. The BBC has quoted that "the Director of National Intelligence (John Ratcliff) said China had replaced Russia and counter-terrorism as the main focus of US intelligence activities" in a report publicized in December, 2020. Whether the alleged confrontation is inevitable or not, how to manage the intensifying inter-state competition and rivalry and avoid (or, at least, minimize) mutually destructive sabotage is an extremely serious, intricate, and difficult challenge to be handled by both the US and Chinese leaderships.

Historically, neither the US nor China treats each other as peer competitor and strategic target of inter-state power struggle simply because China was not even a remote match, in whatever senses, to the power and influence of the US if we roll the time backwards just a couple of decades. The US was the leader of the Allies in WWII and China was in the same camp at the time, as the victim of Japanese Imperialism and military aggression. In the subsequent Cold War, China demonstrated disobedience towards the leadership of the USSR in the Communist world due to sharp ideological and strategic disagreements at the time and was in the awakening of its national consciousness and ambition (Luthi, 2010). The US then kicked in, conveniently.

The US and China started to establish bilateral contacts without the mediation of a third party shortly before Richard Nixon's historical visit to China in 1972 (Ross and Jiang, 2020). Despite the fact that there were not much historically formed animosities, especially sovereignty violation, such as in the forms of military invasion and occupation for most of the part, between the US and China, it does not mean these two powerful, proud and capable nation-states should enjoy a friction-free, co-existence since all the alarming signs in the recent years do indicate otherwise. Many have claimed that the central arena of global power politics in the 21st Century belongs to the relatively declining US and the rising China (Kang, 2017). It is another historical turning point of our time to be witnessed. Notably, many firm believers of *The China Threat Theory* tend to be enthusiastic promoters of this view.

Chapter Three: China's national behaviors through the lenses of the Strategic Filtration Model

In the previous chapter, I have critically synthesized the existing literature relating to my research subject on a selective basis. In this chapter, I would like to introduce my original *Strategic Filtration Model* and demonstrate how the Chinese political leadership as well as other stakeholders could benefit from it as a useful tool or a helpful template to assist holistic strategic planning and practical problem-solving in the midst of the resurgence of great power politics in a global scope.

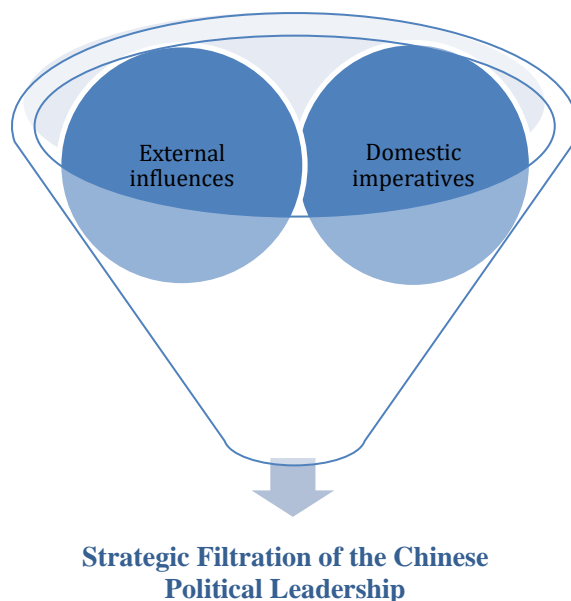
3.1. The powerful presence of the CCP and its eclectic ideological orientation

The powerful presence of the Chinese state under the political monopoly of the CCP has always been the “*elephant in the room*” to be critically addressed regarding China-related political economy. The nominal status of “*state ideology*” (guojia yishixingtai: 国家意识形态) granted to Marxism (makesi zhuyi: 马克思主义) (Zhou and Santos, 2003) is merely a political courtesy in China. The apparent reason for this is that Marxism is simply a monumental political heritage the Chinese political leadership could not surrender, at least not officially. Marxism is the ideology upon which the CCP was founded in 1921. When the CCP celebrated its 100-year anniversary in July, 2021, Marxism was once again highly praised and officially endorsed by the authority in power. However, despite retaining Marxism as the ideological core of the CCP, the party has literally ventured far beyond the authentic Marxist principles in practice.

Therefore, the Marxist or Communist label that has been attached to the Chinese political regime is superficial and can even be misleading. The political filtration function of the Chinese political regime and how the internal sovereignty and external sovereignty are legitimized and achieved through what methods and strategies are much more revealing than a careless political label could ascribe. What I call the “*realist pragmatism* (xianshi zhezhong zhuyi: 现实折衷主义)” is one of the defining qualities that has contributed significantly to the resilience and vitality of the CCP. It is deeply inspired by the combination of both China's own indigenous political philosophies and idealism, and imported ideological products of foreign origins. “*Realist pragmatism*” is also a political tactic and strategic choice made by the Chinese political regime to effectively filter and skillfully manage domestic imperatives and international influences to its own advantage and benefit, including its very survival.

3.2. The CCP as the strategic interface between international power politics and domestic imperatives

From both the theoretical and practical perspectives, nation-state is always on the delicate balance of the internal and the external as my analytical model straightforwardly shows below. In other words, the state is literally the “*strategic interface* (zhanlue jiemian: 战略界面)” that divides the international influences from domestic imperatives.



(Illustration One: The Strategic Filtration Model; **Source:** Original from the author)

The **Illustration One** above is a parsimonious visualization of my *Strategic Filtration Model*. It demonstrates the strategic function of the Chinese political authority as a funnel to filtrate external influences and domestic imperatives according to its own order of strategic priorities. The first and foremost goal for the CCP is to seize the political monopoly in China as long as possible, which I want to reiterate and emphasize again. Other objectives and goals only take a secondary position and, very often, they tend to serve the purpose as strategic instruments to achieve the top goal. Any substantial challenge, regardless of its origin (domestic or international) and agenda, that possesses the potentiality to threaten the political legitimacy and authority of the CCP in China would definitely meet ruthless elimination and eradication with no hesitation and mercy whatsoever. Mark Beeson (2013, pp.154) has resonated with this idea by posing a very inspiring question in his book titled *Re-configuring East Asia* that:

“How the party leadership manages the complex interplay between the domestic and international forces will shape China’s future trajectory in unpredictable but profoundly important ways”.

My theoretical model is a device to better understand the strategic thinking of the Chinese political leadership facing twin pressures from both external power politics and internal imperatives for further development and continuous progression. My following arguments shall shed light on whether or not the Chinese political leadership has both the intention and capacity to constitute any realistic threat to others without endangering the Communist political regime back home.

3.2.1. The external environment and domestic situation in relation to state behaviors

In the Age of Globalization, nation-states are bonded tighter than ever with each other. Those with higher degree of exposure to the external world (i.e. the openness of a state) and being more integrated into the globalized political economy are the ones having complex and intricate interrelationships and inter-dependencies with foreign agents and entities (both governmental and non-governmental). The existence of these highly complex, interconnected relationships and mutual needs could significantly constrain or, at least, influence the behaviors of state-actors, in one way or another, which is the theoretical core contributed by the neo-institutionalists collectively (Domingo, 2022; Milner, Moravcsik and Ebrary, 2009).

After four decades of systemic reforms and continuous opening-up, China has already deeply embedded in the global economic system (Zhang and Zhang, 2018) and international political institutions (especially as one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council). In short, the world needs China and China also needs the world. *The China Threat Theory* straightforwardly warns that China is a threat. It is better to decouple with it before it is too late. However, the hidden punchline is that it might already be too late to divorce China and China also does not want to have a bad divorce with the US or the West in general. The mutual needs are undeniable and arbitrary disentanglement could cause major disruptions to global political economy and inflict varying degrees of harms to all the directly and indirectly involved stakeholders out there. At the current moment, the external environment presents more restrictions than opportunities for China. It is noteworthy that the external environment has also been evolving significantly over time, driven by the dynamic global power equilibrium and the shifting strategic preferences of the major players in the fierce global power game.

As globalization has been deepening over the past a few decades and the ICTs continue to advance over time, international influences now could interact with domestic public opinions, political climate and society-wide imperatives etc., if required conditions, both technical and non-technical, are met (to enable cross-level interaction and interplay). Therefore, multilevel and cross-level examinations of national behaviors framed in an international context is almost a requirement rather than a preference nowadays. I suggest the internal (or sub-national level) and the external (or international level) entrenched in my analytical model could be regarded as the two sides of the same coin. No single side represents the full story of the game. Both the US and China have globally extended, strategic ambitions and both of them are diligently pursuing their own national interests through whatever strategies and tactics they find appropriate and effective.

Despite striking differences, one commonality shared by both the US government and the Chinese government is that they have to win the support from their own people (at least, the majority of the voters in the case of the US) in order to legitimately exercise the sovereign power and behave as a coherent and unified sovereign entity in the highly competitive international community. In short, internal approval and support is the critical prerequisite for state actors to commit to certain behaviors, both domestically and internationally. In other words, state actors do not really enjoy unlimited discretion to make (esp. self-serving) decisions, both inwardly and outwardly, despite the constant presence of temptations and incentives to do so.

From a more concrete and inside-out perspective, domestic public opinions, political dispositions and societal imperatives could significantly shape a state-actor's foreign policies and its outward behaviors in general (this causality has long been noticed and researched by many in varying angles and depths, such as Evans, Jacobson and Putnam (2023)), limit actionable options towards other sovereignties and constrain the strategic resources available at the disposal of the state as my *Strategic Filtration Model* clearly demonstrates. If we look in the other way around, we can see that international pressures and impacts could also visibly (re-) shape the dynamism inside the internal sphere and even alter its qualities and structures after an extended exposure over a considerable amount of time. Precisely due to this reason, theoretically, the artificial segregation of the domestic sphere from the international environment could effectively undermine the quality of national-level decision-making and policy formulation if they are treated as separate systems without any meaningful interactions and mutual influences.

In the specific case of China, the international environment has become much more restrictive and unfavorable, largely due to the mounting competitive pressures from the US and its allies and alignments. China's strategic planning can be significantly disturbed by adverse external

impacts and influences. The US-led containment with the explicit aim to suppress China's burning ambition to become a full-fledged global superpower has already become a reality rather than a probability. One can easily notice that China's foreign and domestic policies clearly reflect the impacts of external influencing variables. However, China's strategic responses are not always well thought out. Its notoriously assertive diplomacy, i.e. the so-called "*wolf warrior*" diplomacy (zhanlang waijiao: 战狼外交), in the recent years is largely a tactical mishap according to my model because this approach can effectively amplify the adverse external impacts rather than neutralize them. It also does not contribute to the preservation of China's international position and restoration of the civil rationality within the Chinese society.

The ferocious waves of mass infections by the Omicron variant after the hasty reversal of the Zero-COVID policy in early December of 2022 throughout major Chinese megacities is another perfect example of how my model works. Strict and prolonged lockdown (or semi-lockdown in some cases) of China's major economic and industrial hubs (such as Shanghai) has contributed considerably to the sluggish Chinese economy since the latter parts of 2022. From a retrospective perspective, the Chinese economy did suffer substantially due to the draconian Zero-COVID policy. This might seem to be a confusing or even inexplicable strategy adopted by the Chinese authority on the surface to aggressively contain the vicious spread of COVID-19 within its jurisdiction.

However, the two underlying reasons are: **A)** without highly effective foreign vaccines and sufficient medical resources to treat infected patients, lockdown is the only realistic option to avoid the complete collapse of the medical system in China. If the Chinese medical system is indeed overwhelmed by COVID patients, massive humanitarian crisis is almost certain to occur due to the extremely limited medical capacities available to accommodate the enormous size of the Chinese population. In this case, it is highly likely that the Chinese political regime won't survive as the result of a disastrously failed and completely out-of-control COVID management and that is exactly what the Chinese political authority fears to its core; and **B)** rising civil rebellion and disobedience among young college students (and workers) throughout China, i.e. the dubbed "*white paper movement*", to protest against the draconian lockdown policy are the real reason why the policy was abandoned, literally, overnight.

Therefore, according to my analytical model, it becomes apparent that the Chinese authority was simply reacting to internal imperatives and external influences intelligently with the sole determination to preserve its legitimacy, authority and absolute control in China indefinitely. The seemingly impetuous and arbitrary decision-making and policy formulation at the very top are surprisingly rational and purposeful if one utilizes my model to critically understand how the Chinese political leadership thinks and acts and why.

3.2.2. Institutional deterioration and decay at international level

At domestic level, the Chinese political leadership faces a large number of extremely challenging issues (not exclusively COVID as mentioned above). At international level, the external environment is also becoming increasingly unforgiving. The main source of external pressures is undoubtably from the US. For a rising superpower like China, the stake to engage in an unpredictable and mutually destructive power game with the still much more powerful hegemon is, literally, very high. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the current Chinese political leadership, China has no other options but to defend, or even over-defend, its national interests when the possibility to reconcile and compromise has been diminishing over time. One of the main attributions to this unfortunate reality is that the deficit of trust at inter-state level, especially between the US and China (Lieberthal and Wang, 2012), has injured the once dearly upheld principle of multilateralism as the cornerstone of modern-day international institutions almost fatally.

Institutional deterioration and dysfunction at international level have been aggravated by the resurgence of great power politics in response to the vigorous rise of China in the past two decades. Based on direct and indirect observations, I tend to theorize that the overflowing *China Threat Theory* in the global political discourse mainly serves the political purpose to justify and normalize the aggressive and punitive actions foreign political powers can possibly take against China in a preemptive manner. Among the various, alleged threats posed by China, the most disconcerting one seems to be the state-sponsored export of its authoritarian values and governance style (Economy, 2021) to purposefully replace Western-style democracy and liberalism in a global scope (Edel and Shullman cited in Hildebrand, 2021). China's growing influence in the "*global authoritarian camp* (albeit a vaguely defined concept)" has greatly undermined the goodwill, trust and mutual understanding between China and the US-led global West.

I want to point out that the hidden logic of *The China Threat Theory* has always been: "*China is guilty until proven innocent*". This logic is literally more harmful than simply the deep distrust or even hostility embedded in the so-called theory itself. It suggests that China is a perpetually hypothetical, "*bad actor*" that cannot be tied down by the existing rules and well-established norms at international level. The deteriorating international institutions are likely to become even more incompetent, counter-productive and fragile than they already are. International institutions are designed to be the solution or at least an alternative to the age-old great power politics due to the lack of centralized authority above sovereignties. They are supposed to be instrumentalized to establish boundaries, rules and limits of the game. However, unfortunately, they are increasingly over-ridden, if not completely nullified, by great power politics. It is a major setback and concern for many institutionalists, to say the least.

For the sake of fairness and objectivity, China is, at times, double-standard, arbitrary and opportunist whenever it can take advantage of a (favorable) situation. Despite persistent and harsh criticisms from the US and others, China's bold and assertive behaviors have been escalating in the recent years, such as imposing unilateral economic sanctions on Australia and Lithuania due to political reasons and cracking down pro-democratic movements in Hong Kong with no regard whatsoever to the "*one country, two system*" promise up to 50 years after the unification. Another high-profile example is that China did not even recognize the authority of the international tribunal's ruling regarding the territorial disputes in the South China Sea in favor of its weaker and smaller neighboring countries. To the utter disappointment of the West, China has doubled down the construction and militarization of artificial islands in the disputed waters ever since.

Again, my analytical model explains China's peculiar behaviors reasonably well. There could be two plausible drivers behind China's threatening behaviors: **A**) the performance of the filtration function by the current Chinese political leadership is dissatisfactory or, at least, suboptimal because it has attracted unnecessarily more external hostilities towards itself by behaving erratically; and **B**) the Chinese political leadership is hijacked by the burning nationalism among the politically enthusiastic Chinese patriots and their collective desire for respect and status in the international community. Unfortunately, some of their demands actually require China to take aggressive and intrusive actions against other sovereignties. This effectively consolidates the popular belief that China is indeed a threat to other members of the international community, especially those are less powerful and resourceful.

To summarize, the international institutions are decaying at an accelerated pace because, ironically, all the major players intend to utilize them to discipline and restrain others and benefit themselves. In short, the rise of great power politics is at the expenses of the credibility, authority and capacity of the international institutions of virtually all kinds. This fact alone contributes further to the anarchic tendency at international level and increases the

difficulties and costs for state-actors to navigate a more turbulent and uncertain global environment. The possibility for state-actors to peacefully and amicably settle their disagreements and divergences through formally institutionalized arbitration, negotiation and reconciliation is dimming under the current trend. This also implies that the power of the state to withstand external influences can be effectively enhanced due to the additional support it receives from a unified internal base.

At this point, distrust, self-preservation, and inter-state competition (if not confrontation) are incrementally corrupting the very foundation of the idealism proposed by neo-institutionalists. As mentioned before, a major setback is already in sight. Disorder and inter-state confrontation have returned in full force to push the global political economy into an ever power-driven and self-interested direction with a much lesser level of (mutual) confidence, solidarity and multilateralism. What makes the situation even worse is the unfortunate fact that this unfavorable scenario might not fade away anytime soon, i.e. it tends to be sticky, especially considering the motion of global political economy always has a fairly strong inertia. The global power equilibrium is currently subject to an active transformation into a re-balance to accommodate the rise and, possibly, fall of China, in short.

3.2.3. The domestic imperatives within the Chinese society

If we divert the attention from the external environment to China's internal domain, it is easy to see that the number one domestic imperative in the country is undoubtedly social stability and economic well-being because these two are the indispensable conditions for the CCP to sustain its political monopoly in China indefinitely. The reason why I put them together is that they are intimately intertwined as each other's necessary condition and they are a pair of mutually reinforcing concepts. This might appear to be a cliché, but it is very much true in the current Chinese society facing both severe internal and external challenges.

Social stability and economic well-being at both microscopic and macroscopic levels are exceptionally desirable to and highly prioritized by both the Chinese political authority and the overwhelming majority of the Chinese general public. As I shall elaborate further in the subsequent parts of my thesis, these shared interests have bonded the Chinese people firmly with the authoritarian political regime through a peculiar form of "*tacit social contract*" that requires mutual commitment and a significant level of trust, or, at least, the willingness to cooperate and compromise.

Having suffered from long periods of foreign invasions and occupations, civil wars and frenetic political movements of various kinds, the Chinese political authority and the Chinese people have reached an agreement that peace and order in the society and economic security and prosperity are more desirable than senseless power struggles. According to formal Chinese political discourse, the Chinese political authority deems stability as the foundation of citizen-government cooperation (Kuhn, 2019). It is also regarded as the "*ultimate veto*" by the vast Chinese populations to delegitimize the monopolistic political status and privilege of the CCP in China.

Under normal circumstances, social stability (Shan, 2021) and the internal demand for economic security and well-being (Boutin, 2019; Li and China Development Research Foundation, 2016) are treated with high strategic priority by the Chinese political leadership because internal instability is the first and foremost danger to the sustainability of the Communist regime. The utmost importance of stability is conspicuously reflected in the massive budget allocated to "*stability maintenance*" (weiwen: 维稳) year-on-year by the Chinese central government.

The Chinese political authority is readily prepared to go any length to stay in power as long as possible. To seize the monopolistic power indefinitely, the Chinese political authority actively fulfills its responsibility to supply a whole spectrum of necessary political devices and institutional provisions to: **A)** secure a well-performing and advancing Chinese economy; and **B)** create an orderly and stable social environment for the Chinese peoples to live in and thrive. According to my own observation and judgement, the well-known “*legitimacy justified by economic performance*” rhetoric is not merely brain-washing propaganda or ideological engineering. In fact, it is a mutually beneficial and strategically indispensable agreement endorsed by both the ruling power and the ruled in the idiosyncratic Chinese social-political-economic reality.

In addition to essential socioeconomic stability and security at the minimum level, the strong internal demand for equality is gradually emerging within the Chinese society as China becomes richer and more resourceful. I suggest that if (*relative not absolute*) equality cannot be restored in the stratifying and conflict-ridden Chinese society, sustainable stability and genuine cohesion at the fundamental level of the social fabric can hardly be achieved, no matter how determined the political authority is at the very top. The demand for socioeconomic justice and equal opportunities for all, instead of a pitiful number of privileged elites and their associates, is unmistakably overwhelming. Exacerbating inequality and unfair (re-) distribution of scarce resources and collective wealth have already become a major source of civil resentment and disobedience in the Chinese society (Fan et al., 2014).

The root cause of inequality in China is actually structural and systemic. It manifests in the form of pervasive corruption that has saturated the entire Chinese society from the very top to the wide bottom. The extractive and rent-seeking propensity of the Chinese bureaucrats fuels the populist rage against the ruling elites and even provokes civil rebellions against the government every now and then. Corruption is not only unfair, but also immoral. “不患寡而患不均” (“*buhuangua er huanbujun*”, literally translated into: “*Not worry about poverty, but rather about the uneven distribution of wealth*”) is a piece of ancient wisdom that is still relevant and applicable in today’s Chinese society.

Noticeably, a significant number of critics have even gone a step further, revealing the fact that corruption has already become a so-called “*malignant cancer* (e’xing aibian: 恶性肿瘤)” of the Chinese society (Shambaugh, 2016a). They claim that the governmental officials are not alone in this highly concerning situation. Corruption has already penetrated the entire Chinese society into each and every socioeconomic stratum. Everybody believes and practices the twisted logic of corruption. Everybody has a part to play in this degenerating social-political-economic orgy of corruption with literally few exceptions. The pervasive corruption has already become an integrated component of the societal norm in China and it is even tolerated by the multitude of Chinese people as long as they, too, could take advantage of a favorable situation or exploit any beneficial opportunity whenever possible without legal and moral scrutiny and judgement, just like the governmental officials do constantly.

This scenario might turn out to be too depressing and overly generalized to some people. But it does hold a certain degree of truth from an objective and more detached perspective. The Chinese society has already exhibited the dangerous tendency of a downward spiral of “*moral degradation*” (daode baihuai: 道德败坏) (Rose, 2013) or even “*moral nihilism*” (daode xuwuzhuyi: 道德虚无主义) (Peng, 2020) and the Chinese political leadership is fully aware of the detrimental consequences that would soon follow if no appropriate measures were taken in a timely manner (Tian, 2022). Anti-corruption, as the primary task of systematic, social detoxification and purification, is literally a battle the Chinese political authority cannot afford to lose because it is the primary source of public resentment and civil rebellion (Bao,

2019), far more severe and provocative than, say, the ideologically invasive “*Western universal values* (xifang pushi jiazhi guan 西方普世价值观)” (Sullivan, 2021).

Unjustified inequality is literally a ticking bomb in China waiting to be either ignited or defused. First-hand observations indicate that the demand for socioeconomic equality grows stronger due to both the shared frustration over the sinful aspects of the society and the awakening consciousness of civil rights (Sun and Guo, 2015). The budding awareness of legitimate rights (be that political, economic and/or social) among the Chinese populations and their collective efforts to impose accountability upon the political-economic elites are already starting to arise in a carefully guarded and traditionally inward-looking social system (Kennedy, 2014).

To fundamentally address these urgent and galvanized imperatives from the Chinese general public, substantial political and legal reforms are inexorably required. However, this might never happen without regime change due to the strong resistance from the vested interests. Also, the notorious lack of transparency in the Chinese political system does not allow public oversight and legal supervision to hold the administrative power accountable. The opaque operations in the state-dominated, strategically important industries are plagued by rampant corruption and fraudulent practice because that is exactly how the political-economic system works in China. The unique *modus operandi* of the Chinese-style of governance, namely without the presence of unambiguously separated and legally defined boundaries among the social, economic and political domains, makes China’s domestic situation extremely complicated and difficult to regulate.

Pathological phenomena are commonplace in the Chinese society as the detrimental by-products of marketization and opening-up. The enlarging “*spiritual void* (jingsheng kongdong: 精神空洞)” now dominates the minds of the Chinese populations. In other words, the Chinese society is dangerously faithless and outrageously opportunist. It seems to be solely oriented by personal gains and locally defined interests. As a result, social degeneration has been taking an increasingly evident shape since the late 1970s and social cohesion has been seriously eroded at the same time (He, 2017). Some authors insightfully pointed out that the practice of corruption no longer applies exclusively to Chinese bureaucrats at all levels (Zang, 2019). It has already penetrated into every inch of the Chinese society like currents of toxin (ibid.). In fact, everybody in the Chinese society could potentially be a culprit of corruption whenever opportunity presents itself and becomes available for exploitation.

I want to add that, due to the malignant competition over scarce (esp. premium) resources, the social life in China is very intense. The infamous Hobbesian statement, “*war of all against all* (yiqieren zhendui yiqieren de zhanzheng: 一切人针对一切人的战争)”, is the dominant logic that governs the current Chinese society. One might naïvely assume that the Chinese culture appears to appreciate collectivism. Naturally, it should also value cooperation and altruism. Quite surprisingly, the opposite is true. The telltale signs of social dysfunction and moral degradation within China’s internal domain are self-evident. They can weaken the strengths and solidarity of this rising superpower to compete internationally as a unified nation-state, or even worse, cause internal frictions and conflicts that can tear the social fabric apart and collapse the authoritarian regime from within. For the Chinese political leadership, maintaining internal sovereignty sometimes might be even more urgent and demanding than maintaining external sovereignty. This is also explainable by utilizing my analytical model. The state actor is always on the tricky balance of internal and external sovereignties.

To mitigate the negativities associated with unjustified inequality should be a good start for the Chinese political authority to introduce genuine and lasting stability into its internal domain. As a direct result of materialistic greed and institutional loopholes, the Gini coefficient has been rapidly climbing over the recent decades in China. The Gini coefficient

(jini zhishu: 基尼指数) is a widely adopted economic indicator of wealth distribution and income inequality. It is not extensively reported and cited in the formal government documentations due to its socially provocative nature. The authenticity and accuracy of the publicly available Gini coefficient of China are almost always subject to endless cynicism or even ridicule (Yang, 2013).

According to the statistics released by the Census and Economic Information Center (the CEIC in short), the Gini coefficient of China peaked in 2008 to 0.491 and the indicator reached the lowest of 0.462 in 2015 over a period of time from 2007 to 2018. Other more critical sources have claimed that the Gini coefficient of China might have already risen to above 0.5 years ago. Xie and Zhou (2014) have conducted a piece of very detailed quantitative research on the actual Gini coefficient of China. These two authors have concluded that the real Gini coefficient of China have almost certainly risen to above 0.5 around the early 2010s, higher than that of the US (0.45) during the same time frame (Xie and Zhou, 2014). Temporal (or longitudinal) compare and contrast in this piece of credible research have high-lighted an alarming rate of exacerbating inequality in China from the 1980s to the 2010s and these two authors believe the situation in China is significantly worse than that of the US (ibid.). Similar conclusions have also been proposed by other authors with lengthy and detailed elaborations, such as Shi, Sato and Sicular (2015).

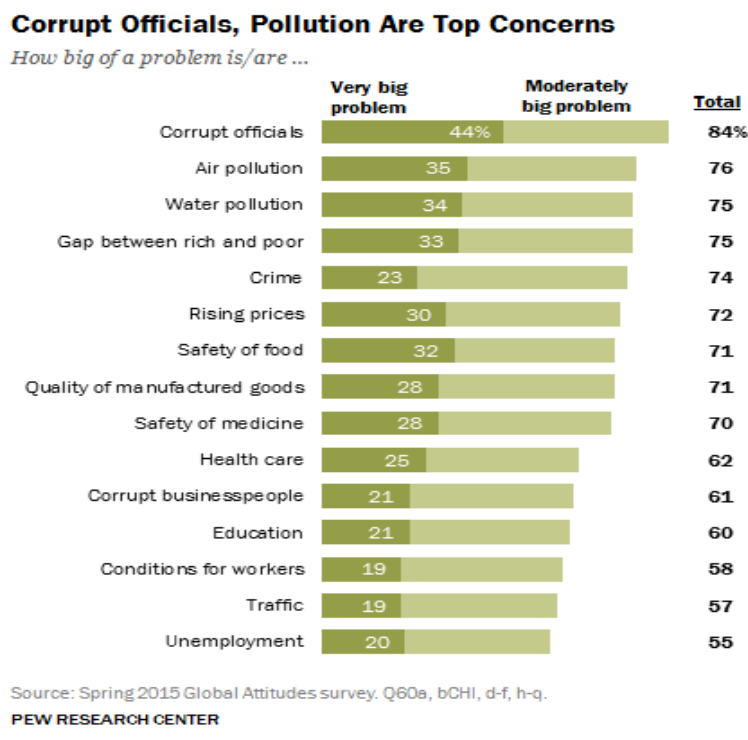
China's bold embrace of marketization without proper establishment of robust and functioning regulatory and supervisory mechanisms (i.e. insufficient institutional building to ensure the principle of justice and equality) has created vast wealth gaps within a once pre-industrialized, agricultural society marked by extreme and persistent poverty and serious socio-economic backwardness. Inequality has escaped from the "*Pandora's box*" after the centrally planned economy was gradually replaced by a self-proclaimed "*Socialist market economy*" that literally allowed brutal, primitive accumulation of capital to happen and thrive just as Capitalism did in the industrialized societies in the Western world.

Inequality was proudly justified by audacious and government-sponsored slogans in the early 1990s, such as "*let some people get rich first* (rang yibufenren xian fuqilai: 让一部分人先富起来)" and "*get rich is glorious* (zhifu guangrong: 致富光荣)". However, these extensively cited quotations should not be taken out of their original context and time frame for the sake of impartial judgment. I have to emphasize that inequality is almost unavoidable everywhere. So, the notion itself simply describes a universal economic phenomenon of uneven income dispersion and it only triggers social discontent when: **A**) wealth tends to concentrate in a fairly small number of individuals (i.e. extreme concentration of wealth); or **B**) the existing wealth distribution mechanism violates the consented principles of justice, fairness and equality in the society.

In the case of China, the aforementioned two scenarios happen simultaneously and they are reinforced by each other over time. The privileged and resourceful elites, who represent only a tiny proportion of the entire Chinese population, have amassed an incredible amount of wealth through the collusion between government and business (guanshang goujie: 官商勾结). Abusing public office for personal gains is morally unacceptable yet notoriously common in the Chinese bureaucratic system. To the utter disappointment of the Chinese general public, this practice still exists and flourishes to this day, despite a series of high-profile, anti-corruption campaigns led by President Xi since the early days of his administration.

Surveys conducted by the Pew Research Institute reveal that an overwhelming majority of over 84% of the respondents believe corrupt government officials are a serious concern (see **Illustration Two** below). We can see from the chart that administrative corruption is viewed even more problematic than China's devastating air pollution according to the respondents. If

we conservatively extrapolate from the survey results, it is not difficult to see that the trust between the general public and the government is depleting due to rampant corruption and pervasive rent-seeking.



(**Illustration Two:** Corrupt officials, pollution are top concerns. **Source:** Pew Research Center)

Nevertheless, why trust matters anyway? Because, once again, civil trust is the indispensable ingredient to stabilize and unify a society (Uslaner, 2018). The deficiency of civil trust can ultimately seal the fate of the Communist regime in China and compromise the top strategic goal of the CCP. In addition, the survey results from the Pew Research Center have interestingly confirmed my previous arguments that inequality, corruption and the lack of civil trust and cooperation are three interrelated encumbrances that are holding back China's economic development and social progression (Fang, 2021). They are also the root causes of China's unstable propensity and accumulating internal tensions. Without curing them thoroughly, the Chinese authority has no other options but to invest ever more resources to suppress its own people in order to attain the so-called "stability" within its own jurisdiction.

To summarize, the national strengths of China are weakened by its institutional deformities and deficiencies because they obstruct more even distribution of resources, opportunities, and strategic attentions to benefit ordinary Chinese populations. China's ability to pose any realistic threat to other sovereignties depends critically on how supportive the Chinese people are to their government. Manipulating nationalism alone is definitely not enough from my perspective. If China strives to earn dignity and respect in the international community, then settling acute domestic issues and reassuring the Chinese people with sincerity, devotion, and efficacy should undoubtedly be a strategic priority. What *The China Threat Theory* does not tell is that the Communist China is and, maybe, has always been the first and foremost threat to itself rather than to others.

3.3. Comprehend China's national behaviors

In this sub-section, I shall demonstrate how to understand the (at times peculiar or even confusing) national behaviors of China by utilizing the *Strategic Filtration Model*. According to my analytical model, observable national behaviors are performed by state-actor under the internal and external impacts. China's distinctive national behaviors reflect how sensibly the Chinese political leadership navigates the turbulent external environment and reacts to compelling internal imperatives so as to preserve its monopolistic political power, as well as the highly regarded vested interests of the political-economic elites. Currently, the inward-looking propensity of the current Chinese leadership to engage in strategic hedging (i.e. retreating into the so-called “*internal circulation*” (neixunhuan: 内循环) which is supposedly a domestic economic safe haven) hints two possibilities:

A) maintaining internal sovereignty in China might be more difficult than maintaining external sovereignty against foreign aggressions as I have discussed in the previous sub-section. This makes much sense because whenever an internal crisis emerges, the Chinese political authority almost always either diverts the attention to external factors and impacts or appeals to nationalism and patriotism or both at the same time in order to hold the Chinese society together and prevent it from falling apart. This tactic has been proved, time and time again, to be easy to apply and very effective in actual political practice; and

B) the external environment (especially the Sino-US bilateral relationship) has already deteriorated to a dismal point where almost nothing can be done to improve the situation and dispel the deep and vast distrust and hostility. China has no other viable options but to retreat into its home base, even just temporarily. China is enduring considerable adverse impacts induced by external hostilities. The only action the Chinese political leadership can possibly take is mobilizing the national propaganda machine to its maximum capacity to publicly condemn and protest the containment and encirclement instigated by the US-led global West across the political, economic, and technological dimensions against China (NBC News, 2024). China's emotional reaction is fairly understandable because, in a retrospective sense, China has enjoyed a much more enabling and benign international environment for many years before the trade war initiated by the former President Trump in 2018 (Hass and Denmark, 2020).

Upon close observations, whatever the Chinese political leadership is trying to do remains to be a remedy rather than a cure, technically speaking. It seems that the ultimate victim of the intensifying US-China competition is, unfortunately, the gradually slowing-down Chinese economy and the life and livelihood of millions upon millions of ordinary Chinese people. At the current moment, China is under the extremely severe, twin pressures of external economic derisking, demand contraction and withdrawal of foreign investment; and sticky internal economic sluggishness with a disconcerting unemployment rate of 19.6% among the country's young urban population (from 16 to 24 years old) according to the official statistics available to the public (Gordon, 2023).

The sticky nature of the deterioration of the Chinese economy and the clumsy responses from the Chinese political leadership signal two things: **A)** externally instigated economic disentanglement or derisking, as the consequence of China's imprudent, provocative, and aggressive foreign policies in the recent years, has begun to bear a bitter fruit for the rising superpower to swallow; and **B)** structural and systemic reform of China's internal domain cannot be delayed any longer. Substantial political reforms and economic reorientations are urgently needed to safeguard the Chinese economy and reenergize the momentum of the idiosyncratic *China Model*.

It is fair enough to say that China is paying an extraordinarily high price for being a perceived threat to the hegemon and the existing world order underpinned by it. Unlike the former Soviet Union, China and the Chinese economy have already been deeply embedded in the West-dominated, global system, which means: **A**) China is comparably much more susceptible to external shocks than decades ago; and **B**) decoupling China can punish the US and its allies too (Hass and Denmark, 2020). Despite the strategic awareness of mutual destruction, the US is determined to contain China's rise through extremely punitive means. China is enduring savage blows to its national economy on an on-going basis. The global West is deliberately distancing and detaching from China. The current situation is comparable to that immediately after the political turmoil in 1989. However, the difference is: this time, Taiwanese investors and industrialists and those from other Asian economies are also evacuating from China at an alarming scale and speed (Taipei Times, 2023). China's friend base is shrinking considerably and the country is becoming increasingly isolated in the international community. China's rapprochement with Putin's Russia is another major contributing factor to be recognized. More sanctions and restrictions from the US-led global West are on the way to stifle the gradually slowing down Chinese economy justified by the so-called "*no limits*" partnership between Russia and China (Hunnicutt and Martina, 2023).

The first and foremost attribution to China's disadvantageous position is that the political climate in the US has already become very unforgiving. Containing (or engaging in intense competition with) China is probably the only bi-partisan agreement at the moment in the American political circle. This highly unfavorable situation owes credits to the political assertiveness and nationalistic ambition of the Xi-centered core leadership in China. The Biden-Harris Administration is highly vigilant and hostile towards the rising China, especially under the politically regressive and ideologically nostalgic leadership of President Xi into his controversial, third term.

Not to mention the political imprudence on the part of President Xi and his close allies to prematurely reveal their unfulfilled ambition and strategic pursuit through both words and actions. The examples are actually numerous to cite: from the "*assertive diplomacy*" (Bekkevold, 2022) to the propagandist promotion of the "*China Dream* (zhongguo meng: 中国梦)" and the "*new productive forces* (xinzhi shengchanli: 新质生产力)" to the lavish expenditures on massive infrastructure-building and co-development projects worldwide (e.g. the Belt and Road Initiative) (Elliott, 2023).

All these fairly convincing empirical evidences have exposed China's true ambition and the growing appetite of the country to expand beyond its jurisdiction driven by internal aspirations. So far, China has already acquired the ability to project its national influences far and wide, irrespective of the geopolitical and geoeconomic divide. In short, it is China's own national behaviors that have changed the mindset and strategic orientation of the US leadership due to three revelations: **A**) China is dissatisfied with a subordinate status in the international community; **B**) China intends to surpass the US, economically, technologically and even politically; and **C**) China does not behave accordingly to the existing, rule-based world order established by the US-led West after two world wars and the Cold War.

Despite of China's fiery ambition to survive and succeed in the highly competitive international community, I want to reiterate that the top strategic goal of the Chinese political leadership is definitely not achieving regional or even global hegemony. In fact, preserving the absolute domination of the CCP in China as long as possible has always been the first and foremost strategic priority. However, it does not mean China wants to willingly lose the ultimate game of the 21st century to the hegemon. Signs suggest that China is reluctant, or even forced to fight an involuntary battle it has carelessly provoked. In terms of the Sino-US relationship, there is no turning back and the chance of reconciliation is literally faint.

Chinese authority openly blames the US for its underperformed economy and other complications at home (Bradsher, 2023). This technique, as argued before, is indeed longstanding and very effective. However, prolonged socio-economic crisis in China can largely compromise the credibility and efficacy of this technique because, over time, it becomes apparent that foreign government should not be held responsible for the administrative incompetence and leadership failure of the national government. The Chinese political leadership is facing incredible challenges from both the internal and the external. If the Chinese political leadership cannot turn the situation around as soon as possible, the legitimacy of the CCP to continue to rule China will be in great danger.

The nightmarish scenario the Chinese political leadership fears the most is that China's internal vulnerabilities could be skillfully exploited by hostile external forces and entities to disintegrate or even collapse the rising superpower from within (Friedberg, 2011). This is literally a reverse version of *The China Threat Theory*. It implies a probable threat against China, not a threat China can pose to others (ibid.). A domestic-international collusion (Lee and Copper, 1997) has the ability to delegitimize or even overthrow a national government is not really too farfetched from my perspective. This point will be elaborated in more detail in the next subsection by using the ruthless crackdown of Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement by Beijing as a brief and up-to-date case study.

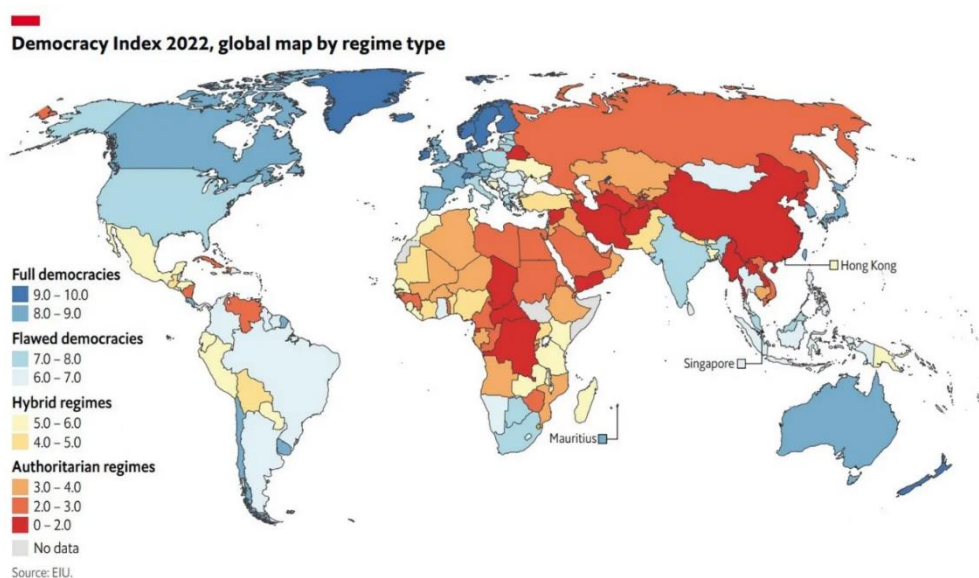
To summarize this subsection, by applying the *Strategic Filtration Model* to re-examine China's national behaviors, we can clearly see major strategic blunders the Chinese political leadership has committed. China's domestic and foreign policies also demonstrate visible inconsistencies and a noticeable level of arbitrariness. Overall, the current Chinese political leadership's performance as a strategic interface between the domestic and the international is dissatisfactory because tensions have been building up both inside and outside the country. Nevertheless, as long as the Chinese political leadership can unite the nation by recognizing and protecting the legitimate interests and inalienable rights of the Chinese general public as the foundation of citizen-government cooperation, then it might still be able to retain its formidable power and better withstand the challenges imposed by an increasingly unfavorable external environment.

3.4. Domestic-international collusion: a brief case study of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong

Both Hong Kong and Taiwan are former colonies in an antagonistic relationship with the central government in Beijing. I put Hong Kong separately from Taiwan for two main reasons: **A)** Hong Kong does not have its own military; and **B)** from a legal perspective, Hong Kong has long become a constituent of China's jurisdiction since the handover in 1997 from the British government. Hong Kong is a financial center and commercial hub in East Asia. This internationally renowned metropolis has well-developed legal and legislative systems and the local society is highly liberal and in good order (Pepper, 2007). According to the Basic Law (jibenfa: 基本法), Hong Kong enjoys a high level of autonomy and self-governance.

However, unfortunately, the “*de-democratization* (qu minzhuhua jincheng: 去民主化进程)” in Hong Kong has extinguished the hope for the Special Administrative Region (the SAR) to become a full democracy. Institutionalized universal suffrage, i.e. the so-called “*one person, one vote*” mechanism, is forcefully rejected by Beijing. To the utter disappointment of the China-watchers based in the global west, Hong Kong might never have the chance to complete its democratic transition into a genuine democracy, not to mention setting an example of democratic governance to people living in mainland China (Hung, 2004).

According to a Hong Kong-based independent media, Hong Kong's democracy index has fallen to 88th in the world in 2022 (Ho, 2023). We could readily see from the **Illustration Three** that Hong Kong has already joined the global authoritarian category (the red areas) within merely three decades after the unification in 1997. The sharp deterioration of the democratic situation in Hong Kong has reinforced the assertion that the Communistic regime in China is a threat to global democracy, as well as the democratic values upheld by the hegemon and its like-minded supporters (FBI, 2022; Maizland, 2021;).



(Illustration Three: Democracy Index 2022. Source: EIU)

The sensational and progressively violent pro-democracy protests and even riots in Hong Kong have clearly demonstrated the intensifying power struggles between the “*pro-democracy*” and “*anti-democracy*” forces in this awkward testing ground of institutional experimentation. The “*one country, two systems* (yiguo liangzhi: 一国两制)” solution was tailored for the special status and distinctive local conditions of Hong Kong as a sovereign part of China. It is now almost completely shattered by Beijing’s ruthless crackdown on pro-democracy movement in the city. The central government also has been imposing increasingly restrictive laws and regulations to keep the SAR firmly in control. Amongst these highly controversial laws and regulations, the “*Hong Kong national security law* (gangban guoanfa: 港版国安法)” deserves to be mentioned here because the intended target of this specific piece of law is precisely the suspected “*domestic-international collusion*” with potentialities to subvert the absolute political authority and unparalleled power of the central government in Beijing (Fu and Hor, 2022).

Social order and economic prosperity in Hong Kong are adversely affected by the pro-democracy movement in the city. Nevertheless, what has triggered the movement? and could the outbursts of violence as an accompanying phenomenon of the movement be justified by legitimate and honorable causes? These are relevant and critical debates for further discussions in a separate research project. I theorize that Hong Kong has fallen from a beneficiary of democracy to a victim of democracy in a matter of a few years. The democratic elements that used to underpin a highly liberal society and an exceedingly internationalized economy, such as freedom of speech, freedom of press and freedom of political association, are almost completely gone, maybe for good due to Beijing’s obsession with absolute control and complete subjugation.

I also want to point out that democracy does not fall from the sky. The hefty price to enforce and implement democratic governance in whatever forms and representations² (not exclusively in Hong Kong) is far higher than many would assume. Under many circumstances, democratization, both spontaneous and externally induced, possesses the abilities to (violently) de-configure and/or re-configure societal establishments. Painful adjustments are almost inevitable according to extensive empirical studies of democratization worldwide, especially in a shorter-term timeframe (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2000; Mainwaring et al., 1989).

The collective efforts of a significant number of politically enthusiastic yet somewhat naïve or idealistic Hong Kongers to resist the grip of power and control by Beijing are futile. It is true that Beijing did blatantly breach the agreement to preserve Hong Kong's Western governing system and life-style without change for up to 50 years. What really irritated and disturbed Beijing to the core is the fact that many pro-democracy protesters and activists based in Hong Kong have received all kinds of support from Western sympathizers, notably from the UK (Levitt and James, 2023), Australia (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.) and the US (Anderson, 2020). These English-speaking, three members of the recently formed AUKUS (i.e. a three-way security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) share their linguistic and socio-cultural similarities and they all have expressed willingness to offer assistance to the pro-democracy protesters and activists based in Hong Kong with *ad hoc* provision of political refuge and sanctuary (to qualified Hong Kongers in the cases of the UK and Australia), diplomatic aid, and even governmental intervention (in the case of the US).

The situation in Hong Kong is a typical and up-to-date exemplification of what I call the “*cross-level infiltration*” (kuaceng shentou: 跨层渗透) of Western influences and interferences into China's jurisdiction. In the specific case of Hong Kong, the implicit intention was to compromise the interfacing or gate-keeping function of the Chinese political authority and challenge its legitimacy and supremacy to enforce and implement, albeit arbitrary and regressive, rules and regulations in the SAR. The so-to-speak “*domestic-international collusion*” between the agents and entities from the internal (within the jurisdiction) and the agents and entities from the external (outside the jurisdiction) are strictly superintended with meticulous methodologies and tough measures by the Chinese central government as a functioning interface between the two.

The pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong is a complex, real-life case of a functional failure of the *Strategic Filtration Model*. This model is relevant and applicable to virtually all variety of (quasi-) states, as long as they have an independently functioning, governing body in between the domestic and the international. However, one should note that the political legitimacy of the governing body to function as a filtration interface is beyond the explanatory capacity of the model. Even unpopular political regimes could perform the function in varying degrees of effectiveness as long as they can exercise the (quasi-) sovereign power independently and effectively.

According to various official statements from the Chinese authority (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2021), Western interferences, notably from the Anglophone countries, i.e. the AUKUS, have implicated in the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong through a range of rather covert, cross-border operations, including offering financial support (Hong Kong Police cited by France-Presse, 2019), assisting personnel training (South China Morning Post, 2020) and providing political asylum opportunities, to anti-Beijing and pro-democracy

² I am aware of the debates over what is authentic democracy and what is not and how it should be institutionalized and practiced in different social contexts.

protesters with Hong Kong citizenship (BBC, 2023). Even though, these aforementioned foreign sympathizers have openly and officially refuted these serious accusations from China. However, their shared empathy and moral support to the pro-democracy forces within the former British colony are more than evident.

At the same time, the media reactions to the movement were sharply divided. Mainstream Western media tried to vindicate and justify the increasingly violent actions taken by the protesters in Hong Kong whereas mainstream Chinese media were keen to condemn that the protests were not peaceful from the very beginning and these so-called “*rioters*” were instigated by foreign adversaries to purposefully disrupt the order and stability in Hong Kong.

It is regretful that Hong Kong has become a political and ideological war zone in the recent years. The city’s (almost unconditional) openness to the rest of the world has also become a strategic concern of Beijing. What the central government fears to the core is the possibility that the internal sovereignty and the supremacy of the CCP would be in crisis as a direct consequence of “*domestic-international collusion*”. Therefore, in addition to use police force to suppress the protests, mainstream Chinese media outlets were also mobilized to create a number of counter-narratives. For example, the deployment of violence violates the legitimate right to protest peacefully (Cao, 2019), and there were a significant number of gangsters and mobs blended in the protesters (South China Morning Post, 2019) with the intention to take advantage of the volatile situation so as to enrich and gratify themselves, such as looters, violent robbers and vandalism-perpetrators (Chui, 2019). Some commentators based in China were eagerly pointing out that the situation in Hong Kong is reminiscent to the racial unrest in the US in spring-summer 2020 with a great deal of political sarcasm (Tiezzi, 2020).

These coordinated counter-measures deployed by the Chinese political leadership are not a product of paranoia. It is entirely conceivable that foreign agents and entities can indeed form alliance with local groups based in Hong Kong to collectively challenge the utmost authority of the powerful and resourceful Chinese central government in Beijing. With the assistance of digital communication technologies and Hong Kong’s well-established status as a liberal financial hub and commercial getaway in Asia, it is much easier and less costly for protesters and their foreign sympathizers to mobilize the funds needed and exchange information and ideas among themselves in order to organize anti-government activities across the physical boundaries of the Chinese jurisdiction.

Therefore, one dialectical revelation I found from the case of Hong Kong is that China can certainly threaten the West, yet, the West can also threaten China by colluding with domestic anti-authority agents and forces to challenge and weaken the supremacy of Beijing or even induce potential regime change to a pro-West one. For hard-core realists based in China, Hong Kong might end up being merely a political instrument (utilized by West powers) to pressure Beijing and undermine its formidable authority in all parts of the Chinese jurisdiction (The Economist, 2024a).

The primary takeaway from the “*domestic-international collusion*”, which is a common technique utilized by anti-government movements worldwide, is that the strategic filtration function of the state is deliberately “*circumvented*” or even “*nullified*” by this cross-level alliance. Since international actors and forces are literally beyond the jurisdiction of the state, they are more uncontrollable and might have their own insidious agendas. Meeting certain technological conditions is also relevant and critical in this case. The instrumental use of digital ICTs has literally overcome the geographic and non-geographic barriers between the colluding partners. Once the contact is successfully made and the alliance is properly established, the filtration function performed by the state will be largely compromised and disabled.

In other words, the highly regarded sovereign power of the state could be seriously infringed, jeopardized and even deprived by politically motivated cross-level collusion and strategic alliance. Apparently, this is utterly unacceptable to the Chinese central government since its political philosophy is characterized by its strong and persistent Leninist propensity, i.e. to tightly control anything and everything within the confinement of the Chinese jurisdiction. One should constantly bear in mind that power-sharing and political tolerance are rare and seldom voluntary for the sake of the political monopoly of the CCP.

Instead of preventing cross-level contacts and interactions from happening at all as the Chinese political authority used do in the past, new strategies have been adopted and implemented. However, the goal remains the same, which is to deter and forbid foreign influences and interference from infiltrating into its domestic domain and shaking the political foundation of the CCP. There are two primary reasons for this visible change of strategy on the part of the Chinese state authority: **A**) insulation (if imposed strictly and rigidly) actually goes against the CCP's opening-up policy and further reforms to release the socioeconomic potentialities of China; and **B**) the Chinese state needs a less hostile and more enabling external environment to establish itself as a positive and contributing member of the international community and have more viable space for strategic maneuverings. Self-imposed isolation is literally suicidal for both China and the political regime in place. Nevertheless, the damage is already done. From a more detached position, the downfall of Hong Kong as a landmark of liberalism and globalization in East Asia has convinced the West that China is indeed a threat to the democratic world and China should be contained with determination and force.

In mainland China and increasingly so in Hong Kong, insulating the Chinese populations from the outside world has already been replaced by meticulous surveillance and strict censorship due to the virtually unattainable nature of the former in the age of irresistible globalization and information explosion leveraged by the ICTs. The Chinese political authority closely monitors and rigorously regulates the activities conducted by the domestic agents and entities with their foreign associates. If their agenda is deemed to be subversive by the Chinese political authority, then they will be ruthlessly eliminated as soon as possible with utmost political determination. The only permissible cross-level collaboration between the domestic agents and entities and their foreign partners is being a tacit and well-disciplined complementation to the Chinese government.

The fairly successful crackdown of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong has demonstrated that Beijing has already become very skillful to handle acute and highly sensitive domestic political rebellion and crisis with the minimum use of coercion and state monopolized violence, if we just compare and contrast Hong Kong's case with the bloody military crackdown of political dissidents in the late 1980s. The filtration function of the Chinese state represents an alternative governing technique with much higher cost-effectiveness and significantly less unnecessary political controversies.

To summarize, the determination and capability of the CCP to retain its monopolistic power in China indefinitely are both impressive and intimidating. This piece of political reality has greatly reinforced *The China Threat Theory*, especially after the pro-democracy protests and riots in Hong Kong having been ruthlessly suppressed by Beijing. One thing becomes clear is that the CCP simply does not share power, even the slightest shred, with anybody outside its own system, not to mention the political dissidents and pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong. Potential dilution of the immense and pervasive power the Chinese political authority has enjoyed within its own jurisdiction for decades is highly offensive and the subsequent retaliation is almost guaranteed.

The ill-fated, pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong taught us at least one thing: in China, power should remain centralized and hierarchically distributed in accordance with orders and ranks. This is exactly the reason why civil movements in China are doomed to fail because: **A)** many of these civil movements, regardless of their dissimilar goals and purposes, are deemed as anti-government in nature. Meanwhile, political tolerance of dissidents is extremely low within the purview of the Chinese jurisdiction; and **B)** the Chinese civil society is weak and unorganized largely due to almost no willingness of power-sharing or genuine civil empowerment by the Chinese state authority.

Chapter Four: reevaluation of China's national capacities in the military, economic and soft domains

China's national capacities should be truthfully evaluated and objectively appraised before any conclusions to be made regarding the strengths and weaknesses of this rising superpower. China's the three sources of national power are its military might, economic magnitude and soft influence, just like the majority of other nation-states within the international community. In this chapter, a critical and detailed appraisal of China's national capacities will be given to argue that whether or not this rising giant possesses the prerequisites and potentialities to be qualified as a strategic threat to the US-led global West and in what ways.

4.1. The intention and capacity of China

The concept of threat has been defined in a very straightforward and concise formula as follow: "**Threat= intention + capacity** to harm others" (Gvosdev, Reveron and Cloud, 2018; Rosenthal and Barry, 2009). Based on this formula, *The China Threat Theory* implies that China has both the capacity and intention to overpower other nation-states (whenever the situation necessitates). Intention and capacity are the two determining parameters of a hypothetical or an actual threat. Therefore, to be qualified as a threat, one should possess these two qualities simultaneously. China's national capacity in today's world is undoubtedly impressive by any standard, despite the presence of a significant number of uncertainties and challenges ahead of its continuous development.

However, the thorny question remains to be: does China have the intention to use its power to intimidate or offend other sovereignties? The answer is inconclusive because intention is far more elusive than capacity. Intention could be self-proclaimed as diplomatic rhetoric constantly attempts to convey and it could also be interpreted from various behavioral indications in an indirect manner. In either case, intention is very subjective and self-referential and the interpretations of intention are almost always open to endless debates. This is another important reason why *The China Threat Theory* is so controversial because there is virtually no overwhelming consensus on China's true intention(s). Opinions are sharply contrasted and the political orientations they are based on are also wildly divergent.

In comparison, capacity, or more precisely, national capacity is easier to be grasped because it leans more towards the tangible and concrete end of the spectrum. According to the existing literature, the capacity of a state could be systematically evaluated or even quantitatively measured against a fairly large number of indicators, ranging from the availability of critical strategic resources to the ability to innovate in key industrial sectors (Men, 2020). Conducting accurate national capacity profiling is difficult, yet not entirely impossible. Demystifying the "*black box* (heixiang: 黑箱 or heihe: 黑盒)" of the state in order to reveal its true strengths and weaknesses is also challenging, especially when the level of transparency is relatively low (such as in the case of China) with regard to some sensitive issues and policy areas, and the available data and information are often insufficient and/or incomplete (Tellis, 2000). This is primarily due to the fact that certain restricted "*insider information* (neibu xinxi: 内部信息)" and sensitive data might be classified and kept confidential by the government. They are literally beyond the reach of ordinary researchers (including myself) without proper authorization and clearance from the authorities (Chapple, 2021).

In order to systematically evaluate the capacity of a state, there are three major dimensions we need to look into, namely: **A)** the military might; **B)** the economic weight, sophistication, productivity and overall competitiveness against foreign economies, especially through international trade relationships (Gilpin, 2016); **C)** the "*soft power* (ruanshili: 软实力)" (through voluntary attraction and skillful persuasion) (Nye, 2009). The first two dimensions are the two supporting pillars of hard power, which is independent from the realm of the soft power. These three dimensions are cautiously derived from the inspiring theoretical works

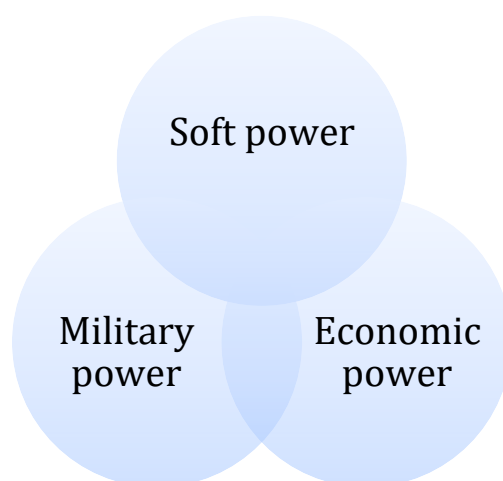
contributed by Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane from the late 1980s to this day. A brief and critical evaluation of the national capacity of China in these three aforementioned dimensions respectively will be presented in more detail in the following parts of the chapter.

4.2. A critical evaluation of China's national capacities in the three key dimensions

A strong and powerful China can be qualified as a threat to the US-led global West as *The China Threat Theory* explicitly implies. However, a weak China is definitely not. Therefore, to objectively, rationally and critically evaluate China's national capacities and potentialities is a necessary starting point to dissect the strengths and weaknesses of this emerging superpower and how it methodically and gradually gains competitive advantages in the escalating power game against the hegemon.

A nation's power is manifested in three key dimensions, i.e. economic power, military power and the soft power (See **Illustration Four** below). A well-balanced and highly developed power portfolio is the source of both respect and fear from other competing sovereign entities. A truly powerful nation-state should excel in all these three dimensions simultaneously. Traditionally, economic power and military power fall into the category of the so-called "*hard power*" as opposed to the "*soft power*", which emerged much later in the political literature and discourse.

It is noteworthy that economic power is the foundation on which military power and soft power are based (Luciani and Beblawi, 2015). National economy provides the crucial financial resources needed by the state to spend on strategically important and resource-consuming public projects and programs and further enhance the national competitiveness in order to stand strong in the international community. For example, (physical) infrastructure construction, military capacity-building and modernization, education popularization (at various levels) and cultural preservation and promotion all rely crucially on the healthy and continuous supply of funding from the state (as their primary source of finance, even though alternative funding sources do exist to a much lesser extent), which is derived from the national revenue extracted from tax payers or tax-paying citizens. In the next subsections, more detailed evaluations of China's military might, economic power and soft assets are going to be presented respectively.



(Illustration Four: the three dimensions of national power **Source:** original from the author)

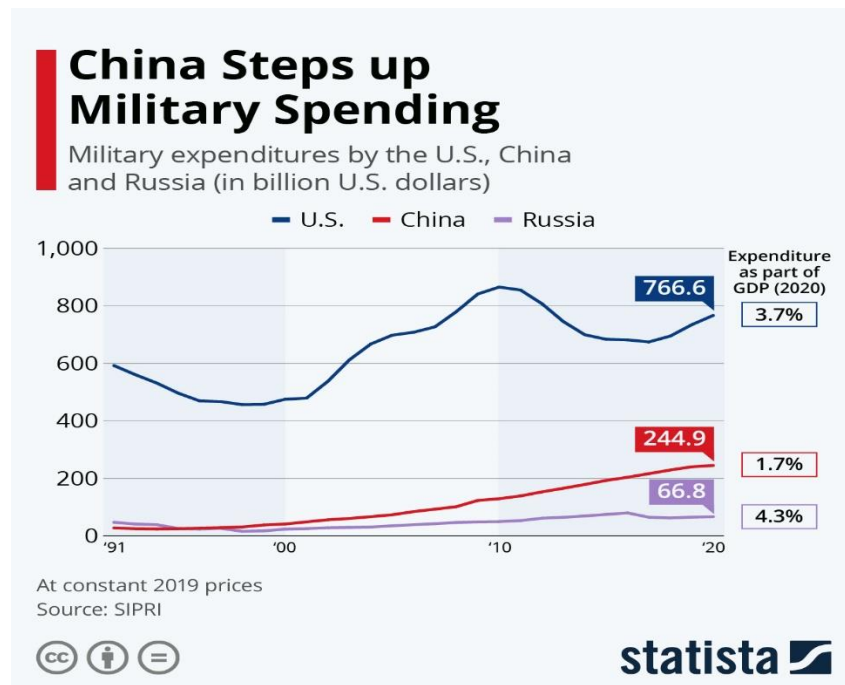
4.2.1. The capacity-building and modernization of the Chinese military

This subsection relies heavily on unclassified (i.e. publicly accessible) data and information, which means some highly valuable classified intelligence and restricted government

documents are not included due to the apparent inaccessibility (i.e. the requirement of authorization and clearance by the authorities). It is widely known that military budgets, projects and operations are universally secretive, especially among the top-tier military powers. Therefore, without the access to premium data and information could negatively affect my ability to effectively evaluate China's actual military capacity and capabilities, which is a considerable limitation I acknowledge and recognize.

The sheer size of the Chinese military is intimidating in its own right and it reflects the size of the enormous Chinese population, despite the fact that disarmament has been taking place since 1985 to dramatically reduce the size of the PLA (Fravel, 2020). Statista (Szmigiera, 2019) has reported that, up till the year 2020, China has the largest military on Earth in terms of the number of active military personnel in service. The total number for China is 2183000, followed by India of 1444000, the US of 1400000, North Korea of 1280000 and Russia of 1013628. Even though this purely numerical indicator is fairly superficial and it does not necessarily determine a country's overall military capacity. However, the size speaks for itself. Both the colossal size and the rapid capacity-building of the PLA have caused deep strategic anxiety and sense of insecurity among China's pro-West neighboring countries as well as their ultimate military patron, the US.

According to Bloomberg (Tweed, 2019), China's military budget in 2019 has increased by 7.5% than the previous year, which was released by the Chinese political authority just before the National People's Congress assembly in early March the same year. This ratio is believed to be significantly lower than an earlier estimation of an increase by 8.1% (around 164 billion USD), before the Sino-US trade war and the subsequent outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic hit the Chinese economy. In general, China's military spending has been steadily increasing over time (see **Illustration Five** below), however, much less than the US military spending in comparison, in terms of both growth rate and overall scale.



(**Illustration Five:** China steps up military spending; **Source:** Statista)

China's generous military expenditure has always been closely monitored and thoroughly scrutinized by the US. The gradual increase of China's publicized military budget over the years has seriously alerted the hegemon and the pro-West neighboring countries of China in

the region. The real military expenditure of China is believed to be significantly higher than what has been divulged in the public domain. However, the potential existence of the widely speculated, top-secret “*black budget* (hei yusuan: 黑预算)” of the US military shows that China is not alone in terms of the deliberate disinformation regarding military funding and operation. It is no exaggeration to say that the US and China actually represent the “*Mariana Trench* (maliyana haigou: 马里亚纳海沟)” of the conspiratorial “*deep state*”, which is a popular idea that frequents the informal political discourse worldwide. What defines a “*deep state*” is that a considerable amount of state secrets that have been systematically hidden away from the awareness and knowledge of the general public in the name of “*national security* (guojia anquan: 国家安全)”. The general public has little or even no control over certain highly classified state activities, even though, theoretically, the people are the ultimate source of power and legitimacy and they definitely deserve the right to know.

According to the 2020 ranking published by Global Firepower (the GFP), China is the world’s third greatest military power with an aggregate index score of 0.0691 (lower score means more powerful), just behind Russia (0.0681) and the US (0.0606). All the top three military powers have been actively engaging in an on-going competition to strengthen their already puissant military capacity according to the GFP. Other ranking systems have shown similar results, the top three powers are invariably the US, Russia and China. One primary takeaway from the various ranking systems is that the competitive military capacity-building among the US, Russia and China is likely to escalate in the predicable future largely due to inter-state tensions and lacking of good will and trust among state-actors.

A new round of security enhancement and military competition in the near future is likely to be triggered by Russia’s unjustified invasion of Ukraine and brutal slaughter of innocent Ukrainian civilians. As one of the very few allies of Putin’s Russia, China is already sitting on the hot seat of geopolitics. What seems to be even more alarming is the fact that China has been catching up with the US closer and closer in terms of a number of more sophisticated and demanding indicators of military strength and capacity, such as digitization and interoperability of the military information systems, the ability to engage in defensive or offensive cyber or information warfare (Cordesman et al., 2016), and automation of military hardware management and network organization (Lovejoy, 2018) in the past decade.

By far, the US still has the most powerful military in the entire world and it is definitely unwilling to surrender the top position to anybody anytime soon. However, the competitive advantages of the US in the military domain have been diminishing over time due to China’s rapid catching-up with well-funded state support. The inconvenient dilemma facing the hegemon is perhaps that, to restore its deteriorating comparative military strengths might stretch further the scarce strategic resources at its disposal, both financial and non-financial. Conceivably, military expenditures would siphon enormous resources from competing civilian projects, and drag the US, once again, into a new round of ominous arms race with the rising China.

Another very important indicator is that the average educational level of the Chinese soldiers has been significantly improved over time. According to Foreign Policy (Barreda and Renato, 2024), “*the PLA once consisted of recruits with no higher than middle school or high school degrees. But in 2001, it began recruiting those with a college background. By 2014, nearly 150,000 of the PLA’s 400,000 annual recruits were college students and graduates.*” It also stated that the Chinese political authority has provided a wide range of incentives and preferential treatments to recruit and retain better-educated talents to serve in the military largely due to the urgent demand for capable personnel who can effectively master advanced and technologically sophisticated weapons in the state-of-the-art warfare. The still on-going war between Russia and Ukraine is a perfect example of how important or even decisive technologies actually are in real-life combat situations in the 21st century. It is obvious that the

PLA has been undergoing a thorough qualitative transformation and up-grading despite its shrinking size. In short, the on-going modernization of the Chinese military strives to have a better chance to win in the battlefields of the future against the world's first-class military opponents.

4.2.2. Military geopolitics in Indo-Pacific Region

China's intimidating military power and its increasingly hold and defiant attitude have quickly provoked reactions from the US and its close allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region, such as Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, India and Australia. Routinized patrolling and collective military excises in strategically critical or even highly disputable localities, e.g. in the South China Sea (Correll, 2021), by the Western military alliance clearly reflect its strategic determination to contain China's growing (in terms of qualitative enhancement and capacity building) and expanding (in terms of geographic projection) military might in the Indo-Pacific Region. The West is also tentatively testing the "*strategic bottom line* (zhanlue dixian: 战略底线)" of China's determination and confidence to resort to (esp. preemptive) military means to defend the highly prioritized "*national security*" and "*core strategic interests* (hexin zhanlue liyi: 核心战略利益)", such as territorial and sovereign integrity, especially regarding the separatist Taiwan and in the South China Sea.

China's responses to the US and its allies' military "*muscle flexing*" are both swift and provocative. China and Russia have launched their bilateral military drills in the South China Sea and East China Sea shortly after the collective military exercises conducted by the US and its regional allies (Hunt, 2016; Liu, 2022). These military activities collaborated between China and Russia have sent an unmistakable signal to warn the Western military coalition about the consequential countermeasures or even retaliations evoked by its military encroachment of China's defensive "*comfort zone*".

To some political professionals, a new round of military re-balancing has already been triggered and the stakeholders in the region have been swinging back and forth undecided due to the strategic deadlock of the US-China competition. Many ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations: Dongmeng: 东盟) member states have openly expressed their unwillingness to choose side between the US and China (Stromseth, 2019). They want to maintain a benign and productive relationship with both these two superpowers (ibid.), regardless of the almost unattainable nature to achieve it. It is noteworthy that the Asian continent has already surpassed the strategic importance of Europe and the Middle East for the US due to (at least partially) China's undisputable military presence and capacity-building in the region in the very recent years (Pei, 2022).

4.2.3. The possibility of war within the "Greater China region"

The most likely trigger of real-life, inter-state war involving the Chinese military and US military is the separatist tendencies across the Chinese-speaking, "*Greater China Region* (dazhonghua diqu: 大中华地区)". The so-called "*Greater China Region*" is a quite popular concept in informal political discourse among the "*pro-China*" ethnic Chinese populations scattered all across the world. Even though, this concept is politically appealing, yet, it has neither been officially endorsed by the Chinese political authority nor included in formal political statements issued by the Chinese government. This concept or idea does imply a hint of unification and solidarity across Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao and mainland China. It also appeals to the patriotism and national pride shared by ethnic Chinese regardless wherever they are physically located. Generally speaking, the "*Greater China Region*" seems to be a fairly benevolent and benign concept in many senses. Nevertheless, ironically, the reality has not always been as agreeable as many ethnic Chinese would wish for. Constant frictions and separatist tendencies have persisted within the so-called "*Greater China Region*" to this very day, especially in the cases of Taiwan.

The “*Tsai Administration* (Cai dangju: 蔡当局)” in Taiwan has an obvious propensity to be tactically opportunist and politically pro-independence. The current Taiwanese political regime under the leadership of the Democratic Progressive Party (Minzhu jinbudang or Minjindang: 民主进步党 or 民进党) is widely known to be hostile and confrontational towards Beijing. “*To resist China and protect Taiwan* (kangzhong baotai: 抗中保台)” has always been the DPP’s overarching strategy to appeal to a significant number of indigenous autonomists and separatists within the Taiwanese society (Myers and Zhang, 2013), both elites and grassroots. Survey data indicates that the proportion of Taiwanese who resist and reject unification with mainland China, despite constant threat from Beijing to resolve the issue by using military force, has been growing considerably over time in the recent years (Feng, 2022).

It is not surprising that the political tension between Taiwan and China has been mounting under the leadership of Tsai as the sitting Taiwanese president, largely due to her defiant and confrontational attitude towards Beijing in a consistent manner. Taiwan has formed economic and trade ties with the US in widened areas and fields, especially cutting-edge technologies, such as semiconductor manufacturing (Han, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2022). The Taiwanese authority also has been solicitating further US military involvement, including on-site personnel training as recently reported by CNN (Liebermann, 2023), to shield the potential military takeover by China. The response from the US is positive. “*The Biden Administration recently approved its first arms sale to Taiwan for \$750 million worth of howitzers and high-tech munitions kits*” (Thrall, Cohen and Klare, 2021). Taiwan’s increasingly tight military bond with the hegemon might not make “*the only Chinese-speaking democracy* (Campbell, 2020)” safe and sound, but more susceptible to the military assertion from the PRC. In this case, *The China Threat Theory* is simply not a hypothetical speculation for the Taiwanese people and their government, but an approaching apocalypse day by day.

The unrelenting attempt of Taiwan to achieve statehood and international recognition remains to be a perpetually precarious “*tinder-box*” in East Asia (Taylor, 2019). Russia’s audacious invasion of Ukraine has alarmed the entire Western world, especially Europe. Putin’s Russia has gotten trapped in an excruciating and prolonged war that seems to be impossible to win or end with the slightest shred of dignity and respect. This is not an isolated case. Many believe Taiwan is likely to suffer the same fate as Ukraine in the hands of the PLA, which is a future scenario the West eagerly wants to prevent from happening (Forsyth, 2022). If Putin’s Russia gains victory in Ukraine and the US-led West impassively allows that to happen, it will greatly embolden Beijing to militarily take over Taiwan.

Tsai ing-wen (蔡英文) has won the 2020 Taiwanese presidential election representing her affiliated DPP with an unexpectedly high volume of votes of 8.17 million (Hass, 2020a), which reflected, in a certain way, the separatist propensity among the island’s populations. Many believe that the intensifying confrontation between the two sides dividing by the Taiwan Strait (taiwan haixia: 台湾海峡) is almost warranted to further deteriorate due to her successor, Lai Ching-te (赖清德)³, identified himself as a so-called “*务实的台独工作者*”, which can be translated into “*a practical and pragmatic pro-Taiwan independence facilitator*”⁴. President Tsai’s recent meetings with high-profile US politicians during her visit to the US in late March to early April of 2023, especially the then House Speaker- Kelvin McCarthy have seriously antagonized Beijing (China power project, 2023; Gan, 2023).

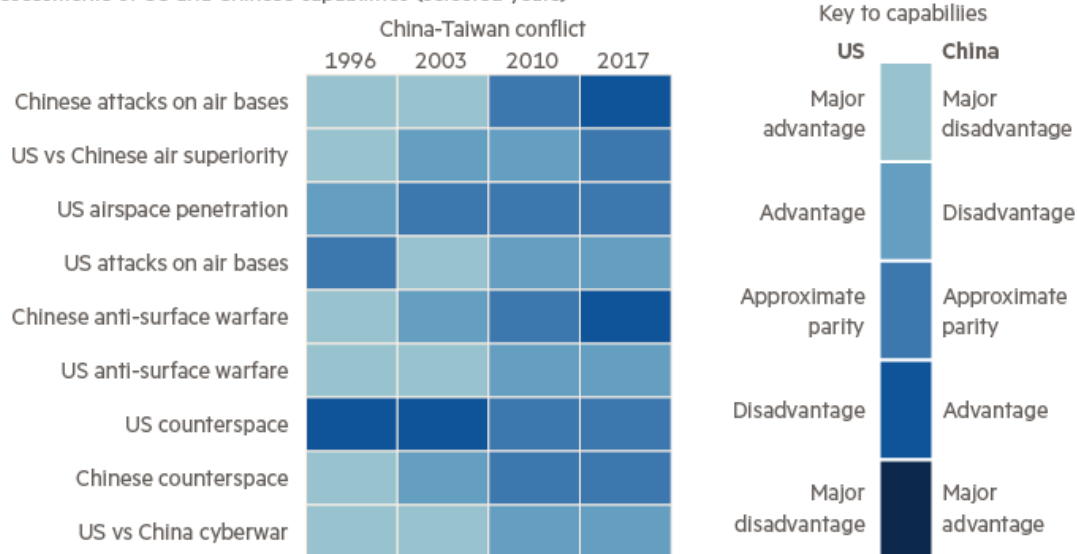
³ The winner of the 2024 Taiwanese presidential election together with Hsiao Bi-khim (萧美琴).

⁴ The author’s own translation from traditional Chinese to English.

It is no secret that Taiwan will never acquire the ability to defend itself from China’s military take-over without the support and assistance from the hegemon and its Western allies when the opportunity is ripe or an independence signal is sent on the part of Taiwan. If a military conflict or even war is triggered between the two sides, then China will be fighting against the US military force rather than the unilaterally deemed “run-away province” on its own. According to Financial Times, the military balance between the US and China in and around the island of Taiwan has already significantly shifted towards the advantage of China over the very recent years (see **Illustration Six** below):

The balance of power has shifted to Beijing

Assessments of US and Chinese capabilities (selected years)



Source: RAND Corporation, 2015
© FT

(Illustration Six: the balance of power has shifted to Beijing. **Source:** Financial Times website)

It is apparent that the US military advantages have been neutralized over time by China’s steady military build-up in and around the Taiwan Strait.

The stunning transformation of the Chinese military coincides, albeit not accidentally, with the extraordinary performance of the Chinese economy in the past two to three decades, notably after China’s final accession into the WTO on December the 11th in 2001 (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020). As argued before, the economic base determines (even though, not solely) the quality of the military. China’s rapid economic development has generated much more national revenue to fund all kinds of formidable national programs and massive projects, including military capacity-building and the step-by-step modernization of the PLA. Along with the tremendous accumulation of national wealth, the Chinese military now could access more secure, reliable and affluent sources of finance (even though, in reality, not exclusively from the Chinese government, but sometimes from private entities as well) at its disposal to achieve ambitious strategic objectives and goals intended.

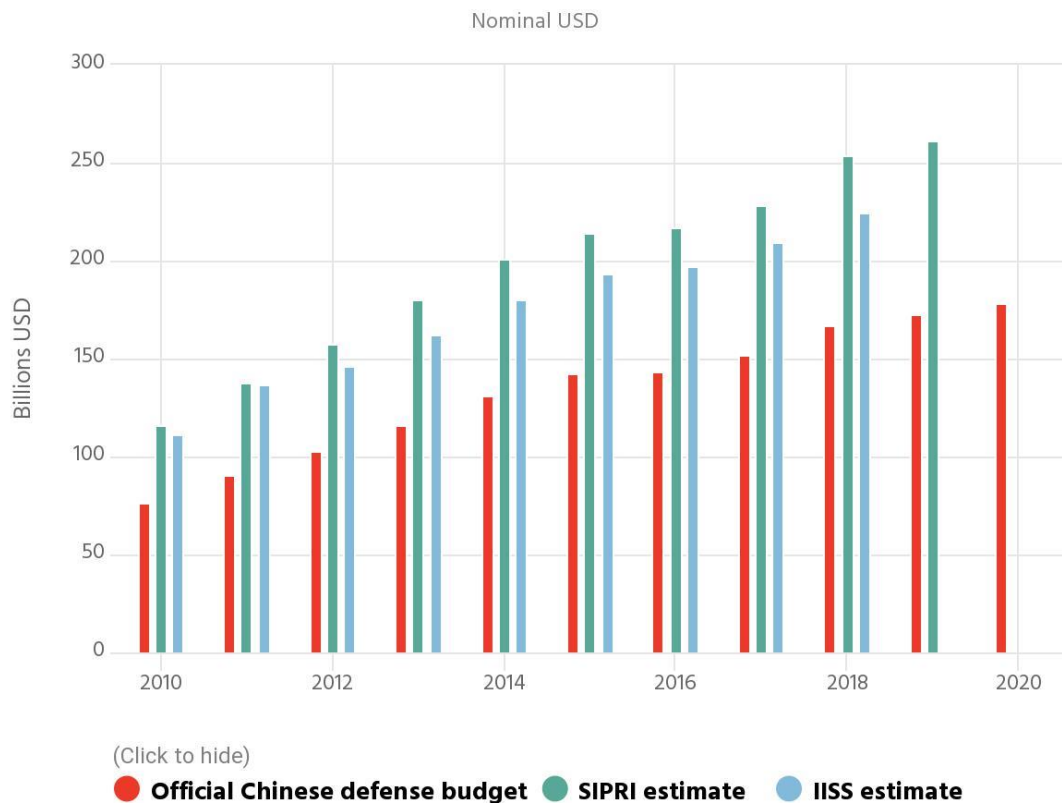
So far, China has already surpassed the US in these key areas: **A) Shipbuilding;** **B) Land-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles;** and **C) Integrated air defense systems** (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020). The modernizing Chinese military has already become an acute threat to the US national security and the existing international order contributed and

sustained by the hegemon and its Western allies, as the 2020 US Department of Defense (the DOD) report has explicitly concluded (ibid.). According to an up-to-date report from one of the major global media outlets, Aljazeera, congresswoman Elaine Luria, a conservative Democrat, said on Twitter on the 7th of December, 2021 that “*makes critical investments in our national defense, and takes important steps to counter the threat of a rising China*” (Harb, 2021). Ensuring sufficient financing and adequate strategic attention from the US leadership to mitigate and neutralize the mounting military threat posed by China has apparently become a bi-partisan agreement within the US political circle at the current moment. “*The threat that the Chinese military poses is not a distant threat; it’s not something that might happen in 2030, 2035 or sometime in the future,*” top Republican Senator, Jim Inhofe, said in April, 2021, warning against cuts of military expenditures by the Biden-Harris Administration. “*It’s a problem we face today. Right now. It only gets worse over time*” (ibid.).

In comparison, China’s annual military budget has been steadily increasing. The CSIS (Funaiole, 2021) indicated that China’s military budget in 2021 “*was set at 1.36 trillion yuan, a 6.8 percent increase from the 1.27 trillion-yuan budget set last year*”. Nikkei Asia (2024a) speculated that China’s military budget for (offensive) purposes would increase by 7.2% in 2024, despite financial stringency contributed by sluggish economic performance. It is true that China’s military spending has already become a focal point of scrutiny by the US intelligence community and national security agency because it is the single most important determinant to the quality, capacity, and potentiality of the Chinese military. However, China’s military spending is fairly moderate if we divide it by China’s massive national GDP. According to the statistics released by the World Bank (2019), China’s military budget ratio against its GDP was only 1.7% in 2020, significantly below the world average of 2.5%, while the US has spent 3.7% of its GDP on defense and security in the same year.

Nevertheless, arguments over China’s opaque military financing are both numerous and persistent and, noticeably, some are actually from rather legitimate and credible sources. Top US think-tanks like the CSIS estimated China’s real military spending should be around 1.5 times of the publicly released figure (see **Illustration Seven** below). For the sake of fairness, the same report has also pointed out that certain critical infrastructure-building projects, dual use (i.e. both military and civilian) technology research and development (the R&D) and supporting equipment manufacturing are often not included in the publicly available military budget in some circumstances. This practice exists in many countries, including the US itself and other major military powers, such as India (as an emerging major player in the Indo-Pacific Region with increasing ambition for status and bigger role).

Estimates of Chinese Defense Spending



CSIS China Power Project | Source: Various

(Illustration Seven: Estimates of Chinese Defense Spending. **Source:** the CSIS, 2020)

4.2.4. A brief case study of Taiwan as the most precarious “tinder-box” in Asia

The most plausible cause for China to resort to its intimidating military power against other parties, both sovereign and non-sovereign, (i.e. a major security concern conveyed by *The China Threat Theory*) in significant magnitude with the potential involvement of the US military in response is undoubtedly the *de facto* or even *de jure* independence of Taiwan (Newsham, 2023). In plain words, in the limited and foreseeable future, the only realistic and probable trigger of a “hot war” (reznhan: 热战) involving both the US military and the PLA is invariably Taiwan. This is exactly the reason why I intend to emphasize and reiterate the unsettled, chronic and precarious “Taiwan issue” (Taiwan wenti: 台湾问题) in a more explained fashion to demonstrate how it continuously breeds the highly suspected military threat China could possibly pose to others in a very brief case study.

If indeed a cross-strait war broke out as a (strategically unfavorable) solution to the intricate political deadlock between Taiwan and China over the period of decades, the US might not be able to guarantee a decisive and overwhelming victory against China due to the apparent fact that the Chinese military capacity-building in the region has largely neutralized the advantages of the US military arrangements and installations in the same area as mentioned previously. In addition to China’s impressive conventional military capacity, one should constantly bear in mind that, the country is also a major nuclear power only after the US and Russia (Macias, 2021). CNBC recently reported that “*The Pentagon said Wednesday (the third of November, 2021) that China is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal and could have 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030*” (ibid.).

A mutually destructive war involving the US and China could lead to unthinkable destruction and catastrophic consequences. The worst scenario conceivable is perhaps a horrifying realization of the so-called “*Mutually Assured Destruction*” (MAD), which is the nightmarish outcome of an all-out nuclear showdown among major nuclear powers. The paradoxical “*nuclear peace*” during and after the Cold War was an ultimate exemplification of mutual nuclear deterrence. The deadly consequences of nuclear warfare should outweigh the strategic value of a minor democratic existence of Taiwan according to a fair number of Realist military strategists and political professionals based in both the US and China (Ashford and Kroenig, 2021).

In plain words, the costs to fight China for the sake of Taiwan are extraordinarily high because: **A)** China’s nuclear deterrence and powerful conventional military force; and **B)** the conceivable objection from the American general public due to their fear of the US homeland being retaliated by, for example, the Chinese inter-continental missiles equipped with nuclear war-heads, if the conflict or even war got out of control and spread beyond the boundary of the region. Even the Taiwanese authority and its people do not seem to have 100% confidence with regard to the verbally agreed (multiple times by President Biden in public) yet non-obligatory (not formalized as a treaty) military protection offered by the hegemon.

Throughout the entire dossier of the newly passed Taiwan Policy Act of 2022, it has never mentioned the US bears the responsibility to defend Taiwan with its own military force when China strikes (The US Senate, 2022). Even though, the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022 has officially recognized the island as a “*major non-NATO ally*” of the US (ibid.), still, the Article 5 of NATO does not apply to Taiwan, technically and ironically. The US authority has repeatedly emphasized on the importance of military capacity-building and combat willingness on the part of Taiwan and a wide range of punitive measures the US could readily impose (at any moment) on China and its high-ranking political and military officials. In short, the US is resorting to the so-called “*integrated deterrence*” at the moment to avoid a full-blown hot war with China (Vergun, 2022). To set the record straight, the US has never definitively promised to fight against the PLA on the battlefield for the sake of Taiwan (ibid.) though.

The Biden-Harris Administration’s strong stance on Taiwan might boost the confidence and sense of security of the island to a certain extent. But, by doing that, Beijing is further provoked and irritated with depleting patience and prudence. As a deliberate demonstration of Beijing’s unbending will, China has been sending an increasing number of fighter jets at much higher frequency to intentionally trespass Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone (the ADIZ), starting in September, 2020.

After former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s whirlwind visit to Taiwan from the second of August to the third of August, 2022, China launched “*live-fire drills on six swaths of sea surrounding Taiwan*” (VOA News, 2022). Economic restrictions and punishments against Taiwan have also been harshly deployed (ibid.) to demonstrate Beijing’s immense rage and unshakable determination to defend its proudly declared “*territorial integrity and national dignity*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, 2024). Pelosi’s successor, the then House Speaker-Kevin McCarthy’s potential visit to Taiwan had induced fierce criticisms and severe protests from China. However, his popularity in Taiwan is far from negligible. Bloomberg reported that around half of Taiwanese support and anticipate his visit (Wilkins and Wan, 2023). Even though Speaker McCarthy’s much-anticipated visit to Taiwan did not eventually materialize, he and President Tsai still have met in person in Simi Valley, California on the 5th of April, 2023, which is hugely provocative and offensive from Beijing’s perspective.

Despite of the mounting hostilities between the US and China, the chance that the US is at war (especially of significant scale and magnitude) with China in the foreseeable future is literally very slim due to the infamous “*balance of terror*” (kongbu pingheng: 恐怖平衡), whether it is military or economic or financial or all of them combined. In this sense, arguably, the US military would not fight a full-blown hot war against China when these two superpowers are still very much intertwined, especially economically. The devastating destructions, in military and non-military forms, China could cause by ferociously attacking the hegemon in retaliation can deter the military involvement of the US in the Taiwan Strait. In other words, military threat and military capacity should not be assessed in isolation. Instead, the only way the optimal deterrence could be achieved by a nation-state is to combine its military might with economic power and soft influence, which is an important argument I shall revisit in the subsequent sections in multiple occasions.

At this point, the US and China are still tightly bonded with each other as the result of decades of international trade and economic integration on the part of China into the US-led global system. Even the most hawkish strategists have to admit the fact that artificial disentanglement with China might takes years to complete and there is a huge price tag attached to it. Before successful and thorough decoupling takes place, the US and China simply will have to tolerate each other, no matter how reluctantly on both sides, because the mutual dependency is simply too monumental to be discarded all at once by either party.

Therefore, from a realistic and pragmatic point of view, the US might have a better chance to overpower China in other alternative domains rather than on the actual battlefield fighting against the well-equipped and qualitatively transformed Chinese military for the sake of Taiwan. I believe the US military would remain strategic prudent yet highly alert. The speculated hot war across the Taiwan Strait is most likely to be triggered by political opportunism or even adventurism and strategic miscalculations on the parts of Taipei and Beijing, rather than a third-party balancer, which is the US, no doubt. The reason for this is simple and straightforward, namely a hot war involving Taiwan and China is literally at the expenses of the national interests of the hegemon as an underpinning force to provide collective security, as well as a guardian and stabilizer of the West-dominated *status quo* in a planetary scope.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that a military confrontation between Taiwan and China has been becoming increasingly probable due to: **A)** the strategic positioning of Taiwan by the current Taiwanese authority tends to be misplaced. I personally believe the strategic importance of Taiwan is indeed considerable, especially in terms of its world-leading semiconductor manufacturing and the geopolitical and geoeconomic location of the island. However, this does not mean the US would and could win a hot war against China without sustaining significant casualties and destructions to its military and even its homebase; and **B)** the assertiveness of the Xi-centered Chinese leadership is a product of the burning nationalism within the Chinese society and Xi’s own political and military ambition to take over Taiwan as another monumental achievement to be accomplished during his prolonged tenure. If Taiwan is conquered under his leadership, the he will forever be honored in the Hall of Fame of the CCP.

Yet, Taiwan is definitely not abandoned. The island does have quite a few sympathizers in the Western world and beyond, including the former British Hong Kong that has suffered a miserable democratic regression in the recent years. Military capacity-building (often a euphemism for arms race in reality) seems to be the best method to deter offensive attacks from happening to a large extent. It is generally true to both Taiwan (with US support) and China. The inconvenient truth for the Taiwanese authority is that the Taiwanese military is only one-tenth of the size of the PLA and, more disconcertingly, its equipment is either obsolete or poorly maintained (Taipei Times, 2022). But then again, the apparent

disadvantages of the Taiwanese military are not the point I try to make here since the tensions across the strait has always been a power struggle between the US and China, not between Taiwan and China, from the very beginning. Therefore, Taiwan's military dependency on the US has never been a coincidence, but by design.

To put things bluntly, Taiwan is not even a qualified player in the unfolding power game between the US and China as the asymmetrically smaller island often wishfully believes to be. To the best, Taiwan is a junior partner of the US. I tend to believe that Taiwan only serves as one of the instruments available within the US strategic toolbox to push China whenever it feels necessary. The “*Taiwan issue*” is often used to temporarily pressure China and cause political disturbances and strategic discomforts to distract or even penalize the Chinese political authority. The true strategic value of Taiwan and why the island has attracted so much attention from the US-led global West is rather simple and straightforward. The (semi-) segregated island literally has a tumultuous relation with China over decades. Playing the “*Taiwan card*” could upset Beijing's strategic planning from time to time and divide its attention and scarce strategic resources to focus on other important policy areas or domestic imperatives, for example.

Whether or not the horrifying scenario of a hot war will ever break out is not determined by military strengths and capacities alone. How much the hegemon is committed to its relationship with Taiwan; How much the hegemon is prepared to sacrifice in order to defeat the PLA for the sake of Taiwan; and what could be the ultimate justifications and motivations for the hegemon to engage in a highly destructive hot war with China in the Taiwan Strait and how the American general public would react to that? I believe a brief history might shed some light to clarify the situation.

The history between Taiwan and mainland China has never been agreeable and pleasant. The Taiwanese political authority has a long antagonistic and confrontational relationship with Beijing over the decades since the Kuomintang (guomindang: 国民党; the KMT in short) fled there in retreat in the October of 1949. The KMT has lost the 2016 election to the DPP in a landslide, which has indicated in a way that self-awareness and self-determination have swung back to the advantage of the pro-independence and anti-China (i.e. kangzhong baotai: 抗中保台) indigenous political party emerged within the Taiwanese society in 1986.

After witnessing the draconian political suppression on Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement by the Chinese central government, Taiwan has become even more fearful of the military taker-over by China and the endangered freedom and liberty under the undemocratic, Communist or Socialist political rule of the CCP. For better or for worse, Taiwan is often regarded as a significant victory of (Western style) democracy in the Chinese-speaking world. Its existence is sharply contrasted with the much larger and more powerful China (in terms of almost whatever indicators) with an inwardly oppressive and outwardly assertive authoritarian political regime in place.

Based on these facts, the only exploitable value of Taiwan to the US is unfortunately its rejection to unify with (mainland) China. In other words, Taiwan has little strategic value if it is irrelevant to China. Pathetically, in this very sense, China determines the strategic importance of Taiwan, not the other way around. Taiwan is an awkward “*de facto state*” with no legal and diplomatic recognition of statehood by the overwhelming majority of sovereignties in the international community. However, this piece of frustrating reality does not seem to deter Taiwan from trying harder than ever to gain recognition and seek support from the global West, especially after the recent downfall of Western-style governance in Hong Kong and the dysfunctional failure of the “*one country, two systems*” policy coined and popularized by Deng Xiaoping (邓小平).

Taiwan is the ultimate spokesperson of *The China Threat Theory* and the potential military aggression of the PLA. This tiny island has, unfortunately, been weaponized in the escalating power game between the US and China. Based on the accumulating empirical evidences, the future of Taiwan is far from optimistic (Schreer and Tan, 2020). The island is the ultimate cost-bearer in this extremely hazardous power game if, at the end of the day, war turns out to be the answer to settle decades of confrontation between Taipei and Beijing. Literally, Taiwan has almost nothing to gain but everything to lose in this highly unfavorable scenario.

There is a much-quoted anecdotal conversation Mao Zedong (毛泽东) had with Richard Nixon in 1972. Mao allegedly said that “*the world is a big thing, and Taiwan is a small thing*” (Wu, 2000). This statement is often interpreted as a realistic and pragmatic depiction of the tension across the Taiwan Strait in a global context. Nevertheless, this statement is not entirely true, especially considering the current political atmosphere. This tiny landmass is a dim democratic existence in the Chinese-speaking world that needs to be protected, guided and nurtured by the “*beacon of democracy* (minzhu dengta: 民主灯塔) (White, 2018)” in the Western world, i.e. the US. However, the possibility of an actual cross-strait warfare between Taiwan and China with the military intervention from the US has resoundingly revealed one thing for sure, that is, Taiwan has never been a small thing to begin with. It is especially the case if we seriously consider the strong determination of the US to defend and promote Western-style democracy in all parts of the world and the burning nationalism among Chinese patriots to passionately defend the territorial integrity of China (regardless of the actual legitimacy of the claims).

The confrontation between Taiwan and China with intimate involvement of the US is more precarious and potentially destructive than the, for example, proliferation of nuclear weaponry in the Korean Peninsula or the tension between New Delhi and Islamabad, simply due to the fact that the potential military engagement between the US and China in the same locality (i.e. in Taiwan and its immediate surrounding areas, not their homelands) is catastrophic beyond our wildest imagination in whatever senses.

The highly sensitive “*Taiwan issue*” is a euphemism referring to the monumental “*incomplete national sovereignty* (zhuquan queshi: 主权缺失)” from China’s perspective. The outstanding “*Taiwan issue*” literally occupies one of the top strategic priorities defined and determined by the Chinese political leadership because this intricate issue itself is a symbolism of China’s strong national pride and collective sense of dignity. Precisely due to its symbolic importance, Taiwan is well capable of igniting a devastating warfare of considerable magnitude among the US (if the hegemon keeps its promise to defend the democratic Taiwan with directly military engagement), China and itself. Regional instability could soon follow if the shock-waves of the warfare spread wider and further over time. It is no exaggeration to say that Taiwan is “*the weakest and most dangerous link*” of the geopolitical security chain in East Asia (Rosecrance and Gu, 2009).

If China fights for pride and dignity as mentioned above, then the US fights for ideologies and values over Taiwan. The US intends to preserve Taiwan as a democratic spark within the Chinese-speaking world because the authoritarian China is obviously a real and acute threat to the global alliance of democracies according to its hegemonic logic (Gokhale, 2021; Hewitt, 2021). Over the years, China has demonstrated exceptionally strong conviction to hold onto its “*undemocratic*” or even “*anti-democratic*” political system. The country is also known to have almost no tolerance to foreign interference on sensitive issues related to national sovereignty and territorial integrity (Trampedach, 2001; VOA, 2021).

China’s bottom-line is very much out there. China can and will resort to the deployment of the PLA to successfully unify with Taiwan by force, if situation necessitates, as the

controversial “*Anti-secession Law* (fanfenlie guojiafa: 反分裂国家法)” enacted and enforced in early 2005 has definitively outlined (Cody, 2005). From a more critical point of view, the battle over Taiwan is not all about geopolitics, geoeconomics and strategic game, but also about competing ideologies and values that still divide the world we inhabit in to this very day.

4.2.5. The economic power of China

In comparison with the military domain, the economic domain involves a much greater number of actors, entities and a whole range of very complex and complicated factors within and across its systemic boundaries. Yet, it is comparably more transparent to the general public and more relevant to the life and livelihood of ordinary people. As one of the two forms of “*hard power*”, the economic domain is deeply intertwined with the military apparatus. The infamous “*military-industrial complex* (junshi gongye fuheti: 军事工业复合体)” did not emerge out of the thin air, as many political economists have long agreed upon (Pavelec, 2010). It is a rather natural alliance formed between the two forms of hard power to leverage and support each other (ibid.) The powerful presence of the “*military-industrial complex*” has been extensively observed all over the world, especially among the major powers.

The economic domain plays a number of critical roles within the framework of a sovereign state at the same time, such as providing the source of finance to both the military capacity-building and “*soft power*” cultivation; serving as a piece of strategic instrument to back-up foreign policies and exert influences internationally; and stabilizing and consolidating internal sovereignty through the provision of sufficient employment and adequate social security benefits etc. Therefore, a healthy, productive and competitive national economy is a necessary condition (albeit not sufficient condition) to underpin a truly powerful nation-state.

The immense strategic importance of the national economy makes it an exceptionally popular subject of research. Researches regarding the Chinese economy, such as its structural flaws and long-term sustainability, are numerous and divergent in terms of their conclusions. Some of them even contradict sharply with others. Competing economic ideas, theories and policy proposals have been driving the hybrid discipline of political economy into all adventurous directions and they tend to fuel endless arguments and debates among political economists. For the sake of conciseness and clarity, this subsection only presents some carefully selected phenomena and issues to highlight the bright side and the dark side of the colossal and transforming Chinese economy and its impacts and connotations to the rest of the world.

4.2.6. China’s growing economy and the strategic leverage derived from it

Once again, the spectacular rise of China (esp. in terms of its economic weight and market size) and the country’s ability to project influence across the globe by the relentless usage of economic instruments have revived *The China Threat Theory*. According to empirical observations, it seems that more power China gains, more people are convinced by *The China Threat Theory* (Global Media Journal, 2021). This is literally a “*slippery slope*” to be recognized and reflected upon because there is a detectable moral quality to this proposition in addition to a political one, namely China is morally irresponsible and untrustworthy. The country is likely to abuse the tremendous economic power and leverage it has acquired to further enrich itself at the expenses of other members of the international community. Whether or not China is morally righteous as a rising superpower and how China would utilize the tremendous economic power and leverage it possesses to serve whatever purposes are always under the meticulous scrutiny of the believers of *The China Threat Theory*.

Political commentators suggested that the most disturbing fact to the anxious global West is probably the reality that the relative rise of China implies the relative decline of the hegemon

(so too other Western great powers). Empirical evidences have straightforwardly pointed out that “*the rapid rise in China’s incomes over the last three decades is threatening that relative position, reshaping the distribution of consumption, energy flows, trade, investment, travel, and military spending*” (Kemp, 2020). The rise of China requires “*status recognition*” (Groten, 2019) and “*institutional accommodation*” (Paul, 2016), meaning the current establishment of global political economy might have already become outdated and needs significant revisions, from the distribution and consumption of critical resources to the global division of specializations to the international trade regimes and policies. It is especially the case from the perspective of the Chinese political leadership.

4.2.7. The “market economy with Chinese characteristics”

The Chinese political leadership formally claims that China is a “*socialist market economy* (shehuizhuyi shichangjingji: 社会主义市场经济)”. One article published by the website of Forbes in July of 2019 has adopted a rather sarcastic title: “*China’s Economic Success Proves the Power of Capitalism*”, which has bluntly revealed the comprehensive agreement among Chinese economists and government officials that “*market mechanism* (shichang jizhi: 市场机制)” is an objective economic principle. It has been scientifically proved to be true and valid by numerous theoretical and practical tests, over and over again, across very different economies and societies in all parts of the world, including China.

China used to reject the idea of “*market mechanism*” simply because it is central to the prevailing Western Capitalism. Clearly, China has long learned its bitter lessons in the past with an utterly inefficient and under-productive command economy from 1949 to the end of 1978 (The World Bank, n.d.). However, China is still not widely recognized as a true market economy and the openness of the Chinese markets tends to be incomplete and conditional (especially to foreign businesses and in certain state-monopolized industries). Nevertheless, China has already become an integrated part of the interconnected and interdependent global economy, after four decades of economic reform and opening-up since the late 1970s. Despite China’s huge economic success, one should recognize the fact that China’s economic integration (through whatever methods and forms) into the world economy has never been perfectly smooth and cost-free. Within the institutional framework of the WTO, China is a frequently sued member and China sues other members a lot too, notably the US and the EU (Gao, 2021). In addition, China’s alleged encroachment and manipulation of the institutional integrity and governance of the WTO over the years has also raised extensive concern and alert in the Western world (Schlesinger, 2017).

The fierce debates over the true nature of the so-called “*market economy with Chinese characteristics* (shehuizhuyi tese shichangjingji: 社会主义特色市场经济)” and China’s idiosyncratic economic governance are commonplace in the literature. The trading relationships (regardless being good, bad or ugly) between China and its growing number of trading partners from all parts of the world are also under the scrutiny of both academic and non-academic attention. The particularities of the Chinese economy are often regarded as incompatible with the so-called rule-based, liberal and capitalist norm and order established by advanced Western economies. Therefore, these distinctive and controversial Chinese characteristics tend to fuel *The China Threat Theory* because the Chinese economy is conspicuously marked by its non-market qualities and interventionist propensities. Nevertheless, the Chinese economy has been thriving in the past four decades despite persistent skepticism and cynicism from the dominant global West. The “*Chinese model*” or “*China Model*” (zhongguo moshi: 中国模式) is indeed an alternative, if not a competing (not to mention replacing), model to the mainstream Western model as the “*Beijing Consensus* (Beijing gongshi: 北京共识)” has proudly declared, well more than a decade ago (Halper, 2012).

4.2.8. The “China Model” of state-led development and modernization

The one-of-a-kind “*China Model*” is certainly innovative with its distinguishing features, but not entirely original. It is deeply inspired by eclectic successful foreign experiences, especially the well-known East Asian developmental states in China’s immediate neighborhood, such as Singapore and South Korea (Xia, 2017). The Chinese political authority has officially recognized the merits of market mechanism to better allocate resources and organize economic activities more efficiently and productively (Brink, 2019) and endorsed (gradual and incremental) marketization ever since the late 1970s. This was an extraordinary strategic move on the part of the Chinese political leadership because the market is undoubtedly the economic core of capitalism rather than socialism. Some defining elements of the capitalist market economy have been tentatively and selectively introduced into China’s own indigenous economic system by the Chinese political leadership to encourage economic growth and boost productivity.

Theorists tend to agree that two of the most striking features of the “*China Model*” are: **A**) its state-centrism; and **B**) its inherently ambiguous nature in terms of how it is put into practice and make it work productively in real-life situations. The Chinese government (or the will of the Chinese power-holders) plays a decisive and overarching role to guide economic activities, often through the deployment of financial instruments, such as access to sizable loan at much lower interest rate, generous provision of subsidies and/or tax waiver to (re-) shape the economic landscape.

One should also bear in mind that the well-established financial institutions and formal banking industries (not the so-called “*shadow banking industries*” hidden deep into the private capital markets) in China are dominated by the Chinese state due to political deliberation. These financial institutions and organizations play critical roles in nation-wide development and modernization and they implement financial policies from the Chinese central bank and, ultimately, the Chinese central government with utmost obedience and loyalty.

Therefore, from a fundamentalist perspective, the “*China Model*” is indeed a hybrid economic system with yet to complete transformation and improvement. It has a political core situated in an economic shell by design. The “*China Model*” combines the elements from both the Western-style market economy and the state-dominated, (semi-) planned economy and it is highly susceptible to significant changes of state policies and shifting political strategies. Even the shared attitudes and mindsets of the core members of the political leadership in power (what I refer as the human factors) matter considerably.

Precisely due to these striking particularities of the “*China Model*”, China still has not yet been recognized as a genuine market economy to this day by many mainstream political economists worldwide. “*Should China be classified as a non-market economy (the NME)?*” has always been a hotly debated question within the framework of the WTO. Major economies based in the global West seem to have a general consensus in this case. China is not an authentic market economy due to the heavy interventions from the Chinese state to directly and indirectly influence economic activities and compromise the ability of the autonomous market to set price.

However, a number of well-established China specialists, such as Nicholas Lardy (Griswold and Parks, 2019), claim that “*It’s more accurate to think of [China] as a market economy. The role of the state has diminished dramatically from where it was 20 to 30 years ago.*” A fairer and more balanced view in this regard should be: there is a whole spectrum of economies dispersed between the two opposite ends of market economy and centrally-planned economy. Pure market economy is almost non-existent in reality these days and the labeling is only a matter of degree.

Unsurprisingly, the US Department of Commerce (meiguoshangwubu: 美国商务部) currently labels 11 countries as NMEs, including China, and it has officially removed Russia from the category of NMEs to the category of MEs in 2002 (Tavernise, 2002). At the time, the listing and de-listing did not seem to be a pure political action because both China and Russia are the major adversaries of the US. There was a certain level of objectivity in it. However, things have changed dramatically since Donald Trump became the president in 2016. Politicization of economic activities and trade relationships by the former Trump-Pence Administration and the current Biden-Harris Administration have fundamentally reshaped the landscape of global economy as Neo-liberalism has once proudly defined and commended.

On the 10th of November, 2022, the US Department of Commerce (2022) has officially revoked Russia's market economy status. It has specifically stated that Russia's non-market operations and activities have violated the widely consented, liberal market principles blatantly, especially "*since the invasion of Ukraine*" (ibid.). Although, there are might be some evidences to support this decision. But clearly, the precise timing of this decision reveals the fact that it could be another instrument to further isolate and exclude Russia from the West-dominated, globalized economic system as a punishment to its military aggression against another sovereignty. Indeed, this is also one of a series of strategic moves on the part of the US to drive (albeit not intentionally) the rapprochement between China and Russia even further and more solidified.

To some extent, China's diligent efforts to build a more efficient and productive economic system according to the widely accepted, market principles are not fully recognized by the US. China's strong determination and commitment to continue to participate in global trade and cross-border economic activities are actually motivated by its ambition to become a full-fledged economic superpower that could rival the US and other Western major powers (Doshi, 2021a). It is literally to China's own best interests to leave the door open and adopt, albeit conditionally, internationally recognized principles and practices of economic governance and development. As a rising economic powerhouse, China has been spreading and projecting its national influences in all parts of the world through trade, investment, business collaboration and infrastructure building etc. Ideally, China is expected to play by the well-established norms and rules that are consented by the mainstream of the international community, especially in the developed parts of the world where the legal systems are highly developed and rules are effectively implemented. However, unfortunately, this is not always the case.

Even though the unprecedented reforms have introduced the market mechanism into the Chinese economic system, the Chinese state has never really retreated from the economic domain completely and the possibility for that to happen both now and in the foreseeable future is literally very slim. Even though, objectively, market mechanism has successfully transformed the Chinese economy and freed it from the rigid (economic) dictation of the political authorities. However, the will of the Chinese political leadership still firmly controls the direction in which the "*Chinese economic express*" is heading (Denoon, 2017).

The most particular feature of the "*China Model*" is the fact that the Chinese economy does tolerate the coexistence of market mechanism and non-market intervention (especially from the governments and their regulatory derivatives at various levels). This characteristic has definitively differentiated the Chinese economy from the Western liberal capitalist economies. It is also a major focal point of debates over the true nature (socialist or capitalist or both or neither) of the "*China Model*" and how to fit the rising giant into the transforming global political-economic system through mutual adaptation and voluntary reconciliation. Some speculative arguments along the line have inevitably touched on that, especially the assertion that the "*China Model*" poses substantial threats to liberal democratic economies

(Han and Thayer, 2022), such as exporting both morally and legally questionable economic practices far and wide across the globe (Ngangjoh-Hodu and Zhang, 2016).

4.2.9. The idiosyncratic “China Model” and its ambivalent future ahead

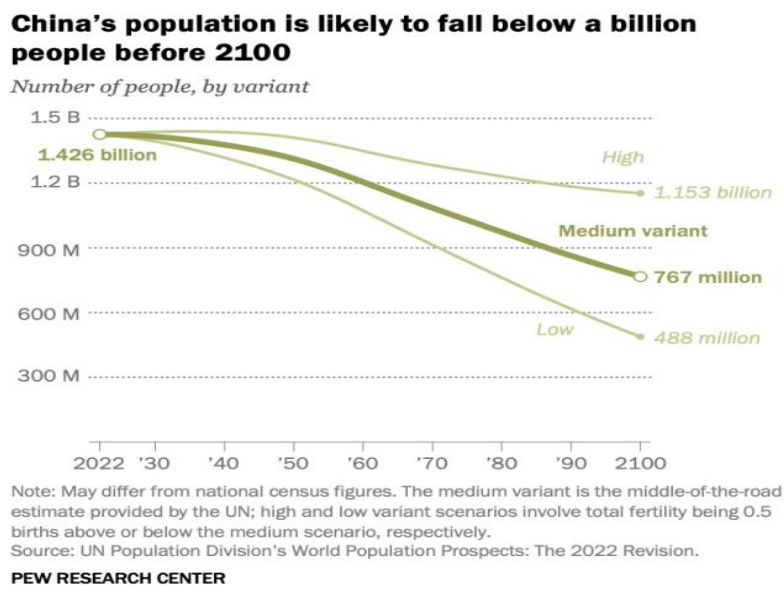
Many agree that becoming a true global superpower requires ambition, time and appropriate strategies. China has been on the right track since the reforms led by Deng Xiaoping in the late 70s (Shambaugh, 2016b). The future outlook of China depends crucially on the continuous success of the deepening socioeconomic reforms within the country (ibid.). China’s economic success does defy some of the enshrined principles according to the mainstream Western experiences (Leng and Wu, 2014), such as mixing market mechanisms with heavy state interventions (Zheng and Huang, 2018), *de facto* tolerance to administrative corruption (Kubbe and Engelbert, 2019) and weak rule of law (Tsai, 2007), etc.

However, to be fair, these obvious particularities and irregularities associated with the enthusiastically debated “*China Model*” are in fact integrated parts of the long-standing Chinese exceptionalism (Guo and Li, 2012). They do appear to be a bundle of interconnected and interrelated deviations from the standardized and universalized Western model of governance and development. However, from a more critical point of view, I theorize that they should be regarded as the products of institutional adaptations because contextual variations from state to state do make the attempted transplantation of successful foreign experiences into an indigenous environment much less effective than many would assume.

4.2.10. The Achilles’ heel of the “China Model”: from quantity (scale) to quality (value creation)

The greatest achievement of the “*China Model*” so far is the undeniable fact that tens of millions of Chinese have been pulled out of poverty, especially extreme poverty, within a fairly short period of time. The UN has fully recognized China’s endeavors dedicated in poverty reduction. According to a very recent report from China Daily (2021), the “*United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has congratulated China on its success in eliminating extreme poverty in rural areas, and he said the notable accomplishment is a significant contribution to realizing a better and more prosperous world as envisioned by the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*”.

Despite the tremendous achievements so far, the vulnerabilities and uncertainties associated with the mesmerizing “*China Model*” hint the long-term limitations of the model itself (Ikenberry, Mastanduno and Wohlforth, 2011). First and foremost, China’s long-enjoyed, demographic dividend has been disappearing over time. The potential demographic decline over the long run is both significant and challenging (see **Illustration Eight** below). If the net gain of productivity *per capita* does not catch up with the rate of depopulation (of working-age people), the size of the overall Chinese economy is almost certain to shrink as time goes by.



(**Illustration Eight:** China's potential demographic decline before 2100; **Source:** Pew Research Center)

Second, Chinese labor used to be cheap, well-disciplined and over-abundant in the not-so-distant past, which has been one of the most explainable reasons why China has been able to continuously attract massive foreign investment since the economic opening-up in the late 1970s (Chow, 2015). But now, Chinese labor has become significantly more expensive and more aware of their legitimate rights and interests (ibid.). The recent worker protest in Foxconn's iPhone plant in Zhengzhou (郑州), Henan Province (河南省) is a perfect example of the visibly more violent outburst of worker movement in China due to the once-a-century public health crisis that has been proven to be hardly preventable and socially instigative by mishandled, draconian quarantine and lockdown (Goh and Lee, 2022).

At the current stage, climbing the global economic ladder seems to be the only viable option for the much anticipated "*industrial upgrading* (chanye shengji: 产业升级)" of the Chinese economy (Jeffries, 2011). The deliberately downplayed "*Made in China 2025*" plan has strongly suggested this strategic avenue China has been embarking on over the recent years, notably after its eventual accession into the WTO in 2001. Some economists believe this is a decisive qualitative transformation of the Chinese economy from lower-end complementarities to higher-end competitions (Lau, 2019), which is an ambitious strategic move led by the Chinese political leadership to methodically cultivate the competitive advantages needed to sustain long-term economic success and prosperity.

Despite the hugely impressive track record of the "*China Model*" in the past a few decades, many political economists believe that the "*China Model*" suffers from a fatal flaw. The model shows various signs that it is not likely to be sustainable, which means it does not guarantee future success (Freeman, 2016). According the up-to-date reports published by the Foreign Policy In Focus (the FPIF) (2021) and Lowy Institute (Kassam, 2020), the most problematic vulnerabilities associated with the "*China Model*" are as follow: **A)** overcapacity and over reliance on external demand rather than internal demand or, in other words, being export-oriented rather than being driven by domestic consumption; **B)** financial under-performance, speculative bubbles and accumulating governmental debts with low or even no

reimbursability (especially at local level across the Chinese jurisdiction); **C**) soaring (economic) inequality among competing social strata and uneven distribution of critical resources within the Chinese society; and **D**) serious and disconcerting environmental degradation or even crisis.

Therefore, this pronounced defect in plain sight is often referred as the Achilles' heel of the "*China Model*", namely the economic non-sustainability that manifests in almost all sectors of the entire Chinese economy. Non-sustainability is literally the weakest and most vulnerable spot of the gigantic Chinese economy and it should be cautiously safeguarded in the short term and, eventually, be effectively corrected and overcome by the utmost strategic endeavors in the anticipated future. From a comparative perspective, if the Japanese economy could have remained in an afflicting stagnation for the past three decades after a golden period of high economic growth, similar situation would happen to China too, even though, the contributory causes might not be exactly the same (Auslin, 2017). In other words, impressive track record in the past does not necessarily warrant future success, technically. It is not a secret that the Chinese economy has been landing and some believe it to be a hard landing, if not crash landing (Biswas, 2016).

The momentum of China's booming economic growth has been gradually slowing down over time. This is an inescapable economic regularity for literally all economies on Earth. Nevertheless, the US still seems to be reluctant to let down its guard. The former Trump-Pence Administration did not even bother concealing its strategic intention to aggressively contain the rising China through a full range of unusually tough measures. After a turbulent and scandalous power transition in 2020 from the aggressive Trump-Pence Administration to the adventurous Biden-Harris Administration with distinctively different leadership styles, China remains to be prudent yet vigilant because: **A**) the country is still not powerful enough to fundamentally challenge the dominant status of the pan-Western camp led by the US; and **B**) the domestic imperatives for political stability and socioeconomic progression are constantly strong (Economy, 2004), which increase the weight of potential opportunity costs as the result of unnecessary provocations to external retaliatory entities and forces.

4.2.11. The (semi-) enclosed Chinese financial sector and banking industry

I want to briefly mention that the one-of-a-kind Chinese financial sector and banking industry that are also frequently referred as the "*Achilles' heel*" of the Chinese economy by mainstream political economists (Das, 2008). The Xi administration is highly alert about the potential financial risks and insecurities hidden in the state-dominated, Chinese financial sector and banking industry. Financial security is one of the top strategic priorities for the Chinese political leadership due the fact that it has the unarguable ability to trigger devastating economic crisis and thus, subsequent political upheaval.

Tragic historical lessons, such as the Asian financial crises in the late 1990s and the global financial meltdown triggered by subprime mortgage crisis in the US in 2008-2009, have proved again and again that how incredibly important financial security is to all economies regardless of their weight, sophistication and composition. Up till the present moment, the Chinese financial market offers very limited opportunities for foreign capitals to speculate and make profits. Speculative financial activities (such as the "*hot money*" bubbles) from foreign investors (especially the so-called the "*financial high-rollers*") are air-tightly prevented by the authority. The Chinese financial sector is a highly enclosed, mysteriously opaque and heavily regulated system that is under extremely strict monitoring and methodical direction of the Chinese Central Bank (yanghang: 央行) and, ultimately, the Chinese political authority.

Despite being properly shielded and carefully protected by the state, a large number of political economists do acknowledge and criticize the fact that it is increasingly difficult for

the Chinese political authority to artificially segregate the Chinese financial sector and banking industry from external impacts, if not completely unrealistic and unattainable, especially with the advent of sophisticated Fintech (Dollar and Huang, 2022). Therefore, it is worth pointing out the fact that China's self-proclaimed "*comprehensive opening-up*" could indeed be selective and conditional with regard to certain sensitive aspects of the domestic economic system. Exceptions do exist and persist. It depends crucially on the mindsets of the core leadership in power as well as its strategic planning, trade-offs and calculations. One should never take the "*deepening reform and opening-up* (shenhua gaige kaifang: 深化改革开放)" rhetoric for granted without a healthy dose of skepticism.

4.2.12. Using non-economic justifications to shut down foreign businesses

The former Trump-Pence Administration and the current Biden-Harris Administration are both determined to banish state-backed, Chinese Multinational Corporations (the MNCs) from the US market due to their strong national security concerns. After forcing Huawei to retreat from the US market and compelling Tik Tok to separate from its parent company, Bytedance, based in Beijing, China protested publicly and furiously that the alleged "*national security*" (guojia anquan: 国家安全), as an almost irrefutable justification, is seriously abused by the US political leadership to arbitrarily and unfairly banish Chinese MNCs out of the lucrative US single market in order to favor and protect the interests of the American businesses.

However, ironically, China has done exactly the same thing to the American MNCs in the past. The eviction of Google from mainland China in 2010 (Chafkin, 2021) due to obscure, non-economic reasons (such as the alleged "*spiritual poisoning* (jingsheng duhai: 精神毒害)" to the impressionable Chinese youth caused by offering unrestricted access to pornographic contents; perhaps, more importantly, Google's unwillingness to cooperate with the Chinese authority by giving its consent to the heavy internet surveillance and strict digital censorship in China has eventually sealed its fate) should also ring a bell for all of us. Facebook and Twitter are also banned in China for conspicuously non-economic reasons (ibid.). Using state authority to shut down foreign businesses by both the US and Chinese authorities due to non-economic, but politically-motivated, considerations has violated their self-proclaimed commitment to fair global competition. It has long been concluded that politics and economics represent the two contrasting faces of the same coin. They both serve as means and ends to each other, meaning, the economic means could be manipulated to achieve political ends and *vice versa*.

Like all great powers, China has its own version of the infamous "*military-industrial complex*". It is often referred as "*军民融合* (Junmin ronghe: *civil-military fusion*)" in the formal Chinese political discourse. This strategic approach allows new, innovative and cutting-edge technologies to be transferred from the civilian domain into military applications or the other way around much smoother and more efficient. Huawei and Tik Tok, as two high-profile cases with extensive media coverage, have fallen victims to the willful determination of the US authority to preclude any valuable and sensitive information and technologies from falling into the hands of the Chinese government and, eventually, the Chinese military. Chinese businesses, especially the so-called "*tech-giants*", were black-listed and even penalized by foreign authority, not entirely because they are more commercially competitive or successful than their foreign competitors as many pro-China commentators speculated, but due to the strong support and assistance they have received from the Chinese state and the intimate connections they might possibly have with the Chinese military.

4.2.13. The enormous size of the Chinese markets combined and their inherent heterogeneous quality

The first and foremost source of China's economic power is the enormous size of the Chinese markets combined. According to longitudinally documented evidences (Macrotrends, 2023), "*China's GNI for 2021 was around \$16.79 Trillion, a 13.08% increase from 2020*". CEIC Data (2023) has estimated that China's GNP was around 17.79 trillion USD in 2022, which revealed that a much-anticipated, dramatic bouncing-back might be difficult to be realized for the visibly more sluggish Chinese economy. In short, the Chinese economy is showing visible signs of irreversible deterioration. This economic powerhouse might be losing its momentum and charms much quicker than many would realize.

However, before the external decoupling and the pandemic hit China, the World Bank (2015) formally and concisely summarizes China's stunning economic achievement in the last four decades on its official website as follow: "*Since China began to open up and reform its economy in 1978, GDP growth has averaged almost 10 percent a year, and more than 850 million people have been lifted out of poverty. Today, China is an upper-middle-income country and the world's second largest economy.*" Apparently, China has been getting richer over time. Poverty has been greatly reduced as the direct result of the economic taking-off and extreme poverty has almost been eliminated in the country. As the China Power Project conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (2020) has accurately reported, "*Decades of rapid economic growth in China helped to lift 748.5 million people out of extreme poverty, dropping the country's poverty rate from 66.3 percent to just 0.3 percent*".

This impressive economic achievement alone has built a foundation of the emerging Chinese markets. Their huge consumption potentials (at least in terms of scale and the budding willingness and financial capacity of the Chinese consumers to spend on commodities and services and invest in a limited variety of financial products available to them) are enhanced by improving domestic aggregate demand. Despite the positive signs, the national saving rates in China remain at a considerably higher level due to low confidence in prospective financial security, especially after retirement with possible medical conditions as the result of aging or even super-aging.

According to the up-to-date statistics released by the World Bank, "*Gross savings (% of GDP) in China was reported at 44.89 % in 2021, according to the World Bank collection of development indicators, compiled from officially recognized sources.*" (The World Bank cited by Tradegeconomics.com, 2023) due to the fear of uncertainties (i.e., weak consumer confidence in the economic prospect) and the lack of well-supported social security system (i.e., concerns over long-term financial security, especially with fixed income and inflation). These critical factors could significantly hold back China's domestic consumption at individual and household level and jeopardize the health of the enthusiastically promoted "*internal circulation* (neixunhuan: 内循环)" by the Xi Administration at national level. Nevertheless, the Chinese markets are still very lucrative and highly attractive to businesses around the world simply due to the combined purchasing power of the 1.4 billion consumers and consumers-to-be in China. Even the slightest slice of the Chinese markets, i.e., occupying a niche, could generate enormous profits for businesses, both domestic and international.

According to the estimations calculated by "*The Blue Book of China's Society, released on Dec. 21 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), indicated that in 2019 the total retail sales of consumer goods in China reached 41.2 trillion yuan (about \$6.3 trillion), leading China to become the world's largest consumer market in physical goods* (People's Net, 2020)". The huge potentials of the emerging Chinese markets constantly entice producers and investors from both inside and outside of China to tap on the opulent amount of revenue and profit generated by the steadily growing Chinese consumer markets. It deserves to be mentioned here that many market study specialists tend to regard the so-called "*Chinese single market* (zhongguo

danyi shichang: 中国单一市场)” more as a myth rather than a fact. The self-evident heterogeneity and the existence of various regulatory barriers (of whatever types and in whatever forms) across the Chinese markets differentiate it from the genuinely integrated US single market and the European single market (ouzhou danyi shichang: 欧洲单一市场). The latter has been created in 1996 through market unification and complete barrier removal among its 28 member states at the time (before the Brexit referendum).

According to the official website of the European Commission, “*the single market refers to the EU as one territory without any internal borders or other regulatory obstacles to the free movement of goods and services*”. In comparison, the complexity to navigate the Chinese markets increases in this very case. China’s market power is sub-divided and thus, deluded as a result of that. Therefore, China’s seemingly immense economic power derived from its enormous domestic markets combined should be discounted to a certain extent and the internal unevenness and institutional barriers of the Chinese domestic markets should also be seriously considered when evaluating China’s true economic capacity and influence.

However, the sheer size of the Chinese markets combined is gigantic by any standard. According to a 200-page, economic forecast published by Morgan Stanley, “*By 2030, China’s private consumption is set to reach \$12.7 trillion, about the same amount that American consumers currently spend*” (CNBC, 2021). The exploding market power China enjoys is literally staggering to both its admirers and competitors. This actually gives the Chinese political authority a huge amount of bargaining power. It can also be readily utilized as a piece of punitive and intrusive economic weaponry by China whenever engaging in power struggles with other economies and sovereignties. This is precisely the reason why the economic development of China at lightning speed is so alerting and disconcerting to the US-led global West because China exhibits apparent awareness and determination to (strategically and forcefully) tap on this economic source of hard power and leverage it to attack and punish daring challengers to the political will of the Chinese authority.

In the subsequent subsection, I shall elaborate on this point further by using a very recent case of the bitter and controversial “*China-Australia trade war*” between two conspicuously asymmetrical trading partners. This case can help to reveal how and why China has chosen to severely sanction Australia through the arbitrary utilization of economic coercion in order to make a loud and clear political point to the rest of the world.

4.2.14. The “trade war” between Australia and China: a case of economic coercion.

The recent trade conflicts between China and Australia are a typical example of the so-called “*geo-economic tensions*” when economic relationships entangled with political divergencies (Hurst, 2021). Unsurprisingly, the most accused perpetrators of arbitrary and politically motivated, trade war are the US (especially during the aggressive, ultra-unilateral and opportunist Trump-Pence Administration from 2016 to 2020) and China (ibid.). Using asymmetrical economic dependence as a piece of weaponry to coerce other sovereignties (often to serve intended “*political purposes*”) is not exactly a new technique or phenomenon. Hirschman's early book, *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade*, has insightfully revealed this intriguing subject of political economy. His work remains to be relevant and important to understand today’s highly globalized political economy (Wagner, 1988).

A series of unusually tough economic sanctions launched by China against Australian exports were a retaliation for Australia’s “*fair share of blunders*” according to Shiro Armstrong, who is the Director of the East Asian Bureau of Economic Research at the Australian National University (the ANU in short). He has explicitly pointed out in his recent online commentary regarding the harsh restrictions China has imposed on Australian exports that “*Calling for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 ahead of any multilateral initiative looked like an assault on sovereignty from Beijing. Blocking yet another Chinese investment — from buying a*

Japanese dairy operation in Australia — on security grounds was another gratuitous affront to the Chinese” (Armstrong, 2020). These embarrassing and disrespectful remarks on China from Australia and the restrictive measures imposed on Chinese businesses by the Australian authority are believed to be the true causes of China’s retaliatory economic coercion later on (ibid.).

The trade war between Australia and China (although in a far smaller scale than that between the US and China) did demonstrate, unfortunately, the “*tit-for-tat*” nature of international trade and global political economy in the real-life world. The so-called “*free trade* (ziyou maoyi: 自由貿易)” across national borders without major frictions has always been an almost mythical economic wonder that we rarely glimpse, if ever. The politicization of economic activities, especially international trade, is trending at this point in the international community. The leaders of this trend are undoubtedly the US and China, the world’s two largest economies with huge domestic market capacity. To put it bluntly, smaller yet open economies, such as in the case of Australia, often fall into victims of the deliberate abuse of market power by their disproportionately larger trading partners.

Smaller liberal (in terms of the openness and, thus, the susceptibility to external conditions and factors) economies do not seem to have sufficient leverage to bargain (at least to make a point or exhibit a gesture), negotiate, appeal and defend themselves, even within the well-established framework of the WTO. Larger and more powerful economies have the obvious propensity to override the rules and regulations embedded in the global political-economic establishment partially due to the insufficient conflict-solving capacities of these rules and regulations in the first place. Paradoxically, being a rule-maker and a rule-breaker (by making all sorts of exceptions for itself) at the same time so as to take advantage of emerging opportunities and evade costs and negative consequences is the *de facto* idealism for commanding and calculative state actors.

The US has set a very negative example to the rest of the world under the chaotic leadership of the former President Donald Trump, especially in terms of its recklessly arbitrary and ultra-unilateral trade policies and tactics. Understandably, China has quickly learned to do the same towards whomever it can overpower and subjugate. Blatant violations of the rules and norms established by the existing global trade regime signaled further degradation of the deficient, fragile and dysfunctional/ malfunctioning governing institutions of global economy. Rather than being deemed as morally inappropriate and accusable, the so-called trade aggression is in fact an embodiment of the privilege and prerogative entitled by the incomparable power of a global economic supernova.

However, I want to point out that using economic sanction to pressure Australia might not be as effective and costless as the Chinese authority anticipated. The following three points should be thoughtfully considered on both sides of a trading relationship:

A) *the dependence is based on rigid demand with few viable substitutes.* China’s demand for Australian agricultural, forestry and fisheries products (mostly edible aquatics) could be easily substituted by other trading partners, even though the Australian exports are of premium quality. The demand itself is not vital and urgent in normal circumstances. However, China’s demand for iron ore and coal is entirely a different story. China’s massive steel industry and its appetite for ever more energy (especially in the form of electricity generated by coal-burning power plants) would put the country in an unexpectedly disadvantageous position if the trading relationship went sour.

B) *alternative sources are unreliable, more costly or inferior in terms of the quality of the supply.* China’s high demand for iron ore and coal can hardly be substituted by other trading partners due to the high quality and low residual contamination of the Australian exports; Up-to-date

statistics has revealed that “Australia still remains by far the top source of iron ore for China, with a 69% share in 2022. Iron ore imports from Australia to China in 2022 increased by 3.4% to 739.5 million tons, from 715.4 million tons in 2021” (Hellenic Shipping News, 2023), despite the fact that “In 2022, China's total iron ore imports were 1.107 billion tons, a decrease of 17.88 million tons from 2021, or a year-on-year decrease of 1.59%. The total import value was around US\$128 billion, a year-on-year decrease of 29.73%.” (Lo, 2021), largely due to the collapsing Chinese property sector and significant decline of infrastructure building projects within the country and beyond, even though some Chinese officials were still in denial that there is a real estate crisis unfolding within China at the moment;

C) *the demand is time-sensitive, i.e., utility diminishes considerably over time.* Agricultural and fisheries products fall into this category because of their obvious perishability. However, diversification on the part of Australia can neutralize the negative impacts of the trade war initiated by China to a certain extent, but definitely not fully, especially considering the handsome profit margin associated with the premier segments of the Chinese markets (CNBC, 2023). Longer-term decoupling might occur due to arbitrary disruptions of the trading relationship, especially when good-will and trust cannot be resumed to the previous level before the disruptions.

Based on the arguments above, deployment of economic sanction should never be random and careless for sophisticated state actors, including China. It requires thoughtful strategic thinking and absolute precision to target the weak links of the chain and minimize the damages the subsequent reciprocal measures may cause. China is obviously a “*smart*” or “*cunning*” player with two decades of experience within the framework of the WTO according to close and critical observations made by many over the years (Mavroidis and Sapir, 2021). China knows exactly that “*trade war*” of whatever kind is highly likely to be mutually destructive to both engaging parties. It also takes a long time for the disturbed trading relationship to resume and heal. But, when the situation necessitates making a tough political statement or maintaining a strong strategic position in front of the entire world, weaker trading partners will be selected and sacrificed, such as in the very recent cases of Australia, Lithuania and a number of others.

The precision of economic sanction is also key because certain industries or interest groups are more vulnerable or more politically influential (especially those who possess considerable lobbying capacity or could form high pressure to the government) than others. To accurately and thoughtfully select the right targets and then impose corresponding economic sanctions makes this economic instrument more efficient and effective. This is exactly what China has done to Australian lobster farmers, wine producers and beef exporters. These victims all have disproportionate dependence on China’s demand for their products in order to survive and thrive and they do not have much capacities to retaliate back or pressure the Australian government to perform retaliations on their behalf.

However, they do have earned much sympathy among the Australian general public and gained wide publicity through extensive media coverage. All these made the Morrison government quite embarrassing and criticizable. It has turned out that these small and medium-sized Australian businesses (mostly in agriculture and farming) are the unfortunate ones to suffer devastatingly and pay the high price for the inappropriate remarks said publicly by Australian politicians against China. In addition, China claimed the sanctions are not going to be lifted in the next five years (ABC News, 2021). The damages to the bilateral trade relationship between China and Australia could be semi-permanent, to say the least.

One highly cited Chinese idiom could shed some interesting light on China’s strategic intention to punish Australia harshly and specifically, i.e. “shayi jingbai (杀一儆百)” or “sha ji gei hou kan (杀鸡给猴看)”, which literally translates into English as “to kill a chicken in

front of a monkey". This highly popular and well-practiced idiom in the Chinese culture means "to make an example of someone by punishment in order to frighten others". Longitudinal observations indicated that the Chinese political authority has been becoming increasingly confident and audacious to put this punitive approach into practice, both inwardly and outwardly, whenever it feels necessary.

Even though, this approach does appear to be incredibly effective in some instances within a short range of time, however, it comes with a hefty price. Firstly, if this approach is repeatedly used at a high frequency against any intended target, its effectiveness drops dramatically from a long-term perspective. Economic detachment will eventually kick in as a result of persistent trade disruptions. Secondly, if this approach is practiced arbitrarily without recognition of and commitment to the preexisting agreements, such as in the case of the trade war between Australia and China, it will almost certainly lead to a visible proliferation of negative narratives against the Chinese political leadership and China as a nation-state (such as *The China Threat Theory* my thesis focuses on), especially from sources outside the jurisdiction of China.

Undoubtedly, *The China Threat Theory* serves as the ultimate summary of all the negative and hurtful narratives against China. If the Chinese leadership determines to normalize economic sanction as a useful instrument in its strategic repertoire and insists to publicly punish weaker and more economically dependent trading partners to make a point in the international community, then *The China Threat Theory* is more likely to gain even higher popularity with an increasing number of believers from the rest of the world that is literally beyond the tight control of the Chinese political authority.

In addition to the hostile repercussions, one should also bear in mind that global trade is highly dynamic. Basically, nothing stays the same forever. Trade relationships and deals have been going in and out of the game all the time. As mentioned previously, the efficacy of unilateral economic sanction and the asymmetrical bargaining power (or coercive power) can only produce short-term advantages. The damage to long-term, healthy and mutually beneficial inter-state trade relationship is considerable. The proliferation of new trade agreements and regimes (Petri, 2022) across the globe, especially in Indo-Pacific Region, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (the RCEP) and Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (the CPTPP), in the recent years is a piece of convincing proof to support my arguments above. Overall, the costs associated with the deployment of unilateral economic sanction are significantly higher than many would expect. The detriments caused by poorly justified, impulsive trade war should constantly remind the Chinese political leadership to utilize (unilateral) economic sanction more cautiously and less frequently.

From China's perspective, bearing a notorious reputation of a "bully" (Li, 2021), who disrespects rules and others in the international community, is bad enough. However, inducing a strategic alliance of collective containment towards itself is literally even worse. This almost nightmarish scenario has been taking shape along with China's increasingly bold and audacious actions to intimidate and silence any daring challenger who disagrees with the Chinese political authority. The so-called "quad", led by the US, have been further strengthened and unified after the trade war between Australia and China (ITR, 2020). Suffice to say, China's aggressive and calculative economic sanction against Australia is a major contributing factor here. One thing that deserves to be emphasized and reiterated is that, no matter how powerful and willful the US or China might be as the world's top two trading nations, potential gains from being punitive, aggressive and unpredictable are not temporally sustainable and the hedging efforts and the decoupling effects in the aftermath will profoundly shape global trade and significantly contribute to the reconfiguration and proliferation of trade regimes.

Another dangerous propensity that is revealed from various controversial trade wars is that multilateralism has been giving way to unilateralism. Ignoring or sacrificing multilaterally defined rules, regulations and boundaries for unilateral gains and benefits is a major setback, for the institutionalists, at least. The resurgence of unilateralism will definitely weaken (instead of reinforce and improve) the existing institutional establishment at international level. Without the presence of rules, regulations and boundaries, it is impossible to play the game fairly and productively.

The visible deterioration of multilateralism has more than the capacity to exacerbate frictions and conflicts among state actors over thorny issues (including trade) that could have been resolved through the mechanisms of bargaining and negotiation instead of resorting to economic coercion and aggression. It seems that “*ultra-unilateralism*”, as the toxic heritage of Donald Trump’s signature foreign policy style, has severely poisoned the global political-economic environment during his single tenure. It also has undermined the foundation for international cooperation almost fatally due to the erratic and outrageous behaviors of the Trump-Pence Administration.

China has become tougher and more tactical after dealing with the outrageously aggressive Trump-Pence Administration from 2016 to 2020. Harsh and punitive policies and measures against China for political concessions and economic gains have almost been entirely inherited by the Biden-Harris Administration, which means the fierce political struggle over the persistent trade imbalance and frictions between the world’s two largest economies are likely to prolong (Lobosco, 2022). CNN has recently reported that, even under the pressures from the American businesses to lower the tariffs on Chinese exports (Lee, 2021a), soaring domestic inflation and serious disruption of the supply chain (Tepper, 2021), the Biden-Harris Administration so far maintains the trade policies of the previous administration with no substantial relaxation in plan (ibid.).

In reciprocity, China has promptly retaliated for each and every blow it has taken from the US. Nevertheless, China-based businesses still have suffered considerably and China is struggling to fulfill its commitment to import the agreed amount of American agricultural products as signed in the bilateral Phase One agreement. The United Nations News (2019) reported that the high-profile Sino-US trade war was a lose-lose one according to mainstream political economists. It has revealed that tariffs alone ‘*cost China \$35 billion in first half of 2019*’ (ibid.). Some later estimation claimed that “*China’s trade war with US resulted in loss of USD 550 billion*” (The Economic Times, 2022). In this regard, China could be a victim of economic aggression too, when facing an even more powerful trading partner it critically depends upon.

This could be another irony of *The China Threat Theory*. The role of economic aggressor is conditioned and determined by how much power a given state-actor possesses and the calculative political will of its leadership. China can easily overpower Australia just like the US can economically coerce China whenever the US political leadership feels necessary. There is no room for “*fair play*” according to the logic of power politics that has been resurrected and revived in the recent years along with the resurgence of commercial mercantilism, grassroots populism and uninhibited nationalism among major powers. Age-old power politics has returned to destabilize further the increasingly volatile global political-economic equilibrium. Power clashes and the abuse of asymmetrical economic power could seriously disrupt and reconfigure the already deteriorating and dysfunctional economic establishment at international level.

However, the trade relationship between China and Australia has not always been a confrontational and conflict-ridden one according to the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s official statements in 2017 about the trade relationship

between these two fairly complementary economies. China did benefit the Australian economy considerably. China's open-door policy offered lucrative trade opportunities to Australian businesses (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.).

"Trade and investment with China are central to Australia's future prosperity. In 2017, China bought \$116 billion of Australian exports, more than a quarter of Australia's total exports to the world; China is our top overseas market for agriculture, resources and services".

Australia has maintained a healthy economic performance by jumping on the bandwagon to "trade with China" in the past four decades. According to the statistics from the Observatory of Economic Complexity (the OEC) (2023), "during the last 25 years the exports of Australia to China have increased at an annualized rate of 16.5%, from \$2.25Billion in 1995 to \$102Billion in 2020". The increasing prosperous and mutually beneficial trade relationship between Australia and China from the early 2000s onwards has suddenly turned sour, right after the turning point of 2018 when Australia has officially banned Huawei from its 5G networks on security grounds (Hartcher, 2021). Trading with China has enabled Australia to escape from the clutches of the 2008-2009 global financial meltdown and thus evaded the miserable fate of economic recession as the rest of other Western economies had gone through.

Some believe that Australia is the collateral damage of the intensifying Sino-US power struggles (Smith and Wesley-Smith, 2021). This explanation is both intuition-friendly and plausible. But it might not be a full representation of the truth. Australia's peculiar behaviors did step on China's red lines multiple times. Not just banning Huawei alone. Australia's call for independent investigation of the "true origin" of the COVID-19 pandemic by international experts and its political support to pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong have seriously offended China's national pride and jeopardized its core interests. As early as in 2019, "Ambassador Cheng Jingye (成竞业) told *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* that the affairs of Hong Kong were "solely the internal affairs of China", warning that any effort to "mess up" the former British outpost was doomed to fail [...]" (Wright, 2019). Subsequently, the bilateral relationship between Australia and China has plunged into a new low in 2020.

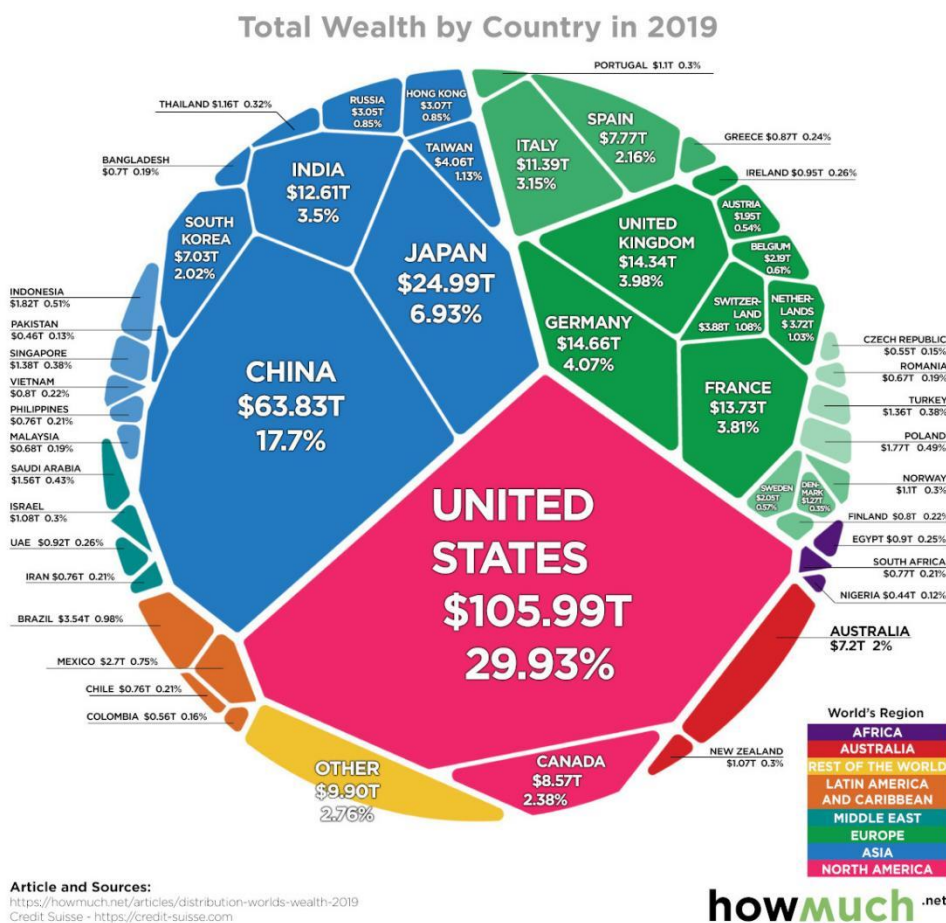
Australia's case (whether or not it is an innocent victim of China's malicious and politically motivated economic assault or coercion) has earned much sympathy in the Western world as well as support from other self-proclaimed "middle powers" in the West camp, such as India and Japan. The official website of Japanese Times has recently published a rather lengthy and detailed documentation and analysis of the trade war between Australia and China (Needham, 2020). The news media seriously warned its audiences that the same thing could happen to Japan or any other member of the Western Camp when circumstance arises (ibid.). This provocative article urged the members of the Western Camp, especially the smaller and less powerful ones to bond themselves tighter and leverage their combined power in order to stand up against the arbitrary will of China. The urgent call for solidarity and collaboration to counterbalance the rising China based in East Asia is loud and clear among the Western democracies and, I suppose, this is exactly their collective answer to *The China Threat Theory*. Even though, China has brought them plenty of economic and trade opportunities as they have openly admitted. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, China is regarded as a foe rather than a friend.

4.2.15. The scale and weight of the Chinese economy

Driven by the overarching developmental logic, "big is beautiful", China has been ambitiously and methodically building up its economic scale and weight over the recent decades (Zhang and Zhang, 2018). The country has already become the world's second largest economy in 2010 and the world's top trading nation in terms of physical goods in 2013. In addition to quantitative scale-building and expansion, qualitative transformation somehow matters even

more from a strategic point of view. China has been catching up with the Western economic benchmarks in terms of economic productivity and competitiveness at an accelerated pace. China's economic upgrading so far is both fast and impressive.

Many commentators tend to agree that China's sheer size (whether is its economy or military) might be the most explainable reason why the country appears to be so intimidating to others. However, I would argue that the improving sophistication of the Chinese economy and China's growing technological capabilities make the country even more fearful to its anxious opponents and competitors. The alleged threats China could possibly pose (especially in the "hard power domains") to the global West make one thing clear, which is, China is definitely not the only country on Earth with high economic growth rate year-after-year. However, China is indeed the largest and the most powerful one among them with a wide spectrum of potentialities yet to fully emerge.



(Illustration Nine: All of the World's Wealth in One Visualization; Source: Visual Capitalist.com)

The inflating *China Threat Theory* is getting louder and echoing throughout the American society and elsewhere in the Western world. The fundamental attribution to this decisive change of attitude regarding China and a strategic reorientation to aggressively contain the rising superpower by the American leadership is the shift of comparative national power between the declining hegemon and a rising, potential challenger, literally, over the past decade. Exactly a decade ago, in 2014, China has officially gained the membership to the highly exclusive "\$ 10 trillion Economy Club (shiwanyi jingjiti julebu: 十万亿经济体俱乐部)" (The CSIS, 2019). There are only two economies in the world can achieve this

magnitude. The other one is undoubtedly the US. A detailed economic forecast conducted by NASDAQ.com in 2020 even predicted that China will become a “\$ 20-trillion economy” in 2024 under normal circumstances and the gap between the Chinese economy and US economy will be further reduced from \$ 7.3 trillion in 2019 to \$ 4.5 trillion in 2024 (Bajpai, 2020).

It is rather obvious that China has been steadfastly catching up with the US over time in terms of economic scale and weight. Other reports have adjusted the size of the Chinese economy by applying the Purchasing Power Parity (the PPP: goupaili pingjia: 购买力平价) to it (Wright, 2019). They claimed that China has already become world’s largest economy in 2014 according to their calculation (ibid.). Even the Voice of America (VOA) (2022) has reported a short while ago that:

“China’s GDP should grow 5.7% per year through 2025 and then 4.7% annually until 2030, British consultancy Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) forecasts. Its forecast says that China, now the world’s second-largest economy, would overtake the No. 1-ranked U.S. economy by 2030. Credit insurance firm Euler Hermes made a similar forecast”.

This should not be regarded as a deliberate exaggeration of China’s economic power, but a financial calibration needed to compare and contrast across economies. However, notably, estimations through this approach are often cited to criticize the “currency peg” imposed on the Chinese Yuan by the Chinese authority as well as the alleged “competitive devaluation” of the Chinese Yuan to gain unfair advantages in international trade (Christensen, 2015).

Whether or not China engaged in unfair trade activities and foreign exchange/currency manipulations, one has to admit that the Chinese economy has been going strong over the years, despite the presence of a number of critical vulnerabilities, such as the alarming over-capacity in industrial productions, the persistent developmental disparity between the urban areas and the rural areas or between the coastal provinces and the inland provinces and the widening wealth gap between social strata.

During the bi-polar Cold War period, the economic weight of the USSR was far smaller than that of the US. According to Mark Harrison (2017), “by the 1970s, {...}, the Soviet Union became the world’s leading power. Yet its economy produced less than half of the real GDP of the US, despite a population of similar size, spread across a much larger territory” and the overall quality of the Soviet (esp. civilian or non-military) productions were believed to be far inferior than their American equivalents at the time. The former USSR was doomed to fail and collapse due to its weak economic power and competitiveness as well as its inability to provide a satisfactory quality of life to its own people. In short, the USSR has chosen “cannon” over “butter”, which is a dismal strategic failure in a retrospective re-examination. North Korea, an officially defined “rogue state” by the US (Triplett, 2004), still maintains this approach up till the present moment due to having been under the Communist dictatorship and tyranny of the Kim dynasty for over 70 years.

However, China is a completely different story because the country knows that a strong, competitive and thriving national economy, especially in terms of consumer-driven consumption and manufacturing (esp. consumer-oriented industries and advanced technology-intensive sectors), is one of the indispensable requisites to become a true global superpower. To the Chinese political leadership, the best way to deter external hostility is to construct a solid economic foundation back home to finance all variety of power instruments available to the state actor so as to compete internationally; and unify the domestic populations by offering the materialistic dignity, security and fulfillment they deserve and desire. Therefore, in this sense, China is a much smarter and economically more capable challenger or threat to

the US global domination than the (politically and organizationally) cumbersome and (economically) dysfunctional USSR used to be.

To some political practitioners, the dubbed Cold War 2.0 has already commenced between the US and China (Doshi, 2021a), whereas some other political professionals try to deescalate the confrontation and cool down the situation (Allott, 2020). To outside observers, the elected politicians (esp. in the current US political circle) and their associated pundits just pay a lip service rather than make a real difference to avoid the heightening tensions (Ignatius, 2023). At this point, the bilateral relationship between the US and China is literally walking on a tightrope. Any casual and unnecessary provocation and disturbance (on either side or both sides), arbitrary and imprudent policies, and transgression of political bottom-line, could readily trigger devastating outbursts of inter-state conflicts, given the fact the Sino-US bilateral relationship has already reached a historical low point and mutual trust and goodwill between these two superpowers have also been gradually depleting.

4.2.16. The sophistication and productivity of the Chinese economy

The Chinese economy does not just grow rapidly in size, but is becoming more sophisticated and productive over time. I would like to elaborate on this point in the subsequent subsections by revealing and discussing how significant the qualitative transformation of the Chinese economy is and why it poses strategic pressures on the US and its allies and in what possible ways.

4.2.16.1. The “long march” towards China’s technological independence

The ultimate “*stranglehold*” to suffocate the Chinese economy by the US is what I call the “*technology embargo*” (keji jinyun: 科技禁运). Technology embargo, if implemented suddenly and harshly by the US and other technologically more advanced nations in collaboration, could produce detrimental, short-term “*shock effects*” (xiuke xiaoying: 休克效应) onto the Chinese economy as many scholars have already theorized (Zhou, 2008). The Chinese political leadership has long realized the inconvenient fact that the country’s excessive reliance on critical foreign technologies would eventually hold back the further development of the Chinese economy into a more productive and sophisticated state (ibid.). Facing technological stranglehold from the West, especially the strictly enforced “*chip ban*” by the US export controls in collaboration with other members of the (yet-to-formalized) “*chip 5 alliance*” i.e. the Netherlands, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea, (Haack, Bordelon and Scott, 2023), China’s coping strategy is undoubtedly and invariably to reduce its technological dependency by replacing critical foreign technologies with indigenous technologies.

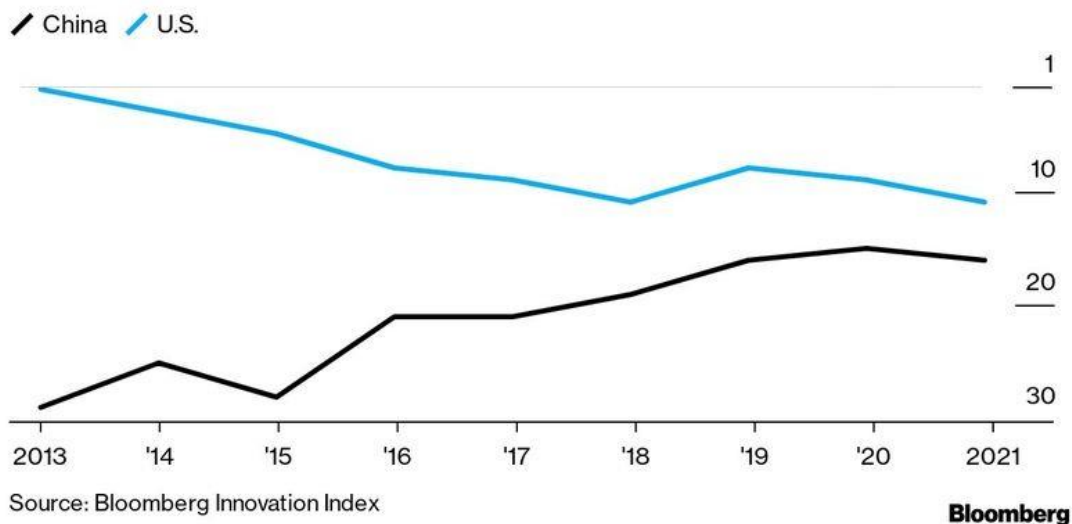
China’s pursuit of technological independence so far has been very impressive by any standard. According to the Bloomberg Innovation Index (2021), the gap, in terms of technological innovation, between the US and China has been narrowing over the past decade or so (See **Illustration Ten** below). According to other similar ranking systems, such as the Global Innovation Index (GII) jointly publicized by the UN’s World Intellectual Property Organization (the WIPO) and Cornell University, the rank of China’s capacity to innovate technologically against other countries has been improving significantly over the recent years. The ranking results have been cited by the US News and China Daily in 2018 and 2019, respectively. The China Global Television Network (the CGTN, which is an official tongue piece of the Chinese authority) (2020) has also reported in a very positive and optimistic tone as follow:

“China retains its 14th spot in the top-performing economies in the Global Innovation Index (GII) 2020 released on Wednesday, according to the UN’s World Intellectual Property Organization

(WIPO) [...] China remains the only middle-income economy in the top 30 of the GII list in terms of innovation capacity and output.”

Converging

The ranking gap between the U.S. and China has steadily narrowed



(**Illustration Ten:** The ranking gap between the US and China has steadily narrowed.
Source: Bloomberg.com)

In order to encourage and promote scientific research and technological innovation in China, the Chinese authority has founded the “*national science and technology award* (guojia kexuejishu jiang: 国家科学技术奖)” in 1999, which is literally the Holy Grail for Chinese scientists and engineers. The national science and technology award conference is held annually at the Great Hall of the People (renmin dahuitang: 人民大会堂) in Beijing to honor top scientific and technological contributors based in China. This honorary system gives recognition, credit, and reward to the most diligent and distinguished scientists and engineers in the country and it also greatly motivates them to proudly bond their individual achievement tightly to the destiny of the Chinese nation (Cao, 2004).

It is indeed true that the socioeconomic status of scientists and other knowledge workers has been elevated to a much higher level these days. Nation-wide oppression and persecution against intellectuals during the fanatic Cultural Revolution (wenhua dageming: 文化大革命) (Cao and Zhong, 2010) have gone for good with almost no chance in sight to return. The strategic importance of scientists and knowledge workers in relation to the national security and competitiveness is fully acknowledged and highly valued by the Chinese political leadership. These highly educated and intellectually productive individuals constitute the growing “*soft assets* (ruan zichan: 软资产)” (China Daily, 2013) possessed by China, and their collective endeavor and hard work will undoubtedly contribute to a much brighter and promising technological future of this rising superpower.

As having been argued previously, if transfer of sensitive foreign technologies is somehow been blocked due to political considerations, then, conceivably, China will have no choice but to work extra hard to carve out a viable way to liberate itself from the technological constraints imposed by the vigilant and hostile global West. Technology has virtually become a ferocious battlefield due to the highly competitive nature of the current Sino-US relationship. The last time the world saw something akin to this was during the Cold War

between the US and the former Soviet Union. Regardless of the seemingly irreconcilable political values and ideological beliefs held by the US and China respectively, one agreement they do share is that technology is the ultimate source of (national) power and wealth and both of these superpowers are deeply aware of its monumental importance in the fierce global power politics.

4.2.16.2. The enhancing technological capacity of China: from “copier to innovator”

Technological capacity, and the ability to innovate could largely determine the sophistication and performance of the economy within a technologically intense external environment (Nelson, Steil and Victor, 2002). It is especially pronounced among the technologically advanced economies that are constantly competing with one another. The US is highly alert of China’s major scientific advancements and improving technological capabilities. The former Trump-Pence Administration as well as the subsequent Biden-Harris Administration have aggressively resorted to the ultimate resolution, i.e. *technology embargo*, to contain the rapid scientific and technological progressions that have been taking place throughout China.

Over the years, the US authority has repeatedly accused Chinese hackers with government liaisons of infringing various digital systems to “steal” valuable business intelligence, patents and other forms of intellectual properties, and even research reports from both military and civilian targets in the US, including corporations, universities and research institutes (Thomas-Noone, 2020). China has also systematically acquired valuable technologies in a fairly efficient manner through state-encouraged, methodical mergers and acquisitions (M &C) of foreign business entities and research facilities (Hannas, Mulvenon, and Puglisi, 2013). Even though, the allegations of illegal intellectual property theft and technology-related espionage perpetrated by China have been officially denied by the Chinese authority time and time again. However, one can easily see how important the so-called technological competitiveness is in the intensifying inter-state rivalry between the US and China, and how technological capacity and the ability to innovate are increasingly politicized and strategically prioritized by these two competing global economic powerhouses.

China’s heavy subsidies and generous administrative support to strategically important industries and key business entities (be that nominal private companies, such as Huawei (华为), or large enterprises of public majority ownership in critical industries and sectors) have also attracted enthusiastic criticisms from the US. With the steadily growing and increasingly lucrative domestic markets, the Chinese authority often conditions foreign access to the enormous Chinese markets with technology transfer. This conditionality allows China to efficiently and effectively absorb more sophisticated foreign technologies into its domestic domain at an accelerated pace. This successful tactic has contributed significantly to China’s “*great technological leap forward* (keji dayuejing: 科技大跃进)” since its opening-up to the rest of the world in the late 1970s. The country is literally moving forward faster and stronger than it has ever been before in its modern and contemporary times via the globally interconnected technological fast-lane. Document showed that the US leadership rejected forced technology transfer to China as a specific component of the “*Phase One*” agreement during the Trump-Pence Administration (Economic and Trade Agreement Between the United States of America and The People’s Republic of China Fact Sheet Technology Transfer, 2020).

Therefore, the intriguing question on every stake-holder’s mind is: Will the US still lead the world with its technological superiority? Or will China eventually surpass the hegemon to become the new world leader in terms of technological innovation and advancement? *The China Threat Theory* definitely suggests the second future scenario is a serious possibility and it should never be materialized. In this subsection, I intend to elaborate on the intimately cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship between China’s improving technological capacity and the strong support from the Chinese authority. The aim is to shed light on the

encouraging and guiding role the Chinese state plays to forcefully push forward technological advancement, and methodically translate the latest technological achievement into real economic growth and sustainability.

Mainstream economists tend to agree that technology is the “*game-changing factor*” in relation to economic productivity and national security (Kosal, 2020). Joseph Schumpeter has famously referred the disruptive economic consequences of radical technological innovation as the “*creative destruction*” (McCraw, 2010). It is indeed true that technology alone could reconfigure the existing economic activities, relationships and structures to an astounding extent (ibid.). If we trace back into the scientific history of human societies, it becomes obvious that major scientific breakthroughs have made the leading nation-state(s) much more powerful and wealthier in comparison with the rest of other followers (Tellis and Rosenzweig, 2018).

Historical records have shown that investing scarce resources in technology could yield tremendous rewards in some extremely successful cases, such as the sweeping Industrial Revolution that was originated in Great Britain and later spread throughout the Western world from the late 18th Century to the early 19th Century. Even though, in reality, the failure rate of exploratory and experimental Research and Development (R&D) is very high and it might take years, or even decades, to see positive results taking shape. In this sense, state-backed investment in technology is both a “*detour*” from a short-term oriented perspective and a “*short-cut*” from a long-term focused perspective, paradoxically.

The newly industrialized Eastern Asian economies (the NIEs), such as South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, and the first industrialized country in Asia, Japan, all have efficaciously transitioned from “*copier to innovator*” as a critical qualitative transformation of their stunning economic progression (Shibata, 2006). China clearly has consulted and emulated the successful experiences from these aforementioned forerunners, namely strong state guidance and assistance in nation-wide, technology-driven economic upgrading, even though, noticeably, the interventions by the Chinese state are inadequately institutionalized and comparably more arbitrary (DeNap, 2017). China does not only generously spend huge public expenditures on building hard infrastructures, but also on cultivating soft assets, especially well-trained and properly educated workforce, in order to gain competitive advantages in the fierce international competition. It is no exaggeration to say that China has invented an idiosyncratic avenue of nation-rebuilding and development through trails and errors with diligent emulations from eclectic sources of inspirations.

The fast advancement of Chinese technologies is literally stunning, especially considering China’s humble beginning to systematically develop its own modern technologies under the guidance and encouragement of the CCP in the mid-1950s (Cao, 2023). Nowadays, impressive examples of sophisticated Chinese technologies are numerous, ranging from one of the world’s most powerful supercomputers by the name of Tianhe-2A (天河-2A, also known as the Milky Way-2A) (Sullivan and Liu, 2015) to the prevalent use of AI-powered technologies in the Chinese digital social life and national defense (Abrams, 2022). All the strategic moves China has been embarking on strongly indicate the possibility that the country is determined to grab the Holy Grail, i.e. *to become the most technologically sophisticated and innovative nation on earth*, once again as it did in the ancient past with the hugely impressive “*four great inventions* (sida faming: 四大发明)⁵” that had shaped the entire human civilization in profound ways (Pan, 2019).

⁵ Papermaking, printing, gunpowder and the compass - the four great inventions of ancient China are significant contributions of the Chinese nation to world civilization.

The government budget to support China's economic upgrading through state-mobilized investments on scientific research and technological development is colossal by any standard. Even though, the ambitious "*Made in China 2025 (MIC2025)*" plan has been deliberately down-played by the Chinese leadership to ease the anxiety and avoid mounting hostility from the US-led global West. However, as the prestigious journal of *Science* (2020) revealed, the "*total public and private science and technology expenditures in 2019 rose 12.5% over the previous year to 2.21 trillion Chinese yuan (\$322 billion), the National Bureau of Statistics reported yesterday*". Despite financial stringency induced by recent economic deterioration, scientific research, including both fundamental and practical, and technological development are still generously funded by the Chinese state. These knowledge-intensive activities encouraged by the state occupy a salient position in China's overall strategic plan. The Chinese political leadership is methodically elevating the sophistication and enhancing the competitiveness of the continuously transforming Chinese economy step by step. To summarize, the Chinese political leadership is determined to reduce China's vulnerable dependence on more advanced and critical foreign technologies and become a global technological leader in the anticipated future.

4.2.16.3. Endogenous innovation encouraged by the Chinese state

China's approach to effectively stimulate and enhance economic productivity is to encourage and promote endogenous innovations through strategic incubation and industrial "*pick and choose*" (e.g. the well-nurtured, so-called "*national champions*"). This approach goes beyond the deliberate manipulations of bureaucratic formalities and barriers to protect and assist the comparably less competitive, indigenous businesses. I noticed that many supporters of the "*protectionism hypothesis*" constantly criticize the shenanigans committed by the Chinese authorities to shield the indigenous businesses from foreign competition (Mahtaney, 2007). However, I suggest that it is not always the case. In reality, the Chinese leadership demonstrates its correct understanding of the ultimate source of real economic growth and industrial upgrading, which is what I call the "*endogenous innovation* (neisheng chuangxin: 内生创新)", be that new products, new services or just simply new manufacturing procedures and methods.

Economists tend to agree that internally derived competitiveness is much more productive and durable in comparison with externally acquired competitiveness (Mackintosh, 2021). From the empirical evidences I have consulted, China understands this economic regularity sufficiently well. The country is determined to tap onto the potentialities of its abundant and better prepared human resources and labor force by pouring massive investments into conventional R&D and, sometimes, even highly exploratory and experimental projects (Lu, 2006). The concentration of premium resources (a strategic combination of both tangible and intangible resources) has critically enhanced China's economic productivity and technological capacity, especially in the strategically prioritized research areas and industries, such as 5G or even 6G end-device production and infrastructure building, the Chinese version of the high-precision Global GPS (i.e. the Bei Dou: 北斗 Navigation Satellite System), supercomputer, quantum computing, aerospace engineering and outer space exploration and AI-powered technologies, etc. The progresses China has made so far are comprehensive and impressive, which have provoked deep concerns among the US strategists and politicians. They view China's remarkable progresses in multiple scientific areas as serious "*threats*" to the American research enterprise and national security (The US Senate, 2019).

According to University World News (2021) "*United States President Joe Biden, like his predecessor Donald Trump, sees China as a serious rival in science and technology research and has lobbied US allies in Europe and Japan to improve technology transfer and controls on Chinese acquisition of sensitive technologies*". It seems that the "*borderless global scientific community* (kexue wuguojie: 科学无国界)" is no longer a virgin land that should have been

kept away from the contamination of power politics. Science itself has been politicized in this case. Unfortunately, this is a very bad news for ethnic Chinese scientists working in the US or participating in research collaboration with American scientists (Silver, 2020). These Chinese scientists now are facing extremely strict scrutiny and restrictions from the US authorities simply due to their ethnicity and/or affiliation with the Chinese academia and government agencies (ibid.). According to Nature.com, “*the number of researchers with dual US–China affiliations is falling*” (Van Noorden, 2022). American scientists are also dissuaded to cut off ties with their Chinese collaborators due to political reasons (ibid.). It seems that the scientific communities in both the US and China have sustained significant collateral damages from the intensifying Sino-US power struggles. A potential segregation of the US and Chinese academia is emerging.

I regard this phenomenon as a by-product of China’s gradually revealing technological ambition. China has demonstrated strong determination to go beyond the “*world factory*” (shijie gongchang: 世界工厂)” specialized in the assembly line. What China really aims at is to surpass the US and become the world’s leading innovator. This is utterly unacceptable in the eyes of the US political leadership. As China’s unfulfilled technological ambition is realizing step by step as time proceeds, the US leadership has finally decided to take drastic actions to neutralize China’s potential threat to its unparalleled technological advantages in the entire world.

The vigilance on the part of the US is not completely unfounded. The hard and diligent efforts invested by the Chinese political leadership have already yielded impressive fruits. I noticed that a great number of earlier researches on the complexity of the Chinese economy tend to stress on China’s over reliance on foreign components with more sophisticated technological content embedded in them (Horaguchi and Shimokawa, 2016). It was true at the time to a certain extent. However, China has made extraordinary progresses in the recent years. According to an up-to-date brief report issued by DEQI Intellectual Property Law Corporation:

“In the first half of 2020, 2.195 million patent applications for invention, utility model and design in China were filed with CNIPA, with a year-on-year increase of 9.8%. Among them, the number of invention applications was 683,000, with a year-on-year increase of 5.3%. A total of 29,500 PCT international patent applications were received by CNIPA, with a year-on-year increase of 22.6% and the top three Chinese enterprises in terms of granted patent inventions (excluding Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan) were Huawei Technology Co., Ltd. (2,772), Guangdong OPPO Mobile Communication Co., Ltd. (1,925) and BOE Technology Group Co., Ltd. (1,432).”

These Chinese high-tech corporations are literally “*cherry-picked*” and carefully nurtured by the Chinese authorities as the most promising winners of domestic competition. They all have been granted a full range of favorable conditions, such as preferential policies (US International Trade Commission, 2007) and recruitment of high-end talents, especially those who have received postgraduate education from well-established Western universities and research institutes (Simon and Cao, 2009), to grow and expand, so as to compete with powerful foreign corporations in global, especially premium (in terms of higher value-adding and profit margin) or more sophisticated (in terms of higher consumer expectations), markets.

Huawei is undoubtedly one of the rising Chinese high-tech giants that is highly favored and strategically valued by the current political leadership in Beijing. However, even with the strong support from the Chinese government, Huawei’s ambition to explore 5G infrastructure-building opportunities in the US and the UK markets have encountered ferocious political blockage by the US and British authorities (Fox, 2022). “*National security*”, again, has become the first and foremost justification to expel Huawei from major Western

markets, including an increasing number of European countries, subsequently (Espinoza, 2023).

Voices inside China (news.cgtn.com, 2018) have harshly criticized the “*unfair treatment*” and/or “*discriminatory treatment*” to Huawei by the US authority. They claimed that economic affairs are deliberately “*politicized*” to serve political opportunism (especially short-term, partisan or even personal gains) rather than ensuring equal opportunities and fair play to all businesses operating in the US market (ibid.). I believe this unfortunate piece of reality is largely induced by the diminishing mutual understanding between the US and China, as well as their declining willingness to cooperate and compromise. Meanwhile, the tensions and divergences between these two fiercely competing superpowers are steadily building up over time. From a more pessimistic point of view, ideological incompatibility and conflict of national interests have been driving these two powerful nation-states into a seemingly unavoidable collision course. Technological competition is only one battlefield between the two. Albeit it may be the most critical one from my perspective.

I want to stress that technology-driven economic competition is just one aspect of the full-blown systemic rivalry between the US-led West and China. The root resides deeply in the systemic differences or even incompatibilities between competing models of governance and development. Currently, the *de facto* trade protectionism and economic restriction and sabotage justified by political considerations are on the rise in both the US and China (Dodwell, 2022). This inward-looking and politically oriented propensity does go against the neo-liberal, pro-globalization, and pro-deregulation idealism that was once upheld dearly by the mainstream Western economies in the post-Cold War period. The admirable “*American Model*” was the most praised and emulated exemplification of a “*superior model of governance and development*” as the “*Washington Consensus* (huashengdun gongshi: 华盛顿共识)” has proudly declared in both spoken and written languages (Birdsall, de la Torre and Caicedo, 2010).

However, in reality, the values, principles, and idealism the mainstream West cherishes have unfortunately turned out to be not persuasive and appealing enough to shape the national behaviors of China and alter the mindset of the Chinese leadership. In fact, China does not necessarily share the belief system with the West and it also does not voluntarily endorse the various proposals initiated by the hegemon and its allies, often times. From the perspective of longitudinal observations, the dominant strategic thinking of the US has shifted considerably after years of “*engagement policy*” since the Clinton-Gore Administration in the 1990s. The tender honeymoon has officially ended, likely for good. The dramatic reorientation of the Sino-US bilateral relationship from complementarity to competition has already inaugurated a new chapter of global power politics in the 21st Century. In the next subsection, I shall use the semi-conductor industry as a brief case study to discuss the heated technological competition between the US and China aiming at the most sophisticated and advanced level.

4.2.17. Geo-politics and geo-economics of technology: a brief case study of the semi-conductor industry

The most vulnerable spot of China’s technological development is microchips, especially the tiniest and most powerful ones needed for a whole spectrum of highly advanced, state-of-the-art manufacturing that has been emerging and thriving in China. The Chinese economy is currently situated in a very delicate and volatile phase of transformation. There are three revelations about it: **A)** economies of scale has almost reached its limit to boost productivity and generate revenue (Chow and Perkins, 2019); **B)** China has already become a leader of development or perfection and application of low(er) and intermediate technologies, especially in terms of cost-effectiveness (Zheng, 2018); and **C)** China still relies on critical and advanced foreign technologies, knowledge and know-how to enable its vigorous

expansion into the cutting-edge areas of scientific research, engineering, and manufacturing (Huang, 2022). China's technological vulnerability is being attacked ferociously by the US at the current moment with the conspicuous strategic intention to castrate the upgrading Chinese economy once and for all.

The increasingly intense power interactions and counteractions between the US and China reveal the unfortunate fact that geo-politics has already successfully hijacked the global economy and made it exceptionally susceptible and sensitive to competition and confrontation among powerful nation-states, or even strategic alliances. The yet-to-complete formation of the Chip 5 alliance (potentially comprised by the US, the Netherlands, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea) is a strategic deliberation on the part of the US with the clear goal to slow down, albeit might be just temporarily, China's rapid advancement in the high-tech sectors.

Chips are incredibly critical to a large number of advanced industries, especially in the case of electronic automobiles manufacturing against a wider context of global energy transition (e.g. the so-called "*transport electrification*"). As the world's largest market and manufacturer of electronic automobiles or electronic vehicles (EVs) (Isidore and He, 2024), and "*the world's largest producer, consumer and exporter of consumer electronics, said an official from the country's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT)*" (People's Daily Online, 2019), the sudden shortage of supply of advanced chips literally possesses the ability to paralyze these thriving, high-tech industries in China, at least in the predictable short-term future.

What makes the situation even more difficult for China is the fact that its remarkable achievement in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) relies critically on highly advanced chips from foreign suppliers, especially those smaller, faster and more powerful ones with lower energy consumption. China's impressive AI development and the comprehensive application of state-of-the-art AI in various domains are effectively being suffocated by the recent "*Chip ban*" (xinpian or jingpian jinyun: 芯片 or 晶片 禁运) enacted by the US export controls (Oermann and Wolff, 2022). China is experiencing severe chip shortage, especially those under the size of 14 or even 7 nanometers, and stricter restrictions are on the way into the year of 2024 (Chiang, 2024).

Facing escalating containment from the US in almost all critical dimensions simultaneously, China is prepared for the worst, strategically speaking. I want to reiterate that technology-intensive industries have already become a bloody yet smokeless battleground for the intensifying inter-state competition between the US and China. Scientific research (including both fundamental and practical) and technological development still occupy a very important strategic position in the minds of the Chinese political leadership, even confronting extremely challenging situations from both the external and the internal at the current moment. So far, it seems that the Chinese leadership is determined (or it also has no other viable options) to go down the avenue it has cautiously chosen, namely reducing its vulnerable dependence on critical foreign technologies, and replacing them with alternative technologies from Chinese suppliers as soon as possible (Bloomberg cited by the Economic Times, 2024).

The accumulating empirical evidences have indicated that (advanced) technology transfer to China has been calculatingly and strictly blocked by the US due to national security considerations. China is, in many senses, stuck in a very disadvantageous or even precarious position. The abrupt and precisely targeted, technological disentanglement can incapacitate China's manufacturing and cause further economic degeneration in the emerging high-tech sectors of this massive economy that is undergoing qualitative transformation (Yoon, 2022).

In the midst of a so-called “*chip war*” (Miller, 2022), it becomes apparent that China suffers considerably. However, so too South Korea. South Korea is situated in a rather awkward strategic position because: **A)** South Korean businesses need the access to the gigantic Chinese markets in order to succeed and thrive in the globally extended semi-conductor industry, especially in the category of the not so sophisticated and advanced segments (e.g. the production of legacy chips) and specializations; **B)** South Korea also needs military assistance and protection from the US to shield against the acute threats posed by the militarily assertive and threatening North Korea. In fact, this is a dilemma shared by many Western or pro-West allies and alignments of the US (VOA, 2022). It is a very tough and afflicting decision for them to make. They are only allowed to choose either the US or China, but definitely not both. Opportunism is largely prohibited in this specific case by strategic deliberation.

This unfortunate piece of reality has revealed the fact that the attitudinal divergences and self-interested calculus do exist among the members of the Western camp. In other words, the loosely organized liberal capitalist economies and sovereignties in the Western world are not monolithic. Internal conflicts of interests could potentially undermine the solidarity within the Western camp and weaken their collective strengths and abilities to effectively counterbalance the supposed “*authoritarian (quasi-) alliance*” led by China. The other suspected members of the authoritarian camp are unsurprisingly Russia, North Korea, Pakistan and Iran etc.

Against the background of the resurfacing great power politics in a global scope, there are two disconcerting points to be noticed here based on accumulating empirical evidences: **A)** the semi-conductor industry is a perfect embodiment of a highly complex and extremely technology-intensive industry. It requires almost seamless international collaborations and contributions from a large number of suppliers and manufacturers dispersed across the globe; and; **B)** the semi-conductor industry is also a, politically speaking, West-dominated industry because “*it almost entirely dependent on the United States and countries aligned with it for chip design, the tools that make them, and fabrication*” as CNN has straightforwardly pointed out on the third of October, 2022. If the semiconductor industry is indeed critical or even indispensable to other strategically important industries, then it is a necessity China cannot afford to be excluded from because the rapidly advancing Chinese economy unquestionably and decisively depends on the healthy supply of chips, especially the more powerful and sophisticated ones, from non-Chinese sources.

Chip shortage is likely to persist in the short-term future since China’s own chip-makers still rely critically on foreign supply of chip-manufacturing equipment (predominately from ASML based in the Netherlands), specialty raw materials and vital components (mainly from Japan) and designing and function-supporting software (mainly from the US) etc. (Kharpal, 2021). In short, the successful operation of the semiconductor industry is a globally extended and highly complex undertaking. However, unfortunately for China, the existing key suppliers do not seem to be, strategically speaking, friends, not to mention allies, of the technologically dependent Chinese semiconductor industry and its emerging cutting-edge manufacturing. As a more immediate result of the sudden “*technological vacuum*” created by the ever strict, US “*chip ban*” on China, this rising geo-political and geo-economic superpower with a strong determination to develop faster and stronger is currently facing extreme difficulties, if not outright impossibility, to acquire the chips it desperately needs for its vital manufacturing back home (Huang, 2022).

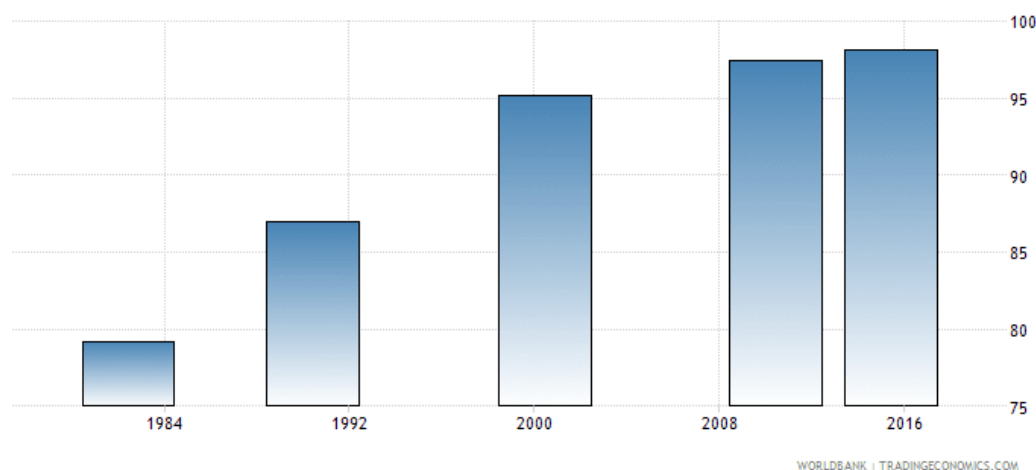
4.2.18. China’s methodical investment in “soft infrastructure”

Achieving technological independence and innovation leadership requires ingenuity from highly educated and properly trained talents. In this sense, China’s generous investment in

and methodical cultivation of the so-called “*soft infrastructure* (ruan jichu sheshi: 软基础设施)” deserves continuous and reflective academic attention. As the second most populous country in the world, China used to be seriously burdened by its vast yet under-productive populations. The sizable public spending made by the Chinese political leadership on China’s enormous human resources, such as better nutrition provision and improved and more accessible health care and medical treatment (Baradat, 2015), deserve recognition and respect.

However, the most significant achievement that is intimately related to the advancing Chinese economy is the comprehensive popularization of education at all levels. The commitment of the Chinese political leadership to diligently invest in the “*soft infrastructure*” over the recent decades has greatly transformed the overall quality of the Chinese labors (meaning healthier working age people equipped with better education and professional skills) (Springborg, 2009; Wei, Yan and Hu, 2014). As the Chinese labors have become more productive, they have also become significantly more expensive (Chan, 2015). Rising costs of Chinese labors is an unmistakable sign of the remarkable upgrading of the Chinese economy and the dramatic elevation of real income and living standard, even though, developmental disparities and distributional unevenness do persist. In a general sense, more and more Chinese have received better education as well as vocational training.

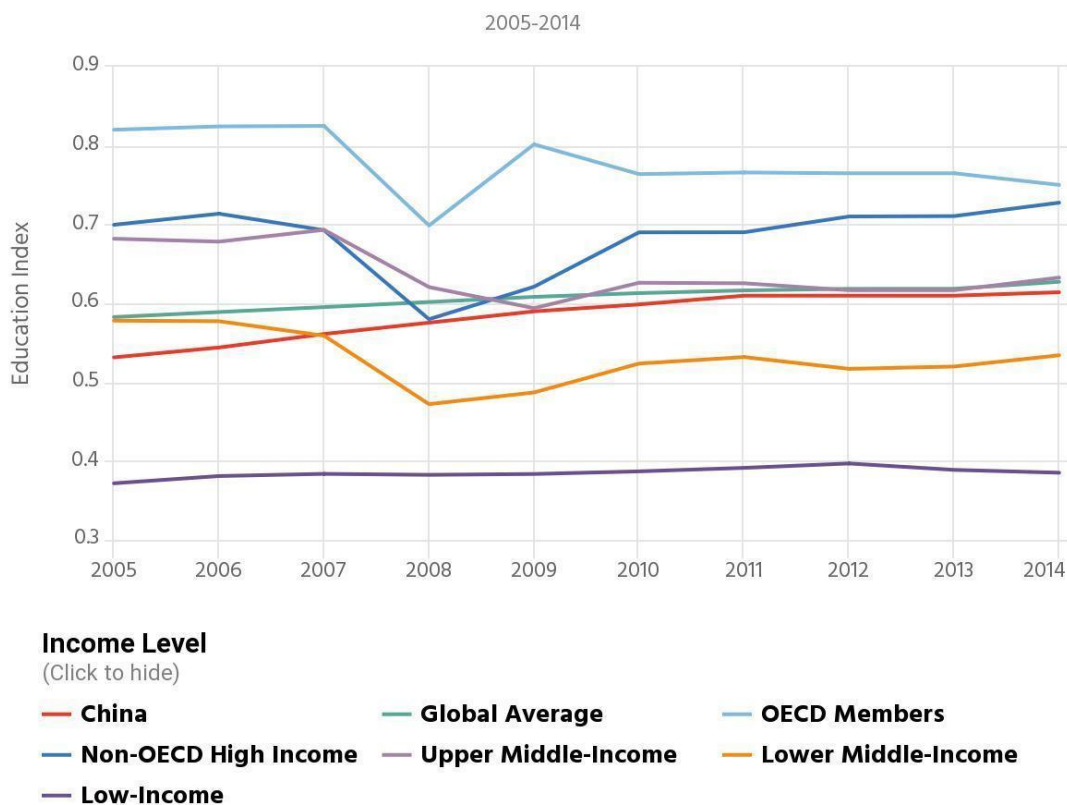
The nation-wide enforcement of the (12-year) compulsory elementary education to all school-aged Chinese youngsters and the popularization of higher education throughout China have been proven to be a huge success despite the existence of criticisms. Younger generations of Chinese labors are much better prepared for higher value-creating jobs that require knowledge and know-how than the older generations of Chinese labors. The **Illustration Eleven** below is originally from the World Bank. It clearly shows the dramatic increase of literacy in China from 1984 to 2016. By any standard or against any criteria, China’s achievement in the area of education at various levels over the past thirty-some years has been fairly remarkable.



(**Figure Eleven:** The literacy rate in China from 1984 to 2016; **Source:** World Bank)

The popularization of higher education in China has borne positive fruits as well. According to the statistics published by Statista, nation-wide, longitudinal investigations that have been conducted over the period from 2008 to 2018 have indicated that the total number of tertiary students (including post-graduate students and doctoral students) in China has achieved a whopping increase of 40% from 20.21 million to 28.31 million within just a decade.

Education Index by Income Level



(**Illustration Twelve:** Education index by income level. **Source:** World Bank)

Illustration Twelve above is a visualization of the fluctuations of Education Index by Income Level over time. It is easy to see from the graph that education and professional training do contribute affirmatively to higher national income, although not too dramatically as some might expect. It is noteworthy that, excluding China and other lower-income economies, the rest of other economies had experienced a sharp dip from 2007 to 2010 due to the global financial meltdown triggered by the US subprime mortgage crisis. However, China has maintained its steady and continuous progress from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s in an uninterrupted manner. According to the same illustration, the education index and income level in China seem to have reinforced each other over time to a fairly noticeable degree. It has clearly shown a rather positive sign of qualitative enhancement of the Chinese workforce and their increasing economic potentials.

It becomes obvious that, in order to achieve higher productivity and economic sophistication rather than aimless expansion of the scale of production, the Chinese economy needs better educated and professionally trained workforce with solid knowledge base and state-of-the-art know-how from all backgrounds and specialties. Understandably, the public expectations on advanced education and vocational training programs are high. Harsh criticisms on over-education (also known as the devaluation of education due to educational redundancy caused by over-expansion of tertiary education from undergraduate level upwards) (Lee, 2010), academic corruption and fraud within the Chinese academia (Altbach, 2016); and the disconcerting educational disparities across socioeconomic categories and geographic localities (Huang and Wiseman, 2011) are numerous and commonplace in the popular Chinese public discourse. Another pronounced problem that raises doubts about the

seemingly successful popularization of higher education in China is the mismatch of demand and supply in the Chinese labor market. It persists and exacerbates under the deteriorating economic conditions triggered by the pandemic. If this trend continues and many young college graduates are in great difficulty to find suitable jobs, more critics might start to reflect on the real missions and purposes of higher education popularization in China.

In addition, the failure to serve the industries with desirable talents they need could also compromise China's ambition to become a fully industrialized economy and a leader of technological innovation in the anticipated future. In short, foundational education in China has produced a large quantity of semi-skilled labors to feed the labor-intensive industries in the earlier stages of the country's economic reform and opening-up. However, in order to participate in higher value-adding economic activities and release the full potentials of the Chinese economy, China definitely needs to exploit the advantage of its growing number of colleges, universities, and research institutes and facilities, and make them not only accessible to qualified and aspirational (mostly younger) people, but also productive to serve the real requirements of the Chinese society. They should be able to cultivate future generations of the Chinese workforce with the capabilities to take the constantly advancing Chinese economy to the next level.

4.2.19. Economic governance with “Chinese characteristics”

The Chinese economy has been growing in size and its sophistication has also been improving at the same time as discussed previously. However, what *The China Threat Theory* conspicuously and specifically questions about are the true nature of the colossal Chinese economy and how it is governed by the Chinese authorities, i.e. *the economic governmentality in China*. Due to the spectacular economic miracle China has achieved within a fairly short period of time, there is a widely shared academic intrigue to uncover and make sense how the Chinese economy is governed and put into work as a one-of-a-kind economic specimen and model.

One easy-to-grasp metaphor from myself would be: the Chinese political authorities run the country like an “*extended feudal family enterprise*”. I suppose the highly popular concept of “*state capitalism* (guojia zibenzhuyi: 国家资本主义)” could be an incomplete or even inaccurate label that has been assigned to the seemingly enigmatic Chinese political economy. One insight we should constantly bear in mind is that the authentic Chinese style to get things done is always shaped by China's own tradition, historical experiences, values, and philosophies (such as statecraft, economic governmentality as well as the country's own world view).

How China defines itself and handles its national affairs are key to critically and productively understand the Chinese political economy, as well as *The China Threat Theory*. The deliberately emphasized and strongly insisted “*Chinese perspective*” in the formal Chinese political discourse deserves full recognition and intellectual attention. It represents an alternative point-of-view and approach to critically understand the interplay of the politics and the economics at different levels in China and how the Chinese political leadership is sought to effectively govern a highly dynamic economy in growing size, complexity and sophistication.

It is rather distinguishing that the indispensable “*Chinese characteristics*” are imposed on almost all the important political concepts in the formal Chinese political discourse. They are actually born out of the unique and singular “*Chinese perspective*”. The “*Chinese characteristics*” and the “*Chinese perspective*” are almost like a pair of “*mirror concepts*” (jingxiang gainian: 镜像概念) that constantly reflect each other. They are both intimately related to the well-known “*Chinese exceptionalism*” (zhongguo liwailun: 中国例外论) as its

rhetorical and conceptual manifestations. These two concepts are inherently intertwined with each other, so much so that they almost always go hand-in-hand in formal diplomatic rhetoric and political discourse with fairly high frequency.

4.2.20. The “China Model” after WTO accession

The much-debated and enthusiastically critiqued “*China Model*”, which is a terminology given to the idiosyncratic Chinese-style of economic governance and development, has evolved significantly over time. Traditionally, China used to specialize in a bundle of labor-intensive industries, such as the production of textile, toys, apparel and shoes, just like the Newly Industrialized Economies (the NIEs) in East Asia did in the past. As time goes by, the composition of the Chinese exports has progressively transformed and diversified towards more sophisticated and higher value-adding ends.

According to a piece of highly cited longitudinal research conducted by Peter. K. Schott (2006), China commands a premium than other economies of similar Per Capita GDP (PCGDP) and skill abundance. China’s Export Similarity Index (ESI) has shown an increasing overlap with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (the OECD) economies from 1972 to 2008 (ibid.). This piece of research has been conducted roughly three decades after China’s comprehensive economic reforms, at which point the improvement of the sophistication of the rapidly transforming Chinese economy had already started to take a visible shape. In the following decade, a large number of researches have detailed that Chinese exports have demonstrated exceptional sophistication in intermediate goods than other comparable economies with similar level of economic sophistication and capacity (Alcorta, 2021; Naughton, 2018).

The export sophistication ranking, which is conducted annually by the “*Growth Lab*” of Harvard University, has ranked China 16th globally in 2019, moving up three places than the previous year (Hancock and Anstey, 2022). This ranking system has revealed the alarming (from the perspective of the US) fact that the gap between the US and China (in terms of export sophistication) has been closing over the recent years (ibid.). It seems that even the fierce Sino-US trade war in the past a few years could not hold back the rapid qualitative transformation of the Chinese economy. This indicator alone strongly hints China’s economic growth and upgrading are very likely to continue, if the internal stability and external benignity are both ensured and enabled. It also reveals, to some extent, the resilience and self-correcting ability of the “*China Model*”. With constant adaptations, adjustments, and revisions, the viability and vitality of the “*China Model*” should not be wishfully underestimated, especially from a competitive point of view.

China’s eventual accession into the WTO in 2001 marked a turning point of the rapidly developing and transforming Chinese economy. The “*China Model*” has withstood extraordinary challenges because the official membership to the WTO has introduced a great deal of foreign competition into the carefully protected Chinese economic system at the time. Indigenous Chinese businesses were suddenly exposed to unprecedented impacts from global competitors, even though, a temporary protective shield had been thoughtfully provided by the Chinese authorities.

Initially, concerns over the inferior quality of Chinese productions and weak competitiveness of the Chinese economy as a whole were seriously considered by many Chinese economic strategists and political professionals (Unger, 2014). In other words, the Chinese economy was indeed small, fragile, and underproductive at a critical point of time when the opportunity to participate in global trade and economic integration was emerging. China was literally in a fairly disadvantageous position, compared with well-established global benchmarks. To the surprise of many skeptics, China’s membership to the WTO has turned out to be a training program for this rapidly growing, economic supernova. The country’s accelerated leap-

forward is believed to have happened in the last two decades. A large number of cynical critics have attributed China's impressive economic performance and achievement entirely to the Chinese authority's unfair or even discriminatory treatment to foreign competitors. In other words, China's economic success is a result of the *de facto* protectionism in place from their collective perspective (Clarke, 2008; Ding, 2008; Sager and Westin, 2002; The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2004).

However, this is only a half truth to the best. Empirical evidences do suggest that indigenous businesses in China are likely to receive more support and favorable treatment from the Chinese authorities at various levels than their foreign counterparts. However, two points we need to bear in mind are: **A)** "*government favoritism*" does not automatically guarantee long-term business success and economic prosperity; and **B)** WTO does have its rules and regulations to deter protectionism in outrageous forms in order to ensure "*fair competition*" to all member states (World Trade Organization, 2019). Therefore, there must be some other more critical attributions than just the favorable treatment the Chinese authorities have deliberately offered to assist the Chinese businesses in global competition. Some empirically grounded researches have already discovered the "*secrets*" behind China's dramatic improvement of its economic quality and competitiveness.

One of the insights I want to briefly mention here is the concept of "*Sino-Capitalism*" that has been brought forward by Christopher. A. McNally (2012). This terminology is a nuanced version of the more popular "*State-Capitalism*" in the existing literature. It stresses on the twin driving forces within the Chinese economic domain, i.e. the top-down state guidance and intervention and the bottom-up entrepreneurial enterprise (ibid.). Based on this critical understanding, I would like to propose my own theorization of an intimate, robust (once established and normalized) and *guanxi* (关系)-mediated "*strategic alliance or even integration*" between the Chinese state and the Chinese economic entities and agents, especially large (in terms of scale and weight), influential (in terms of social impact), and strategically important ones, regardless of their ownership nature and managerial structure (such as state-owned/dominated or joint venture or private).

This alliance is politically motivated yet economically oriented to achieve strategic objectives and goals that are cautiously identified and relentlessly pursued by the Chinese political leadership. I believe this is one of the defining characteristics and the fundamental functional mechanism of the "*China Model*". The inseparable yet inherently expedient alliance between the Chinese state and the indigenous economic entities and agents is the key to demystify China's hugely impressive economic achievement so far. Nevertheless, China's economic ambition and self-realization have encountered harsh containment from the US as the political tide has turned against the rising superpower in the recent years, especially after Donald Trump became the 45th president of the United States in 2016.

4.2.21. "Dual-Circulation" and the uncertain future of the Chinese economy

Facing mounting pressures from the US, China resorts to a newly re-invented "*hedging device*" by the name of the "*Dual-Circulation Model* (shuangxunhuan moshi: 双循环模式)" (Wang and Michie, 2021). This model is being heavily promoted by the Xi Administration in the recent years as a strategic response to better cope with a much more turbulent and volatile external environment. This model reveals the Chinese political leadership's accurate and thoughtful understanding of the two mutually dependent and interactive environments (i.e. the internal and the external) divided by the Chinese state as a form of interface with sovereign power and independent decision-making capacity.

The "*Dual-Circulation Model*" could be unpacked into two strategic insights: **A)** the immense importance of internal aggregate demand to boost real and sustainable economic growth; and

B) the awareness of the increasingly disruptive and hostile external environment and its negative impacts onto China's economic performance and well-being. This model interestingly coincides with the theoretical model I have presented in Chapter Three of my thesis, especially in terms of timing and the multilevel analytical approach embedded in them. Despite certain apparent similarities, however, these two models are devised for very different purposes and they are definitely not equivalents or alternatives to each other.

Nevertheless, both models have critically captured the intense dynamics and multilayered complexity of today's globalized political economy. The "*Double-Circulation Model*" has subtly revealed the strategic intention of the current Chinese political leadership to reduce excessive reliance on external demand and boost internal consumption in order to: **A)** strengthen economic security, sustainability and competitiveness in the long run; and **B)** shield domestic economy from the shock waves caused by external disturbances. The internal circulation is expected to function as a risk-absorbing, "*economic cushion*" to hedge the volatile external environment, especially considering its structurally ruptured quality and constantly unstable propensity.

4.2.22. Re-configuration of the global value chains of production and supply

The external hostilities towards China are largely contributed by the containment strategy adopted by the US leadership (both the Trump-Pence Administration and the Biden-Harris Administration) in collaboration with its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region. The willful efforts on the part of the US to re-construct the globally extended value chains of production and supply according to the logic of power politics could be either resource-consuming or self-harming (Bessler, 2022). The resurgence of Mercantilism and protectionism in the US in exceptional forms have been noticed and documented by a large volume of up-to-date researches (Hoekman and Zedillo, 2021). However, the trend of globalization could hardly be reversed or undone without causing major disruptions to the existing institutional and practical establishments based on which politics and economics are governed, channeled, and put to work across the globe.

A United Nations (the UN) report cited by Business Standard (Heijmans, 2021) claimed that "*trade shocks fueled by unilateral tariffs between the U.S. and China have undone three to five years' worth of growth among global value chains in affected countries, according to a UN policy brief*". One has to admit that the costs of artificial economic disentanglement between the US and China are considerably high, and the consequences are far-reaching to both the US and China, as well as the rest of the world. The outcome is highly likely to be mutually destructive or, even worse, incomplete (e.g. semi-disentanglement) and unexpected (e.g. sudden and violent disruption or even paralysis of certain segments of the global value chains of production and supply). The Indo-Pacific Region is believed to suffer significantly from the collateral damage in a bitter and involuntary way (Choudhury, 2021). However, there are also others believing China's neighboring countries, such as India and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (the ASEAN), can effectively fill up the industrial and manufacturing void left by China and benefit from it economically to a great extent (Saint-Mézard, 2023).

Many patriotic, China-based strategists tend to agree that the US trade war against Chinese exports and businesses is only one part of a malicious political agenda to castrate the gradually slowing down Chinese economy, once and for all (Warner et al., 2020). Some even suggest that Japan was a historical lesson for China to always bear in mind that being on the position of the world's second largest economy just behind the US is indeed politically precarious and strategically uncomfortable (Sakuragawa and Kikuchi, 2018). Many have pointed out that the US intends to artificially separate the production segments China has specialized in (over many years of participation into international trade) from the globalized value chains of production and supply and replace them with more reliable and secure

alternatives offered by US-based manufacturers and suppliers or simply outsource from its allies and partners (Thomas-Noone, 2020), i.e. the so-called “*friend-shoring*” (you’an waibao: 友岸外包).

How realistic and effective this strategy can possibly be is highly debatable, and the so-called “*economic decoupling* (jingji tuogou: 经济脱钩)” or the more euphemistic “*de-risking* (qu fengxia: 去风险), between the US-led West and China is under meticulous interrogations from a large number of political economists, strategists, and policy-makers alike. So far, the professionals do not seem to have reached a consensus among themselves. Their views and arguments are often visibly contradictory to one another and highly politicized in varying degrees. However, one thing for sure is that the strategic determination to reconfigure the existing global production and supply chains or even the entire international economic regime driven by the obsessive pursuit of absolute national security and superiority on the part of the US is real and happening. The longer-term consequences of this strategic quest can be profound and enduring. It might fundamentally and permanently alter the existing global division of specializations, as well as the well-established economic coordination and collaboration at supra-national level.

From the shared perspective of many Chinese political economists and strategists, the ill-justified restriction and eviction imposed on China-based MNCs operating in foreign markets (notably in the high-profile cases of banning Huawei from 5G infrastructure building in the US and forcing Tik Tok to separate from its Chinese parent company, Bytedance, based in Beijing) are undisputable pieces of evidences to support their argument that international trade frictions and the right to access foreign markets have been outrageously weaponized to punish political opponents and attack economic competitors with the intention to inflict malicious destructions and thus overpower them eventually (Lattemann, Alon and Zhang, 2020). Many China-based, political strategists insist that China should and has to fight back forcefully in order to defend its legitimate rights to pursue further development and engage in economic activities worldwide with fair treatment and the much-deserved respect (Lau, 2019).

These so-to-speak pundits, regardless of their ideological diversity and socio-political background, tend to agree on one thing that economic warfare is nonetheless warfare. The nature and the purpose are the same. Mutually destructive economic warfare can cause severe damages to all involved economic agents and entities and/or national economies because extremely brutal and deliberately prolonged economic warfare possesses the ultimate, non-violent ability to shake or even collapse the very foundation of the state regardless of its political-economic natures, structural qualities, and institutional features. This is exactly what has been escalating between the US and China. If China is regarded as an economic threat to the national security of the US, then it is also the case *vice versa*.

4.2.23. China’s determination to safeguard its economic security

Due to the monumental importance of the performance and health of the national economy, many Chinese strategists and policy-advisers have expressed their deep concerns about the increasingly evident “*economic insecurity*” in China, and the integrity of country’s inalienable right to pursue peaceful development under the mounting pressures from the US-led Western coalition (Kimball et al., 2021). China's State Council Information Office (The CSCIO: zhongguo guowuyuan xinwen bangongshi: 中国国务院新闻办公室) has issued a white paper (baipishu: 白皮书) towards the end of 2016, stating that: “*Development is a universal human theme, providing for people's basic needs and giving them hope of better life. The right to development is an inalienable human right, symbolizing dignity and honor*”. Needless to say, this statement has rich political messages and meanings to be critically unpacked.

Some authors (Oud, 2020) have insightfully revealed the hidden strategic agenda of a series of repetitive or highly similar statements from China's official sources as follow: "*The right to development discourse lends legitimacy to Beijing's political interests and agenda and provides a convenient vehicle through which China can advance its vision for a "shared future" with "mutually beneficial cooperation" at the United Nations*". I would add that it is also a direct response to the drastic measures from the Washington, D.C. to suppress China's vigorous and continuous rise. The message is loud and clear: China will never give up its ambition to realize the glorious nation-wide rejuvenation and the country is prepared to confront the US with determination and fortitude with maximum resource and effort commitment.

One should also note that "*the right to development*" is an essential component of China's national "*dignity and honor*" as the previous quotation from the CSCIO has deliberately emphasized. For a proud nation-state like China, this gives us an additional insight into how serious the Chinese political leadership is about economic development within its jurisdiction and how determined it is to resort to any means possible within the purview of its power to safeguard the highly regarded "*economic security*" in the face of escalating adverse impacts and restrictive pressures from the external.

4.2.24. The strategic priority of economic stability and well-being

The Chinese political leadership is seemingly obsessive about various key economic indicators, especially the Gross Domestic Product (the GDP) and its growth rate. However, this is nothing odd and unwarranted. It is widely agreed that the performance of the national economy, at both the macroscopic and microscopic levels, could largely determine the quality of life (also known as the living standard) of the people subject to it. When the national economy deteriorates dramatically (such as during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the global inflation triggered by high energy price and food insecurity due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine), then people's livelihood is almost certain to suffer considerably as a result of the precarious and stringent economic conditions. If economic under-performance persists and unemployment remains at a high level (normally a double-digit figure) due to whatever uncontrollable factors and/or man-made policy errors, then social unrest is very likely to follow soon after that.

This is exactly what has happened in the US during the pandemic, as well as the current situation in the post-lockdown China. Jason Schenker (2021), an economist and chairman of The Futurist Institute, has linked the staggering loss of employment and the likely delayed recovery of the job market to various socio-political, pathological symptoms emerged within the American society, "*such as political upheaval, violent unrest, and uncertainty*". He believes, among many others, that historical data do indicate a clear association (or even causal relationship to a certain extent) between economic crisis and social instability, or even violent revolution in some extreme cases (ibid.). However, the US is definitely not the only one facing challenges of economic instability aggravated by the pandemic. We can readily see that the soaring unemployment among Chinese urban youth has already produced unhealthy or even disconcerting social phenomena (Yao, 2023). In short, a strong, stable, and productive economy is the utmost precondition to safeguard the highly regarded national security that all state actors strategically prioritize and diligently pursue (Li, 2013).

The Chinese political leadership is well aware of the hazardous "*domino effect* (duominuo xiaoying: 多米诺效应)" that can be triggered by economic deterioration and precarity. This is reflected in many Chinese government documentations. In one report, President Xi emphasized that "*the security of the people is the purpose, the security of politics is the bedrock, and the security of the economy is the cornerstone* (Tsuchiya, 2021). Under the politically regressive and diplomatically assertive leadership of President Xi, the CCP has mobilized the entire Chinese politico-economic apparatus in maximum capacity to hedge the negative impacts China has so far endured from: **A**) external economic decoupling and/or derisking;

and **B**) internal economic failures contributed by historically formed, structural deformities and imperfections, as well as self-contradictory and disoriented policies that have been put forward in the recent years.

4.2.25. Economic volatility during the pandemic: a brief comparative case study

In this sub-section, I intend to conduct another brief case study on China's economic resilience and vulnerability during and after the height of the pandemic in comparison with the US. I want to highlight the importance of economic resilience because it is a highly desirable quality that can help a recovering economy to bounce back quicker and stronger. In a general sense, China's economic power to threaten others should never be taken for granted. If the Chinese economy lacks resilience, it won't survive all variety of formidable challenges there might be. The best way to observe and examine economic resilience is through the lenses of crises. The once-a-century COVID-19 pandemic was an extremely tough test of economic resilience for a broad range of reasons. How the pandemic has devastated economies worldwide in unexpected and severe ways, and what are the coping mechanisms from the US and Chinese leaderships to preserve their deteriorating national economy are going to be discussed in more detail in the subsequent parts of the sub-section.

4.2.25.1. "Vaccine politics" affects economic resilience during the pandemic

First, I want to digress a bit from economic resilience because it is intimately conditioned by inseparable political factors. All economies have suffered devastatingly during the excruciating pandemic with virtually no exception. However, some have sustained particularly severe sufferings than others, largely due to the uneven distribution of critical medical resources in a global scope, and the different coping strategies adopted by governments in different national situations and contexts.

The forecast released by the International Monetary Fund (the IMF) (2021) during the height of the pandemic indicated that the anticipated recovery would inevitably be uneven across countries due to: **A**) the access and distribution of vaccines and therapeutics; **B**) the dissimilar macroscopic policies formulated and implemented by governments to restore economic activities to the pre-pandemic level; and **C**) certain industries, businesses, and individuals are hurt disproportionately hard by the pandemic and their recovery is depended critically on how effective the COVID-19 is contained and managed and how to stimulate and restore the aggregate demand without incurring high inflation (ibid.). Therefore, the pandemic is also a tough test of government competency to provide critical and urgently needed public goods so as to stabilize the economy and relieve the financial hardship experienced by many.

From a retrospective perspective, the existing gaps and disparities, both within and across the national boundaries, have been amplified by the ravaging pandemic over the course of more than three years. The emergence of the so-called "*vaccine nationalism* (yimiao minzu zhuyi: 疫苗民族主义)" in the advanced nation-states did dim the hope of the struggling developing countries to reach "*herd immunity* (qunti mianyi: 群体免疫)" through comprehensive vaccination before more harm could have been done (Wong, 2020). What I call "*vaccine politics*" was another embodiment of the power struggles between the US and China simply because comprehensive vaccination with highly effective vaccines is an indispensable precondition of economic resilience and recovery. Methodical vaccination can avoid an enormous number of unnecessary fatalities than naturally achieved herd immunity through mass infections.

How to ensure the principle of equality and egalitarianism (which is cherished almost universally) during an acute and devastating global public health crisis and preserve the entire human race, especially in the under-developed parts of the world, was a highly demanding mission to be accomplished. China's "*vaccine diplomacy* (yimiao waijiao: 疫苗外交)" has

met extensive cynicism in the Western world due to the fact that the protection rates of the Chinese vaccines are significantly lower than that of the US vaccines, and a considerable proportion of the Chinese vaccines are not free of charge to the recipients, i.e. they are not donated (Nolte, 2021). Nevertheless, others also pointed out that Chinese vaccines and medical equipment are comparably much cheaper in terms of the purchasing costs, which makes them more financially accessible to poorer countries in need (ibid.).

According to Fortune (2021), the US has donated 275 million vaccine doses worldwide and China has only committed 119 million vaccine doses to a lesser geographic coverage. Absolutely free and highly effective vaccines from the US have literally compromised China's vaccine diplomacy, which is largely motivated by the implicit political agenda to salvage China's sinking national image and boost its soft power to the rest of the world. Undoubtedly, this is yet again a heavy blow from the US to suppress China's efforts to ascend to a prominent status in the international community. We should note that both the US and China are not perfectly altruistic when it comes to vaccine donation (Gill and Ruta, 2022). The ultimate motivation behind their generosity is the fact that the pandemic will not end unless herd immunity is achieved in all parts of the world (ibid.). This is simply a piece of unarguable scientific fact. In short, the world can only recover when we recover together.

The momentum of COVID-19 has been gradually waning down (from the developed world to the rest) due to increasing vaccination and the availability of more effective therapeutics. The evolutionary pattern and declining virulence of COVID-19 itself were also a contributing factor. However, the semi-permanent destructions done by the pandemic remain to be a constant challenge facing both the US and China to stabilize and re-energize their national economy, and restore confidence in their respective economic prospect.

Therefore, the pandemic at least taught us one thing: even from an absolutely self-interested point of view, no economic security or prosperity could be achieved by any nation-state on its own. The global economy is characterized by the increasing interconnectivity and interdependency. Several decades into the third wave of globalization since the late 1980s, the rules and tactics of the game have long been altered, so have the mindsets and behaviors of the major players. In today's world, states are bonded tightly to one another due to their mutual needs and shared interests. China is definitely no exception as the pandemic has unraveled conspicuously.

4.2.25.2. Economic performance during and after the height of the pandemic: China VS the US.

China was once regarded as a very successful case of COVID-19 management and containment among the world's major nation-states in terms of infection and death ratios *per capita* (Johns Hopkins University, 2022). However, the huge socioeconomic costs China has paid for fighting forcefully against the unprecedented pandemic without any foreign assistance are literally staggering, especially from a retrospective perspective.

The world's first major city besieged by COVID-19, Wuhan (武汉), has suffered devastatingly. Later on, China's world-renowned economic hub, Shanghai (上海), has gone through very strict, city-wide lockdown for exactly two months from April the first to June the first in 2022 (Goh and Woo, 2022; Huang, 2022). "According to data from Shanghai's statistics agency, the city's industrial output fell by 61.5% in April compared to a year earlier. Retail sales fell by 48.3% over the same period", as Fortune has reported just one day before the lockdown was finally be removed (Gordon, 2022). The estimated loss of global trade due to China's draconian lockdown (of Shanghai and other major Chinese urban economic hubs) was around a staggering 28 billion USD at the time of reporting (ibid.).

The draconian Zero-COVID policy adopted by the Chinese authority has knowingly sacrificed enormous economic interests (Hancock and Anstey, 2022), including the highly regarded GDP growth rate. CNN accurately concluded in a retrospective manner that “China’s economy expanded by just 3% in 2022, far below the government’s own target, marking one of the worst performances in nearly half a century. Growth was impacted heavily by months of widespread Covid lockdowns and a historic downturn in the property market” (He, 2023). Meanwhile, the situation in the US was quite ambivalent despite the hegemon has adopted a hugely different approach to tackle the vicious pandemic. The Washington Post straightforwardly pointed out that “The U.S. economy grew by 2.1 percent in 2022, notching six months of solid growth despite widespread concern that the country might be on the brink of a recession” (Bhattarai, 2023). A (hopefully mild) recession or even an upsetting stagflation rather than a recovery was seriously considered at the time. A series of (dramatic) raises of interest rates were made by the Federal Reserve over a relatively short period of time from March 2022 to March 2023 to tame the unexpectedly sticky inflation and cool off the overly heated job market (Tepper, 2022).

In China, the authority was very insistent to maintain its own approach to handle the pandemic. Despite the dissatisfactory economic performance against the ambitious economic goal set by the Chinese political leadership, the Zero-COVID policy has remained in place until the early December of 2022 due to acute outbursts of public rage over prolonged periods of lockdown and travel restriction in major Chinese universities and cities (Wei and Cheng, 2023).

To the strategic trade-off of the Chinese political leadership, the Zero-COVID policy and the grave damages it can cause to the Chinese economy and the Chinese society are the inevitable and acceptable costs to secure the CCP’s absolute control in all parts of China during an unfolding crisis. The Chinese political leadership was fully aware that without highly effective, foreign vaccines, and adequate medical resources (esp. enough hospital beds and well-equipped Intensive Care Units), widespread of COVID-19 within China’s enormous and densely packed (esp. urban) populations is literally a sentence to death to the country, the Communist political regime in power, and countless, vulnerable Chinese people. Therefore, we can see that economy has always been the second important priority after the security of the political regime and the unchallenged authority of the CCP.

From the shared perspective of political economists, the politics and the economics are always deeply intertwined. The timing of the outbreak of the pandemic was exceptionally inconvenient for China. China was under the double economic pressures at the time. One is the on-going trade war and decoupling with the US, and the other one is the considerable decline of external demands for Chinese exports due to significant economic contractions of its major trading partners, such as the EU and Japan (Li, 2021). Despite China’s harsh criticisms and public protests, the country still has made significant concessions to formally reach the Phase One agreement in January, 2020 with the American trade negotiation team. “Beijing promised to increase its purchases of US products and services by at least \$200 Billion (£142Billion) over 2020 and 2021” (BBC, 2021). However, “In 2020, China’s total imports of covered products from the United States were only \$99.9 billion, reaching only 58 percent of the commitment” (Bown, 2021).

I speculate that China was either evading its agreed obligation on purpose, or the country was reaching its economic limit under the mounting pressures from the US. I want to reiterate and stress that interdependence does not automatically guarantee a stable, equal, and amicable inter-state relationship, such as the one between the US and China (Vasquez and Mitchell, 2013). It only makes arbitrary decoupling or derisking more costly and destructive. In addition, converting economic dependency into political concession (or *vice versa*) almost always needs to go through a highly complex and incredibly intricate negotiation process.

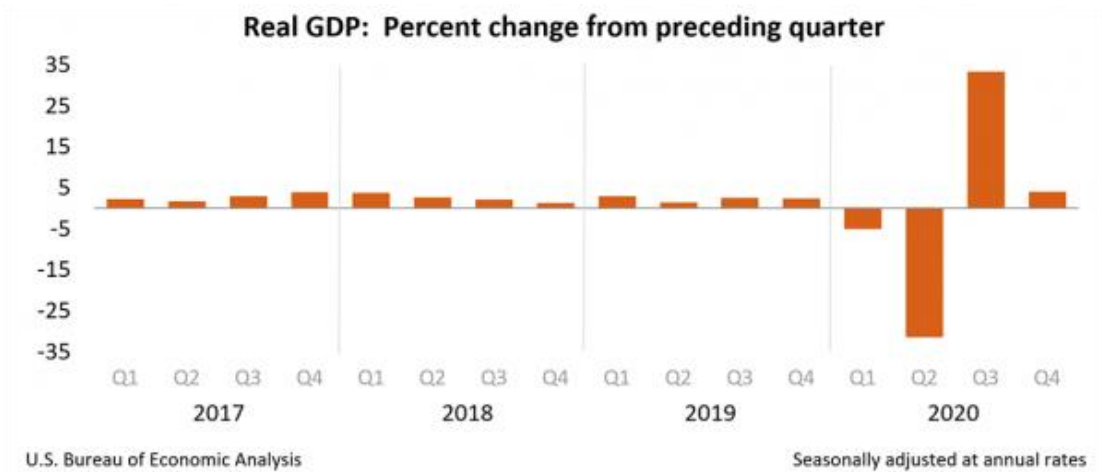
In general, the less resourceful (in terms of the availability of trading alternatives) (Duchesne, 1997), less wealthy (in terms of the GDP and the GDP *per capita*) (Fairman, 2012), and less patient (in terms of time-sensitivity of the trade disruption) (Menkel-Meadow, Schneider and Love, 2021) party is often the disadvantageous one according to a large number of empirically informed researches. Since the Chinese economy is heavily dependent on external demand rather than domestic consumption, which literally makes China a vulnerable giant, paradoxically.

The performance of the Chinese economy was not particularly unsatisfactory before the sharp deterioration in the second quarter (Q2) of 2022 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023). The Chinese economy had narrowly missed a contraction in Q2 of 2022. At the time, many already deemed it as an ominous signal about the uncertain future ahead of the burgeoning economic powerhouse. In fact, in the initial stage of the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, China was the only major economy that had a positive GDP growth rate in 2020 at a record low rate (in comparison with itself) of 2.3% (Vaswani, 2021).

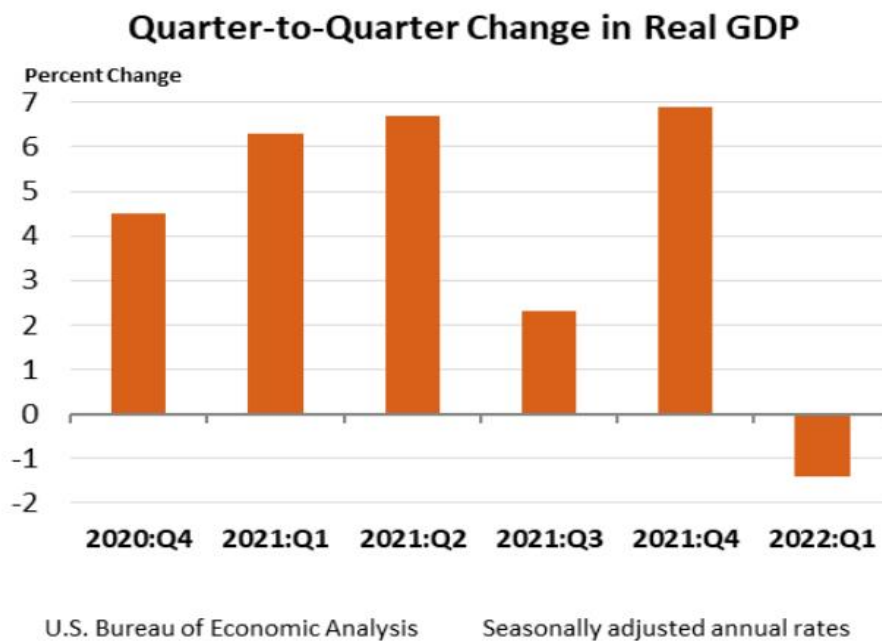
In comparison, according to the European Central Bank (2021), advanced Western economies, including the hegemon, all have fallen victim to the pandemic. At the time, it seemed that, especially from the perspective of the Chinese authority, the draconian Zero-COVID policy adopted by China might have an advantage over how the pandemic was managed in the Western world (Morrison, Kennedy and Huang, 2022). This actually has provoked intense debates over whether or not China's Zero-COVID policy preserved or destroyed the (currently sluggish and visibly deteriorating) Chinese economy.

Despite setbacks, the US economy demonstrated more sustainable resilience and stronger recovery as the momentum of the pandemic has been waning down over time. Major indicators of the US economy were starting to pick up in 2023 (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2023a). However, the overwhelming economic turbulence and financial hardship endured by the US and the American people in the past three years are undeniable. The pandemic in the US was successfully mitigated after a dramatic spike in January of 2021 (Reuters, 2022a). The sinking US economy then began to recover due to the vigorous roll-out of vaccination and the gigantic stimulus package offered by the Federal Government (Bachman, 2021), albeit the latter might have contributed to the high and persistent inflation in the US in the subsequent periods. The resilience of the US economy is unexpectedly stronger than some earlier estimations in spite of all the adverse conditions and factors in presence. For example, the sharp political division and fanatic ideological polarization among the (understandably infuriated) American politicians and ordinary citizens that are agitated by the poorly managed pandemic in the earlier days of acute outbreak.

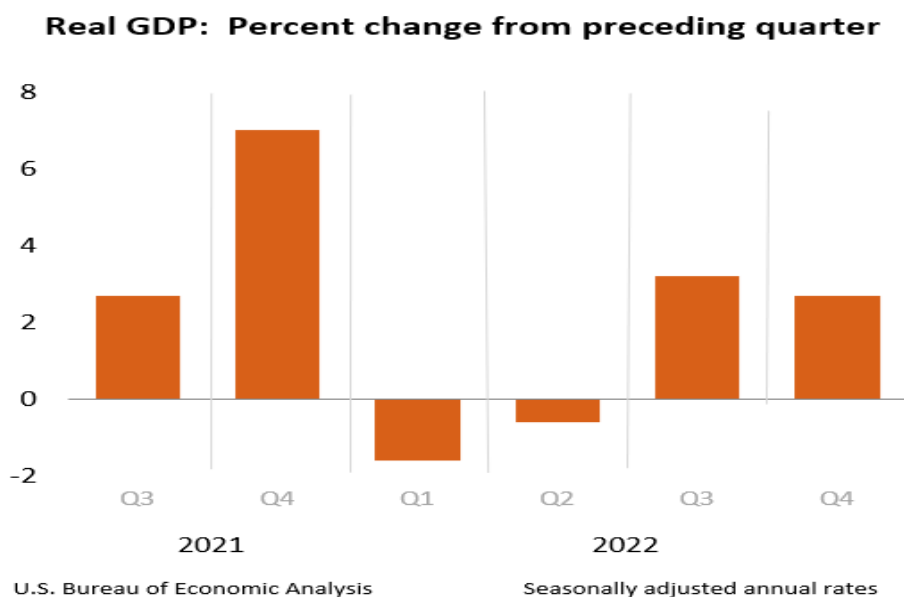
The official website of the US Bureau of Economic Analysis released quarterly real GDP growth of the US economy from 2017 to 2022 (see the **Illustrations Thirteen, Fourteen and Fifteen** below). These visualized statistical data reveal that the US economy has experienced two consecutive contractions in the first half of 2020 and the first half of 2022. The former was obviously the product of the sudden outbreak of the pandemic. However, the latter was believed to be the outcome of the Federal Reserve's decision to dramatically raise the interest rates in order to curb the historically high inflation (World Bank, 2023) triggered by both internal and external attributions, such as the generous stimulus package and lavish public spending initiated by the Biden-Harris Administration (Fortune, 2023), and Russia's unjustified invasion of Ukraine (Caldara et al., 2022).



(**Illustration Thirteen:** Real GDP: percent change from preceding quarter. **Source:** U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis)

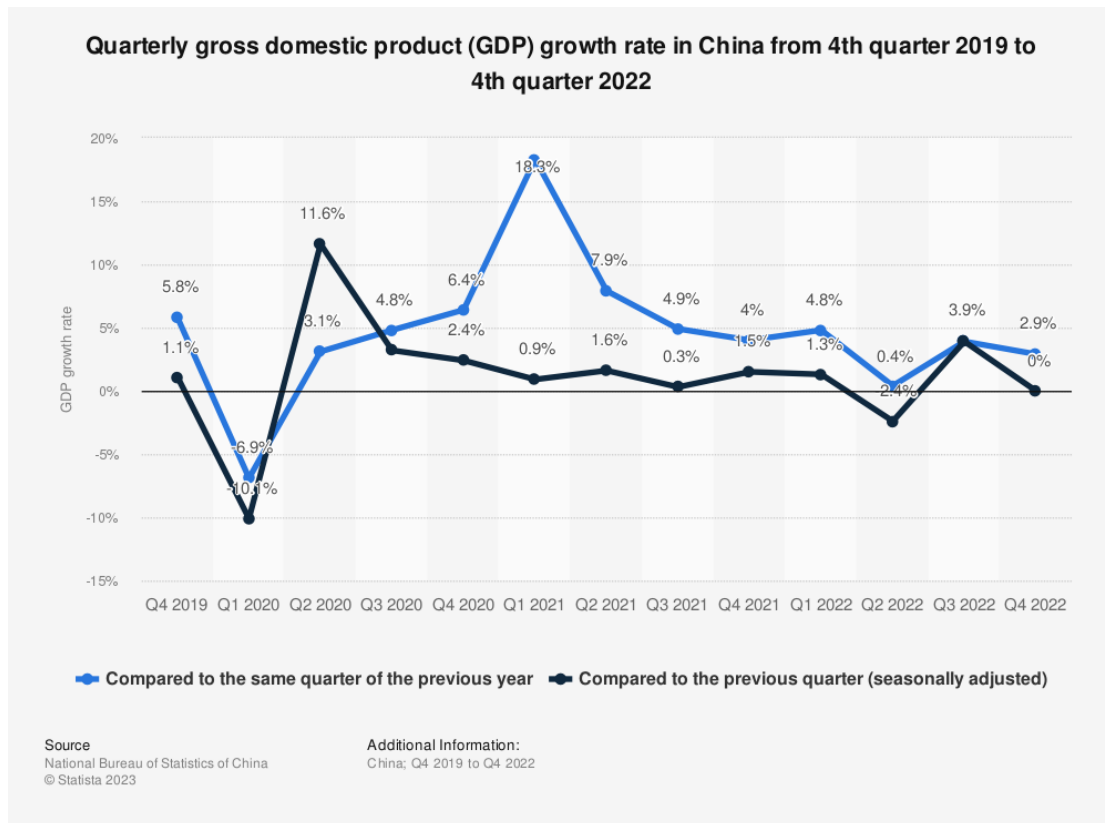


(**Illustration Fourteen:** The real GDP of the US from Q4 of 2020 to Q1 of 2022; **Source:** US Bureau of Economic Analysis.)



(Illustration Fifteen: The real GDP for the US from Q3 of 2021 to Q4 of 2022; **Source:** US Bureau of Economic Analysis)

Below is another illustration (**Illustration Sixteen**) of the fluctuations of the quarterly GDP in China from the end of 2019 to the end of 2022. If we compare it with **Illustrations Thirteen, Fourteen** and **Fifteen** together, it is noteworthy that China has also experienced two negative growth rates in early 2020 and early 2022 respectively. The time periods roughly matched the two consecutive economic contractions in the US as mentioned earlier. This can hardly be a coincidence. From my perspective, it suggests two things at least: **A)** the pandemic has very consistent negative impacts onto both the US and Chinese economies; and **B)** the US and Chinese economies are intimately intertwined with each other and their mutual dependency is higher than many (including the political leaderships on both sides) would assume and anticipate, which makes the artificial decoupling more difficult, time-consuming, and painful.



(Illustration Sixteen: Quarterly GDP growth rate in China from Q4 of 2019 to Q4 of 2022; Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China)

The shock waves of global economic deterioration caused by the COVID-19 pandemic provoked intense sense of economic insecurity within the US political circles, as well as among the much-tormented American people. Despite earlier optimism on China's potential economic bounce back after the abandonment of the Zero-COVID policy, it has never really materialized. Unexpectedly, the situation in China has gone from temporary business suspension to mass bankruptcy and permanent shutdown. The more vulnerable Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (xiaowei qiye: 小微企业; the SMEs in short) in the hospitality industry and education providers at all levels have suffered the most due to their intimate reliance on face-to-face/person-to-person engagements and interactions.

According to a very recent report published by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (the EBRD, 2022), China's draconian containment of the pandemic has initially led to survival-threatening situation for the Chinese SMEs. However, in the subsequent phase of economic recovery, the Chinese political authorities have deployed flexible, pragmatic and (locally) adaptive measures to assist the Chinese SMEs to get through the exceptionally difficult economic hardship, such as granting access to additional financial resources through temporary deregulation, as well as stimulating domestic consumption through the provision of incentives, all of which the EBRD deems as both appropriate and effective (ibid.).

Nevertheless, the Chinese economy took a sharp turn since the April of 2023, which was contributed by a series of highly destructive incidents along the timeline: **A)** continuous government suppression of overly powerful, under-regulated tech-giants with private ownership (e.g. Alibaba and Tencent) over the past a few years; **B)** soaring capital flight and massive withdrawal of foreign investment caused by the dramatic deterioration of China's macroscopic economic environment; **C)** liquidity crises of major Chinese real-estate

developers (e.g. Evergrande and Country Garden) that can and will trigger a disastrous meltdown of the Chinese housing market and, subsequently, the financial industry, if the Chinese authorities do not step in; **D**) collapsing collective confidence in the prospect of the Chinese economy among consumers and investors; **E**) insolvent local government debts; and **F**) decoupling and/or derisking strategies adopted by major Western economies.

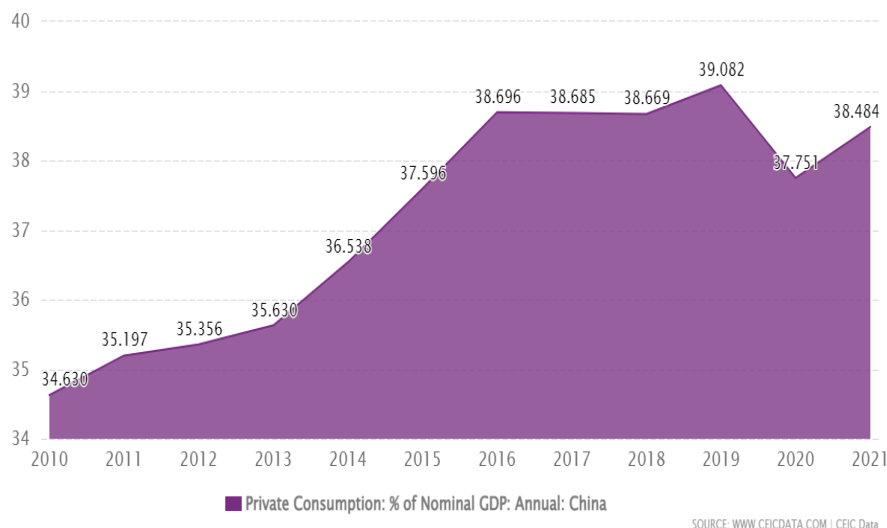
These attributions listed above are not created by the pandemic, but they are surely triggered and exacerbated by it. I theorize that these are the candidate causes responsible for the sluggish Chinese economy we can collectively observe from both the outside and the inside. Their combined presence can undermine China's full recovery from the pandemic and jeopardize the lives and livelihoods of millions upon millions of ordinary Chinese people.

4.2.26. The external dependency of the Chinese economy

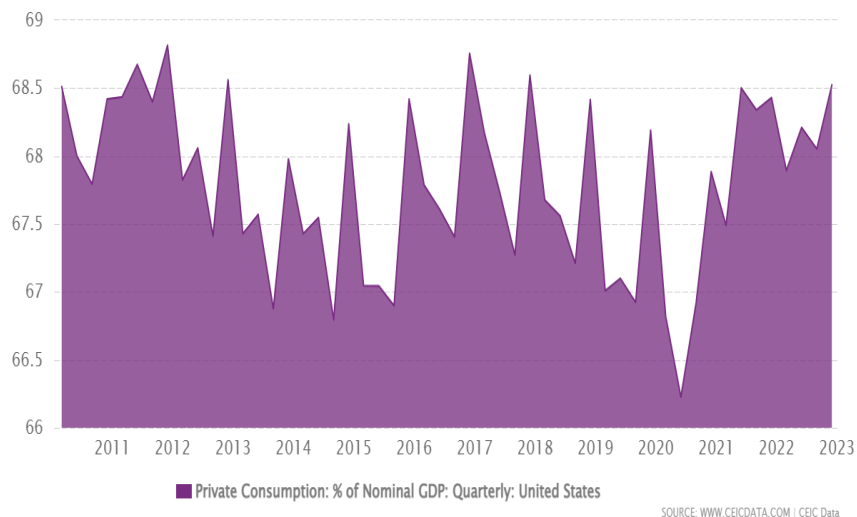
The Chinese economy is comparably more vulnerable than the US economy because it is still very much export-oriented. The largest chunk of China's domestic consumption is actually real-estate (Hoyle and Jain-Chandra, 2024). When the real-estate industry is collapsing, the Chinese economy automatically loses a major driver of domestic consumption and economic growth (ibid.). This inconvenient situation makes China exceptionally susceptible to the shifts of foreign demands (esp. sharp decrease or even just irregular fluctuation of the demand) at this point. Imposing more and stricter trade barriers and restrictions to artificially "*correct*" the persistent trade surplus China has enjoyed and benefited since 1995 by the US government are inevitably going to cause even more devastations to the struggling Chinese exporters (Trading Economics, 2019).

In comparison, the primary driver of US economic growth is an endogenous one (i.e. domestic or private consumption) and it is also a more sustainable one according to mainstream economists (Syed, Lee and Liu, 2013). As the two illustrations (**Seventeen** and **Eighteen**) below indicate, the percentage of private consumption in relation to GDP has been fluctuating between the range from 66.5% to 69.5% in the past decade for the US economy (www.ceicdata.com, 2023). In sharp contrast, the percentage of private consumption in relation to GDP for the Chinese economy has been fluctuating within the range from 35.5% to 39.5% during exactly the same time period (ibid.).

Based on this piece of very revealing statistical information, it is rather apparent that the US economy is almost certainly to be more resilient to withstand adverse external impacts and influences than the externally-dependent Chinese economy. This means, if the US-led West deploys harsh trade restrictions or even economic sanctions on China as a punitive instrument, China will suffer disproportionately hard and its ability to compensate the losses in the Western markets is conceivably quite limited. The over-dependency of the Chinese economy on international markets (especially the premium Western markets) to absorb its production overcapacity is definitely a systemic vulnerability, or maybe even a fatal defect, of the idiosyncratic, Chinese-style economic governance and development, i.e. the so-called "*China Model*".



(Illustration Seventeen: Private consumption ratio to national GDP in China; Source: The CEICDATA.com.)



(Illustration Eighteen: Private consumption ratio to GDP in the US; Source: The CEICDATA.com.)

Under the twin pressures of the lingering pandemic and mounting external hostility, the previously mentioned “double-circulation” model has re-entered into the formal Chinese political discourse and strategic agenda to: **A)** safeguard China’s economic baseline; and **B)** to offset its vulnerability with regard to the increasingly volatile and unforgiving external environment. However, to what extent China intends to retreat back to its domestic, economic safe haven and how this strategic shift and/or tactical remedy on the part of China could shape both the transforming “China Model” and the increasingly politicized global economy in what ways are still yet to be precisely known at this point. More data and information are required to make a cautious longer-term estimation.

One thing that political economists tend to agree upon is that the economic relationship between the US and China has already been hijacked by power politics due to the competitive nature of their intense, bilateral relationship. The *China Threat Theory* is only a rhetorical vessel for the ultimate power game to reside in. Unsurprisingly, the pandemic is not immune from Sino-US competition. The very reason why I decide to include the COVID-19 pandemic

into the brief comparative case study is that the pandemic is an extremely intricate and politically sensitive compounding factor to the complex and complicated power equation of the Sino-US, inter-state rivalry. It is also a monumental “*contingent factor* (oufa yinsu: 偶发因素)” that has gravely disrupted the strategic planning of both the US and Chinese leaderships under normal circumstances. Preventing something of the magnitude like the pandemic from happening again might end up futile. However, when that day comes, both China and the US should decide with unclouded rationality: to what extent they can fight against each other, and to what extent they have to cooperate and collaborate for the common good? The latter is what the *China Threat Theory* never touches on.

4.2.27. Is “Chimerica” the outcome of Sino-US competition and rivalry?

Due to the idiosyncratic “*institutional and systemic riddles and complexities*” embedded in the China’s internal domain, the Chinese economy is often defined as a “*bureaucratic market economy* (guanliao shichang jingji: 官僚市场经济)” by mainstream Western political economists, or, for the sake of fair representation, a “*socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics* (you zhongguo tese de shehui zhuyi shichang jingji: 有中国特色的社会主义市场经济)” as the Chinese political leadership prefers to call it in formal occasions. The interventionist and extractive propensity of the Chinese bureaucratic authorities at all levels is the primary source of criticisms from numerous scholars and commentators both within and outside the country (Norris, 2016). However, some others believe the Chinese-style political-economic governance has certain underrated merits (Bardhan, 2020), such as long-term focused and less time-consuming decision-making and regional competition based on economic performance and governmental competency (to accomplish goals and objectives set by the central leadership). These merits have contributed to China’s accelerated development and modernization in a number of positive ways (ibid.).

It is noteworthy that government intervention and politicization of economic activities and operations are on the rise in the US (Brower, Politi and Chu, 2023). This peculiar phenomenon can be traced back to the former President Trump’s strong determination to aggressively contain China with the purpose to tackle the alleged threats China poses to the US economy and national security. The Trump-style political reasoning and policy formulation and implementation have blatantly violated the conservative political ideologies shared by the mainstream Republicans and a significant proportion of independent voters in the US, which is the implicit principle of “*big market versus small government*” (Schimmel, 2016). This very idea believes that the market should remain autonomous and play the most prominent role in the economic domain. Spontaneous market mechanisms should be given the full capacity to govern economic relationships, organize economic activities, and determine resources distributions instead of (excessive and unnecessary) interference from the government (Goldberg, 2016). However, this view has been becoming increasingly faint over time, at least in the Washington. D.C.

The most likely exception is that, only during national emergencies and crises, the government should step in and take more control. The acceptable justifications for government to intervene in and interfere with the economic domain should be limited according to political-economic theories of Neo-liberalism (Teepel, 2011). The legitimacy for government to take more control in the economic domain is critically dependent on the nature, urgency and severity of the emergency or crisis at stake, in normal circumstances. The pandemic I have already elaborated on previously is a perfect example of just that.

However, I want to shift the attention to other more controversial instances. For example, shutting down foreign businesses forcefully is an unmistakable signal of government strength and political-economic aggression against other sovereignties. The constant abuse of “*national security*” by the Trump-Pence Administration as the ultimate justification to evict lawfully

operated, China-based MNCs from the US market is simply a prelude of the highly likely economic disentanglement and segregation in the years to come. The surge of protectionism in the US against China in unprecedented forms and manifestations has revealed the unfortunate fact that the provocative and inflammatory *China Threat Theory* has already dominated the strategic thinking in the US political ecology and climate. This propensity is likely to persist or even escalate from this point onwards.

The US House has voted a legislation to ban Tik Tok, the popular video-sharing application, in the US (Wong, Stewart and Kaplan, 2024). Tik Tok is likely to be forced to separate from its Chinese parent company, Bytedance (zìjē tiáodòng: 字节跳动), based in Beijing or change its ownership if it wants to remain operative in the US market (ibid.). This is just one high-profile incident of the political-economic frenzy perpetrated by a large number of American politicians and strategists (with different political affiliations and positions) against overseas Chinese businesses (Drezner, Farrell and Newman, 2021). Apparently, containing China has already become a rare bi-partisan consensus within a highly polarized climate in the current US political circle due to the inflated and (somewhat) irrational *China Threat Theory* entrenched on the minds of American political professionals and the general public alike, according to some observers (Heer, 2023). A large quantity of empirical evidences also demonstrated that the *modus operandi* of the previous Trump-Pence Administration has been inherited almost entirely by the Biden-Harris Administration, albeit with a less dramatic display of aggressiveness and hostilities (Nikkei Asia, 2024b). With or without government support, some Chinese businesses do seem to thrive in the US market just like their successful American counterparts operating in the Chinese markets (South China Morning Post, 2023a). It is simply a fact to be recognized here (ibid.).

From the perspective of the US authority, overseas Chinese businesses are regarded as the strategic extensions of the CCP with suspicious political agendas and missions to be accomplished against the host countries (Li, 2024). It is true and noteworthy that some of the Chinese MNCs do tend to take advantage of the US regulatory and institutional loopholes and behave in opportunist or even scheming ways to profit from the world's largest premium single market (Abosag et al., 2020). Nevertheless, I argue that their existence and behavioral controversies in the US market should not be utilized as a justification to consolidate the administrative power and legitimize government intervention in the economic domain to achieve non-economic (often politically motivated) objectives and goals.

Unfortunately, it seems that, in order to defeat China economically, the US political leadership is trying to imitate China's signature "*government interventionism*" in its (still open and neo-liberal) economic system, i.e. using arbitrary administrative power to purposefully intervene into economic activities and reconstruct economic relationships so as to serve politically beneficial ends. This voluntary assimilation of the striking "*Chinese-style political-economic governance*" on the part of the US does not replicate China's competitive advantages in the hugely different American context. Instead, this attempt could seriously damage the credibility and functionality of the institutional norms and establishments in the US by emulating China's highly controversial, institutional particularities and unconventional practices, or even outright defects, especially in terms of:

A) no clear separation of the politics and the economics (such as in the cases of political rent-seeking and hijacking the economy to serve political purposes and obtain political gains rather than being guided by spontaneous market mechanisms); and **B)** unbounded and unchecked administrative power.

Ironically, it almost appears that, in order to win the competition against China, the US should become more rather than less like China, maybe for the worse, not better. This can actually be one of the most ominous implications of the circulating and inflating *China Threat Theory*

within the American political circles and society. Namely, whatever China does will prevail. I cannot help wondering that “*would the strategic merger and institutional hybridization that many call “Chimerica” (zhongmeiguo: 中美) be the eventual outcome of the ongoing Sino-US competition?*”

If it is indeed the case, we should almost certainly see an unprecedented, hybrid model of political-economic governance and development to forcefully and vigorously emerge in due time as the Sino-US competition continues and deepens. This new model of political-economic governmentality is highly likely to replace the deteriorating, or even collapsing, neo-liberalism in a planetary scope in profound ways. I believe this should be regarded as an inevitable and ironic consequence of the inter-state rivalry between the US and China. The observable transition from pro-globalization and neoliberalism to the next one is real and happening. How the post-neoliberal world will look like and function is yet to be known precisely with details. I believe it could nonetheless take a considerable amount of time for the new governing mechanisms of global political economy to evolve into a full-fledged existence and establish far and wide throughout the globe in the longer-term future.

4.2.28. The attributions of the deteriorating Chinese economy

At the current moment, many start to doubt about the shining brand of the “*China Model*” due to the fact that the Chinese economy has deteriorated considerably since the latter parts of 2022 with historically low growth rates of GDP. This apparent economic sluggishness has concerned China-watchers worldwide (He, 2022). Public discontent over high (urban) youth unemployment and financial stringency began to gain momentum within the Chinese society, notably among the otherwise self-restrained middle class (ibid.). I believe the sluggish Chinese economy is mainly caused by four discouraging factors: **A)** China’s draconian Zero-COVID policy and its sudden reversal; **B)** the gradually bursting real-estate bubbles as well as the related financial insolvency deeply embedded in the fundamental structures and operational logics of the “*China Model*”; **C)** the disempowerment (or even suppression) of the private sector in the Chinese economic domain to prevent any substantial power transfer; and **D)** the unnecessary assertiveness and imprudent provocations towards the US-led global West. These four contributing factors do present extraordinary challenges to the uncertain prospect and outlook of the world’s second largest economy, which has been highly regarded as a growth engine and major economic contributor based in the increasingly prosperous Asian continent for years.

At this point, China is seemingly under considerable pressures to retreat back into its domestic safe haven (i.e. the so-called “*internal circulation*”) so as to withstand the external containment and stabilize and revitalize its sinking national economy. From my perspective, this strategic move is neither inevitable nor irreversible. The unsatisfactory performance of the Chinese economy can be attributed to both the traditionalist and revisionist tendency of the Xi Administration during a period when China entered into a visibly more volatile and unpredictable phase of development and transformation and the mounting pressures from the US with the unshakable determination to defeat China once and for all in the unfolding Sino-US power showdown. It seems that the internal political conservatism and regressionism, and external power struggles can potentially drive China into a more enclosed (not necessarily self-contained) and isolated state of existence with unoptimistic consequences.

Many commentators tend to agree that this is probably not a positive sign for China because a great number of stakeholders (including both Chinese and foreign) share the view that it is to China’s own best interests to leave the door open and continue to adapt to and evolve along with the existing global political-economic establishment and order, albeit they are created and still dominated by the US-led global West to this day (Tan, 2023). Challenging the *status*

quo on the part of China (either intentionally or unintentionally) does not seem to be a sensible strategic move to achieve any attainable agenda. The premature provocation to the hegemon as well as its loyal allies has led to a pernicious consequence, which is, the US-led global west has become increasingly hostile and tactically retaliatory to suppress the continuous rise of China in collectivity and solidarity, especially in a whole spectrum of rapidly emerging high-tech sectors and industries, through whatever restrictive and punitive instruments available at its disposal.

4.2.29. The “soft influences” of China as a revitalizing ancient civilization in East Asia

I want to end Chapter Four by focusing briefly on the weakest dimension of China’s national power, namely its soft power. China is an enduring ancient civilization with rich and proud cultural heritage that has been accumulated over millennia. The ancient China was literally the world’s leading contributor and innovator in almost all the major fields, such as science, technology and engineering (Beshore, 1988) and art and literature (Li, 2022). Even the bureaucratic system in the Chinese feudal society was an inspiring prototype of political governance to China’s admirers (Tan, 2021). Neighboring East Asian countries were heavily influenced by China’s impressive soft power in the ancient time and they have voluntarily absorbed and assimilated a considerable amount of Chinese culture and institutional arrangement into their indigenous societies, such as in the well-known cases of Japan (Tan, 2021) and Korea (Seth, 2006).

China’s fall from glory is believed to start in the 18th century under the “*isolation policy* (biguan suoguo: 闭关锁国)” adopted by the rulers of the Qing Dynasty (Qing chao: 清朝), the very last dynasty of China’s imperial history with a long list of monarchs of Manchu origin (manzu: 满族) rather than Han Chinese (huazu or hanzu: 华族 or 汉族) (Li, 2020). The tragic decline of China was coincided with the rise of the European colonial powers during roughly the same time frame. With their overwhelming military advantages enabled by superior science and technology, the European colonial powers invaded many parts around the world and extracted massive resources and wealth from their overseas colonies.

In contrast, as history reveals, China’s inability to modernize led to immense miseries, sufferings and atrocities the country had endured in the hands of brutal foreign invaders in its modern and contemporary times. China’s downfall as a once splendid ancient civilization was tragic and the country’s comeback to the center of the international stage under the rule of the CCP has marked a new chapter of this enduring and reinvigorated nation-state in the 21st Century.

In a general sense, the soft power of today’s China has lagged far behind its military and economic powers. China ranked the 27th by the “*soft power 30*” in 2019 with considerably low scores in government, enterprise and digital sections (Soft power, 2019). In contrast, Japan ranked the 8th, way ahead of China, in the same year by the same report (ibid.). According to this rather credible ranking system, the Chinese culture remains to be the primary source of China’s authentic soft power and national attraction (ibid.). In other words, China still relies, to a large extent, on the cultural heritage left by its ancestors to pull the rest of the world towards itself rather than create new national magnetism on a spontaneous and continuous basis.

I theorize that soft power ought to stay independent from the influences of the hard powers and it should emerge spontaneously within the civil society in a bottom-up fashion rather than being systematically manufactured and supplied by the authorities from top-down. The so-called soft power of China is actually the government-sponsored “*soft propaganda* (ruan xuanchuan: 软宣传)” in disguise from my perspective. It is inherently disingenuous and politically engineered to beautify the image of the CCP, rather than China, in a global scope.

China's highly committed and lavishly invested national image-building leveraged by its vigorous rise in the recent decades was fairly effective. The country's soft influences in foreign territories are most visible and welcoming in the so-called *Global South*, especially in Africa where education and job opportunities for young and aspiring populations are literally very limited and unreachable (Repnikova, 2022). China has attracted many of these young people to visit or study in the country by promising opportunities to receive quality education and exploit lucrative working possibilities. These aforementioned incentives are directly or indirectly related to material benefits and gains in nature. Therefore, I rule these government-sponsored, national promotions out as authentic soft power. Nonetheless, in a certain sense, China is indeed a competing force to the US in terms of national attraction, especially in many strategically neglected parts of the world by the hegemon. "*Soft power with Chinese characteristics*" might be controversial in its own right, but it could also be significantly influential, surprisingly penetrating and strategically far-reaching at the same time.

Chapter Five: The multifaceted China Threat Theory as an interconnected, social-political-economic conundrum

In the previous chapter, I have systematically evaluated China's national power in the military, economic and soft dimensions respectively. In this chapter, I intend to explore and reveal the multifaceted complexities of *The China Threat Theory* as an interconnected, social-political-economic conundrum. Again, the arguments and analyses I shall present are framed in the macroscopic context of the intensifying Sino-US competition and rivalry due to the fact that *The China Threat Theory* is literally the fuel of this ultimate power game in the 21st century.

5.1. Has the “New Cold War Era” already started?

Many political professionals agree that the current Sino-US relationship is indeed a “*slippery slope*” (Wu, 2019). Some suspect that the tensions between the US and China have already inaugurated a new phase of Sino-US relationship (Heydarian, 2020). The highly suspected “*new Cold War*” might have already started according to an increasing number of political observers and commentators (Baru, 2021; Green, 2020), despite both sides have officially claimed that neither of them has the intention whatsoever to engage in the mutually destructive confrontation with each other.

However, actions speak much louder than rhetoric. A new round of inter-state competition has been happening and intensifying between the US and China in the recent years. The trade war and economic decoupling/derisking in the economic domain that have been discussed previously are only two high-profile episodes with many more yet to come. The anti-China political atmosphere (esp. in the US) has been heating up while the bilateral relationship between the US and China has entered into a new Ice Age.

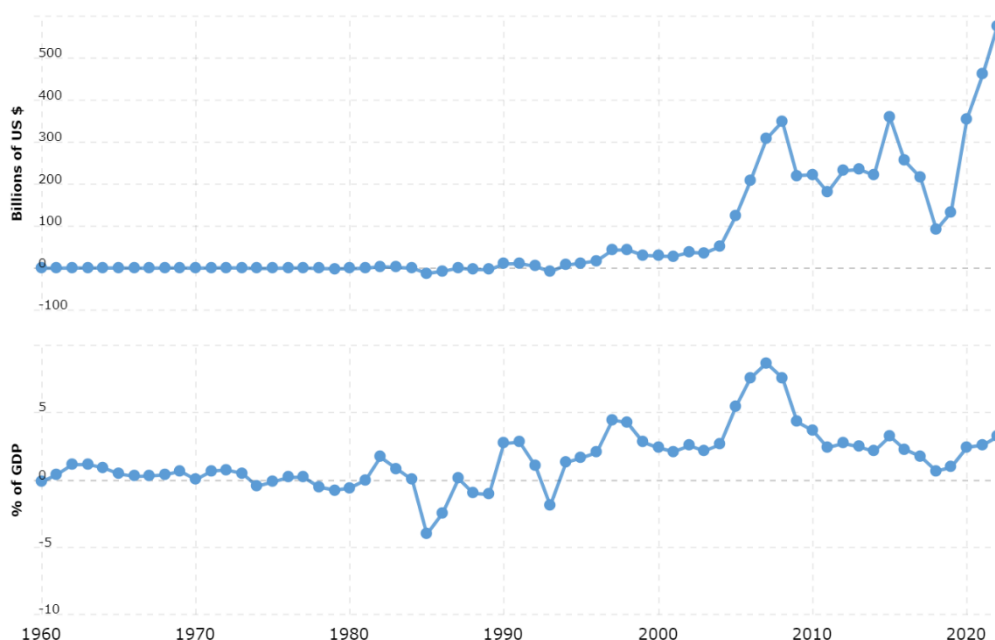
According to United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (the UNCTAD) (2022), “*the world's largest bilateral flows of merchandise trade run between China and the United States of America, and between their respective neighboring economies*”. The Sino-US economic relationship has long been believed to be fairly complementary and mutually dependent on each other. Therefore, in normal circumstances, the presence of higher degree of (economic) interdependence should increase the opportunity costs of artificial and arbitrary decoupling/derisking on both sides. The former Trump-Pence Administration's strong determination to “*correct*” the persistent US-China trade imbalance is a self-destructive, strategic move to hedge the (self-perceived) *China Threat* with aggressive and punitive methods, especially from a short-term perspective. However, the long-term gains, if the strategy could live up to the expectations, are highly likely to be significant or even decisive.

It would be naïve to assume that these interconnected and overlapping interests could prevent inter-state conflict from happening at all. Nevertheless, it does significantly complicate the so-called “*global power game*” (quanqiu quanli boyi: 全球权力博弈) in many ways and it can also considerably reduce the unthinkable possibility of an all-out showdown between powerful states. In reality, non-military forms of power struggles, including trade and currency warfare, cyber intrusion, technology embargo and political and economic exclusion or even sanction, just to name a few more important ones here, are much more likely to take place and they will intimately intertwine with global power politics as long as the latter exists.

Donald Trump's high-profile trade war against China has inaugurated a confrontational and unpredictable era of the Sino-US relationship. The trade war was literally triggered by the resurgence of *The China Threat Theory* within the US political climate and the American society. According to historical statistics, it is noteworthy that China generally had rather balanced trade relationships with most of its trading partners, except the US and Hong Kong (Keller and Rawski, 2007). China's whopping trade surplus with the EU in recent years was

also significantly reduced by 27% in 2023 in comparison with the previous year at a total value of 291 billion Euros (Eurostat, 2024). Some suggested that this might be a reciprocal, strategic move on the part of China to derisk the Union in the form of trade reduction (Moller-Nielsen, 2024). China is actually trying to diversify and rebalance its trade relationships with other economies to hedge the decoupling or derisking strategies adopted by the US and the EU as the country's long-time, top trading partners. However, to what extent the premium Western markets can be substituted by the alternatives remains to be a considerable challenge for the Chinese leadership to cope with, both now and in the short-term future.

If we stretch the time frame back a bit longer, we can see that China's overall trade surplus has been fluctuating since late 2000s, which can be seen in the **Illustration Nineteen** below. In a pure numeric sense, China's steadily growing trade surplus from mid-2000s to the current moment is almost undeniable. However, the explanation to this peculiarity could be simpler than most would expect, which is the rapidly growing GDP of China's national economy, especially after the WTO membership was granted in 2001. We can readily see from the same illustration that China's overall trade surplus in relation to its national GDP did not really increase dramatically after a brief peak in the later 2000s.



(**Illustration Nineteen:** China's trade surplus from 1960 to 2023 and its ratio to China's annual GDP; **Source:** adapted from World Bank).

Even though, the persistent trade deficit the US has with China over the years seems rather unsettling. However, quite a number of American economists and even politicians do not necessarily deem it as intentional and detrimental. They believe, other macroscopic factors, such as low saving rates of Americans, net inflow of capital and strong desire to export to the US from outside the country due to the privileged status enjoyed by the US dollar as the global reserve currency (Tradingeconomics.com, 2022; US-China Business Council, 2023) and a recovering US economy could be the real attributions to this much misunderstood myth. Some economists have also pointed out that the increasingly complex value chains of globalized production and consumption fulfilled by cross-border economic agents and entities, especially the MNCs (Blanchard and Shen, 2017), make trade deficit or surplus a weaker indicator of economic well-being and competitiveness. It also can be easily and deliberately manipulated to serve the purpose of political provocation.

5.2. Is the “China Threat Theory” a self-fulfilling prophecy?

The economic decoupling or derisking between the US-led global West and China is not merely a highly popular speculation, but a reality that can be traced back as early as the Obama-Biden Administration. Will this be an amicable farewell or a bad divorce, only time will tell in due course. The ill-fated Trans-Pacific Partnership (the TPP, now the TPP-11 without the US) was a major strategic move during the Obama-Biden Administration (with Hillary Clinton as Obama’s potential successor to carry on the re-balancing project in the Asia-Pacific region, albeit she was eventually defeated by Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election) to strengthen the US military and economic presence and influence in Asia-Pacific (or Indo-Pacific as having been re-positioned and redefined later by the US political leadership) and thus to reduce the growing reliance on trade with China among its allies and supporters in the region. It is obvious that the US political leadership has already started taking methodical countermeasures to contain the continuous rise of China in East Asia, long before Donald Trump started his amateur political career. Nevertheless, President Trump was the one who almost single-handedly started the Cold War 2.0.

Based on abundant observational evidences, the escalating power struggles between the US and China have been unfolding right in front of the entire world since Donald Trump’s electoral victory in 2016 to this very day (The Editorial Board of New York Times, 2023). Everybody could be a first-hand witness if he or she might take an interest in the delicate and volatile bilateral relationship between the US and China. It has become apparent that the aggressive trade policies and economic restrictions against China were not dramatically revised and relaxed by the Biden-Harris Administration. The anti-China, economic crusade instigated by Donald Trump is carrying on, even to a greater extent of severity, and the Sino-US economic relationship will remain to be thorny in the predictable future.

However, with the soaring inflation in the US and the mounting pressure from the opposition Republican Party and ordinary American people to bring the historically high prices of daily necessities down, the Biden-Harris Administration has even briefly considered to remove some of the tariffs imposed on Chinese consumer goods by the previous Trump-Pence Administration (Lynch, 2022). Albeit, President Biden and his advisors do not want to show political weakness (ibid.) and get accused of implementing appeasement policy as the Obama-Biden Administration allegedly did with regard to the rise of China.

Therefore, treating China as a serious strategic target and opponent is definitely not solely contributed by the political rise of Donald Trump and his unconventionally adventurous administration. What deserves academic attention is the fact that containing China with a wide range of extremely punitive and inhibiting methods now has already become a bipartisan common ground among American politicians and strategists, even though, some more reflective commentators, such as Daniel Drezner (2020), believe that America’s apparent strategic anxiety is actually based on an unhealthy dose of introspection and even lacking of confidence to its own model of political-economic governance.

Within the American political circle, the Republicans and Democrats are unified by the presence of a commonly defined “*primary threat to the United States of America*” (Bloomberg, 2019), namely an increasingly powerful and capable China rising from the other side of the Earth. Containing China has become a unifying cause to the Democrats and Republicans, despite the current political atmosphere in the US, which is being described as “*deeply divided and polarized*” (Congressman Ed Case, 2021) by many political observers and practitioners. This is an unmistakable warning sign to the Chinese political leadership. The current US political leadership, i.e. the Biden-Harris Administration, has invested considerable efforts to convey an unambiguous and coherent message to the American people and people all around the world that the America has returned back to its traditional track to perform its long

associated “*hegemonic roles*” after the finalization of the Cold War as the *de facto* global leader, prosperity provider and peace keeper (Stokes and Raphael, 2010).

Whether or not the US could shoulder and fulfill these formidable responsibilities and obligations as its allies eagerly expect, the hegemon simply can and should not be substituted by China or any other in the near-term future, especially from a functional perspective. Many still believe the (waning) Western domination depends critically on the underpinning role played by the US. Therefore, the battle is still raging on into all directions and possibilities, with or without Donald Trump and his political legacy. High-profile political campaigns launched in the past a few years to attack China’s moral position and economic base under the leadership of Donald Trump has literally ventured far beyond the political comfort zone within which the previous US administrations have dwelt. The mounting pressures and hostilities from the US have induced a series of defensive actions on the part of China to enable self-preservation and risk-hedging.

According to a very recent online opinion poll published by the sensationalist, pro-government Global Times (huanqiu shibao: 环球时报) on August the 11th, 2020, it claimed that “90% of Chinese netizens” support retaliations against the US trade sanction and political meddling into China’s domestic affairs, especially the deliberate internationalization of the separatist, anti-government movements in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. I suppose many might doubt about the credibility of the mainstream Chinese media outlets, both digital and traditional. It is true that mainstream Chinese media outlets are notoriously uncritical towards the Chinese government. They all tend to endorse the official stances of the Chinese political authorities and propagate state-approved views about and interpretations of (controversial or debatable) political affairs to audiences both within and outside of China.

Nevertheless, for the sake of fairness, they do have a certain level of reliability and credibility because, even though, large and well-established Chinese media outlets (not the multitude of grassroots digital media on the Chinese internet) are subject to the strict censorship imposed by the Chinese authorities, but they rarely fabricate data and evidences out of thin air or disseminate outrageously false information to purposefully mislead the Chinese audiences (Wang, 2017). The most common technique they constantly deploy is selective representation of facts and truths. The reason why large and well-established Chinese media does not actively engage in the shady business of “*fake news* (jia xinwen: 假新闻)”, which is a globally trending concept propagated by Donald Trump and many of his followers, is not because of their moral self-discipline, but due to the increasingly available methods to fact-check them by the technologically savvy and intrinsically wary Chinese general public in the Age of Information Explosion and Globalization (Burrett and Kingston, 2019).

Therefore, the various opinion polls published by mainstream Chinese media could still reflect the mental state and psychological disposition of a fair proportion of the Chinese general public to a certain extent. The influence of the Chinese media and the subtle information embedded in Chinese news reporting and story-telling should never be reduced into mere state-backed propaganda simply because the rigid, clumsy and old-fashioned propagandist operations have already retreated, to a large extent, from the Chinese social life for good as time passes by.

What we now see in the Chinese media landscape is more resemble to a combination of truth and political embellishment. The alarming takeaway from the various opinion polls conducted and publicized in China is the likelihood that the Chinese political authority might resort to unusually tough, retaliatory actions against the US political interference and economic aggression due to the strong base of public support back home. If this became reality, then it should be extremely hazardous because, in the middle of an escalating inter-state rivalry

between the US and China, growing hostility and revengeful tendency on either side is undoubtedly pouring gasoline over fire. It seems to me that more popular and convincing the China Threat Theory becomes, more likely it will be materialized as a self-fulfilling prophecy in the foreseeable future.

5.3. Democratic decay in the US and the split of the Indo-Pacific Region during Cold War 2.0

Donald Trump's single tenure was a sharp tipping point of the Sino-US relationship. Trump's intelligence chief, John Ratcliffe, at the time publicly declared that China is "*the greatest threat to America today, and the greatest threat to democracy and freedom world-wide since World War Two*" (Cohen, 2020). Nevertheless, China should not be held responsible for the visible democratic decay that has been emerging within the US domestic political system. Trump did contribute greatly to this dangerous tendency in his unique and distinctive ways. Ironically, the former President Trump shares one noticeable commonality with the current Chinese core leadership, which is both of these two administrations tend to abuse the national power to strengthen the president's own political status and influence (Jackson et al., 2020; The Guardian, 2022). Fortunately, the US constitution and other institutional establishment do not approve and tolerate autocrat and personality cult as a time-honored political tradition. Despite this, some have openly demonstrated their deep concerns over the dangerous deterioration of the American democracy into a so-called "*autocratic democracy*" in an incremental fashion during the past two decades since the 911 terrorist attack (Baker, 2021). Trump's susceptibility to political opportunism and outrageous self-interest have greatly enhanced this disconcerting trend.

Trump reemerged again as a leading candidate for the 2024 Presidential election and his popularity among voters should not be underestimated according to recent polls (Goldmacher, 2024). It is rather apparent that his personal influence remains to be exceptionally strong (especially within the Republican Party) yet very irrational and detrimental, in terms of its populist appeal and over-simplified strategic thinking based on hunches rather than scientific data and facts. It is no exaggeration to say that, as long as Trump and his like-minded admirers are in power, the Sino-US relationship will invariably be heading towards what I prefer to call the "*politically uncharted territories*" where neither of the two sides knows for sure how to navigate the rules and boundaries, if they still exist to some extent, somehow.

Quite a number of political observers and commentators deemed the chaotic Trump-Pence Administration as a "*political disruptor*" (Lonstein, 2018) to the not-so-harmonious yet generally tolerable coexistence of the US and China at the time. The former Trump-Pence Administration had essentially re-defined China as a "*strategic competitor*" (or even an officially recognized political adversary) rather than a "*strategic partner*" (Tellis, 2019), which fundamentally altered the nature of the Sino-US inter-state relationship and its future orientation. The driving force behind this dramatic strategic revision is undoubtedly the age-old logic of power politics and the lingering influence of the "*power transition theory*" that still occupy the mindsets of many political professionals worldwide in today's conditions. In other words, the notorious Cold War mentality still haunts nation-states, especially the great powers, in a very consistent and persistent way.

From an even more radical and provocative perspective, today's Indo-Pacific geopolitics and geoeconomics are seemingly divided by the drastically competing global democratic camp versus the global authoritarian camp. The former is (potentially) comprised by the US, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Australia and India. The latter is (potentially) comprised by China, Russia, North Korea and Pakistan. This is a quite inflammatory and ominous perspective to observe and judge the precarious power gaming unfolding in the highly contentious Indo-Pacific Region. The increasing popularity of this type of strategic thinking does not contribute, in any way, to the de-escalation of the already intense situation

in the Indo-Pacific Region. On the contrary, both the two camps demonstrate growing hostilities towards each other and they are seemingly moving into a collision course head-on.

Various signals indicate that the so-to-speak “*New Cold War*” might turn out to be a full-fledged reality sooner than we expect. The Cold war 2.0 is much more complex, intricate, delicate, and challenging to all the players involved in comparison with the previous one. Once it starts, it is almost impossible to reverse it and end it in a clean and respectful way within a shorter time frame. At the current moment, political observers and commentators tend to agree that the notorious Cold War mentality remains particularly stubborn and influential among many political strategists and decision-makers from both the two competing sides (Risso, 2015; Zheng, 2018).

To summarize, China has already become the *de facto* leader of the global authoritarian camp, even though, the grouping is rather loose, meaning, it is not based on strong ideological bonds, vast mutual interests, and common strategic goals. China is deemed and treated as the most prominent threat to global democracy by the US leadership. However, China’s presence and ascendance in the international community do not contribute in any meaningful way to the democratic decay, the rise of populism, and political polarization within the US. Politicians and opinion leaders like Donald Trump did. One should seriously ask: with its corrupted democratic foundation, will the US still lead the global democratic camp effectively in the forthcoming days?

The Indo-Pacific Region has become the main battlefield of the Cold War 2.0 (Biba and Wolf, 2021), with the potential involvement of multiple nuclear powers. Cold War 2.0 presents a highly precarious political game with unimaginable consequences if things turn sour suddenly or impulsive move is taken based on miscalculations. The paradoxical “*nuclear peace*” did demonstrate that a hypothetical nuclear warfare between (major) nuclear powers possesses the capability to wipe out the whole world and destroy the entire human race (Krepon, 2021). Technically, there will be only losers in the scenario of a nuclear apocalypse. Therefore, I argue that it is extremely irrational to replicate the Cold War once again in the name of democratic crusade in the Indo-Pacific Region or even beyond out of any strategic considerations and calculus because this disturbing episode in the history was literally written in blood, horror and devastation.

5.4. Containing China during a time of dual crises

For the US leadership, containing China requires internal cohesion and resource commitment. The dual crises the US was experiencing, a chaotic and violent power succession and the ravaging pandemic, temporarily distracted the US to focus on China. As for China, the Chinese authority was also preoccupied by the overwhelming waves of COVID-19 mass infections within its jurisdiction. It was unsurprising that Donald Trump has lost the support from the majority of the American voters as well as some of his fellow Republicans in the election year of 2020 due to a series of outrageous and self-serving behaviors of his, such as the blatant violation of the highly regarded political tradition in the US to voluntarily accept political defeat and transfer power peacefully to the next administration (Sevastopulo and Fedor, 2020); the ineffective and clumsy mishandling of the ravaging COVID-19 pandemic in the US (Parker and Stern, 2022); and serious abuses of his executive privilege and power, e.g. asking for political favor from foreign leaders (Shear and Haberman, 2019) and issuing pardons for his allies and close associates (Siders, 2021).

From a retrospective angle, the US has finally gone through an excruciating power transition at a turbulent time when the two aforementioned crises were devastating the country simultaneously. However, the heavy pressures from the US were not really alleviated under the Democratic Biden-Harris Administration simply because the new political leadership in the US has almost inherited the “*tough-on-China strategy*” entirely from its predecessor

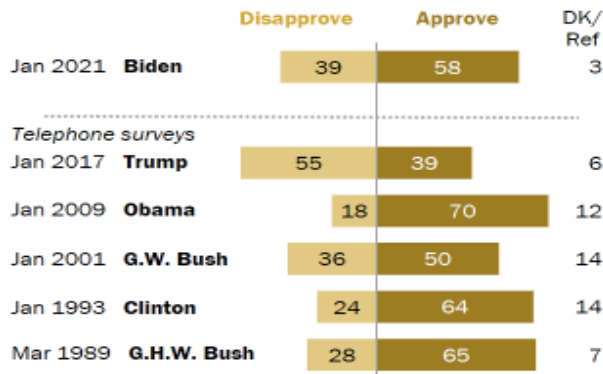
(Commuri, 2023). The most noticeable change was that a large number of controversial policies and executive decisions made during the Trump's single tenure have been promptly undone by the subsequent Biden-Harris Administration. However, containing China continued or even aggravated as the pandemic waned down.

As briefly mentioned earlier, what China enthusiastically attacks and ridicules is the shining brand of the widely admired and extensively emulated "*American-style democracy*" that deteriorates and decays within its own society (Liu and Xu, 2023). The American people are certainly aware of it as well. Nation-wide, longitudinal surveys showed that the American general public was expecting to see more policy cohesion, rational decision-making, bipartisan cooperation, and policy prudence under the Democratic Biden-Harris Administration (Manning, 2021). In response to their collective demands, President Biden has repeatedly made a formidable political promise to "*heal*" the American society that is afflicted by all kinds of societal chaos and unify the multitude of socially alienated and politically disenfranchised American people (The Economic Times, 2020).

Despite an excitingly good start, however, as the charts below indicated, the American people had ambivalent opinions regarding the new administration. They did not necessarily demonstrate high confidence towards the future success of the Biden-Harris Administration in the subsequent period of time (Khalid, 2022). Yet, a significant number of interviewees believed the Biden-Harris Administration might have a better plan to salvage the sinking US economy and defeat the COVID-19 pandemic than the disoriented and impetuous former Trump-Pence Administration (Washington and Inquiries, 2021) (See **Illustration Twenty** below). At least it was the case immediately after Joe Biden and the Democratic Party's hard-won, political victory in 2020.

Majority of public approves of Biden's job explaining his plans for the future

Do you approve or disapprove of the job President-elect ___ has done so far in explaining his policies and plans for the future to the American people? (%)

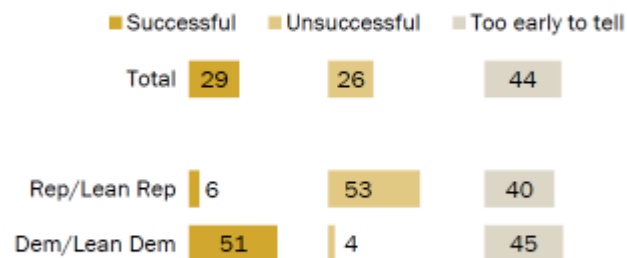


Note: Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 8-12, 2021.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Public mixed on whether Biden will be successful in office

% who say Biden will be a ___ president in the long run



Note: No response not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 8-12, 2021.

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(Illustration Twenty: national surveys of the public opinion on the Biden-Harris Administration; Source: Pew Research Centre)

At the height of the pandemic, both the US and China prioritized the containment of COVID-19 with the highest level of urgency and resource commitment, albeit through their dramatically different approaches. When China remained in a defensive mode by maintaining its draconian Zero-COVID policy against the pandemic, the US seemingly jumped ahead with more proactive measures and initiatives to tackle this massive, global public health crisis. Nation-wide vaccination was vigorously rolling out to reach herd immunity as the Center of Disease Control (The CDC, 2020) guidance prescribes. Timely economic relief and gigantic stimulus package were also generously introduced by the Biden-Harris Administration. The two most pressing missions right after the chaotic power transition for President Biden and his administration were: **A)** containing and defeating the pandemic; and **B)** salvaging the sinking American economy that has been stricken extremely hard by this almost unprecedented public health crisis since the massive outbreak of the “Spanish Flu” in

February, 1918. Not power struggles with China. Nevertheless, China still occupied an exceptionally important position in the US strategic portfolio, especially from a long-term focused perspective.

In fact, as discussed in more detail previously, I believe the pandemic was a strategic touchstone to test the economic resilience, the administrative capacity, and the political competency of state-actors during an extremely difficult time of devastating sufferings and overwhelming hardships. The situation seemed to be even more challenging for the US and China because these two were (and still are) tightly locked in the middle of a chronic inter-state competition. The pandemic has simply revealed the systematic weaknesses of acute, society-wide dysfunctions that are normally hidden away from the public awareness. This was indeed true and painful for both the US and China to discover their respective institutional defects and systemic downsides during a public health crisis that only occurs once a century.

5.5. The idiosyncratic Chinese political system as the ultimate source of the “China Threat Theory”

I have examined and discussed the intensifying power game between the US and China through the lenses of great power politics, leadership competency, and democratic decay against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this subsection, I intend to divert the attention to the internal sphere of China, such as its institutional arrangements and conflictual propensities, to reflect upon a whole host of allegations of *China Threat* deeper and more critically.

If China does pose serious challenges or even threats to Western democracies and the post-Cold-War world order as explicitly alleged by *The China Threat Theory*, then without sophisticated and critical understanding of the Chinese political regime and the ruling party itself is almost unthinkable, especially from a competitive point of view. The reason is rather straightforward and simple, China’s domestic and foreign policies, as well as its pragmatic political operations and maneuverings, are fundamentally and vitally dependent on the decision-making ability and strategic calculus of the core leadership of the CCP.

Therefore, in the subsequent parts, I want to delve into the political nature and the organizational particularities of the CCP to uncover the root of *The China Threat Theory* that is embedded deeply in the one-of-a-kind Chinese political-economic system and social realm. In addition, some of the exaggerated accusations and unfair prejudices against China will also be revealed and critiqued in varying depths in accordance with the principle of impartiality.

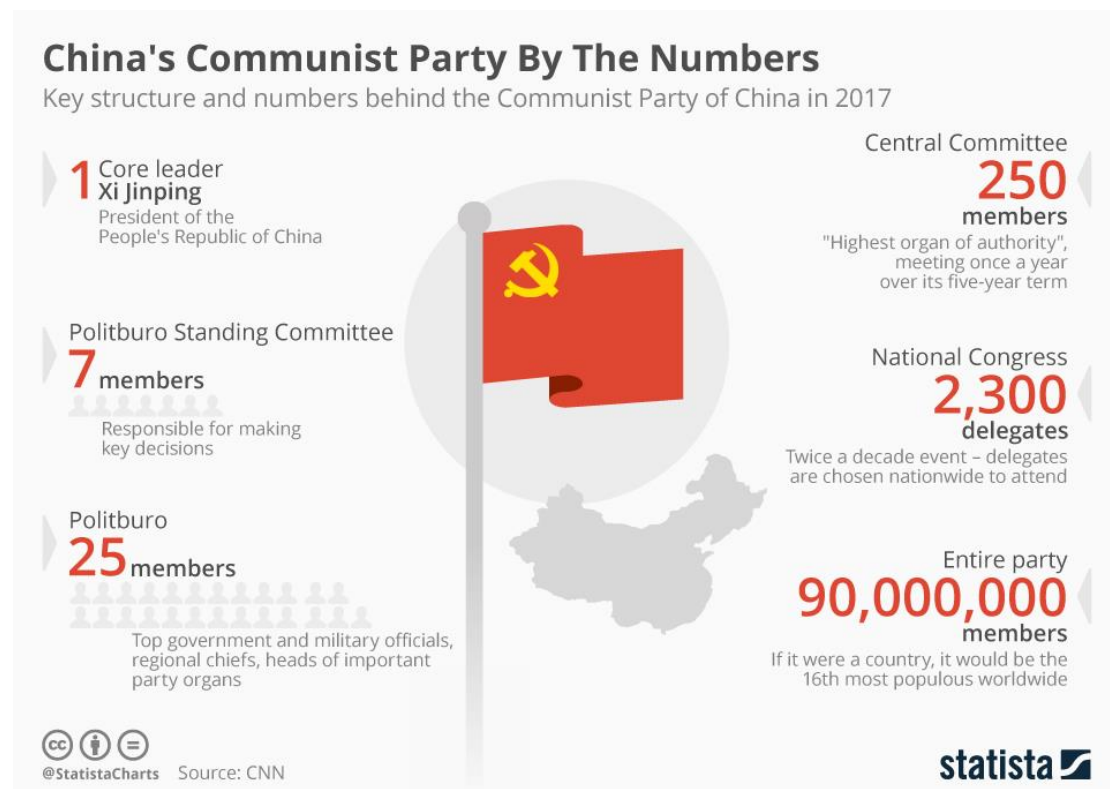
5.5.1. The CCP: its nature, organizational composition and governmentality

China has a very idiosyncratic political system that has been dominated by only one political party since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (zhonghua renming gongheguo: 中华人民共和国; the PRC in short) in 1949. A critical dissection of the Chinese political system from a number of selective perspectives will be given in order to critically understand the *de facto* political hotbed that has been breeding the increasingly popular *China Threat Theory* both now and then. I also attempt to rationalize why external hostilities towards China are so persistent over time, despite diplomatic remedies and soft propaganda supplied by the Chinese political leadership to dispel their adverse impacts.

The vitality and resilience of the CCP have greatly surprised many pessimistic China-watchers based in the global West. The CCP has been the political monopoly in mainland China for exactly seven decades up till the year 2019. The CCP has officially broken the record set by the former Soviet Union, which has an organizational lifespan of exactly 69 years from 1922 to 1991. The notorious political label of Communism or Socialism that has long been attached to China is inaccurate at best and misleading at worst. The true nature of

the Chinese political regime or system and how it functions coherently as a whole are much more complex and complicated than many would assume. The intricate, structural composition and institutional arrangement of the CCP, in addition to its eclectic ideological heritage, have made the CCP a one-of-a-kind ruling political party of an emerging superpower.

The CCP is literally a political enigma, far beyond a casual and wishful political labeling could ascribe. The (in-) famous “*Chinese exceptionalism* (zhongguo liwailun: 中国例外论)” (Ho, 2021; Tze, 2021) constantly compels political theorists to explore beyond their intellectual comfort zone and reflect critically on the indispensable “*Chinese characteristics* (zhongguo tese: 中国特色)” that are intimately and meaningfully associated with this powerful, flexible, adaptive, pragmatic and cunning political monopoly that stewards the largest economic-political-military powerhouse in the Indo-Pacific Region.



(**Illustration Twenty-one:** The hierarchical membership composition within the CCP in 2017; **Source:** CNN)

The pyramid-shaped, organizational structure of the CCP reflects China’s hierarchical, cultural and political tradition (See **Illustration Twenty-one** above). Rigid and Leninism-inspired centralization of power from the wide bottom to the tiny top within the CCP has long fueled widely spread accusation of dictatorship or autocracy from the Mao-Era to this very day (Feldman, 2021; Guo, 2000).

The inherent lacking of defining elements of (Western-style) democracy, such as political competition (Michael, 2019), civil participation in public affairs (Guo, 2021), protection over universal human rights and robust rule of law (Larry Diamond, 2004 as cited in Nwogu, 2015), within the organizational composition of the CCP and its insubstantial, “*cosmetic political reforms*” (Washington et al., 2012) over the years have also attracted numerous, harsh criticisms towards the party from both domestic and international political enthusiasts alike.

In short, the CCP is definitely not a believer or admirer of Western-style democracy and it constantly suppresses the internal demand for “*horizontal checks and balances* (i.e. externally existing, independent from the party)” (Zhou, 2020) and power-sharing with the disenfranchised Chinese civil society (Gao and Teets, 2020). This reason alone qualifies the CCP to be a major target of Western democratic crusade.

Nevertheless, I have to emphasize that the *China Threat Theory* suffers from a fatal flaw of conceptual ambiguity. By that I mean: this inflammatory ideological construct lacks precision and clarity of targeting. The alleged threat without unambiguous definition can potentially cause confusion and even repulsion among both its intended and unintended audiences. The critical question that deserves intellectual reflections has always been: is the CCP a threat or China as whole is a threat or the Chinese people are a threat to the Western civilizations or even beyond?

The politically correct answer to this provocative question is undoubtedly the CCP. The sheer organizational scale of the CCP and the enormous amount of power and strategic resources it possesses literally top all political entities on the surface of the Earth (Mack, 2019). This gigantic political existence is unsurprisingly subject to constant unfavorable judgments and hostilities (notably from the so-to-speak “*free world*”), not to mention its self-declared and very insistent Communist or rather Socialist political nature. In essence, the undemocratic or even antidemocratic political nature of the CCP and its overwhelming domination in the Chinese political ecology is the ultimate driver of *The China Threat Theory*.

Nevertheless, the CCP is neither an equivalent to China as a nation-state nor a full representation of all Chinese people, technically speaking. Therefore, for the sake of rigor and clarity, even if the CCP has been conveniently deemed as a “*political adversary*” and a significant threat to global democracy (Kleinman, 2023), China as a whole and the Chinese people should not be shamed and attacked as a collateral damage. Unfortunately, in reality, China as a nation-state and the Chinese people are increasingly not exonerated from the various accused sins and disrespects committed by the CCP, especially in the informal, popular discourse (Raleigh, 2020; Rogin 2020). The inseparability of the CCP from China as a sovereignty and the multitude of Chinese people makes the surging *China Threat Theory* extra sensitive and controversial in many ways.

5.5.2. Political corruption, administrative incompetence and governmental unaccountability in China

In addition to the undemocratic or even antidemocratic political nature of the CCP, US officials constantly insist and demand that the CCP, as the sole ruling party in China, should be held accountable for whatever alleged faults, aggressions, and oppressions committed by China as a sovereign entity, such as irresponsibly spreading the deadly coronavirus worldwide (Silver, Devlin and Huang, 2020); constructing and militarizing artificial islands in the South China Sea (Van, 2020), and even systematic genocide of Muslim minority in Xinjiang (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Even though, the Chinese political authority has refuted each and every one of these serious allegations with fiery words and alternative supporting evidences, these efforts serve almost no instrumental aims but further damage the moral credibility of China on the international stage.

The outrageous absence of accountability to the governed (i.e. the vast and heterogeneous Chinese populations) and lacking the sense of responsibility to other members of the international community is an unforgivable political disability of the CCP from the perspective of the global West. Only the so-called “*vertical accountability*” exists to a limited extent within the organizational boundaries of the CCP. Significant internal reforms of the party after the Mao-Era did occur and the power dynamics has been considerably transformed as a result of that. According to Gilli and Li (2012), the increasing size of the selectorate since

Deng Xiaoping became in power “*had rendered reciprocal accountability effective as a disciplinary device on the leader’s behavior*”. This presumed reciprocal accountability did help to prevent the absolute concentration of power to just one individual. But it is still far from a fully functional and institutionally sustainable checks-and-balances mechanism in its own right.

However, recent empirical evidences indicated a sharp reversal of this tacit, internal political consensus within the CCP as a progressive political heritage left by Deng and his disciples. The 20th National Congress of the CCP on the 16th of October, 2022 has officially legitimized and unanimously approved Xi Jinping’s extended, third-term (Economic Times, 2022; Lam, 2023) and his supreme status as the “*core leader*” of the CCP (Tiezzi, 2022). This marked the moment after which the power and authority of President Xi has reached an unprecedented level since the long-past Mao Era. The newly appointed members of the Politburo have turned out to be loyal allies and firm supporters of President Xi (McDonald, 2022).

The highly unusual concentration of power into one “*core leader*” or “*leadership core*” and the immense power and authority the “*core leader*” possesses have literally undermined the already flawed mechanism of collective decision-making and bureaucratic meritocracy as the CCP’s preferred substitute for political competition within a multi-party system. This fact alone has induced even more and further distrust and hostilities among the Western powers due to their shared fear that China might be on the path towards political regression, strategic arbitrariness, and behavioral self-assertiveness. This potential direction is both threatening and detrimental not only to China’s opponents, but also to China itself.

The so-called “*reciprocal accountability*” within the CCP that I have touched on previously was fundamentally based on favorable (re-) distribution of wealth and interests within the highly exclusive circle of political elites (Shirk, 2023) rather than shared values and rule-based agreements and consensus approved by the Chinese general public, which makes this peculiar form of “*accountability with Chinese characteristics*” (if I may call it that) even more meaningless and prone to all kinds of political ridicules and even de-legitimization. If the crisis of lacking accountability (towards both the internal and the external) persists for the CCP, then harsh criticisms, intensifying political smearing, and unjustified and willful attacks on China as a nation-state and the Chinese people will very likely to continue, maybe forever more.

The political accountability issue is an inescapable shadow that follows the CCP wherever it goes and whatever it does. There are plenty of examples to prove this conclusion. The malfeasance, corruption, incompetence and unaccountability of the Chinese political bureaucrats at various levels have seriously undermined the credibility and reputation of the Chinese political system and adversely affected how China is viewed by outsiders. Transparency International (2023) has ranked China 76th among 180 countries in terms of political corruption and compromised governance last year, which, itself, was very revealing. China ranked far behind Hong Kong (14th) and Taiwan (28th) and it is moving downwards rather than upwards.

One recent and highly relevant example stood out among many others is the mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic at the initial stage of mass outbreak by the local government in Wuhan. It was a typical case of political malfeasance, administrative incompetence, and almost unimaginable ignorance with disastrous consequences. The initial disinformation and cover-up of the mass outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan by the local government roughly from late 2019 to early 2020 has provoked harsh criticisms and accusations, notably outside China (Kim, 2020). The true origin of the COVID-19 and the credibility of the subsequent investigation conducted by the World Health Organization (the WHO) in Wuhan are shrouded in mystery. Speculations of a potential “*leak*” from Wuhan Virology Institute

(wuhan bingdusuo: 武汉病毒所), either accidentally or intentionally, have been propagating and circulating enthusiastically by various Western media, even very influential ones such as the Wall Street Journal (the WSJ) (Metzl, 2020). Up till the current moment, there is still no definitive scientific evidence to identify the true origin of the SARS-CoV-2 (i.e. COVID-19). Its evolutionary patterns and pathways before the mass outbreak in Wuhan were also not known precisely or consented by the mainstream of the global scientific community (Lewis, Kozlov and Lenharo, 2023).

As a consequence of the evasive attitude of the Chinese authorities and the lack of willingness to cooperate with thorough, independent international investigation, a number of extremely malicious accusations that deliberately target China have emerged soon after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the notorious “*China virus* (zhongguo bingdu: 中国病毒)”, “*Wuhan virus* (wuhan bingdu: 武汉病毒)” or “*Kung flu* (gongfu liugan: 功夫流感)”, coined by Donald Trump (BBC, 2020) and popularized by his like-minded supporters and followers.

These extremely derogatory terms have blatantly entered into the popular discourse and captured extensive attention. Anti-China activists and political forces (unfortunately, often times, they do not seem to differentiate the CCP from China or the Chinese people) have exploited this rare opportunity created by the COVID-19 pandemic to seriously tarnish the reputation of China as a nation-state and hurt the collective national pride shared by ethnic Chinese worldwide by promoting malevolent hate speeches and wild conspiracy theories through all kinds of sensationalist (especially internet-based, digital) media. We could readily see that the absence of a distinction between the Chinese political authorities and China or the Chinese people is a dangerous political dishonesty to be recognized here. It is rather disconcerting that this trend is vigorously driven by a significant proportion of popular and populist Western media with pernicious intentions. It becomes, literally, the fuel for the *China Threat Theory*.

5.5.3. The inseparability between the CCP and the Chinese people

In the escalating “*blame game*” initiated by the US against China over the recent years, this aforementioned distinction is virtually obscured or even disappearing. This shift in political discourse and usage of offensive political language is both controversial and disconcerting simply because anti-Communism or anti-Authoritarianism is one thing, however, anti-China is an entirely different matter. The most explainable reason why this distinction tends to be downplayed or even outright dismissed in the popular political discourse is that, in China, the CCP has already hijacked the state and the general public as a result of the deliberate and purposeful integration of the civil society with the state (a peculiar Chinese variant of the Hegelian proposition).

Over the decades in power, the CCP has sought every opportunity to penetrate and integrate itself into the live and livelihood of the Chinese people in order to create strategically valued, mutually shared interests and thus maintain its tight control over the entire country as a whole. The ultimate goal of the CCP is invariably to hold onto the monopolistic power in China indefinitely or as long as possible. This is a goal the CCP cannot afford to fail to achieve successfully, or otherwise, the party will collapse into nothingness and be completely destroyed by the inevitable and bloody political reckoning in the aftermath. This is literally a life-or-death strategic goal that determines the very survival of the CCP situated in an increasingly hostile and unforgiving global environment with persistent internal instabilities and conflicts of multifarious forms and representations as my *Strategic Filtration Model* indicates.

It is an unmistakable fact that the CCP has already become inseparable from China as a sovereignty and the Chinese general public. The CCP and the Chinese people are securely

bonded with one another over many years of civil-government expedience and/or cooperation to the point that they simply rely on each other to survive and cannot afford to be opportunistic. I believe the undifferentiated and ambiguous attacks on the CCP by misusing the concept of “China” (such as in the conspicuous case of *The China Threat Theory*) might end up fueling the already burning nationalism in the Chinese society because, to the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people, it is China under attacks rather than the ruling political party. From the shared perspective of many Chinese patriots, China is their beloved motherland and it represents the ultimate, collective pride they have to defend and fight for at all costs.

5.6. Political sustainability of the CCP and China’s domestic cohesion and stability

In this subsection, the political sustainability of the CCP will be examined critically in relation to the *China Threat Theory*. I want to reiterate that this inflammatory theory is neither true nor false because it is inherently hypothetical and speculative, even with the presence of a considerable amount of very persuasive evidences. In short, if the CCP falls, the *China Threat Theory* might subside for some time. But according to my own judgement, it might never disappear completely.

First of all, I want to clarify that the *China Threat Theory* is actually based on an underlying assumption or precondition that China is domestically stable and the country continues to thrive under the sustainable leadership of the CCP in the foreseeable future. In this sense, China’s domestic situation determines whether or not this rising superpower has the abilities to constitute any realistic threats to other sovereignties. If the Communist political regime collapsed or social upheaval dominated the Chinese society, then, conceivably, China would be much less a threat to others in these extremely unfavorable scenarios. Therefore, in the subsequent parts, I intend to explore two areas of major challenges awaiting to be effectively addressed by the Chinese political leadership, namely the political sustainability of the CCP and the internal cohesion and stability of the rapidly transforming Chinese society.

5.6.1. Administrative corruption as the primary threat to the political legitimacy of the CCP

It is widely quoted in the literature that “*absolute power corrupts absolutely*” (Li, 2019). The almost unbounded, monopolistic administrative power in China has led to serious abuse of offices among Chinese bureaucrats at all levels. In reality, there is an underdevelopment, if not completely absence, of institutionalized and strictly enforced, non-partisan, disciplinary mechanism to “*put power in a cage* (ba quanli guanjin longzi: 把权力关进笼子)” that the Xi Administration has always been eager to achieve (China Daily, 2015), at least, rhetorically.

In short, the rampant administrative corruption in China is the unfortunate product of the structural defect and institutional disability of the one-of-a-kind Chinese political system (Duan, 2014). Corruption is literally one of the most persistent, detrimental and pressing challenges facing the Chinese political leadership due to its hazardous potentiality to bankrupt and undermine the fairly scarce and greatly precious citizen-government trust and cooperation and thus threaten the legitimacy and authority of the CCP as the sole ruling party in China (ibid.).

It has long been pointed out by a large number of political observers and commentators that administrative corruption could not only cause devastating damages to the image and reputation of the CCP both in China and worldwide, but also endanger the political survival of the party (i.e. *the political sustainability of the CCP*), if short-term remedies and long-term reforms were not initiated and implemented by the Chinese political leadership with efficacy and dedication. It is no exaggeration to say that China’s internal instability and legitimacy crisis of the Communist regime in power are largely credited to this single issue alone.

The political sustainability of the CCP owes a lot to the spectacular performance of the Chinese economy on both the microscopic and macroscopic levels. It appears that the astounding economic development and modernization throughout China have conveniently justified the political competence and legitimacy of the CCP and, also, have won a significant number of supporters both at home and abroad (Dickson, 2016). Some commentators deem this as platitudes (Culver, n.d.), yet one should take what the late Premier Li Keqiang (李克强) once said during a press conference into serious consideration: there are still around 600 million Chinese have a monthly income below 1000RMB (138USD) (Li, 2020). According to the logic of the well-known Maslow's hierarchy of needs (McCuire, 2012), the majority of the ordinary Chinese people remain at the bottom of the pyramid. Living necessities and basic economic security are the most desirable and satisfying to them. Healthy performance of the national economy can fulfill their needs and wants. It is the most important precondition to ensure civil-government cooperation, or, at least, expedience in today's China.

Based on the reality that collective wealth and economic resources are far from affluent in a *per capita* sense, corrupt and rent-seeking behaviors of office-holders are regarded as a form of repulsive and intolerable crime in the eyes of the Chinese general public (Kwong, 2015). In fact, the highly defective Chinese political system and governance-style are the very root of these afflicting problems. It is widely known that the CCP is seriously plagued by rampant administrative corruption (Lagunes and Rose-Ackerman, 2015), such as bribery taking, fraud and embezzlement, and various forms of malfeasance and incompetency (Cai, 2014). They can be attributed to the unfortunate fact that China is still ruled by almost unchallenged administrative power rather than authentic and robust rule of law, even the Chinese political leadership itself recognizes it, albite unwillingly.

The Xi Administration is clearly aware of the potential political crises facing the CCP if the party does not reform itself to meet the increasingly strong domestic imperatives from the Chinese general public, such as the pressing demand for clean governance, political transparency, and genuine empowerment of the private sector and the civil society to resist and forbid financial exploitation of corrupt government officials and their cronies (Zheng and Huang, 2018). In response to the intense repulsion and resentment towards corruption within the Chinese society, the Xi-centered political leadership has invested hard efforts to educate the Chinese bureaucrats from top-down and has deployed extremely tough measures to discipline and even punish the daring offenders in its own political system (Jiang, 2017).

However, from a historical perspective, it is somewhat unfair to blame corruption exclusively to the CCP because corruption has long existed in the Chinese society since many hundred years ago, much longer than the political history of the CCP of just over 100 years (from 1921 to 2021). Some scholars argue that the stubborn feudalism in the Chinese society has systematically cultivated a distinctive bureaucratic ecology of normalized corruption among power-bearers and office-holders in a very consistent and persistent manner from the ancient time to this very day (Gupta, 1974).

In China, politics is simply meaningless and worthless without rent-seeking. Without introducing independent supervision and effectively enforced regulation into the (historically segregated, self-contained and inward-looking) Chinese social, economic and political systems, corruption is highly likely to continue to exist or even thrive under whatever political regime. Administrative corruption is taking more subtle and secretive forms in order to avoid detection and prosecution at this point in China. The most explainable reason for this is perhaps that the consequences associated with administrative corruption regardless of its magnitude have become much more severe and punitive due to President Xi's draconian, top-down campaign to crackdown administrative corruption within the CCP since he came in power in early 2013.

Despite a reasonable degree of success, some more pessimistic and cynical scholars have expressed their skepticism about the long-term efficacy of Xi's high-profile, anti-corruption campaign. They tend to agree that the “*root causes*” of China's rampant administrative corruption reside deeply within the one-party political system itself (Wu and Ma, 2016). They claim that, without decisive political reform to fundamentally transform the existing system, administrative corruption is highly unlikely to be eradicated, or at least, minimized in China (ibid.). But, pushing forward systemic political reform requires the CCP to voluntarily surrender its political monopoly and absolutely control in China (Lin, 2014; Scrafton, 2019). This is utterly unacceptable to the ruling party and it has been strongly resisted by the core leaderships of the CCP from Deng, as the initiator of the economic reforms, to Xi, as a nostalgic imitator of Mao.

Despite the considerable reluctance on the part of the CCP to reform politically, some China-watchers commented: this might not be easy to achieve and a (potentially) violent and disruptive revolution remains to be the ultimate determinant to compel the CCP to concede and compromise with the emerging civil awakening among the Chinese (esp. younger and better educated) populations (White, 2013). Corruption in China is an outrageous consequence of what I prefer to call the “*interchangeability*” or “*quid pro quo*” between economic benefits and political capital. This is made possible by the high tolerance of prevalent corruption within China's gravely defective bureaucratic system and the Chinese society. Containing the pervasive rent-seeking propensity among the Chinese bureaucrats is not done by the well-established and effectively enforced rule of law, but according to the mindsets and attitudes of the central leadership at the very top (Guiheux, 2007; Zhang, 2020). The latter is notoriously subjective, arbitrary and politically motivated to defend the deeply interwoven and enormously vast vested interests, especially those of the “*red princelings*” and the powerful factions they are associated with, and engage in internal power struggles.

Since the CCP became the sole ruling political party in 1949, its party membership (not to mention high-ranking government positions) has been intimately associated with all kinds of privileges and prerogatives in the country (Sullivan, 2007). I theorize the party membership is a thoughtful political instrument to form strategic common ground or even alliance with both the ordinary members of the Chinese general public and, more importantly, the emerging indigenous (socioeconomic) elites, especially China-based entrepreneurs, capitalists and industrialists with significant business success and considerable social influence (such as the quite vocal and bold Jack Ma (Ma Yun: 马云) of Alibaba (阿里巴巴) who frequently appeared in public occasions before being eventually silenced and subjugated by the political authority) (Pei, 2021), and public opinion leaders.

I am here to propose a “*value exchange system*” to theorize the CCP is situated at the top of the food chain by deliberation and how it functions to secure and advance its own interests. Administrative power and its bearers are literally the most convertible and sought-after social capital in the Chinese society, which is channeled through extremely complex interrelationships and transactions among and between a whole spectrum of agents, entities and forces. It is noteworthy that the CCP has always been an accomplished master of relationship building and management in many senses. The party is an efficiently organized, political organism thriving in a typical “*high-context culture*” where tacit agreements and unwritten rules play critical roles (Brandt, 2021), and within a “*guanxi* (关系: interpersonal relations)-mediated” society that appreciates interest-based reciprocity and mutuality rather than morally acceptable code of conduct and the rule of law. Chinese bureaucrats (at both central and local levels) constantly demand financial gain and economic return for their organizational inputs and they also actively collect a handsome amount of dividend for their role of “*lubrication*” in economically productive activities.

In this sense, the CCP (together with its members of office-holders) could be regarded as a parasitical organism hosted by the entire Chinese nation-state. It is the ultimate decision-maker and organizer within the jurisdiction of China, but not necessarily a contributor in nature. The CCP enjoys much more privilege and coercive capacity than regular political parties (including both ruling parties and opposition parties) in mainstream Western democracies due to literally being the political monopoly in an authoritarian yet powerful nation-state. This is exactly why administrative corruption is so deeply saturated in the party because no viable supervision and competitive pressure have ever substantially existed since 1949 to regulate the greedy and exploitative behaviors of the Chinese bureaucrats and their cronies towards private businesses and regular individuals. The latter is absolutely resistless to the power, influence, and even coercion of the former.

I want to briefly mention that another major source of the formidable power and influence the CCP possesses is the so-called “*power of the purse*” (Li, 2010). In China, the ruling party holds the ultimate authority to determine the funding for numerous civil programs (especially social security/retirement benefits, research and education, and Medicare) and public projects (especially infrastructure construction and urbanization) throughout the country or even abroad (Raine, 2013). Achieving absolute domination in both the economic domain and the political sphere has made the CCP almost indispensable and irreplaceable to the survival and well-being of China as a functioning sovereign entity and, not to mention, the life and livelihood of countless Chinese people depending on it.

The China Threat Theory does owe much of its notoriety to the controversial political nature (i.e. Communist or Socialist) and practice (i.e. administrative corruption) of the CCP. There is a major institutional divergence or even incompatibility regarding how politics and economics should be properly distinguished and governed in China versus in the liberal capitalist Western democracies (especially in the US). This fundamental difference contributes further to the popularity of *The China Threat Theory* due to the fact that the CCP is excessively powerful and interventionist, even for supporters of the “*strong state*”. To them, the only acceptable role the state could possibly play in the economic domain is to supply necessary institutional provisions and various public goods to enable and safeguard the spontaneous functions of the free market. The insatiable grip onto both the economic and political powers by the Chinese political authorities definitely qualifies a threat in its own right.

5.7. State Capitalism in evolution

As mentioned above, the Chinese state plays a central role in economic governance and development. Systematic state sponsorship, subsidy and support to strategically important Chinese businesses (the overwhelming majority of them are state-owned enterprises with deep government background) in key industries, such as telecommunication, energy and transportation, at the expenses of the private sector (Nikkei Asia, 2024c). As time goes by, the strong interventionist propensity of the Chinese state has gradually penetrated into the privately owned Chinese businesses as reforms continue to roll out throughout China. This is literally a landmark of the continuous evolution of China’s heavily scrutinized and critically critiqued state capitalism. The case of Huawei deserves to be mentioned again here. The strong support and *de facto* endorsement from the Chinese government to encourage Huawei’s ambitious expansion in major global markets have provoked extensive and enthusiastic criticisms and oppositions from the global West, in particular in the US, for the violation of the principle of fair competition (Haley and Haley, 2013).

Ironically, what ultimately sealed the fate of Huawei in the US market (as well as other major Western markets) was its deep governmental background and self-evident favoritism generously offered by the Chinese authority. This is a peculiar variant of the Chinese-style “*State Capitalism* (guojia ziben zhuyi: 国家资本主义)” that has regained notoriety in the

recent years. With the vigorous rise of a significant number of China-based and state-backed MNCs operating in major global markets, their unusually strong market penetration capacities and rapidly growing market shares driven by low-price strategy have promptly alerted the US-led Western powers. After some initial successes, the “*state capitalism of Chinese characteristics*” has met (temporary) setbacks in major Western markets due to its political nature, especially for the sake of national security. From my perspective, the situation is not going to improve in the foreseeable future because China is no longer a target of Western assimilation, but the ultimate opponent the West has to contain and, eventually, defeat.

The conventional business promotion instruments the Chinese state used to deploy, such as preferable industrial policies (Huld, 2023), generous government subsidies (Leahy, Kyngé and Yu, 2024), lower regulatory barriers (Wang and Lu, 2023) and financial loans at much lower interest rates (Lin, Cai and Li, 2003), are apparently not sufficient and sophisticated enough to gain global economic domination in today’s highly competitive conditions and within much more complex and volatile business environments. Talent incubation and recruitment from top education and research institutes (in China and worldwide), streamlined technology transfer in-between civilian and military utilities, local adaptation of Chinese high-tech firms in foreign markets with meticulous cross-border support and assistance, etc. have been eagerly and diligently provided by the Chinese government to help China-based MNCs to penetrate into (both premium and emerging) global markets for higher profits and more economic influences (Bernier, Bance and Florio, 2020). All these are warning signs of *China Threats* in the eyes of China’s opponents.

5.7.1. The controversies of the “China Model” and its state-backed internationalization

It is generally true that China has been exporting its idiosyncratic model of political-economic governance and development abroad with enthusiasm and open arms, even though the Chinese authority officially denies this rather obvious inclination. If the politically and morally controversial “*China Model*” is popularized and emulated in other parts of the world due to its huge successes so far (especially in terms of poverty reduction and raising the overall living standard from a low level at a fast pace), then it will undoubtedly be a very realistic threat to the standardized, universalized, and normalized Western modes of political-economic governance and development in a global scope.

The “*China Model*” is the embodiment of China’s immense political influences and economic resourcefulness. State-centrism and government interventionism are two of its defining features. In addition, the “*China Model*” also has the contaminating elements of corruption and rant-seeking embedded, deeply and structurally, in it, which, I believe is a fatal flaw of the seemingly attractive model itself. From a morally responsible perspective, the enthusiastic promotion of the “*China Model*” in the international community should be seriously re-considered and reflected upon with caution and criticality.

Some insightful China specialists, such as Lance Gore and Yongnian Zheng (郑永年) (2019) have explicitly pointed out that China’s institutional deficiency and systemic deformity would eventually hold back the country’s further development into a more advanced, orderly, stable and productive stage. Genuine trust between the citizens and the government, voluntary and mutually beneficial cooperation and collaboration among the multitude of socioeconomic agents and entities (Wu, 2015), political transparency and accountability (Stromseth, Malesky and Gueorguiev, 2017), clean governance, social justice, economic egalitarianism and inclusive development (Sun and Guo, 2015), and so on and so forth are the critical ingredients that are shockingly missing in the mesmerizing “*China Model*” as abundant empirically supported studies have carefully documented and clearly shown over the years. Ultimately, these missing ingredients will almost certainly dim the shining brand of the “*China Model*” to

a considerable degree and undermine the moral credibility of China as a rising political-economic force with profound sense of pride and still unfulfilled ambition.

If the Chinese political leadership fail to ensure its political accountability, then it can hardly ensure the political sustainability of the CCP and preserve the Communist regime in China indefinitely. The country will also be haunted by the constant fear of internal disintegration and instability due to the lack of political accountability and genuine civil support. At the international level, China's national behaviors show incompatibility with the well-established, West-dominated norms and rules. The country is becoming increasingly isolated in the international community. All these are highly likely to turn China into a threat to itself, rather than to the rest of the world.

5.8. Organizational efficiency and efficacy of the CCP during the ravaging pandemic

As argued previously, the pandemic is not only a touchstone to test the resilience of a national economy, but also a touchstone to test the political competence and capacity of a given state-actor. In this subsection, I want to elaborate further on the political strengths and weaknesses of the CCP that have been unexpectedly revealed by the severe challenges the devastating COVID-19 pandemic posed to the entire world from early 2020 to this very day. My rationale to raise the pandemic once again is that the COVID-19 pandemic was an extremely urgent and overwhelming threat to the public health, national economy, and social orders of virtually all countries with no exception. It was a highly complex and inherently ferocious compounding or background factor that occupied the uttermost priority of governments around the world in the past three years or so. Horizontal compare and contrast can be made with relative ease and convenience.

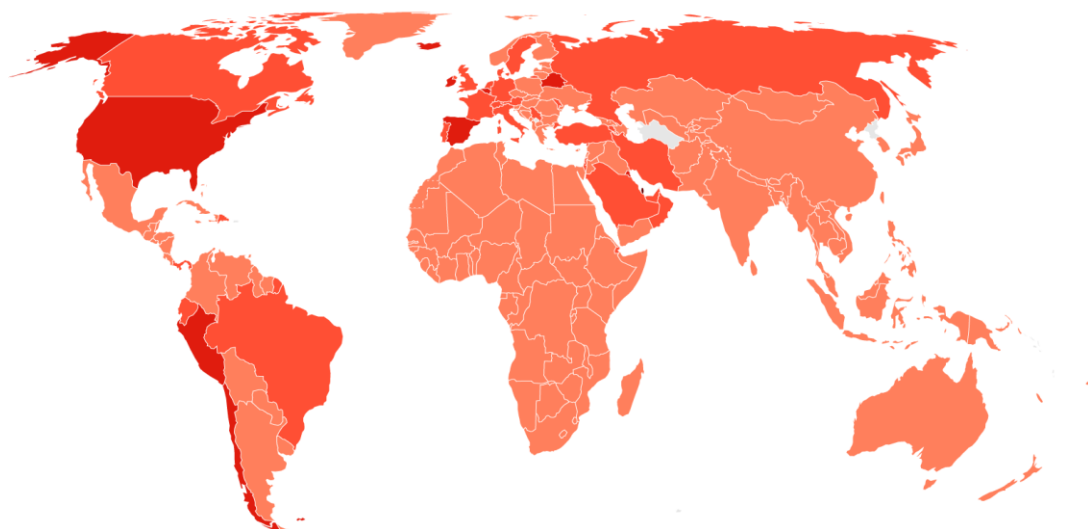
From a retrospective perspective, we can see that governments have come up with their own and dissimilar coping strategies to mitigate the pandemic-induced shocks and disturbances. Astronomical sizes of “*economic relief* (shukun jiuji: 纾困救济)” and “*stimulus package* (ciji fang'an: 刺激方案)” have been dedicated to rescue unemployed individuals and assist families that were struggling financially by the Biden-Harris Administration (Edelstein, 2022), even though, when economists look back, this seemingly generous approach has contributed greatly to the historically high inflation that had suffocated a large number of price-sensitive, American consumers. It also has aggravated the fiscal imbalance, which is another grave and pressing challenge for the US leadership. If the US Congress refuses to raise the debt ceiling in due course, then the US government is almost guaranteed to default soon, which will literally be “*an unprecedented event in American history*” (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2023b). Eventually, the Congress conceded.

In contrast, the Chinese political leadership insisted on its draconian Zero-COVID policy, despite the serious damages it has caused to the struggling Chinese economy and the psychological well-being of vulnerable populations, especially school-aged children (Hu et al., 2023). The Chinese political leadership knew perfectly well the fact that neglecting the pandemic or even just trying to play it down would only end up in huge losses of lives and money (many businesses have been forced to be shut down for a prolonged period of time due to the pandemic, especially in the service and hospitality sectors). Ultimately, the legitimacy of the political regime could have been at risk if the government has failed to contain the pandemic in whatever ineffective ways. The unrevealed reason why the CCP can still manage to hold onto its enormous power in China and survive the extremely challenging test of the pandemic is that that the draconian Zero-COVID policy has bought precious time for the natural “*decline of the virulence*” of the virus to happen as it became more contagious (Naheed et al., 2023), albeit at the expenses of the painful losses and miserable torments suffered by certain vulnerable groups in the Chinese society.

Based on how the pandemic was handled by the Chinese political leadership and governments in the western world, quite a number of commentators and scholars based in China were eagerly arguing that the concentration of power from bottom-up (especially the re-concentration of power from the local authorities to the central government during the Xi Administration) and without the burden of the notorious “*political filibuster*” and “*partisan politics*” (typically exemplified in a plural political system) in the Chinese political system might have some unexpected advantages, notably in terms of organizational efficiency and collective goal-achieving (Cao and Yan, 2021; Dobson, 2013; White, Chan and Mitchell, 2022).

They have enthusiastically cited evidences such as the absolutely free and utterly humane medical treatment to COVID-19 patients with Chinese citizenship and swift construction of high-quality, make-shift hospitals in a matter of mere days for emergence uses as the most convincing examples of the often wrongfully blamed managerial strengths of the CCP (ibid.). They argued, very confidently, that the current Chinese leadership has deployed swift, drastic and effective measures (i.e. *strict city-wide lockdown of more than 11 million residents in Wuhan for more than two months straight*) to aggressively contain the early outbreak of the pandemic in central China and delayed the pace of its ferocious momentum and rapid encroachment way more successful than its Western counterparts in Europe and in the US (Lu et al., 2021).

The effective containment of the pandemic by the Chinese central government was undoubtedly a huge success and a positive contribution to the global efforts to combat this devastating global health crisis from the standpoint of many Chinese scholars and government officials. It was true (to some extent) at the time. Empirical evidences also instrumentally supported comments along this line. The outbreak of the coronavirus definitely had an enormous and destructive impact on almost all the states across the board (conceivably, even including those extremely isolated and secretive countries, such as North Korea and a tiny minority of others, where no official reports on coronavirus have been publicly released by their governments, if they do have functioning governments in place) and China remained to be one of the few countries with the lowest infection rates as various statistical mappings from multiple credible sources consistently showed, both before and after the vigorous roll-out of vaccination starting late 2020 to early 2021 in the US (*such as the statistical mapping of COVID-19 infection by country below provided by CNN Health*) (See the **Illustration Twenty-two**).



(**Illustration Twenty-two**: Tracking Covid-19’s global spread. **Source**: CNN Health)

However, China's draconian Zero-COVID policy was ended with a hasty and seemingly unprepared abandonment by the Chinese authority in early December of 2022 due to two critical and rather straight-forward reasons: **A**) the accumulating resentment towards the government and intensifying rebellions against the authorities by the Chinese general public, notably among college students and (comparably younger) wage workers, were starting to surge within the Chinese society over stringent lockdown and travel restrictions for unnecessarily long periods of time (Human Rights Watch, 2023); and **B**) the Chinese businesses (in various sizes, especially the micro and small ones) were facing permanent closure due to constant, semi- or complete shut-downs of their premises despite the presence of *ad hoc* assistances (some are thoughtful, yet, some others turned out to be impractical) available to them provided by the governments and authorities to get them back to normalcy.

The frustrating and disconcerting situation for the struggling Chinese businesses was that: their economic activities were seriously disrupted; their revenues were far from self-sustainable (in many cases, no revenue whatsoever for extended periods of time) and their capitals were gradually drained without profits to replenish their liquidity. This should be a piece of resounding counter-evidence to doubt about the ability of the current Chinese leadership to formulate sensible policies and execute them with efficacy and thoughtful, humanitarian considerations in an extremely challenging and fast evolving crisis of public health.

I reiterate here that I view the pandemic as a tremendous and overwhelming test to all nation-states regardless of their huge differences. It can provide rich information and data for observers to compare and contrast the two, drastically competing models of political governance championed by the US and China, respectively. In the specific case of China, the pandemic has clearly revealed the strong determination and administrative capacity of the Xi Administration to contain and manage acute public health crisis with fatal consequences. The striking signature of the current Chinese political leadership and the undeniable strengths of the CCP are fully embodied in this devastating incident.

The Chinese leadership style is tough, undivided, responsive, and structurally top-down. These are in fact some of the desirable qualities to tackle the extremely critical and time-sensitive pandemic. However, the (somewhat) radical nature of the Zero-COVID policy and its draconian, rigid and, at times, inconsiderate implementation in the later stages of the pandemic have also mercilessly revealed the incontrovertible and inflexible policy-making and/or decision-making at the very top and its inability to successfully enforce them in the best interests of the general public at local levels.

If the Chinese political leadership is overly powerful and willful, then the US leadership seemed to be rather weak and hesitant. The former Trump-Pence Administration was fiercely criticized by the multitude of state governments, both Democratic and Republican, for its disoriented and dismissive leadership and serious lack of federal support. The then governor of New York State, Andrew Cuomo, has publicly denounced Trump multiple times by accusing him of "*federal negligence*" and "*the greatest failure to detect an enemy attack since Pearl Harbor*" (Pengelly, 2020). The highly unfortunate reality is that, the US, as the most scientifically advanced and technologically capable country on the planet, led the entire world in terms of the number of confirmed COVID-19 infection cases as well as appalling death toll.

It is no exaggeration to say that the US has suffered more horribly and devastatingly in comparison with other large, high-income, developed countries in the Western world. According to a science-based, analytical article published by the New York Times, the major attributions to America's extraordinary sufferings by the pandemic are: **A**) lower vaccination rates, especially among the vulnerable populations; **B**) underlying health conditions, such as

obesity and diabetes; and, even more concerning, **C**) the mounting distrust, anti-elite sentiment and exacerbating social stratification (Mueller and Lutz, 2022) within the degenerating society of a relatively declining superpower. The third attribution conspicuously demonstrated the dangerous propensity of disorientation and lacking cohesion in the American society, as well as the alienation of the general public from the elites. Maybe, as some suggested, a self-perceived threat from China could eventually unify the Americans (Ni, 2021) and bridge the gaps of the internal inconsistencies embedded deeply in the American society (Heinberg, 2022).

To summarize this sub-section, the checks and balances of the three powers (i.e. *administration, legislation and jurisdiction*) and political plurality are systematically ensured to reflect the quintessential democratic principles in well-established Western democracies. However, they are not found in viable and sustainable forms in the Chinese political system, for better or for worse, depending on one's own political values and beliefs.

Generally speaking, decision-making and policy formulation and implementation in Western democracies often need to go through intricate institutional procedures and formalities and, as a result of that, consuming much more time and involving a significant number of constraining agents and regulatory bodies. From a comparative perspective, the top-down, one-party authoritarian political system in China can accelerate decision-making and mobilize public opinion and strategic resources in a considerably more efficient and effective manner whenever the situation necessitates.

This *de facto* sacrifice of democracy for efficiency, either intentional or unintentional, can elevate the organizational efficacy and shorten the response time to effectively tackle acute (nation-wide) emergence. Nevertheless, it is often at the expenses of social justice, political accountability and individual liberty in many cases as political critics have long pointed out with no mercy to “*save the face*” of the CCP (Heath, 2016).

One more concerning fact I would like to add, in addition to the aforementioned organizational strengths and weaknesses of the CCP in time of crisis, is that the competence and capacity of the core political leadership at the very top is also extremely critical and literally inseparable from the idiosyncratic governmentality in China as we could clearly see that:

A) political rejection and resistance are systematically eliminated (or at least minimized) to ensure the will of the core political leadership would be carried out thoroughly and decisively without significant obstructions;

B) vested interests are protected and prioritized, but not necessarily the general public, due to their inferior strategic importance and value according to the utilitarian calculus of the core leadership and;

C) top-down decision-making does not guarantee the overall quality of the decision. There is technically no causal relationship between the efficiency of decision-making and the quality of decision-making.

The effective containment of the pandemic in China (esp. in terms of the death toll *per capita*) did owe its success to the leadership style of the CCP. However, this single incident has very limited generalizability to other policy areas or other pressing issues in very different natures and in hugely dissimilar circumstances. It is undeniable that the Chinese central government has literally saved many innocent lives and treated many infected Chinese citizens for absolutely free during the COVID-19 outbreaks in a timely and humanitarian manner.

However, we could also see that the Chinese political leadership has experienced great difficulties to turn the national economy around and prevent outbursts of mass protests from gaining momentum in the Chinese society. These facts have inconveniently refuted the self-justified legitimacy or even institutional superiority over other political-economic systems claimed by a significant number of political professionals based in China. One single case of this magnitude of devastation (i.e. the pandemic) could unexpectedly reveal the, otherwise hidden, organizational strengths and capabilities of the Chinese power apparatus, as well as its inescapable limitations and flaws. How (un-) successful the pandemic has been managed by the Chinese political leadership should not be regarded as the definitive proof to warrant the formidable political privilege and self-proclaimed organizational superiority of the authoritarian political regime in China.

5.9. The merits and defects of the Chinese-style political-economic governance

Based on the previous analyses, I propose the Chinese political regime should be treated with an open mind as well as a certain level of respect it deserves. The regime itself is problematic or even seriously flawed, just like other alternative political regimes with varying degrees of defects. My statement does not mean that the numerous criticisms against the Chinese political regime are unsubstantiated and the Chinese political authority has neither the willingness nor the commitment to initiate systematic reforms and transformations of the existing mode of governance in its political sphere, economic domain and domestic society with many yet-to-realize potentialities.

Quite on the contrary, the current Chinese leadership is very much vocal as well as determined to push the nationwide reforms further under the leadership of President Xi and his close allies. A widely talked about possible “*rolling back*” of the reforms by the Xi Administration is supported by some very recent, factual evidences to a certain extent (Moak, 2019). However, I tend to believe that, even though, the current Chinese leadership does demonstrate more conservative and traditionalist tendencies than its predecessors, it does not want to hold back the deepening reforms in the economic domain due to the monumental importance of economic performance and well-being in China, as long as the monopolistic political status of the CCP remains to be unchallenged and the Communist regime is not endangered at the very fundamental level. Reform is definitely not abandoned, technically speaking. But the direction of reform might still in a process of adjustment and reorientation. It will ultimately be determined by the political calculus at the very top.

In a general sense, *The China Threat Theory* does not seem to pay much reflective attention to the significant evolution of the CCP during different periods of time over the course of decades. Its incredible adaptation to the swiftly transforming internal and external environments and impressive resilience against formidable challenges over and over again. Numerous arguments under the umbrella of *The China Threat Theory* question about the political legitimacy and accountability of the CCP as I have previously discussed. They also have explicitly doubted about the party’s ability to lead the Chinese nation into a pacifist and prosperous future. It is fair enough to say that their shared skepticism is understandable or even reasonable in some respects. Nevertheless, China’s glorious return back to the center of the international stage over the very recent decades, its remarkable social progressions in all the key areas at lighting speed and its deep-seated integration into the global economic system (Whalley, 2011) should make all of us give *The China Threat Theory* a deeper and more reflective thought.

5.10. China as an alleged economic threat to the West

To advanced and high-income Western economies, the abundant and comparably much cheaper Chinese labors have always been regarded as a threat to their domestic blue-collar, working-class jobs (i.e. job replacement), especially in the labor-intensive manufacturing

sector (O'Brien and Williams, 2016). This is a well-received and valid conclusion about China's position in the global division of labors. Based on this piece of reality, *The China Threat Theory* strongly claims that Chinese economy thrives at the expenses of the Western economies, especially the US largely due to the persistent and enlarging trade deficit year-on-year since 1985. Put the oversimplified Mercantilist logical reasoning aside, China did, objectively, benefit enormously from its swift integration into the globalized economy system under the so-called Neo-liberal world order and the relatively more benevolent engagement policy and strategic partnership orientation during the Clinton-Gore Administration in the 1990s (Heydarian, 2020).

Nevertheless, from the reversed perspective, the West also has benefited greatly from China's diligent economic inputs and contributions. The incredibly cheap Chinese labors dramatically lowered the prices of the end-products in the Western consumer markets, which significantly benefited lower-income individuals and households in the US and elsewhere (Siripurapu and Berman, 2022). Cheap Chinese labors also have contributed enormously to the revenues and profits of the powerful Western Multinational Corporations (MNCs) or Trans-National Corporations (TNCs) by reducing the cost of labor to a fraction as one of the most basic and essential inputs of the production of physical goods (O'Brien and Williams, 2016). Therefore, *The China Threat Theory* has deliberately emphasized on the downside of the cheap Chinese labors in terms of employment replacement without acknowledging the fact that they have lowered the living costs for lower-income individuals and/or households in Western societies and contributed considerably to the Gross National Product (the GNP) of China's major investors, traders and business partners in the Western world (ibid.).

Extrapolating from the arguments over the cheap Chinese labors above, we could easily see that *The China Threat Theory* is not only a political accusation, but also an economic one. It reflects, rather vividly, the intense strategic anxiety on the part of the US-led global West towards a burgeoning, unconventional economic force in the non-Western world that seemingly defies their collective skepticism and expectations. To the shared amazement of the China-watchers based in the Western world, China has neither been assimilated (i.e. Westernized), nor fixed in the labor-intensive sector indefinitely with no aspiration to climb upwards the global economic ladder.

On the contrary, China demonstrates strong determination to grow even stronger and more competitive against the well-established international benchmarks, most of whom are senior members of the Western camp (Ford, 2015). Potential talent competition from China at the higher value-added end of the production chain, such as Research and Development (R&D) and prototype design, by well-educated and highly trained Chinese professionals or skilled workers is not an unfounded paranoia (Taylor, 2014), even though, China still ranked significantly lower than most of advanced Western economies according to the Global Talent Ranking 2021 published by International Institute for Management Development (the IMD) at the 36th place.

The increasingly capable and productive Chinese labors and their abundant availability and comparably less costs now pose another emerging economic threat to Western skilled labors and professionals in the premium segments of the globalized labor markets. Ultimately, with the steady accumulation of valuable soft assets and qualitative transformation of the China's colossal economy, the rising superpower displayed strong potentialities to outperform the advanced Western economies as its developmental trajectory extends into the foreseeable future. This is probably an even more concerning issue *The China Threat Theory* might or might not imply.

Despite the silver lining mentioned above, the Chinese labor markets also face a number of complications that are produced by a combination of social, political and economic factors

and conditions. Due to the continuous yet uneven economic development inside China, the overall situation in the Chinese job market is rather ambivalent. On the positive side, the gradually upgrading domestic labor markets have presented lucrative employment opportunities for younger generations of better trained and more educated talents.

However, on the negative side, the widening wealth gaps between socioeconomic strata and how scarce resources and opportunities are distributed among (working-age) Chinese populations are reflected in three detectable trends in the Chinese job market: **A**) labor stratification contributed by professional skill possessed and education received has become increasingly evident (Postiglione, 2015; Sheng, 2014); **B**) automation and other advanced technologies have squeezed the wage margin of cheap and under-skilled Chinese labors to an almost disconcerting extent (Holzer, 2022) ; and **C**) well educated and highly skilled talents have returned back to China due to the presence of attractive incentives of various kinds (Lam, 2015; South China Morning Post, 2023b) and they are competing aggressively against their Western counterparts in fierce, globalized competitions. An up-to-date, comparative study claimed that “*China (the 36th) continued to climb the rankings (of the Global Talent Competitiveness Index) and is now the most talent-competitive upper-middle-income country*” in the entire world (Monteiro, 2022).

We can see that trends **A** and **B** present tough internal challenges to the Chinese political leadership to maintain the highly regarded social stability and cohesion and trend **C** is an emerging economic threat China could possibly pose to advanced Western economies by cultivating and attracting more high-quality talents both at home and from the rest of the world. The situation in the Chinese labor markets is a very revealing indicator of the socioeconomic transformations, both positive and negative, in the country.

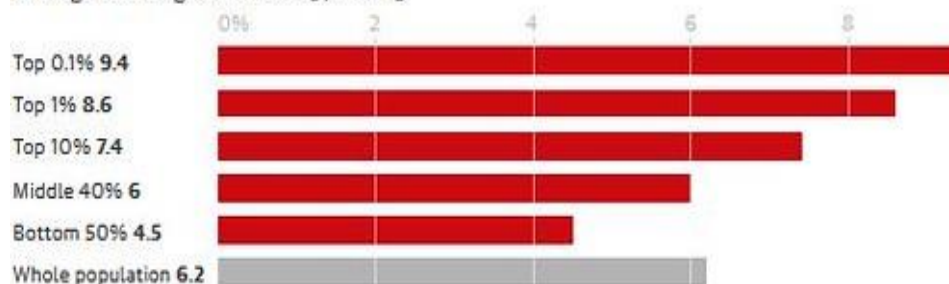
China’s accumulating soft assets are the ultimate source of its elevating innovative competitiveness and economic productivity. The mutually reinforcing interplay between the quality and quantity of talents serving the country and the performance of the national economy should be fully recognized and taken into serious consideration. I believe these three trends together could determine, to a large extent, China’s competitive position in the globalized economic system. They too possess the ability to shape, not only the domestic, but also the international economic landscape in significant ways through China’s globally extended interconnectivities and cross-border influences.

5.11. The emerging wealth gaps as a negative outcome of uneven economic development in China

The observable stratification in the Chinese labor markets is merely the tip of a very large iceberg. In this subsection, I would like to bring up another related and extremely hazardous pathological phenomenon associated with the Chinese-style economic governance and development, namely the increasing lack of economic egalitarianism (i.e. *the soaring inequality in China*) and inclusive development in today’s Chinese society. The **Illustration Twenty-three** below shows straightforwardly this highly concerning propensity of uneven wealth accumulation and (re-) distribution in post-reform China on a continuous basis.

China's wealth gap has grown hugely over the past 40 years

Average annual growth rate 1978-2015



Guardian graphic | Source: Piketty, Yang and Zucman. American Economic Review. Income groups based on Chinese income in 2015, and numbers based on those aged 20 years and over

(Illustration Twenty-three: China’s wealth gap has grown hugely over the past 40 years;
Source: Guardian)

The acute socioeconomic issue of inequality exhibits its dangerous capability, in one way or another, to undermine the internal cohesion and stability of the Chinese society as well as the long-term sustainability and prosperity of China’s economic future. It is noteworthy that Chinese people now pay significantly more attention to how the collective wealth and resources are distributed and allocated, fairly or dishonestly or even illegally, within their own society than almost any time before (Chen, He and Yan, 2022). The dramatic multiplication of sources of information has made the regular Chinese populations more politically critical thanks to the instantaneous availability of information and the high efficiency of information dissemination in the Age of the Digital enabled by the seemingly over-abundant and open-ended Internet (*despite the presence of strict media censorship in China*) (Yang, 2009).

The long-suspected existence of the so-called “*social volcano* (shehui huoshan: 社会火山)” embedded in the Chinese society has triggered extensive debates throughout the global academia over the years (Whyte, 2016). Even though, scholars have not reached a consensus among themselves, the warning signs of the morally deteriorating Chinese society should not be taken as false alarms because excessive and unjustifiable inequality (or even just the collective perception of it among the social subjects of the CCP) could effectively undermine the trust and cooperative relationships between the Chinese people and the Chinese authorities at various levels (Zhou and Jin, 2018).

Over the past three years, the ravaging COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately hurt lower-income individuals and households according to mainstream statistical estimations across countries, including China (Sadler, 2021). The pandemic has financially squeezed the poor or the have-nots further to make the already inconvenient truth even more disconcerting, unfortunately (Tang, 2022). The frustration and resentment towards the political authorities and economic elites have been brewing within the conflict-prone Chinese society simply because certain individuals or social groups have become the miserable sacrifices and cost-bearers of China’s economic miracle.

Therefore, I want to emphasize the fact that China’s national ability and capacity to constitute (potential) threats to others is actually at the expenses of the legitimate interests and well-being of a considerable proportion of the Chinese populations at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The forcefully suppressed internal tensions (i.e. the “*social volcano*” metaphor mentioned previously) in China are literally a ticking bomb. If these neglected populations are

forced to rebel against the authorities (at a desperate point) for fair treatments and rights recognition, then the alleged threats China could possibly pose to others will likely to lose its credibility due to the budding outbursts of socioeconomic upheaval and political movement within the risk-ridden Chinese society.

5.12. The high costs of China's economic miracle

China has been burgeoning along its own path of “*trials and errors*” as many China-watchers have observed and agreed (Yip, 2012). China's economic success is hard-won and the country has paid very expensive prices for its impressively successful development and modernization in the recent decades (Landry, 2012), such as allowing socioeconomic stratification and rural-urban disparities to happen and deepen (Li, Satō and Sicular, 2015), as well as sacrificing nonrenewable resources and the well-being of the natural environment (Economy, 2004) to exchange for foreign investments to boost the GDP etc.

It is indeed true that economic development and social progression have never been cost-free anywhere at any point of time in the collective histories of human development. The cost-bearers of China's economic miracle used to be deliberately neglected by the authorities at various levels (Li, Goldschmidt and Ebrary, 2009) and their legitimate demand for economic justice and equality has also been suppressed and betrayed to serve the purpose of primitive capital accumulation in order to fund China's incredibly rapid industrialization and modernization led by the extractive and interventionist state.

These aforementioned vulnerable populations tend to concentrate in rural areas, inland provinces or remote regions in China (Liao, Wei and Huang, 2020). Vulnerable populations residing in these regions have suffered from a great deal of disadvantages, such as insufficient education, inadequate professional skills, and limited economic opportunities available to them (ibid.). The existence of severe developmental disparities of various kinds have revealed the cruel fact that the existing “*China Model*” is not based on the principles of egalitarianism and inclusive development, at least not substantially. The most assailable are knowingly sacrificed by the authorities as the ultimate cost-bearers of China's stunning economic wonder.

This piece of detrimental reality has actually produced frustrations, tensions and rage among the Chinese populations. The enlarging wealth gaps between socioeconomic classes and the diminishing social mobility, which were once believed to be the pathological symptoms and sins of Capitalism, have literally reincarnated into a self-proclaimed “*socialist*” society in China. Mainstream academic explanations to the socioeconomic and developmental disparities in China are: **A**) China has a great variety of preexisting, historically formed mixes of endowments across its vast territories (Gao, 2021); and **B**) these mixes of endowments have produced very dissimilar economic outcomes scattered across the country and they tend to be amplified by preferential policies and economic incentives available in real-life implementations (Zhou and Hu, 2020). Economic heterogeneity (not necessarily diversity) is obvious not a strength but a contributing source of social instability in this specific case.

5.13. Political legitimacy jeopardized by economic inequality

China's internal stability and national cohesion should never be taken for granted as I have touched on in multiple occasions before. The legitimacy crisis of the CCP in China has always been waiting for any opportunity to trigger it and erupt. In fact, the Chinese authority has invested a whopping amount of around 1.39 trillion RMB (202.28 billion USD) in 2019 for the sole purpose to maintain internal stability (Lam, 2019). The presence of a whole host of destabilizing factors constantly threatens the CCP's political monopoly in China. The ruling party sees only one way out of this highly unfavorable or even doomed situation. The solution is not through genuine and substantial political reform, but by intimidating and

offering economic inducement to the Chinese peoples for their instrumental support and submission indefinitely.

This type of carrot-plus-stick solution might encounter harsh criticisms or even ridicules outside China, however, the pragmatic and interest-oriented Chinese populations are definitely buying into it and willing to cooperate with the government as long as it keeps its promise to deliver concrete benefits to the people. Their occasional skepticism and cynicism regarding the true nature of the Chinese social-political-economic reality simply did not prevail facing pragmatic rationality and the temptation of the materialistic offerings promised by the Chinese authority, until inequality, social stratification, class immobility, and economic deterioration have virtually broken that almost sacred promise.

The post-reform CCP deliberately and strategically popularized the rationale that its legitimacy to rule China is justified by pure economic conditions and factors alone. Nevertheless, this type of logical reasoning is weak and hardly convincing in my opinion. The communist regime in China, like all political regimes around the world, should also be subject to moral judgement and legal scrutiny in a continuously evolving and highly dynamic domestic environment. Within China, the collective and strong demand from the governed for socioeconomic justice and egalitarianism, authentic rule of law (not rule by law) and administrative accountability, if dismissed or mishandled, can very well undermine the power and authority of the ruling elites from bottom-up. This remains to be a formidable challenge to the CCP in its homebase, in addition to the mounting external containment from the US-led global West as suggested by my *Strategic Filtration Model*.

To summarize, the much-speculated reform in China is still in an on-going process to move forward. The real question is not whether the reform is halted or not into the third-term of President Xi, but where the reform is heading eventually. It is generally true that, without substantial, systemic revisions, the seemingly fabulous “*China Model*” will likely to grow into a fateful threat to itself. This does not require even a single blow from the hegemon and its Western allies.

At the beginning of 2021, a new policy orientation initiated by the Xi Administration has captured the attention of numerous China-watchers worldwide (Wu, 2022a). It basically claimed that Deng Xiaoping’s “*let some get rich first*” approach has already caused significant detriments and irreversible damages to the cohesion and unity of the Chinese society and it should be replaced by the refashioned “*common prosperity* (gongtong fuyu: 共同富裕)” approach through strict regulation of high-income earners (Paskin, 2021). Wealthy individuals in China and their political connections within the ruling party have become the targets of financial scrutiny and subsequent sanction (if convicted) by the Xi Administration (Tang and Wang, 2022).

Even though, many believe this new approach can seriously demoralize and deter the multitude of indigenous entrepreneurs, industrialists, and capitalists as well as their political patrons to continue to engage in economically productive activities (Wei, 2021). However, conceptually speaking, it at least gives recognition to the importance of wealth (re-) distribution rather than merely wealth creation and accumulation by the core leadership of the CCP at the current moment.

If relevant policies under the guidance of the “*common prosperity*” approach are well-designed and effectively implemented, it should offset the aforementioned downside (e.g. inequality and the social tensions associated with it) of the “*China Model*”, as well as the Chinese economy dictated by it. Unexpectedly, it has turned out that the “*common prosperity*” approach seriously spooked the market and economic agents and entities, both domestic and international, and caused (to a considerable extent) the collapsing confidence in the

deteriorating Chinese economy without achieving its original goal of economic egalitarianism and inclusive development.

There are two possible explanations for the (seemingly temporary) setback of the re-popularization of the “*common prosperity*” in China: **A**) the “*common prosperity*” approach is only a political instrument to overpower private actors and entities that are capable and influential enough to threaten the absolute authority of the Xi-centered “*core leadership*” in the highly promoted “*New Era*” (xinshidai: 新时代) of China and extract more wealth from them to advance state interests (i.e. guojinmintui: 国进民退) (Lin et al., 2020); or **B**) this could be another example of the infamous short-term and long-term conflict. In the short-term, the “*common prosperity*” approach might hurt the economy temporarily, but, in the long-term, it could transform the “*China Model*” into a morally sound and economically egalitarian model of (political-economic-social) governance with the ability to benefit all Chinese people in a non-discriminatory fashion.

In addition to use fiscal instruments (such as taxes) to redistribute the collective wealth, another political remedy also deserves to be noticed and examined closely, namely the welfare system and the safety net in gradual development in China that I shall discuss in more details in the subsequent parts. Social security in China is designed, strategically, to appease and comfort the Chinese populations and mitigate internal conflicts from my perspective. It is also an indispensable precondition to release the consumption potentials of the Chinese consumers to drive the massive Chinese economy into a less externally dependent, more prosperous and sustainable future.

5.14. The Chinese deficient welfare system and the faulty social safety net

If the Western political reasoning tends to emphasize on “*shared values and principles*” (Dowling, 2021; Fiori and Bianchin, 2020), then the Chinese political reasoning tends to create “*shared interests* (especially economic and financial interests)” (Kemburi and Li, 2014; Minot, 2015) in order to achieve whatever objectives and goals intended.

It is rather apparent that China has always held a very “*realist and realistic*” approach to handle politics (Gao, Ingram and Kee, 2016), including those extremely delicate and thorny ones, and maneuver around whatever rules and normative establishments in place. The well-known political pragmatism of the CCP, as a signature characteristic or a defining quality that has long been associated with Chinese politics, is often enabled and instrumentalized by highly intricate and mutually beneficial interdependence and interrelationship. The civil cooperation (*if not obedience*) and expedience between the Chinese people and the Chinese political authority are definitely no exceptions.

In China, the (quasi-) contractual relationship between the Chinese populations and the political authority is not enforced by an independent third party, but by a much tighter bond of shared interests, especially with regard to sufficient and reliable employment to the maximum proportion as possible for working-age populations (i.e. the “*employment maximization policy*”) (Cheng, 2014) and secured retirement benefits, notably within the public sector (Zhao, 2009), just to name two of the most important ones to ordinary Chinese people’s life and livelihood.

However, by saying the above, China is not a unique case. The situation is strikingly similar across societies all over the world. It is almost like a thoughtfully designed “*package deal*” (Voegeli, 2012) offered by the government to its people in exchange for their civil cooperation and political support. The only difference is that in China the deal is kept strictly bilateral (not third party is permitted to participate, especially agents and entities with foreign background and liaison), ambiguously expedient, and insufficiently institutionalized. Since the shared interests are highly regarded by both the Chinese political authority and the

Chinese people, therefore, unilateral withdrawal from the mutually dependent commitment by either party could end up causing unthinkable disruptions to the cohesion and stability of the continuously transforming Chinese society. In this sense, opportunism and arbitrariness on both sides have been greatly limited and effectively constrained as a result of the high stakes involved.

5.14.1. The Chinese welfare system in development

A critical component of the aforementioned “*package deal*” is invariably the welfare system in addition to employment provision. The collective desire for an accessible and functioning welfare system or safety net can be found in almost all societies in a fairly consistent way. In the Western world, critics of late-Capitalism or advanced Capitalism tend to agree that the advanced European welfare states use high social security and generous civil benefits to offset the negativity that is inherently associated with Capitalism itself and promote democratic governance by utilizing the welfare system as a tool to woo the citizens to voluntarily participate in the public affairs and fulfil their civil duties (Caldwell and McCann, 2019).

Despite being self-declared and self-positioned as a Socialist political regime, the Chinese political authority also has been selling its own mode of governance and development extremely hard to its subjects, namely the multitude of heterogeneous Chinese populations. The existing welfare system in China is far more unreliable and inefficient than that of the European welfare states in comparison. It is also much less comprehensive in terms of the coverage and much more discriminatory against vulnerable social groups (Hebert, 2020; Lau, 2020).

The very reason I intend to elaborate on the Chinese welfare system in this subsection is that it is a multi-faceted, multi-layered and highly complex socioeconomic device to support and sustain the one-of-a-kind Chinese political regime in a geographically vast and socially diversified nation-state. If the Chinese welfare system fails to deliver the highly desired and much valued economic security to the Chinese people, then two things are very likely to happen: **A)** the interest-based or interest-motivated civil cooperation with the extractive Chinese governments (at various levels) will not be guaranteed and all sorts of political rebellions and social activism perpetrated by the disgruntled and frustrated Chinese citizens will rise within the transforming Chinese society; and **B)** Chinese consumers will have much less disposable income to spend on commodities and services, i.e. *weak internal aggregate demand in the domestic markets*, and comparatively high saving rates are also going to persist.

These two possibilities are unfavorable enough to undermine the CCP’s ultimate goal to stay in power as long as possible because China is likely to stagnate economically and stumble politically as the direct results of a dysfunctional social welfare system in place, if not collapse to itself from within right away. In these two ominous scenarios, if materialize, China will be seriously weakened and pose no significant threat to the rest of the world. A sudden and violent downfall of the Chinese political regime can largely be avoided due to the presence of an improving welfare system to better take care of the Chinese populations and convince them to continue to support the political regime. If I may digress a bit here, we should note that a dramatic and violent demise of the CCP is not exactly what the hegemon is happy to see because it could destroy China’s national economy and shatter the fundamental fabrics of the Chinese society, as well as create an enormous number of refugees and miserable humanitarian crises that could seriously dim the future of the entire human race.

5.14.2. The “economic hypothesis” of the Chinese welfare system

Chinese people have long desired a reliable and functioning social security net, yet, they have received not enough to meet their collective expectations. The Chinese political authority has often attributed this piece of inconvenient truth to the so-called “*early stage of development*”

(chuji fazhan jieduan: 初级发展阶段)” China has been situated in for many years (Liu, 2011). It was true that “*resource constraint* (ziyuan xianzhi: 资源限制)” seriously hindered the healthy development of the Chinese welfare system (ibid.). Many scholars were eagerly arguing that, quite provocatively, there has never been a welfare state in existence at any point of time in China’s enduring history, from the ancient past to the current moment (Ding, 2022). The likelihood for China to develop into a full-fledged, European-style welfare state is literally quite slim based on existing data and well-informed speculations. The “*economic hypothesis of welfare state*”⁶ (Ringen and Ngok, 2013) has dominated the popular public discourse in China for quite some years and the Chinese populations seem to have been convinced by this quite plausible explanation. They have reluctantly accepted it as part of the harsh social reality brought by historically formed, economic backwardness and underdevelopment.

If we assume the plausibility of this so-called “*economic hypothesis*” is valid and exclude other contributing factors for a moment, the defective and dysfunctional Chinese social welfare system is merely a direct consequence of its developmental inferiority in the past and the lack of sufficient amount of fund to make it work. According to a large number of empirically-grounded researches, it has been extensively observed that the scarcity of resources (*both monetary and non-monetary*) in various kinds and forms (Zeng, 2017), especially in the cases of critical public services, such as education and medical care or health care, has firmly anchored the Chinese populations (notably the more conservative and risk-avoiding or risk-sensitive Chinese middle class in growing size) to whatever the state offers over the years due to almost no viable alternatives (i.e. other non-governmental social security providers) in existence for ordinary people (Frazier, 2010).

Historical evidences, such as an officially published policy report in 1987, has truthfully revealed that “*about four-fifths of China’s labor force is not covered by any national or local government income-maintenance program*” at the time of reporting. Only employees of the state-sector have the privilege to enjoy social security entitlement at the time (ibid.). This piece of unfortunate reality has led to vigorous popularization of social security in the following three decades to effectively cover 1.36 billion people, around 96% of the entire Chinese population, with health insurance and 999 million people have already been included into the national pension scheme (Textor, 2021). To cite a key financial indicator, the expenditure in public health by the Chinese government has reached 2.1 trillion RMB (*roughly equals 330 billion USD*) in 2021 (ibid.). Although, understandably, one might argue that a considerable proportion of China’s impressive public health budget might be contributed by the ravaging pandemic and the draconian Zero-COVID policy insisted by the Chinese political authority at the very top.

Overall, it is fair enough to say that China’s accumulating national wealth has indeed contributed considerably to the steadily developing Chinese social security system to benefit, hopefully, the very majority of the people in due course. Although, from a more critical point of view, it might just be a self-interested product of political self-preservation at the very top of the Chinese leadership because the CCP should never forget about its humble origin as well as some of the well-received ancient Chinese political wisdom, such as “*the water can float a boat, however, it can also sink a boat* (shui neng zai zhou, yi neng fu zhou: 水能载舟, 亦能覆舟)”.

Other criticisms devoted to the imperfect Chinese social security system could be easily found in the extensive literature, such as the counter-productive uses of social security funds by the

⁶ The development of the welfare system is held back by the limited economic resources at the government’s disposal.

inefficient, bureaucratic and corrupt administrative management (Zou and Li, 2011); and lacking of both healthy competition and mutually beneficial complementation from the private sector, which do limit the range of choices and the overall quality of the welfare provided to the Chinese populations (Yin, Lin and Gates, 2000). Some even have gone much further to argue that the Chinese citizens' (over-) dependence on government-sponsored welfare protection has weakened their collective bargaining power in relation to the suppressive, extractive and self-serving Chinese political authorities at all levels (Morton, 2006). This interesting argument has provoked my own political reflections on the Chinese social security system in the next subsection.

5.14.3. Social stabilizer: the “political hypothesis” of the Chinese welfare system

On top of the scarcity problem as the aforementioned “*economic hypothesis*” has claimed from a pure economic perspective, another even more pressing and concerning issue is the fact that the available resources, especially the premium resources, are not distributed according to the principle of social justice or fairness in the Chinese society. Premium resources or resources in high and rigid demand are not always allocated based on vulnerability, criticality and urgency of the need.

As having been argued by quite a number of authors, the potential bargaining over welfare entitlements between the unorganized individuals or smaller social groups within the much-suppressed Chinese civil society and the Chinese government is both highly asymmetrical and institutionally complicated (Yang, 2016). Civil consciousness and the awareness of legitimate and unalienable human rights have been awakening along with China's rapid development and increasing exposure to the external world as an inevitable, yet unintended or even undesirable, by-product (Chen, 2020). Therefore, the Chinese welfare system needs to address the uneven distribution of critical resources in the Chinese society and fulfill its crucial role as not only a protective layer of the society, but also an indispensable “*social buffer* (shehui huancong: 社会缓冲)” to mitigate, cushion and absorb intensifying internal conflicts over resource allocation and benefit-sharing.

I argue that the so-called “*political hypothesis*” uncovers another driving force to the development of welfare system in China (Bockermann, 2020). Whether or not the Chinese welfare system could eventually benefit every Chinese citizen without *de facto* discriminatory “*terms and conditions*” embedded in the “*social contract*” (shehui qiyue: 社会契约) and effectively neutralize the extractive tendencies of the insatiable political-economic elites are still waiting to be seen in due time. Many scholars believe that the Chinese people have long been disenfranchised from their legitimate rights and interests in order to be readily exploited as submissive and powerless labors (U.S.-China Security Review Commission, 2002). The cheap, well-disciplined and politically unorganized and fragmented Chinese labors (Cao and Firm, 2005) are the ideal to feed the increasing appetite of the burgeoning economic development rather than being treated as well-protected and well-supported citizens.

Ironically, the systemic labor exploitation on the part of China has contributed greatly to the extremely cheap prices of the Chinese exports, which, ultimately, benefiting the lower-income Western consumers and preserving their quality of life as *The China Threat Theory* has implicitly and unintentionally revealed. The Chinese authorities have consciously and knowingly sacrificed the legitimate rights to social provision and financial security of its vulnerable populations simply to exchange them as cheap labors for an opportunity to participate into the globalized value chains of production and earn the much needed funds for domestic development as well as foreign currencies reserve (especially the US Dollar as the default global reserve currency) the country has to stockpile for strategic purposes and settle international payments.

The “*China Model*” did contribute significantly to a variety of afflicting socioeconomic defects we can readily observe. It is simply a piece of fact to be recognized here. Alienated and under-protected economic rights and the uneven (re-) distributions of wealth and critical social resources in China, do interconnect and intersect with many frustrating aspects of the faulty welfare system that has not yet been fully developed. One of the most controversial issues that has long been raised and fiercely criticized by the West is the human rights situation in China. Among the multifarious accusations, the politically suppressed socioeconomic rights of the multitude of ordinary Chinese workers, especially the so-called “*migrant workers*” (or also referred as the surplus rural labors) (nongmingong: 农民工), have received critical attention both inside and outside of China among scholars, activists and policy-advisers.

I view the improving welfare system in China as an inevitable outcome of development and civil consciousness. It is a deliberate political remedy with the strategic intention to win back the trust and cooperation from the huge number of grassroots economic contributors and passionate social activists and human rights advocates, who support and defend the legitimate interests of the vulnerable and the mistreated. The “*political hypothesis*” has revealed the strong political imperative for a better and more inclusive welfare system inside the Chinese society. Like many other institutional devices and structures in China, the Chinese welfare system invariably has a political core inside an economic shell.

To conclude, the “*economic hypothesis*” that has been examined in the previous subsection presents a more superficial explanation to the historical underdevelopment of the welfare system in China. According to its logic, as China gets richer and ascends into a higher-income economy, the Chinese welfare system should be improved and upgraded accordingly. As the “*political hypothesis*” strongly suggests, the internal demand for a functioning, inclusive and equitable welfare system in China is an inevitable consequence of economic development and social progression as well as the awakening awareness of the legitimate rights and interests of the masses. If realized, this path will lead to a fairer and more egalitarian future of China to truly reflect the authentic socialist nature of the Chinese nation-rebuilding through further and deeper reforms.

In summary, the welfare system is deeply intertwined with economic development and social progression. Economic development and social progression are always working in a mutually reinforcing manner, almost everywhere in the world (Lipset, 1966). As argued previously, China used to deliberately sacrifice social justice and equality to exchange for short-term economic gains, both domestically and internationally, and outrageously benefit a tiny proportion of (political-economic) elites with unfathomable social capitals in comparison with the rest of others. Apparently, this tactic is strategically myopic and unsustainable in the long run. It could severely disintegrate the Chinese society from the very fundamental level and undermine the highly valued social cohesion and stability from bottom-up. In other words, the progressively improving Chinese welfare system reveals its true and hidden strategic function as an indispensable “*stabilizer*” to mitigate and resolve internal frictions and conflicts and hold the Chinese society together in solidarity, which is the necessary precondition *The China Threat Theory* is implicitly dependent on.

5.15. The “social contract” and domestic imperatives within the Chinese society

China’s internal stability and social cohesion are largely determined by the resilience of the (quasi-) contractual relationship between the Chinese state and the Chinese people. From my perspective, this so-called “*social contract*” has never been a one-time deal. It is a vital relationship that needs to be constantly updated and nurtured. The *de facto* democratization (even though to a fairly limited extent, especially from a rule-based point of view) and civil rights awakening have been tacitly emerging within the Chinese society, which necessitate

renegotiation and reinforcement of the evolving “*social contract*”. In other words, the terms and conditions of the “*social contract*” should be constantly renewed and amended as time goes by in order to ensure civil commitment and cooperation.

I believe the Chinese people want and deserve more than what has been promised and provided to them so far. The aforementioned political core of the Chinese welfare system (Ringen and Ngok, 2013) only presents one specific aspect of the perpetual bargaining between the ruler and the ruled in China. Without the pressure of periodic elections at all levels and genuine and institutionalized public consultation, political bargaining in China has been kept strictly in a very ambiguous, informal, asymmetrical and incremental fashion by deliberation. In addition to that, many persistent issues and unsolved problems, such as discrimination in all forms and representations, institutional loopholes and arbitrary implementation of policy instruments are major targets for further and comprehensive reforms.

My intention to emphasize on the dynamic and evolutionary nature of the so-called “*social contract*” is that it determines the continuity and momentum of further and deeper reforms in China. Keeping the reforms going is an ineluctable response to the mounting domestic imperatives for democratization and justice (in all dimensions), even though, in many cases, the demanding parties do not seem to have a streamlined agenda among themselves and they also tend to suggest divergent or even contradictory policy proposals and strategic priorities.

If the Chinese political leadership fails to recognize the strong imperatives, such as civil empowerment, political democratization, and economic justice and egalitarianism, in its own society and does not take methodical and effectively measures to tackle them, then the Chinese populations are very likely to interpret the government’s signals of indifference and unresponsiveness as evidences of administrative incompetence and a unilateral breach of the social contract. Eventually, the Chinese people will refuse to cooperate with the government any longer. In this dangerous scenario, *The China Threat Theory* automatically loses its footing (i.e. *the integrity of the social contract and voluntary public support to the political regime*) in the Chinese society, for better or for worse, depending on the strategic stances taken.

A solid and mutually beneficial social contract does not only give the Chinese people the sense of security and commitment to participate into economically productive activities and contribute to social progressions, it also glues the Chinese society together as a unified whole in order to withstand whatever external hostilities and pressures there might be. “*Deal first the internal conflict before resolving external conflict*” or “*winning the domestic before conquering the global*” (rangyi bixian an’nei: 攘夷必先安内) is an overarching strategy the Chinese political leaderships (in the modern and contemporary time), be that Communist or non-Communist, have always prioritized during turbulent periods of external uncertainties and internal transformations.

5.16. Power re-centralization and the four possibilities of the China Threat

In China, power centralization and wealth concentration are intertwined deeply and intimately with each other (Shirk, 2007). Many believers and propagators of *The China Threat Theory* tend to assume that the power and financial budget at the disposal of the Chinese political authority is limitless (Curcio and Sullivan, 2017). They argue that no government on Earth could compete with the kind of power and resourcefulness the Chinese government has enjoyed for decades in an authoritarian, one-party dominated superpower or, at least, superpower-to-be (Li, 2022). They also cited the power re-centralization during President Xi’s prolonged tenures since late 2012 and the Xi Administration’s burning ambition to grip onto the tight control over both the Chinese society and China’s national political economy as convincing indications to support their shared view that the current Chinese political

leadership is revisionist and regressive (Rühlig, 2022). However, I intend to argue that this speculation is intuitively appealing but not technically accurate when interrogated with facts and empirical evidences.

First and foremost, the visible re-centralization of power from the bottom to the top during the Xi Administration is indeed a significant strategic move to be noticed. It is a reverse of the previous decentralization of power. However, the reason behind it has always been the malfeasance (or, more straightforwardly, incompetence) and corruption of the local governments and authorities. In other words, the local governments and authorities could not or would not always carry out the orders and implement the policies assigned from the central government with utmost obedience, loyalty and efficacy. In fact, these qualities are the most valued and desired abilities by the Xi Administration and the president himself according to extensive, first-hand observations made by China-watchers worldwide (The Economist, 2022a). At the current moment, meritocracy and administrative competency are substituted (maybe just temporarily) by unconditional loyalty (ibid.) due to the depleting mutual trust between the central and the local and, even more critically, between Xi's own faction and the rest of other non-Xi factions that are struggling to survive.

Another more provocative explanation I theorize to account for the power (re-) centralization within the Chinese political system is that: **A)** over concentration of power inevitably invites resistance and counteraction, thus, trust and loyalty become critical than other qualities; and **B)** when absolute trust and loyalty cannot be ensured at the local levels, then the central leadership has to tighten the control by retracting more power and discretion from the local governments and authorities in order to secure its dominant position and ensure its endurance. This is actually a mutually reinforcing spiral of the unhealthy and unusual concentration of power we can observe in the current Chinese political system. This tendency alone has exacerbated *The China Threat Theory* due to its ability to embolden the almost unconstrained Chinese core leadership to engage in all sorts of political adventures, both at home and abroad.

From Xi's perspective, the earlier decentralization of administrative power from the central government to local authorities did not deliver the ideal results. Serious abuses of the political discretion to make self-profiting decisions are both commonplace and staggering throughout the country (Zhong, 2015). The so-called "*central-local dynamics*" has always been an afflicting and controversial issue in Chinese politics. The opinions on whether or not (especially administrative among other forms of) power should be centralized and to what degree are sharply divided, even within China (Lieberthal, Li and Yu, 2014).

To outsiders (of the CCP), voluntary power delegation or power sharing does seem to soften the impression and perception of the rigid and hierarchical authoritarian political regime in China. However, with insufficient presence of supervision from neither the central government nor an independent oversight body, serious abuses of power and appropriation and embezzlement of valuable public assets and resources at local level are conceivably hard to be regulated, let alone prevented. Therefore, the seemingly revisionist political moves under the leadership of the Xi Administration are actually countermeasures to control and discipline abusive local authorities by limiting their political discretion and autonomy. The persistent "*local protectionism*" (difang baohuzhuyi: 地方保护主义) in multifarious forms and varieties is a major hindrance to pushing forward deeper and further reforms led by President Xi and his like-minded allies. Therefore, removing internal barriers and building a unified national market in order to enable the highly-promoted "*dual circulation*" are the unseen agendas hidden behind this debatable strategic move on the part of the Xi-centered core leadership (Pollard, 2022; The Economist, 2022b).

One should recognize that the fragmented nature of Chinese governmentality has long been recognized and seriously concerned by many political strategists and theorists, way before the CCP seized the monopolistic power to rule China in 1949 (Mudacumura and Haque, 2004). The existence of powerful local cadres with their own political agendas and economic interests also presents formidable challenges to the central government to consolidate and exercise its ultimate authority and implement strategic plans nation-wide (Yu and Guo, 2019).

Therefore, the power re-concentration is both a component of President Xi's (seemingly) draconian anti-corruption campaign and also a necessary strategic move to eliminate the resistances and obstructions at local level that could significantly hold back deeper and further reforms instigated from top-down (Li, 2016). Therefore, power re-centralization is a sign of reorientation of the on-going reform, rather than anti-reform as many have suspected. The real contentious debate is not about whether or not the reform is being halted but in which direction(s) the reform is going under the assertive leadership of President Xi and his visibly more conservative and traditionalist administration.

From my perspective, the Xi Administration clearly has its own agenda regarding the directions and the outcomes of the continuous reform. One major goal is to mitigate and bring down the soaring inequality in China, as well as the internal tensions instigated by it. An intriguing phenomenon that deserves to be reiterated here is that the re-distributing of the national wealth from the state and a tiny proportion of elites to the vast majority of the Chinese people is happening, albeit slowly, due to the increasingly strong demand for economic justice and social egalitarianism in the Chinese society as argued in more detail previously.

In other words, if making the cake bigger was the goal of yesterday, then making sure everybody gets a fair share of the cake is the goal of today. According to the official report of Xinhua Net (2017), while President Xi was attending the 25th Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC in short) (yatai jinghe zuzhi: 亚太经合组织) Economic Leaders' Meeting in Vietnam, "*Xi called for greater efforts to address the lack of inclusiveness in development, which is a problem facing many economies, in a bid to enable more people to share the benefits of development.*" President Xi has made similar remarks in many other international and/or domestic forums and conferences to stress on the importance of inclusive economic development, which clearly reflect his awareness and determination to reverse the dangerous wealth polarization in the Chinese society (within a national scope), even though, for the sake of fairness, China is definitely not the only country in the world that is plagued by exacerbating inequality.

The potential connection between the reform in China and the alleged *China Threat* has never been a straight-forward one to begin with. The logic is full of twists and turns. If the reform continues and succeeds under the leadership of President Xi, then China's national capacity should be further enhanced. In this case, China is more likely to pose threats to the US-led global West due to the fact that capacity is one of the two determinants of threat. Therefore, if this conventional wisdom is indeed right, the hegemon should be content to see the reform fail in China.

However, the available data and information indicates the reality is far more complex and complicated than this intuition-friendly, convenient logical reasoning, which has been embraced by many, both elites and the masses, in the American and Chinese societies. Below is a **2x2 matrix** I have developed to illustrate the four possibilities of the outcomes of China's internal reform combined with the attitudes of the Chinese leadership regarding the existing rules of the game set by the US-led global West, i.e. China's strategic orientation and positioning in the international community.

<p>China is more powerful ×</p> <p>China accepts the existing international order and play by the rules ①</p>	<p>China is less powerful ×</p> <p>China rejects the existing international order and does not obey the rules ②</p>
<p>China is less powerful ×</p> <p>China accepts the existing international order and play by the rules ③</p>	<p>China is more powerful ×</p> <p>China rejects the existing international order and does not obey the rules ④</p>

(**Table Two:** The four possibilities of the *China Threat*; **Source:** Original from the author)

Apparently, the most favorable scenario for the US would be a less powerful China (not necessarily collapsed and chaotic) that (voluntarily or involuntarily) subjects to the existing world order dominated by the hegemon. The most unfavorable scenario would be a more powerful China that aggressively challenges the global hegemony of the US. These two scenarios are relatively easy to comprehend and grasp. However, what about the rest of the other two possibilities?

The situation is tricky and delicate, to say the least. A more powerful China that could be tied down by the existing world order is somewhat hard to imagine and it is also against what we know about the current Chinese leadership that is well-known for its unusual (diplomatic) assertiveness and strong nationalist appeal. This scenario has almost no chance to be realized because the entire history of the rises and falls of the great powers suggests that the rising power is rarely, if ever, nondisruptive to the *status quo* (Ward, 2017).

Then what a less powerful and rejectionist China could possibly do to shape the world as we know it? First, two preconditions need to be met. **A)** China does not slip into nation-wide dysfunction and deep economic recession; and **B)** China does not retreat back to itself completely, i.e., closing the door entirely to outsiders. Then, in this case, China still possesses considerable power and capacity to act deliberately and disruptively to undermine the existing world order sustained by the US-led global West. What the US is concerning the most at this point is that a willful and unpredictable Chinese leader with unfathomable power (as the result of power concentration) might actually do when the national economy deteriorates significantly and the internal instabilities start to rise. Military take-over of Taiwan is the most likely candidate from the shared perspective of the US political leadership and the multitude of strategists based in the Western world. This is literally the most acute and immediate threat China could possibly pose under the leadership of President Xi and his close allies in the next five to even ten years.

5.17. Human factors and the Chinese political fundamentalism

Since Chinese politics is still highly dependent on actual power-holders rather than impersonal institutions, therefore, the strong presence of all kinds of “*human factors* (renwei yinsu: 人为因素)” in the Chinese political system literally compels political strategists and theorists to always take them into serious consideration. Major changes in occupants of key government positions and internal balancing and counter-balancing among the competing factions within the Chinese political system constantly send intriguing signals to China-watchers worldwide for them to interpret and evaluate critically.

The Chinese political system is notoriously opaque and it is organized in a strictly hierarchical and very rigid political structure. Each and every key position in this massive and complex structure is occupied by absolutely loyal and highly disciplined official that has been

hand-picked by the current central leadership. The loyalty and discipline that I am mentioning here are used in a very narrow and specific sense. The loyalty and the self-discipline of the Chinese bureaucrats are supposed to be devoted to the party and the highly emphasized “*leadership core*” (i.e. President Xi himself)⁷⁷, not necessarily to the vast Chinese general public and their legitimate interests (Hitkari, 2022).

According to a significant number of close and long-term observers of the Chinese political system, the non-Xi factions within the party have been methodically and ruthlessly eliminated, or at least fatally weakened, to ensure the absolute domination of President Xi’s own faction and its associated vested interests (Le Miere, 2022). This seems to be a double-edged sword. On the positive side, the pernicious internal struggles among political factions for power and interests are mitigated. However, on the negative side, the internal “*competition*” (if I could call it that) among the political factions within the CCP, as the last remaining hope for potential checks and balances, is greatly dimmed, if not extinguished.

Given the sheer power and weight the prominent political figures have and bear (often on behalf of their affiliated factions in a largely enclosed and internalized political system), their personal dispositions, not to mention hardwired value and belief systems, could exert profound influences in China and even beyond. It is better for the multitude of China-watchers world-wide to understand the strategic thinking of President Xi and his close allies from their own perspectives as actual power holders because it is a much more efficient way to navigate Chinese politics and make sense of the underlying logic of China’s national behaviors. Whether China poses threat or not is critically dependent on the attitudes, agendas and calculus of the current or any previous Chinese high-ranking politicians.

I want to reemphasize that the Chinese-style governmentality always has a political core situated within an economic shell. This managerial structure does not only bear the striking signature of the CCP, but also differentiate the peculiar Chinese political economy from the mainstream Western political-economic establishments and experiences. It is widely noted that China’s political reform is visibly slower and rather limited, in comparison with the economic reform. CCP’s widely known “*political incrementalism* (zhengzhi jianjin zhuyi: 政治渐进主义)” has always been the default explanation to this seemingly curious political phenomenon (Zhang and Sun, 2019).

However, I want to add that this piece of reality has revealed the “*political fundamentalism*” upheld by the ruling party and its current leadership, namely returning back to the CCP’s founding tradition to serve all Chinese people with utmost diligence and devotion and seizing the political monopoly in China as long as possible. In order to retain the formidable political power and the unparalleled privilege in China indefinitely and convince the Chinese general public that the CCP is the fittest to rule the country, it almost requires a time-honored, static and immutable “*political core*” to firmly secure the CCP at the most salient position of China’s political economy and social life, regardless how things have moved on over time.

In summary, changes are taking place in China on a daily basis, encouraged by pro-reform economic motives and constrained by conservative political fundamentalism. However, we should always bear in mind that the so-called changes won’t touch on the monopolistic status of the CCP in the political sphere. As long as the CCP is in power, it would never surrender it voluntarily. President Xi’s highly cited catchphrase, “*remain true to our original aspiration* (buwang chuxin: 不忘初心)”, and his revisionist embrace to the political tradition of the CCP

⁷⁷ The so-called “习核心” in Chinese.

clearly demonstrate his conservative political disposition and faithful understanding of the timeless fundamentalism borne by his affiliated political vehicle.

It is safe to say that the political heritage and tradition of the CCP are continuing to dominate China's political climate under the compelling leadership of the ever-powerful President Xi and his own faction. Finally, I want to add that, despite being consistently portrayed as benign and progressive by the mainstream Chinese media outlets, one should be cautiously aware that the CCP would literally go any length to secure its top priority (i.e. staying in power for as long as possible) at all costs, which is a survival instinct shared by all political parties on this planet.

To summarize Chapter Five, *The China Threat Theory* is a multifaceted and highly complex manifestation of the unfolding power struggles between the US and China for global preeminence. External hostilities towards the CCP, especially to the revisionist and traditionalist Xi regime with unusually high concentration of power into the hands of the sitting president, are mounting. It is generally true that President Xi has ignored and discarded a variety of explicitly and implicitly consented political traditions within the party, such as rolling back of the democracy-leaning, collective decision-making mechanism at the top-tier of the Chinese political system. China, as a proud nation-state and sovereign entity, as well as the multitude of the Chinese people, has unfortunately become the collateral damage of the controversial and self-serving behaviors of the CCP in a one-party dominated political sphere, economic system and social environment in combination. I believe this is what *The China Threat Theory* should really aim at and attack.

Chapter Six: “Cold War 2.0” between the US-led liberal Camp and the China-led Authoritarian Camp in the Indo-Pacific Region

In the previous chapter, China’s unique political system and its one-of-a-kind governmentality across different domains have been critically discussed from an interconnected and mutually referential perspective. I have revealed, to a certain extent, the complex internal structures and institutional particularities of the authentic, Chinese-style governmentality and their intricate operational mechanisms. I have also revealed the awareness and determination of the CCP to ensure civil-government expedience and cooperation in the swiftly transforming and conflict-ridden Chinese society during a sensitive period of higher economic uncertainties and political volatilities. In this chapter, I shall delve into the turbulent external environment China is currently situated in against the background of the intensifying power struggles between the US-led Western democratic alliance and the China-led authoritarian strategic association.

6.1. The triangularity of the US, Japan and China: power balancing in motion

The bi-lateral relationship between the US and China is already burdened by many thorny complications and ideological disagreements and divergences. The involvement of a third party could conceivably make the situation even harder and messier to be properly managed and carefully handled. This awkward third party is, unfortunately, Japan.

Japan has invested considerable strategic resources and diligent efforts to reinforce its solid and tight (political-military) alliance with the US so as to deter whatever perceived threats posed by the rising China. Some strategists have long suspected that the escalation of political confrontation in Indo-Pacific Region is ominous. Armed conflicts involving global and regional great powers are not entirely impossible to happen in the foreseeable future (Tan, 2015). Japan is a well-established major power situated in East Asia and the country used to be a highly speculated candidate for regional or even global hegemony in the 1980s and 1990s when the performance of the Japanese economy, as well as its economic influence in Asia, was at its peak (Golub, 2016).

Nowadays, Japan is no longer the largest economic powerhouse and growth engine in Asia and the Japanese military has been decisively castrated by the US as the ultimate punishment for being defeated by the Allies in WWII. The commonly known Japan Self-Defense Forces (the JSDF) was established in 1954 to fulfill defensive purposes (Eldridge, Nakamura and Leonard, 2020) and it is currently understaffed with great difficulty to recruit new soldiers according to a recent article published by Foreign Policy (Porter, 2023). As China has been rising and becoming increasingly assertive (outwardly), Japan is seriously concerned about its own national security. Japan’s potential responses to the perceivable threats posed by China are critically revealed by the official website of the Japanese Ministry of Defense.

According to this highly credible, governmental source, the role of the JSDF is not only ensure “*effective deterrence and response to contingencies*”, but also maintain “*stabilization of the Asia-Pacific region and improvement of the global security environment*” (JGSDF, n.d.). The latter explicitly hints the possibility that Japan might get involved in conflict mitigation outside its national borders, which is clearly alerting to China due to the visible propensity of the current Chinese political leadership to take over Taiwan by force, despite the presence of very strong “*integrated deterrence*” (Center for a new America Security, 2023) from multiple external sources. The much-strengthened military alliance among Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines etc., under the leadership of the US (United States Department of State, 2023) and the hegemon’s *de facto* deliverance of the Japanese military force, even without the amendment of the Article 9 of Japan’s post-war, pacifist constitution, have caused great strategic concerns to the Xi regime.

It is self-evident that Japan's geological proximity to China and its amicable relationship with Taiwan have made the country's strategic position exceptionally inconvenient and challenging. In short, Japan is awkwardly caught in the middle of an escalating power game between the US and China. Its ability to balance out China's presence and influence in Asia and beyond on its own is conspicuously deficient (Katada, 2020). Therefore, to leverage the collective strengths of other pro-West democracies in the region through tighter strategic cooperation and alliance to encircle the rising China within the so-called "*first island chain* (第一岛链)" has become an almost inevitable option to Japan (O'Hanlon and Yeo, 2023).

6.2. Localized "Westernization" in Asia

The influence of the West is considerably strong in Asia. The concept of "*the West*" does not necessarily imply negative connotations in Asia despite the huge differences of all kinds, from linguistic to religious to ideological, between the two. In reality, many non-Western countries do admire and appreciate the Western model of governance and development due to the extensively acknowledged "*demonstration effect* (yanshi xiaoying: 演示效应)" radiating from better governed and materialistically prosperous Western civilizations (Warner, 2020). Even the economically struggling Socialist societies during the tumultuous time of the Cold War have visibly displayed their interest in emulating successful Western experiences (United States. Congress. Joint Economic Committee, 1977), not to mention after this excruciating political deadlock has finally ended with the sudden and dramatic downfall of the Soviet Union in early 1990s.

The military might, scientific achievement and materialistic prosperity of the West have greatly motivated and justified Westernization in Asia. Japan was the first viable and successful case of Westernization in Asia, way ahead of other later followers. Conventional wisdom and indeed mainstream political-economic historians tend to attribute the spectacular rise of Japan from the latter half of the 1800s to its hugely rewarding and quite thorough "*Westernization*", which is also widely known as the Meiji Restoration (mingzhi weixin: 明治维新) (Hellyer and Fues, 2020).

The rise of the so-called Newly Industrialized Economies (the NIEs: xinxing gongyehua jingjiti: 新兴工业化经济体), such as South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan (not a sovereignty) in the 1970s and 1980s, has illustrated the gradual dissemination and expansion of Western political ideology and economic practice to East Asia through Western-style industrialization encouraged by the state (i.e. the concept of the Developmental State) (Warner, 2020). It is, indeed, through this diffusive process driven by exemplification of successful and admirable Western achievements and voluntary assimilation on the part of non-Western countries, the so-called "*Western Model*" has gradually become universalized and standardized in a global scope, including Asia.

The political and economic elites in East Asia are much exposed to Western ideologies and idealism since many of them have lived lengthy periods of time and received advanced education in Western countries (Lam and Lim, 2017). These elites then have tried to pursue the avenue of Westernization so as to introduce peace, order and prosperity into their indigenous society. Nevertheless, these elites are also very pragmatic and flexible regarding the "*social reform* (shehui gailiang: 社会改良)" they have initiated to emulate the "*Western model*". They do appreciate and cherish certain time-honored indigenous values, norms and idealism that are compatible and complementary to the "*Western model*" (Antons, 2005). These positive sociocultural heritages are carefully preserved and deliberately included in the reform agenda in order to adapt to local conditions and particularities (Davidann, 2019). This is the primary reason why adapted or localized Westernization has produced impressive outcome of development and extraordinary elevation of living standard across the

industrialized (or even just semi-industrialized) parts of Asia. Based on these facts, the power, influence and appeal of the US (or the West in general) in Asia should not be underestimated. Ironically, China is now dealing with an increasing number of countries in the Indo-Pacific Region that are more hostile, or at least skeptical, towards itself rather than the hegemon. China's growing unpopularity in Asia and beyond definitely fuels *The China Threat Theory* among its surrounding countries and economies.

6.3. America is back and who else are on board?

Anti-West sentiment is not particularly strong in (East) Asia as mentioned above, except for China and North Korea due to the Communist nature of these two authoritarian or even autocratic political regimes. It is a major misunderstanding that East Asian countries might bear persistent resentment and hostility towards the West due to historical conflicts and imperialistic invasions and they are happy to see a rising superpower (i.e., China) in their own region and willingly follow its leadership and whatever wishes without any degree of resistance. Quite on the contrary, Asian states are very wary to the vigorous rise of China (Fruhmann, 2020; Jones, Khoo and Smith, 2014), especially after the bitter territorial disputes between China and its immediate neighbors in the South China Sea. The continuous military capacity building of the PLA in the surrounding areas of the Taiwan Strait is also highly disconcerting (Maizland, 2022).

In the early 2000s, China was much more welcomed due to its enormous market power and increasing economic openness to the rest of the world, noticeable to countries and economies (including Taiwan) in the neighboring region; The national behaviors of China were also much more predictable and tamed due to the higher level of political transparency and policy consistency in presence at the time (Bader, 2005). Although, China's assertiveness and isolationist tendency started to emerge (Roland, 2021), China's economic ties with other Asian countries and economies seem to be rather solid.

According to a recent statistical report, "*applying a continental lens, approaching half (47.4%) of mainland China's exports by value were delivered to fellow Asian countries while 20.7% were sold to importers in Europe. China shipped 19.9% worth of goods to buyers in North America*" (Workman, 2022). However, the tightening economic bonds do not guarantee political trust and goodwill between China and its Asian neighbors. The typical examples are Japan and Taiwan (Caixin, 2023). Within the Chinese political discourse and among the Chinese political professionals, this peculiar and ironic scenario is called "政冷经热 (zhengleng jingre)", which literally means "*economic relationships are hot whereas political relationships are cold*" (Kamata, 2022). At the current moment, China's pro-West neighbors are trying to balance out the increasingly powerful China at their doorstep with their collective strengths (Baldor, 2023). Some of them even willingly invite the US to increase its political and military presence in the region to deter the perceived military threats posed by the China-led, authoritarian, strategic association, notably Taiwan, South Korea and the Philippines.

In the US, the seemingly short-lived "*pivot to Asia*" policy (chongfan yatai zhengce: 重返亚太政策) during the Obama-Biden Administration has indeed met with temporary setbacks during the chaotic and willful Trump-Pence Administration, such as the arbitrary withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (the TPP) so as to protect US jobs. The subsequent Biden-Harris Administration has re-energized the infamous "*encirclement strategy* (baowei zhanlue: 包围战略)" against China with the strong intention to lock China's growing power and influence down in a rather confined geo-strategic space, together with its allies and partners in the much enlarged and inclusive Indo-Pacific Region.

The Democratic Biden-Harris Administration has indeed promptly canceled out and reversed many of the arbitrary and controversial policies and executive decisions made by President

Trump during his single term. Nevertheless, the new administration preserves Trump's signature "*tough card*" against China (Yeung, 2020). The noticeable difference is that the Biden-Harris Administration tries to get the same job done with comparably more relaxed and skillful diplomatic rhetoric and gestures than the Trump-Pence Administration did.

The shared sense of insecurity among China's neighboring countries, especially those having territorial disputes with China (Shambaugh, 2014), does go against the naïve yet fairly popular assumption circulating in the Chinese society that Asian countries share similar cultures, mentalities and historical experiences, so that they would unite themselves together and look after one another. Either being related or unrelated to this intuitive assumption, China is an active promoter of regional integration in Asia (Tong and Kang, 2020) with varying degrees of economic success and political failure.

Overall, the situation in Asia is fundamentally different from that of the much more integrated and unified Europe. In other words, China's immediate, geographic environment is full of uncertainties and challenges for the rising superpower to achieve regional domination. The involvement of the hegemon does not just complicate the situation, but also makes China's strategic position considerably more uncomfortable and restrictive. Even though, Asia is comparably more fragmented and uncoordinated than the European Union, however, in the specific case of the European Union, integration at supranational level does not automatically guarantee streamlined unification and undivided solidarity. The highly controversial Brexit in early 2020 has clearly demonstrated that the EU also faces the lurking danger of disintegration from within. Brexit might just be a symptom or an early sign of it.

Based on rich empirical data and numerous case studies, we could clearly see that friction-free and sustainable regional integration is more inclined to be a hopeful, if not wishful, solution that is conceived to bring peace and co-development in a historically fragmented and conflict-ridden region like the Asian continent. Yet, often times, regional integration remains to be an unattainable political fantasy that constantly entices politicians across the global without the blessing needed to be realized.

Therefore, China's true strategic agenda to promote regional integration in Asia should serve as a Realist wake-up call to all stakeholders in the region and beyond. It might actually be a prelude of regional hegemony or domination by China in the future rather than a sincere, wholehearted, and multilaterally oriented proposal to promote co-development and shared prosperity in Asia. In short, if China determines to ascend to a full-fledged global superpower status, dominating Asia is inevitable and indispensable. This possibility constitutes an unmistakable threat to none other than the already strategically anxious Japan.

6.4. Fragile and intense bilateral relationship between China and Japan

The reconciliation between France, Britain and Germany after WWII has laid the foundation of a united and peaceful Europe. The much-anticipated reconciliation between China and Japan is yet to occur. In a general sense, too many unsolved complications are involved in this fragile bilateral relationship and too little mutual trust is demonstrated on both sides. Some strategists, notably based in China, tend to view the US as an obstruction to prevent China and Japan from significantly improving their bilateral relationship due to the hegemon's own strategic calculus and political interests in the region (Wu, 2005).

According to the longitudinal opinion polls conducted jointly by the Genron NPO, a Japanese think tank, and China International Publishing Group over the very recent years, the perception of Japan among the Chinese respondents was noticeably improved in the year of 2018, which marked the 40th anniversary of the peace and friendship treaty between Japan and China. Even though, the call for normalization of the Sino-Japanese relationship and higher degree of strategic cooperation seems to be sincere and eager on both sides, the percentage of

the Chinese respondents who regard Japan as the primary military threat to China has dramatically increased in the recent years, whereas, in Japan, the perception of China among the Japanese respondents remains persistently unfavorable. The default explanations to the fragile and intense Sino-Japanese relationship have always been China's state-sponsored, anti-Japanese propaganda over the years and its progressively strong, defensive responses to the much-strengthened US-Japan military alliance since early 2000s onwards.

China believes the stringent military restrictions imposed by the US on Japan after the WWII have been deliberately loosened due to the strategic concerns of attacks from the “*stereotypical villains*” in Western political blaming game, namely China, North Korea and Russia, as the US Department of Defense publicly and insistently proclaims (Vergun, 2020). It is no exaggeration to say that the Sino-Japanese relationship has never been based on trust, mutual understanding and goodwill, but purely on power balancing and strategic expediency, especially with the heavy involvement of the US. This (what I prefer to call) power trinity among the US, Japan and China is doomed to be a major source of political complications and confrontations rather than a de-escalator (of power politics in Asia) or a stabilizing force as pro-US interpretations have suggested (Green and Bates, 2009).

The shocking results of various opinion polls over the recent years, such as Pew Research Center (Stokes, 2016), NHK World (2020) and many others, all have confirmed the persistent hostilities between China and Japan and among their peoples. Another alarming tendency I have noticed is that a significant proportion of the members of the Japanese general public have been gradually buying into the inflating *China Threat Theory*. They treat China as the primary military threat to Japan. Many Japanese respondents also stated that they value Japan's relationship with the US much more than that with China, despite the fact that the US was the one who has dropped two atomic bombs in Hiroshima (広島) and Nagasaki (長崎) respectively and forced Japan to surrender towards the end of WWII. This devastating piece of historical fact has planted the seed of cynicism deep into the US-Japan strategic alliance, especially from China's own perspective.

Various poll results have consistently shown that both the Chinese and Japanese respondents believe the rare amicability between China and Japan has briefly peaked in the year 2018 (Zhou, 2021). However, the Sino-Japanese relationship is far from good according to respondents on both sides (ibid.). Conventional wisdom tends to attribute the intense relationship between China and Japan to historical conflicts (i.e. the Japanese invasion and occupation of parts of China during the Sino-Japanese wars) and the presence of strong nationalism in both countries. These two reasons are plausible and intuition-friendly. But they only tell an incomplete story. The missing part is the insidious role the US plays in between these two competing great powers in East Asia and this is not a biased judgment by deliberation on my part.

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, when the Japanese economy was virtually outperforming the rest of other major Western economies in terms of growth rate, competitiveness and well-being (Ishi, 2000), Japan had been temporarily put into a hypothetical position as a potential challenger to the US global hegemony (especially in Asia), similar to what *The China Threat Theory* propagates nowadays (Nymalm, 2019). The critical difference is that Japan has never been a “*peer competitor*” (Mearsheimer) to the US, technically speaking, and the country has also been militarily castrated after having been defeated in WWII. The only viable candidate in the entire world with the potentialities to replace the US global hegemony should be none other than China. At this point, the US needs Japan almost more than ever because Japan is the most loyal and capable one amongst its allies and alignments with the ability to effectively hedge the longer-term threats posed by the rising China in the (strategically much-enlarged) Indo-Pacific Region.

It is true that history is full of twists and turns. The Japanese economy has lost its magic and charm and has struck in an afflicting stagnation for over three decades straight (Yoshino and Taghizadeh-Hesary, 2017). As time passes by, Japan is no longer the largest economic powerhouse and the only industrialized country in Asia. China, among others, have seized the rare opportunity to catch up after the catastrophic destruction of the WWII and the excruciating Cold War (Hsiao and Hsiao, 2017) by opening-up to the external world and offering attractive elements (such as cheap labor and land) and conditions (such as tax concession and other types of preferential policies) of production in order to suck in an enormous amount of foreign investment on a continuous basis (Tseng and Rodlauer, 2003).

The power balance in Indo-Pacific Region has already been disrupted by the vigorous rise of China, which is the ultimate reason why Japan is so concerned and anxious about its national security. Japan is actively seeking an ever-tighter bond with the US and other pro-West allies in the region (Eckstein, 2024). The dramatic reconciliation between Japan and South Korea in the past a few months is the most recent advancement of the emerging strategic alliance led by the US to encircle and contain China at its doorsteps (Yeo, 2023).

The triangular entanglement among the US, Japan, and China has been evolving into a rather awkward, delicate, and cynical direction. The US and Japan used to be devastating enemies to each other during WWII. Now they have become reliable and intimate allies to collectively counter-balance the rising China. China used to be a weak and miserable victim of Japanese Imperialism and Militarism during WWII. But now China has become the greatest military security threat to Japan (Yao, 2023). In this sense, power politics seems to be even more theatrical and unexpected than sensationalist fictions. During the recent David Camp talk on the 18th of August, 2023, South Korea and Japan agreed to put their historically formed feud aside and work together under the leadership of the US to deter and/or cope with the (military) threats from China and its authoritarian associates, especially the unpredictable North Korea and the aggressive Russia (Hunnicut, Brunnstrom and Shin, 2023).

Japan's radically revised strategic (re-) orientation has largely been a product of the transforming global power equilibrium. China has not always been seriously regarded as a security concern or a competing force by Japan or any other member of the pan-Western camp. Just a few decades ago, China was extremely weak, poor and chaotic (Bader, 2016) and *The China Threat Theory* simply had no footing in the reality at that point. Therefore, the resurgence of *The China Threat Theory* in the 2000s, especially after China's eventual accession into the WTO in 2001, is more of a compliment rather than a malicious defamation according to my own judgement. From a Realist perspective, it is the ultimate strategic recognition to China's power, capacity, influence, and potentiality.

Japan is a proud and ambitious nation-state and it does have the appetite for respect and status in the international community, just like China. Japan has joined the Western Camp long before other pro-West East Asian states, such as Singapore and South Korea. Japan was very proud of its early membership in the global "*Western Club*" (xifang julebu: 西方俱乐部) (Young, 1998) and used to be seriously embarrassed by its geographic location and Asian heritage. The infamous "*leaving Asia and entering Europe* (tuoya ruou: 脱亚入欧)" theory proposed by Fukuzawa Yukichi (福泽谕吉), a prominent Japanese intellectual of the 19th century (Kim, 2016), was a perfect example of Japan's long quest for political and geo-cultural (re-) positioning in the face of Western expansion and domination in a global scope and its strategic inconvenience caused by bitter East-West clashes. I believe this is true both then and right now.

At the current moment, Japan seems more like a submissive subscriber of the US security package deal due to its lack of leverages against both the hegemon and China. According to

close secondary observations, Japan's loyalty and commitment to its strategic alliance with the US has far exceeded that of other partners due to its growing sense of insecurity brought by the increasingly powerful China just across the narrow East China Sea (zhongguo donghai: 中国东海) (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The US Department of Defense has detailed that "*The Japanese government provides nearly \$2 billion per year to offset the cost of stationing the 55,000 U.S. forces in 85 facilities across Japan*" (Vergun, 2020). The numbers truly speak for themselves.

Japan has been militarily castrated by the US as the ultimate punishment for the hideous war crimes it had committed during WWII (Jaguaribe and Vasconcelos, 2004). Despite persistent objections from both the Japanese people and foreign governments, Japan's attempt to re-militarize has become more evident than ever before (Hughes, 2017). Needless to say, China is highly alert on every strategic move made by Japan in that direction (Lam, 2017). The potential amendment of the Article 9 of the Japanese pacifist constitution is the most sensitive and decisive political action Japan could possibly take to officially re-militarize in front of the entire world.

According to a report released by the Institute of Security and Policy Development in 2018, amendment of the Article 9 was a very ambitious political goal for the assassinated former Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe (安倍晋三), during his intermittent tenures, yet, without eventual success. The intended amendment, if succeeded, would break the world's longest record set by the Japanese Pacifist Constitution, i.e. no amendment whatsoever since 1947 (Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2018), and produce heavy military pressure on China, North Korea and even Russia.

For some right-wing, nationalistic Japanese politicians and strategists, the Article 9 has always been a humiliation suffered by Japan as the result of having been defeated in WWII, along with Italy and Germany (Sieg, 2019). They stated that it is a military shackle and a political infringement of Japan's sovereignty and the legitimate right of the Japanese people to defend themselves whenever threat emerges (Sissons, 1961). If Japan achieves the amendment of its Pacifist Constitution at some point in the future, under the tacit approval of the US, then it will almost certainly cause major disruption to the *status quo* of geopolitics and military balance in the immediate region.

Conceivably, China, North Korea and Russia would definitely take corresponding countermeasures to cope with the re-militarized Japan. A new round of arms race among technologically capable and economically viable stakeholders (maybe to a lesser extent in the cases of North Korea and Russia due to their limited economic capacities to afford hugely expensive arms race with Western great powers) could be readily provoked and the entire Indo-Pacific Region is likely to slip into an extremely precarious scenario. In this scenario, all the competing stakeholders are deeply trapped in a never-ending "*security dilemma*" that spirals out of control.

I believe that this is exactly why the Chinese political leadership always despises the inherently inflammatory and profoundly troublesome *China Threat Theory* because it is literally a hazardous "*self-fulfilling prophecy*" with grave consequences in reality. Therefore, the Chinese political leadership spares no efforts to actively debunk *The China Threat Theory* through all kinds of channels and via all forms of platforms so as to divert hostilities diligently whenever the opportunity presents itself. However, due to China's assertive diplomacy and counterproductive propagandist efforts, negative narratives against China still flourish in the global political discourses.

China has long been perceived as being "*passive and reactive*" towards external stimuli by a large number of China watchers worldwide (Li, 2013). This revelation is compatible with

China's traditional security strategy, which, according to the Chinese political leadership, has always been defensive rather than offensive in nature (Jash, 2021). However, over the recent years, things have changed noticeably on the part of China. China's arbitrary and assertive behaviors have been increasingly interpreted as otherwise by many (ibid.).

I believe China's behavioral transformations as a self-fulfilling superpower are largely the combined outcome of the country's dramatically growing national power across all the critical dimensions and its increasing confidence and audacity to impose punitive coercion against other sovereignties in order to advance its own national interests internationally. In short, a much more powerful China has already acquired the capabilities to stand strong for itself on the world stage and defend its prioritized interests forcefully.

Due to its sensitive strategic position, China remains highly alert at all times. The rising superpower is ready to detect and sense any significant changes in its surroundings. The frequent and routinized military exercises conducted by the US-Japan-South Korea defense alliance are purposefully targeting China, North Korea and Russian as many US-based political strategists, especially those with government affiliation, have explicitly acknowledged (CSIS, 2019). The so-called "*trilateral military alliance*" among the US, Japan and Republic of Korea (The ROK in short) might indicate the inauguration of a "*New Cold War Era* (xin lengzhan shidai: 新冷战时代)" with its epicenter located in Asia (or the Indo-Pacific region) in terms of hard power (re-) configuration and (re-) balance (ibid.). If this interpretation turns out to be indeed true, then Asia or the much-enlarged Indo-Pacific Region will become the forefront of another round of ferocious power struggles driven by the intensifying Sino-US competition. This is literally a very ominous scenario for this historically conflict-ridden and much tormented landmass.

The on-going power struggles between the US and China do make things harder for Japan as the awkward third party in this highly precarious trinity. Japan is not allowed to be opportunist in this case. Japan has to make a choice to either stand by the hegemon or reconcile with China. It's an either-or, definitely not both. In other words, Japan simply cannot eat the cake and have it too. It seems that Japan has already made the strategic decision to tightly bond itself to the hegemon, even though, by doing that it would lose the chance to win China's goodwill and trust and improve its intense relationship with this rising superpower.

The US military presence and intervention in Asia (or Asia-Pacific or even Indo-Pacific) is not entirely unsolicited as argued earlier. The region has received much more wanted or unwanted attention due to: **A**) the continuous rise of China; and **B**) the strategic shift of the US foreign policies and its political-economic-military operations in the region. No matter how seriously and persistently China openly protests against the unwelcoming US meddling with many thorny issues in its surrounding areas (such as the separatist Taiwan, the territorial disputes in the South China Sea or over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands), the US is determined to support its anxious and insecure allies and alignments with the military protection and assistance they ask for in order to deter the combined power of China, Russia and North Korea, albeit no formal strategic alliance has ever been formed among these three major US adversaries in the Indo-Pacific Region or even beyond.

The politically divided Asia (into two competing camps) reveals the unfortunate reality that *The China Threat Theory* is no longer just sitting on intelligence reports or on the tip of people's tongue. The hegemon has already taken methodical actions to cope with the potential (esp. in the hard domains) threats China could possibly pose to its strategic interests in the region and that of its close allies. In other words, the US is containing China with an increasing degree of assertion and preemption. The alleged *China Threat* is treated as a very serious and pressing challenge, rather than a hypothetical speculation, regardless the US

political leadership chooses to officially admits it or not. In the next chapter, different approach and strategy to achieve national security by the US and China respectively will be compared and discussed in more detail.

Chapter Seven: The US approach VS the Chinese approach to national security

The China Threat Theory is fundamentally a national security issue determined by its political nature. How national security is defined and achieved bear monumental strategic importance to all nation-states, especially the powerful and influential ones, such as the US and China. As the world's most capable and mighty nation-states, both these two competing forces are strongminded to consolidate their domestic base and overpower or, at least, outperform their primary opponent in order to gain competitive advantages in the fierce global competition. They both demonstrated strategic urgency to (re-) construct the composition and structure of the constantly evolving world order to favor their own national interests, as well as the strategic alliance they lead and dominate, respectively.

7.1. National security as the ultimate strategic priority for all nation-states

Pursuing national security is a universally shared, surviving instinct of all nation-states with no exception (Stolberg, 2013). The *China Threat Theory* is an explicit proposition accusing the potential jeopardy of national security (of other sovereignties) perpetrated by China. To what extent this assertion is actually true and a brief compare and contrast of the different approaches taken by the US and Chinese political leaderships to achieve their respective, self-proclaimed “*national security*” will also be touched upon in the subsequent discussions. A number of critical questions regarding the utmost importance of “*national security*” are going to be critically deliberated: How national security is defined and how it could be achieved through what methods and measures? Does unilateral pursuit of national security jeopardize the national security of other sovereignties? Should national security be exploited, or at least, instrumentalized as the ultimate justification to serve offensive rather than defensive purposes?

The current US national security strategy issued by the sitting President, Joe Biden, is characterized by three salient features: **A**) preemptive and proactive; **B**) value-oriented (especially regarding democracy and universal human rights protection); and **C**) globally-focused (Biden, 2021). Quite a few high-profile Chinese scholars, such as Wu Xinbo (吴心伯) from Fudan University (复旦大学), Shanghai, have seriously questioned the strategic rationality and *de facto* attainability to pursue “*absolute security* (juedui an'quan: 绝对安全)” by the hegemon in a global scope. He, among others, has long claimed that the national security approach adopted by the US would hardly lead to a stable, peaceful and cooperative security situation in the Indo-Pacific Region because China feels increasingly “*encircled*” and “*constricted*” due to the steady expansion of the US-led security alliance to its sensitive strategic peripheries and aggressive encroachment of its diplomatic leeway (Wu, 2000).

In other words, China's “*strategic comfort zone*” deserves sufficient respect from the hegemon and its allies (Kipgen, 2021). Excessive squeeze of China's viable space for political and military maneuverings and limiting the strategic options available to the Chinese political leadership could inevitably induce even more and tougher defensive and retaliatory actions from China and thus worsen the already intense, confrontational propensity in the region.

China's approach to achieve national security is comparably more self-restrained and domestically-oriented (i.e. within its own jurisdiction rather than in relation to other sovereignties) in comparison with that of the US. This approach reflects China's long-standing diplomatic principles of “*mutual respect* (xianghu zunzhong: 相互尊重)” and “*multilateral cooperation* (duobian xiezu: 多边协作)” at international level and it places much of its focus on domestic stability at national level. “*Mutual respect, non-interventionism and multilateralism*” are the three defining features of the diplomatic tradition that has guided China's foreign policies over the decades (Elgebeily, 2017; Wang, 2000). China does not really treat international affairs as an extension of its domestic affairs as the US often does because only the hegemon has the prerogative and authority to do that and get (sometimes)

uncritical praise for consolidating the *status quo* (no matter how it is defined and maintained) from its loyal followers.

However, one agreement the US and Chinese political leaderships tend to share at this point is that the so-called “*confrontation*” (especially in extreme forms) is undesirable and should be avoided whenever nonbelligerent solutions are available. Negotiations and reconciliations are preferred and prioritized to stabilize this highly complex and extraordinarily complicated bilateral relationship. Theoretically, the willingness on both sides to de-escalate should significantly reduce the probability of prodigious and catastrophic political opportunism and miscalculation. Nevertheless, the atmosphere remains intense and unpredictable. The heating competition between the hegemon and China shows no visible sign of waning down despite a number of major strategic distractions in presence, such as Russia’s unjustified invasion of Ukraine and the soaring inflation (of necessities) throughout the US.

At this point, China does have an extensive checklist of national security issues. The country is not only on high alert of foreign military intervention or a sudden *coup d’état* (with or without) foreign backup, but also other more chronic, sensitive, and endogenous threats to its domestic stability from within. At the current moment, China is probably more concerned about: **A**) the separatist tendency in Taiwan (台湾), Hong Kong (香港), Xinjiang (新疆) and Tibet (西藏) with foreign sympathy and assistance; **B**) serious domestic economic deterioration triggered by the pandemic and the collective containment (Ye, Levine and Liu, 2011) instigated and perpetrated by the “*conspiratorial West*” (Sadler, 2022); and **C**) the intense public rage over administrative corruption and misfeasance (Liang, 2024) and systemic suppression of civil liberty and human rights (Li, 2010), and rebellion and activism of significant scale motivated by other acute socioeconomic complications (The Economist, 2023), such as inequality and environmental degradation, or even just the unsustainable Zero-COVID policy (Wolfe, 2022). These critical and challenging issues combined could provoke dangerous unrest and upheaval within the tightly controlled Chinese society.

To summarize, China’s current approach to ensure national security could be described as pragmatic and defensive (Mekercher, 2022) to the external and oppressive yet expedient to the internal (rather than being overly coercive and excessively violent as the Chinese authority used to be). It is almost ironic for us to realize the seemingly paradoxical fact that China does not only threaten others as the *China Threat Theory* enthusiastically propagates, but can also be threatened by others as well. The empirical evidences are both abundant and concerning to the current Chinese leadership, such as extensive exposure of China’s inappropriate ethnic minority policies and their implementation in the autonomous regions (Hasmath, 2022); Deep foreign sympathy to the pro-democracy protestors in Hong Kong against Beijing’s revocation of (the formally promised) autonomy and self-governance (Bader, 2019) and active encouragement to Taiwan to resist unification with the mainland China (IISS, 2021); and malicious infiltration of subversive values and ideologies into the Chinese society to create self-doubts and disorientations (Schambaugh, 2016; The Wilson Center, 2014), and promote anti-government sentiment among the severely suppressed Chinese populations (Hachigian, 2014).

These lurking threats faced by China from both the internal and the external are far from merely unwarranted political paranoia on the part of the Chinese political authority. In many senses, they are real (in varying degrees) and hard to be dismissed, strategically speaking. As long as they possess the ability to potentially undermine the utmost goal set by the CCP, i.e. *being the political monopoly in China indefinitely*, they will be ruthlessly neutralized with no mercy and hesitance whatsoever.

In order to ensure national security against the various internal and external threats I have discussed previously, whether they are existential or just perceived, should never be

downplayed or even overlooked if one wants to genuinely understand the strategic thinking and calculus of the current Chinese political leadership. What *The China Threat Theory* does not tell is that China's vulnerabilities are in plain sight and they could be skillfully exploited by whomever with the intention to bring this rising giant down to its knees.

7.2. National security under multiple challenges

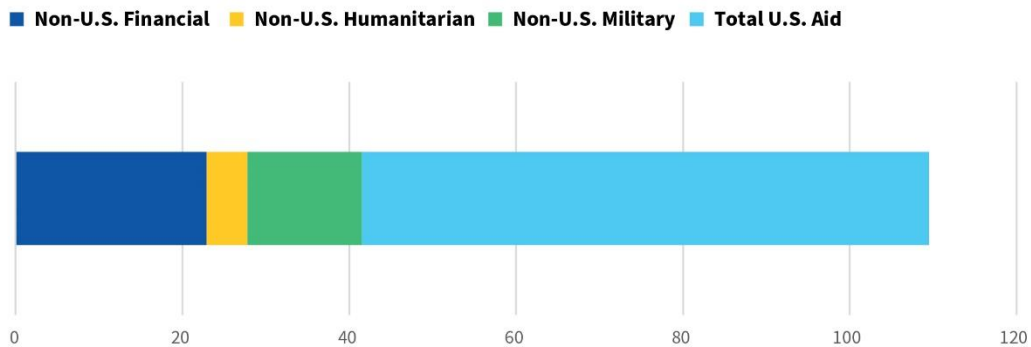
Like China, the US also has a variety of acute national security issues, especially in the recent years. The national power of the US used to be incomparable (right after the downfall of the USSR) and the country is still the ultimate “*security provider*” in the entire world to this very day (Kramp-Karrenbauer, 2020). The hegemon's new opponent and strategic target is undoubtedly China. Up till the present moment, the US diplomatic rhetoric still addresses China as a “*competitor*”, rather than a “*strategic partner* (zhanlue huoban: 战略伙伴)” as being used by the European Commission (2019a) several years earlier or an “*enemy*” as the USSR used to be. Noticeably, according to the official website of the European Union (2022), China has been redefined and repositioned as an “*economic competitor and a systemic rival*” by the EU. The political subtlety here is obvious and interpretations of these frequently used terminologies could differ significantly from different perspectives of strategic thinking.

According to my own observations, the Biden-Harris Administration has been cautiously and tentatively adjusting itself to navigate its own way to deal with the rising China. It is noteworthy that the Biden-Harris Administration has almost inherited the strategic thinking entirely from the previous Trump Administration. It, too, firmly believes that China is the only viable competing force in the entire world with the ability to challenge the US global domination and whatever values and interests the hegemon stands by. Even though, China deserves a critical amount of strategic attention and resources, but the US still does not treat it as a devastating enemy that demands immediate, all-out, inter-state confrontation. According to President Biden's own public remarks, the US does not want to engage in a confrontation with China, but in a fierce competition instead (Salama and Lubold, 2021).

At the current moment, two influencing factors deserve to be noted and bear in mind are: **A)** the COVID-19 pandemic is still lingering in many parts of the world (notably in China after sudden abandonment of the Zero-COVID policy in early December of 2022) despite comprehensive vaccination worldwide. A prolonged and full-fledged global recession is entirely possible due to significant disruptions of the production and supply chains located in China as the combined result of the overwhelming pandemic and the deepening US-China decoupling; and **B)** President Putin's unjustified war against Ukraine has not only created devastating atrocities, but also has fueled the soaring prices of oil and gas (energy) and wheat (food) in a global scope.

Meanwhile, the seemingly generous Western military and economic aids to Ukraine have also become a fiscal burden to Western governments, especially the US due to the fact that 62% of the total aids have been provided by the hegemon alone (Cancian, 2022) (see **Illustration Twenty-four** below). Even though, the majority of the American general public displayed strong support to the Ukrainians and approved the US military aid on the battlefield (Kamarck and Muchnick, 2023), the call for ending the war as soon as possible has also been gradually rising within Western societies as time goes by.

Global Contributions to Ukraine



Source: "Data Set - Ukraine Support Tracker Data," Kiel Institute for the World Economy, last modified June 2022, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/data-sets/ukraine-support-tracker-data-17410/>.

CSIS | INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM

(Illustration Twenty-Four: Global contributions to Ukraine. Source: the CSIS)

These two extremely unfavorable factors literally have dimmed the hope of a fast and healthy recovery of the US economy even further, despite the momentum of the pandemic has already visibly subsided. The situation in China is not optimistic either. The Chinese political authority has unexpectedly and hastily abandoned its draconian Zero-COVID policy due to the mounting, anti-lockdown civil movement within the Chinese society (Davidson and Yu, 2022), which has led to mass infections of COVID-19 throughout its densely populated, urban areas within a matter of two to three weeks (CNBC, 2023).

The Chinese economy and the Chinese people have suffered devastatingly, both before and immediately after the reversal of the Zero-COVID policy. The Chinese economy has deteriorated visibly in the year of 2022 in comparison with its historical performance. According to the associated press (2023), *“the world's No. 2 economy grew by 3% in 2022, less than half of the previous year's 8.1% rate, official data showed Tuesday. That was the second-lowest annual rate since at least the 1970s after 2020, when growth fell to 2.4% at the start of the coronavirus pandemic”*. Since the pandemic has finally subsided worldwide (including in China), many economic institutions have predicted that a bounce-back is likely to happen for the Chinese economy in 2023 (Hunter, 2023), even though, the growth rates could still be moderate, such as the (cautious and conservative) forecasts publicized by the OECD (2022). It predicted that the Chinese economy will grow by 4.6% in 2023 and by 4.1 % in 2024 (ibid.).

China's weaker economic position could, in a certain way, ease the insecurity felt by the hegemon to some extent. However, I have to emphasize that a dramatic deterioration, if not a sudden collapse, of the Chinese economy is also not in line with the national interests of the US due to the fact that China has already deeply embedded in the global economic system. No matter how repulsive China currently is in the eyes of the Americans, the global economy still needs its participation and contribution to stabilize itself.

Russia presents a much more acute, short-term threat than China does. President Putin's struggles to turn the situation around on the battlefield in Ukraine might end up in vain. This proxy war (at least some believe so) is likely to prolong due to the involvement of the West and China and their deep national security concerns on both sides. What severely irritates the US is that, right now, Russia and China are visibly engaging in strategic rapprochement as the result of their shared containment from the global West. The shocking invasion of Ukraine by

Russia has defined the watershed of two competing camps, i.e. *the US-led global West versus the China-Russia quasi-strategic alliance*, clearer than almost any time before. The world is unfortunately divided into two camps once again, which strongly hints the possible resurrection of the long buried Cold War into a full-fledged existence in the forthcoming years.

As a consequence, the *China Threat Theory* is trending globally due to China's strategic association and bond with the militarily abusive and ideologically chauvinist Russia (a rogue state in the eyes of the West). It is worth noting that China has never officially condemned Russia for its unjustified war against another sovereign state, as well as a recognized member of the UN, in any formal (international) occasions. It is indeed true that China's teaming up with Putin's Russia has made the alleged *China Threat* even more threatening and disconcerting in many ways to the US-led global west.

7.3. Political extremism and domestic terrorism in the US

The US does not only need to deal with the combined threats posed by China and Russia as mentioned above, it also needs to resolve a wide range of acute domestic pathological issues, such as high (esp. drug-related) crime rates and aggravated gun violence, run-away inflation, pouring illegal immigrants from the Southern border and supply chain insecurity caused by the hollowed-out manufacturing in its homebase etc. These highly pressing issues literally demand for strategic attention and resource allocation from the US Federal Government. Some suggested, rather optimistically, this might be able to buy some precious time and room to breathe for China to get better prepared for the escalating power game with the hegemon (Kliem, 2022).

In general, national security could be challenged and threatened by various menaces in dissimilar forms and representations, originating from both within and outside of jurisdiction of the state. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic recession triggered by it, there is another inflammatory and malignant "*social tumor*" that is deeply rooted in the fundamental fabric of the American society for the Biden-Harris Administration to seriously concern about, which is the sharp ideological divide and confrontation within the American society. The toxic "*white supremacy* (bairén zhìshàng: 白人至上)" and "*systemic racism* (xìtǒngxìng zhǒngzúzhuyì: 系统性种族主义)" have led to "Black Lives Matter" demonstrations in many locations in the US simultaneously after the tragic death of George Floyd on May 25th in 2020 (Taylor, 2021). Frequent outbursts of mass violence amplified by the abuse of gun ownership (i.e. mass shooting) are absolutely horrendous and deeply disconcerting (Alfonseca, 2023; BBC News, 2023). The increasingly evident ideological incompatibility between people groups poses an almost overwhelming threat to the cohesion, stability and unity of the American society in today's conditions.

Former President Trump was a factor in its own right. It is no exaggeration to say that the long-existing racial hatred and political divide in the American society have been dramatically aggravated by Donald Trump's constant and willful lies, disinformation and/or misinformation, and deliberate provocations when he has been in charge of the US as the sitting president from 2016 to 2020. What is even more concerning is that, a significant number of extremists (meaning people who hold extreme values and beliefs or, at least, exhibiting the susceptibilities to accept and practice them) within the American society have been radicalized by Donald Trump's knowing propagation of his personal version of the "*alternative realities and facts*" (Dalkir and Katz, 2020) and various conspiracy theories. These radicalized mobs and agitated extremists are ready to take sinister actions whenever an opportunity arises (U.S. Department of the Treasury, n.d.). They tend to resort to the use of violence to disrupt the existing social norms and orders in order to publicly demonstrate their

fanatic political ideas and beliefs, as well as making their (self-perceived suppressed) voices heard (Kleinfeld, 2023).

Some of these extremists or groups of extremists have already been classified as “*domestic terrorist groups*” (including a significant proportion of white supremacists and violent racists) by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (the FBI) and they are under the intensive surveillance or active criminal prosecution by the American law enforcement. According to a very recent interview of the current FBI director, Christopher A. Wray, conducted by the Washington Post (Bump, 2021), he has conspicuously revealed the dangerous reality that ideologically motivated, individual and/or mass violence (notably among politically and racially motivated extremists across the whole ideological spectrum) has been penetrating and escalating in today’s American society and it has reached a horrifying peak marked by the Capitol Hill insurrection on the 6th of January in 2021 to illegally sabotage the formal certification of the final result of the 2020 presidential election. Wray has stated truthfully in the interview that:

“When it comes to racially motivated violent extremism, that number — again, number of investigations and number of arrests — has grown significantly on my watch,” he (Wray) continued. *“And the number of arrests, for example, of racially motivated violent extremists who are what you would categorize as white supremacists, last year was almost triple the number it was in my first year as director.”*

His fact-based statement has given us a quick glimpse into the intense political atmosphere in America right now. It also has provided a very useful clue for us to soberly realize how precarious and disconcerting the situation is in the immediate post-Trump Era. Removing Donald Trump from the presidential position alone does not magically make things go back to normal as they ought to be. We should constantly remind ourselves that Donald Trump is only a catalyst. The real dynamites have already been planted deep into the American society long time ago. Clearly, there has been a long neglected national security threat to be recognized and dealt with here, which is not being posed by foreign adversaries, such as the Russians or the Chinese or the Iranians, but by the Americans themselves. I have to emphasize the fact that there is little evidence to indicate that international collusion has contributed to the dramatic rise of politically motivated and ideologically-oriented violence in the American society.

Therefore, the outwardly focused approach to ensure and defend national security by the US political leadership, to say the very least, needs significant revisions. The US should divert more of its attention and resources towards endogenous (neisheng: 内生) national security threats emerging from its own society instead of focusing too much on exogenous (waisheng: 外生) national security threats coming from other competing sovereignties and hostile non-state agents and entities. No security blind spot should exist, albeit unintentionally in many cases, or otherwise, there will be a wide-open loophole to compromise all the hard efforts invested to ensure the safety and security of the state as a whole.

Conceivably, if the US does treat China as the ultimate opponent and it has the strategic urgency and determination to fully commit itself to the highly unpredictable and mutually destructive power struggles against China. It has to harmonize and unify the competing domestic interest groups and settle the devastating crises in all forms and natures inside its own society first. By doing that, the US is more likely to have a better chance to win the competition against China, at the end of the day. In other words, it is highly unlikely for the US to achieve its seemingly unattainable goal of absolute national security without eliminating the sources of troubles from within in the first place. Chinese political philosophers and strategists have long figured out this. They have always tried to convince the Chinese rulers that “*domestic strength keeps away foreign aggression* (rangyi bixian an’nei: 攘

夷必先安内). This is literally food for thought for the US political leadership or any political leadership.

To summarize, the *China Threat* should only take a secondary position in terms of urgency and priority in the current circumstances, especially from a short-term perspective, because long-term solutions could rarely solve short-term problems. The various burning domestic challenges and threats within the American society, such as racial tensions, ideological divide, proliferation of gun violence (esp. mass shooting), drug-related crimes and run-away inflation, should be cautiously and decisively addressed with both efficiency and efficacy simply because the window of opportunity is diminishing. A catastrophic outburst of social unrest is merely a matter of time if the US political leadership fails to resolve these aforementioned, acute and intricate security issues within its own jurisdiction. Having said this, I also want to emphasize that China is no exception in terms of dealing with afflicting domestic complications. China is also challenged by a whole host of seriously pathological socioeconomic issues its own domestic sphere. Therefore, my prescription to both states is fundamentally the same one with localized nuances.

Chapter Eight: China's counter-strategies and countermeasures to the US containment

China is definitely not defenseless in the face of the US-led collective containment. In this chapter, I would like to discuss China's counter-strategies and countermeasures to minimize the adverse impacts induced by external containment so as to preserve its political regime, national economy and social stability, all at the same time. This is literally a formidable task for the Chinese political leadership to accomplish and achieve with great caution and wisdom. It requires policy prudence and an incredible amount of strategic rationality and ingenuity. The future outlook of global political economy depends critically on China's strategic planning and delivery in response to the mounting pressures from the US-led Western camp with their (deteriorating) collective strengths and leverages.

8.1. Critical understanding of Xi's "bottom-line thinking"

If the US feels anxious and insecure, strategically speaking, then so does China. The country has shifted into the "*defensive mode*" in recent years according to some influential China watchers (Shambaugh, 2016). As for China, the warning signals emanating from the hegemon are clear and resounding and the Chinese political leadership is prepared for anything and everything in accordance with the heavily promoted "*bottom-line thinking*" (dixian siwei: 底线思维) and "*limit thinking*" (jixian siwei: 极限思维) (The People's Government of Zhejiang Province, 2022). These are two of the relatively recent catchphrases refashioned by the Xi Administration to hedge external containment and the mounting financial risks exacerbated by the insolvent local government debts (Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, n.d.), the crashing real estate markets (Wakabayashi and Fu, 2024), and economic sluggishness, in terms of significantly lower growth rate of the national GDP and unexpectedly weak domestic consumption despite the provision of incentives and stimuli of various kinds (not financial offering directly to individuals and households regardless of their actual financial conditions) by the Chinese central leadership (Sutherland, 2023).

The external containment is a major attribution to the negative impacts China exporters and business elites have been enduring. Abundant empirical evidences have strongly indicated that restrictive and punitive measures that are specifically targeted Chinese exports, Chinese businesses and high-profile figures (especially those with intimate government liaisons) have been escalating since the Sino-US trade war in 2018 like an out-of-control spiral and they have been taking place simultaneously in both the economic domain and the political sphere (Das, 2021; Magnus, 2018).

The bottom-line thinking seems to be a new official approach (albeit not too dramatically different from the previous ones, only visibly more conservative and defensive) of the Chinese political leadership to achieve national security and defend national interests in the face of the intensifying containment from the US-led Western coalition. It is fundamentally a strategic reaction induced by external hostility and restriction and it also demonstrates the exceptionally strong, surviving instinct of the CCP as the monopolistic ruler of China.

A crucial takeaway from the high-profile, bottom-line strategic thinking endorsed by President Xi is that when facing an extremely hostile and unfavorable situation, to know where the bottom-line is and how to defend it is key. This strategic thinking does go beyond the conventional wisdom of "*hope for the best and prepare for the worst*" (Apperson, 2006). It does have deeper strategic and tactical meanings and connotations to be cautiously interpreted and unpacked. The reason why it deserves to be mentioned here is that the so-called "*core strategic goals of top priorities* (youxian hexin zhanlue mubiao: 优先核心战略目标)" that have been pinned down by the Chinese political leadership are literally beyond the realm of political bargaining and compromise. They ought to be defended and secured at literally all costs, no matter how overwhelming and inhibiting the external impacts and pressures might be.

All relevant stakeholders are expected to seriously recognize and respect China's determination to safeguard its proudly declared "*core strategic interests* (hexin zhanlue liyi: 核心战略利益)" as the "*bottom-line thinking*" strongly prescribes. However, these highly prioritized national interests are in fact very domestically-oriented and inward-looking when examined closely and critically. According to a piece of China's official document under the title of "*China's Peaceful Development* (zhongguo heping fazhan: 中国和平发展)", there are several core interests upheld by China, including "*state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development*" (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2023).

Therefore, territorial disputes, separatist attempts, anti-government movements of all kinds, instigation of regime change or peaceful evolution and externally imposed economic sanction, restriction and exclusion are all acute threats to China's highly regarded "*core national interests*" as the aforementioned document has unambiguously detailed. The hidden similarity they all share is that they are all serving the same strategic purpose to ensure and secure the Communist regime in China indefinitely. In other words, they are driven by the possessive pursuit of regime preservation on the part of the CCP, ultimately. The bottom-line is and has always been the survival of the ruling party, which is literally above anything else.

China's behavioral tendencies to expand beyond its national borders are actually aiming at stabilizing and gaining favors from the domestic base. The Chinese political leadership strives to address the evolving needs and wants of the vested interests of the privileged, the key pressure groups and the Chinese populations in general (in a descending order of importance and priority) with a whole host of carefully balanced strategies and instrumentally crafted tactics. This approach deliberately places much of its weight and emphasis on internal sovereignty and stability (in more explicit words, the CCP's monopolistic political power and status), even though, at times, it appears to be expansionist and externally motivated on the surface, such as in the case of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Whether it is natural resources exploitation or primitive accumulation of bloody capital on foreign soils, China always wants to benefit itself and its home base first and foremost. Some wittily commented that what China considers as "*mutually beneficial*" is what China could benefit twice (Mitter and Johnson, 2021). This is exactly why China is seldom regarded as a positive contributor in most of its international explorations and adventures. The country is more of a threat as well as a corrupting force with regard to many underdeveloped, fragile, indigenous economic systems in the Global South with hidden wealth and unfulfilled economic potentialities (Tudoroiu and Kuteleva, 2022). However, practicing neo-colonialism with Chinese characteristics in the Global South is just one facet of the alleged criticisms of China's internally driven global expansion (Kleven, 2019). The impediments China encountered in the Global North, such as a major target of anti-dumping (European Commission, 2019b; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2024) and anti-subsidy (European Commission, 2023), present much severe (short-term) challenges in the years to come.

In general, China might be viewed negatively by many (esp. the Western powers and economies) for good reasons, but the strong will of the Chinese political regime should never be wishfully underestimated. The relentless use of coercive measures and confrontational gestures might not be the answer to bend China's determination because mental fortitude has always been an integrated part of China's national characters, especially during adverse times. China is more inclined to be unified and united when facing severe external challenges and threats rather than falling apart into nothingness.

In addition, the well-known Chinese pragmatism should be capable enough to intelligently bypass or get round a variety of restrictions and obstructions imposed by the US-led global

West and deescalate or cool down the heating situation to a certain extent. Nevertheless, the Xi Administration seems to be less flexible and resilient than its predecessors. Compromise is not always the default choice for President Xi and the other members of his highly homogeneous, inner political circle, unless other strategic options are either not viable or even do not exist.

Sovereignty-related issues, such as deterring the separatist tendencies in Taiwan, Hong Kong (former Western colonies), Xinjiang and Tibet (ethnic minority concentration areas) under international scrutiny and pressure and defending territorial integrity (such as in the South China Sea, over the Diaoyu (钓鱼岛) /Senkaku (尖阁群岛) Islands with Japan as well as smaller-scale and lower-intensity border clashes with India) are the redlines for the Chinese political leadership to assure no one can transgress. Again, China's national pride plays a critical part in all of these remaining or outstanding issues regarding sovereignty and territorial integrity. The reason why I tend to highlight the Chinese national pride and sense of dignity in relation to these aforementioned issues or areas of issues is that the deliberately provoked nationalism within the Chinese society could lead China to break its long-standing promise to remain peaceful (both inwardly and outwardly), which has always been the first and foremost concern of *The China Threat Theory*.

To summarize, under the strategic guidance of the “*bottom-line thinking*”, the inconvenient truth is that the Chinese authority almost has no other strategic options but to react forcefully and aggressively when one or more of the “*core national interests*” are to be compromised by either domestic or international adversaries or both. Using force and coercion is the last resort deployed by the Chinese authority in normal circumstances. It is most likely to be the result of the emotional and moral hijacking by the overly provoked nationalism based on passion rather than rationality in the Chinese society (Peng and Ngeow, 2022).

The national security-related and territorial integrity-related issues that I have discussed in this subsection do possess the ability to trigger a real-life, armed conflicts or even wars in Asia, involving a world-class military power with considerable nuclear capacity (i.e. China), not to mention the potential military intervention from the hegemon and its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific Region. All the stake-holders should strictly avoid stepping on the red lines drawn by Beijing as the warnings conveyed by the Xi Administration are unmistakably loud and clear, trickling down from the very top to the wide bottom. If China's core strategic interests are infringed and violated, the unthinkable is almost guaranteed to happen because it means the heavily defended “*bottom line*” has been trespassed and the self-defense mode should be immediately triggered as a result of that.

8.2. China's potentialities to challenge and reshape the US-dominated world order

The notion of Asian-Pacific or Indo-Pacific region has gained much more popularity in the international political discourses thanks to the high-profile re-orientation of the US foreign policies. China's both defensive and offensive attitudes regarding the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and its subsequent defiance to the unfavorable ruling of the international arbitration (in July, 2016) have significantly raised concern about China's increasingly assertive inclination and potential abuse of its considerable national power to coerce other members of the international community (Chubb, 2021). The bitter territorial disputes in the South China Sea (esp. with the Philippines at the moment) have since become a major piece of supporting evidence for the propagators of *The China Threat Theory* to argue that China's rise is literally at the expenses of other sovereignties and the country would not remain peaceful as it has repeatedly claimed and promised (Sevastopulo, 2024). I deem apprehensions along this line are both reasonable and understandable. China does have the inclination to disrupt and reshape the existing *status quo*, not just in the South China Sea

alone, as long as the potential gains are significant and strategically valuable and the punitive consequences are within the range of acceptance.

It is noteworthy that the Indo-Pacific Region has already become an emerging strategic focus for major powers. An increasing number of directly and indirectly involved stakeholders (such as the US, China, Japan, Russia, India, South Korea, Australia and the ASEAN) all claim national interests in the region. Ultimately, the growing strategic interest into the Indo-Pacific is primarily due to the fact that this region hosts the rising China. It is likely to be dominated by China first before the rising superpower expands even further. What the global West concerns the most is the possibility that, with the vigorous rise of China, the existing world order might be reconstructed by the rising superpower to benefit and serve itself and accommodate its own strategic preferences (Cohen, 2023; Rees, 2023).

Precisely due to the shared concern, China is already regarded as a longer-term threat (or simply a factor of disruption in a softer and less provocative tone) to the existing international norms and *status quo* (Lo, 2021) sustained by the hegemon and its allies. What has deeply frustrated the US-led West is that China has proved time and time again that it could not be tamed and assimilated by any foreign political will and agenda (Zhang, 2015). The “*replacement hypothesis*” does not only suggest China’s potentiality to replace the US as a global dominating force, but also the possibility for the rising superpower to rewrite the world order at its will and reconstruct the rules of the game at the fundamental level (Doshi, 2021b). China’s bolder and more unpredictable behavioral patterns and visibly more defiant attitudinal tendencies are indications of its status as a “*systemic rivalry*” (officially used by the EU) to the US-led global West in a dissolving unipolar world.

Nevertheless, China behaves, for most of the part, in consistent ways with the strategic thinking and calculus of the Chinese core political leadership rather than the collective expectations of the global West, and so does the US (even though, highly institutionalized checks and balances of powers could significantly limit the discretion of the White House). There is a major conflict over the nature and practicality of the world order between the US and China at this point. According to formal diplomatic rhetoric, the US is determined to maintain the almost sacred “*status quo*” and preserve the existing international norms and orders in all parts of the world. From China’s perspective, the hypocrisy of this statement is rather obvious because the US has been actively engaging in ideologically driven or value-driven (many might argue, fundamentally, interest-driven) political, economic and military crusades and interventions on many foreign soils, bringing destructions and chaos rather than peace and prosperity to the local societies (South China Morning Post, 2014). The US has definitely disrupted the existing norms and orders in many parts of the world and, at the same time, failed to re-establish functioning and sustainable new norms and orders to replace the previous ones that have been completely destroyed by military operations and social upheaval.

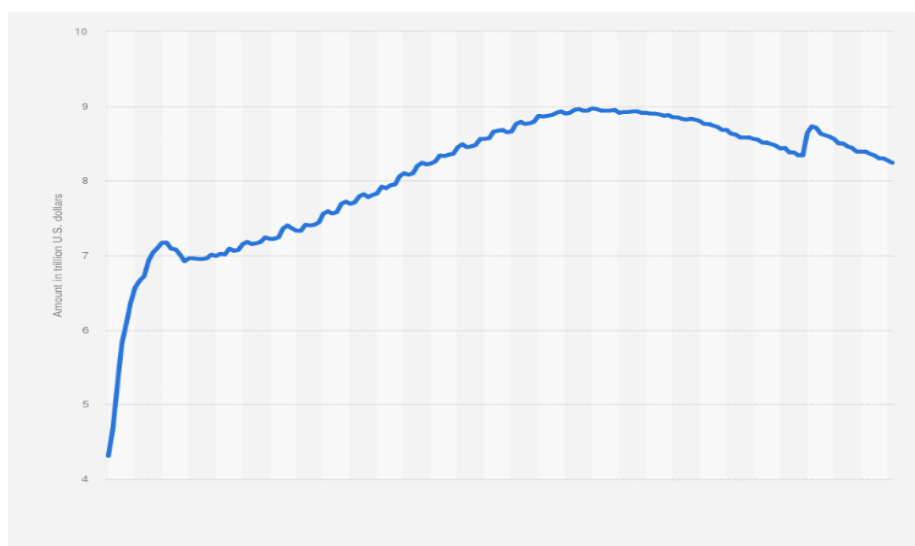
Upon closer and more critical examination, the so-called *status quo* from America’s perspective is in fact a euphemism for the “*unipolar world system*” it has dominated and benefited for decades as the sole dominant superpower on Earth. The rise of China has significantly accelerated the gradually deteriorating unipolarity underpinned by the hegemon and, at the end of the day, it is an intolerable threat to the US. Senior observer and journalist, Graeme Dobell (2018), from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (the ASPI) has accurately and concisely summarized the ultimate strategic concern of the US as follow:

“The charges against China are that it challenges ‘American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity’, wants ‘to shape a world antithetical to US values and interests’, and seeks ‘to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor’ [...].”

The strategic goal of the US to prolong its global hegemony, whether attainable or not, could be translated into a very straightforward political message, which is, the global domination by the US should be secured and defended with utmost strategic urgency and tough measures, if necessary. The global leadership of the US as a substitution to the absence of an international authority above sovereignties should also remain to be unchallenged and respected by nation-states around the world. According to what I prefer to call “*the hegemonic logic*”, one thing becomes apparent. Any substantial change of, or even just the attempt to change, the US-dominated world order is definitely guaranteed to be neutralized or even retaliated by the hegemon. This strong surviving instinct of the hegemon is driving the strategic earnestness of the US to preserve and restore the deteriorating hegemonic system with a whole range of strategic techniques, instruments and devices all at the same time against China. Unfortunately, most of them are sticks rather than carrots in nature.

I want to mention that the US has also committed certain unforced errors with no direct links to China. The erratic and arbitrary behaviors of the US in the recent years have also contributed greatly to the degradation of its credibility and authority in the international community. Examples are fairly numerous and revealing, such as discretionary withdrawals from various international treaties and organizations and resorting to assertive means to resolve inter-state frictions during the Trump-Pence Administration (Wolf, 2019); the hasty and chaotic pulling-out from Afghanistan (Donati, Rasmussen and Phillips, 2021) with absolute disregard to its most loyal and important Western allies, such as the Great Britain; and the aggressive quantitative easing (QE) of the US Dollar during the Biden-Harris Administration that might lead to financial default and insolvency (Graham, 2023) (see **Illustration Twenty-five** below).

The last one is likely to weaken the status of the USD as the global default reserve currency to settle international payments and aggravate the soaring inflation worldwide. Short-term oriented and impulsive political decision-making can seriously undermine the supposed role assigned to the US as the “*benevolent hegemon*” and the single most important institutional contributor and stabilizer at the international level (Ali, 2015). Therefore, the relative declining of the US cannot be attributed entirely to the rise of China. The hegemon has been digging its own grave and bury itself underneath its own strategic blunders and administrative disorientation.



(Illustration Twenty-five: U.S.: quantitative easing 2020-2023; Source: Statista)

China displayed strong realist and realistic propensity in understanding and participating into international political economy in today's conditions (Snelder, 2014). China tends to skillfully exploit the existing international norms and establishment to benefit itself and actively (re-) shape those that hinder its strategic interests (Williams, 2020). This is fairly understandable as China famously stated that it would not be bound by rules it did not create (Lowy Institute, n.d.; Snelder, 2014). Overall, China is a major driving force that instigates and initiates institutional transformation at international level, however, it does not intend to fundamentally alter the understructure and landscape of the existing international norms and establishment according to many first-hand observers (Williams, 2020). There are at least two reasons to explain this peculiarity: **A)** China itself is a long-term, *de facto* beneficiary of the so-called *status quo* dominated by the US; and **B)** the resistance from the still more powerful West could be considerable. From the perspective of the Xi Administration, inter-state confrontation with mutually destructive consequences should be strictly avoided, whenever circumstances are permissible (Subramanian et al., 2023).

To summarize, China's growing might to potentially reshape the *status quo* defined and sustained by the hegemon is under serious reexamination. China's ambivalent and intricate relationships with the existing institutional norms and establishments at international level are a major source of anti-China backlash in a global scope. China's non-affirming and assertive behaviors in the recent years have fueled the *China Threat Theory* in many ways and reinforced the explanatory strength of its various associated arguments. All the detectable signals have resoundingly indicated that the US political leadership not only treats China as the most prominent, existential security threat to itself, but also a formidable threat to the deteriorating unipolar world order underpinned and sustained by the global West collectively. No matter how reluctant China appears to be to engage in escalating power struggles with the US and its allies, the cruel game of the Cold War 2.0 might have already started way earlier than many thought.

8.3. The domestic resistance to The China Threat Theory and the burning nationalism in China

The *China Threat Theory* literally has very few true believers in the Chinese society, as this subsection will discuss in more detail. The alleged threats posed by the rising China have encountered serious refutations and fierce criticisms from a vast number of Chinese nationals, if we just look into China's indigenous political discourse in all forms and representations and of various origins with a healthy dose of acceptance and respect (Xinhua Daily Telegraph, 2022; Yee and Storey, 2013).

Many members of the Chinese general public and even some governmental officials are puzzled by the external hostility towards China (*ibid.*). To them, China has never done anything disrespectful or offensive to other sovereignties, which, obviously, is an embodiment of wishful thinking or a product of years of propogandist brainwashing from a Realist perspective. Many Chinese nationals firmly believe that China does not deserve to be treated as a threat, not even a hypothetical one, by anybody across the board. The *China Threat Theory* is simply an unacceptable insult to their beloved motherland and compatriots (Geng and Xu, 2019).

Facing mounting external pressures, a significant proportion of the Chinese patriots still stands firmly by the Xi Administration with their collective moral support (Tsang and Cheung, 2024) despite the popularity of the administration has been visibly declining according to some first-hand observers (The Economist, 2024b). Their shared agreement is that trade imbalance or trade friction, Huawei's eviction from the US market and denial of cutting-edge technologies (Nikkei Asia, 2024d) and various forms of sanctions (esp. secondary sanctions) are discriminatory treatments to Chinese businesses (Malkawi, 2023). They are maliciously weaponized by the US authority with the sole aim to suppress China's

rise and unfulfilled ambition. To many Chinese patriots who support the Chinese authority, these aforementioned harsh measures deployed by the US are nothing but political-economic instruments to hold back the momentum of China's rapid development (NBC News, 2024) and terminate the country's realizing rejuvenation in the anticipated future (Xinhua, 2023). A large number of popular and sensationalist Chinese digital media have even claimed that the US does have a sinister agenda to castrate the Chinese economy once and for all as it had done to the burgeoning Japanese economy decades ago (Sohu.com, 2018).

The nationalist angle through which the Sino-US economic frictions and political tensions are portrayed by the Chinese media deserves strategic attention because China has always been a very proud nation-state (Jiang, 2017). National pride and strong sense of dignity have helped this enduring civilization to survive through extremely miserable atrocities in its modern and contemporary times (ibid.). Once the strong sentiment of nationalism and patriotism is provoked among the Chinese general public, then the deepening economic disentanglement and disputes between the US and China will no longer be a pure economic matter, but a political matter with China's external sovereignty and national dignity at stake. In short, China will not surrender to external coercive forces, especially when its people are unified by their collective identity and shared sense of pride. This is probably a shared rejection and collective resistance from the multitude of Chinese populations to the intrusive approach adopted by the US to keep China at bay.

The burning nationalism among the politically enthusiastic patriots within the Chinese society is a psychological product that is systematically manufactured and deliberately manipulated by the Chinese political authority over the years (Zha, 2015). The shared repulsion of and collective resistance to the over-flowing *China Threat Theory* amongst China's nationalists and patriots, if genuine, are absolutely unsurprising and understandable. Their confusion and rage to see China be (mis-) treated as a threat can be explained away by the fact that the majority of Chinese tend to have a very superficial understanding of the operational logic of the hegemonic system or the so-called "*unipolar world order*" (danji shijie geju: 单极世界格局) (Hansen, 2010).

Their naiveté and nationalistic propensity can be easily exploited for political manipulations and provocations. In fact, Chinese media (especially those with state-approval and sponsorship) is extremely skillful at creating embellished images and perceptions of China. Well-established Chinese media is constantly under the pressures and directions from the Chinese authority to depict the amicable relationships China has with the rest of the world, as well as the competitive advantages of the Chinese political system over other alternatives (Cagnassola, 2021). Genuine criticality and objectivity are rarer than what the Chinese media self-proclaimed and they are often directed to foreign governments and affairs, especially regarding the US. It is no exaggeration to say that the Chinese general public has been living comfortably in an artificially created social bubble that is segregated from the external world. Although, this is absolutely not the fault of the people, technically. From my perspective, their passionate and almost unconditional support to the state authority is actually a calculated product of ideological engineering rather than sincere love for their motherland and fellow countrymen. In the following subsection, I intend to briefly explain how and why the state-of-the-art Chinese propaganda works to neutralize the ideological encroachment and contamination from foreign sources.

8.4. The strict social surveillance and transforming state-sponsored propaganda in China

The Chinese authority regards *The China Threat Theory* as an ideological and discursive intrusion with the malicious agenda to undermine the reputation, credibility and moral position of the Chinese state in the international community. It also presents considerable challenges to the propaganda machine of the CCP. From a technological perspective, it is

conceivably hard to maintain a tight control over the information and narratives flowing in and out of China via all kinds of digital platforms (esp. popular social media) and websites (Wang, 2020). In the Age of the Digital, information tends to be over-abundant (unlike other elements of the modern life) (Albers, 2012) and constantly travels at the speed of light across the boundaries of nation-states (Eder, 2011).

So far, the Chinese political authority still manages to keep a lid on the public political discourses (which have been largely digitalized over the recent years) and closely monitor the shifting public opinions in real time with the assistance of the state-of-the-art technologies, such as big-data processing and mapping conducted by supercomputers (e.g. the Tianhe Xingyi: 天河星逸) (The Quantum Mechanic, 2023) or mathematical modeling driven by advanced AI technologies (Gokhale, 2020). In addition, with extremely strict IP restrictions and online content censorship, the seemingly impossible mission is delivered with (horrifying) efficiency and effectiveness by the Chinese authorities (Pei, 2024). By methodically deploying a full spectrum of highly sophisticated surveillance, monitoring and regulatory devices and techniques into the digital social life in China, Chinese netizens are comfortably placed in a digital bubble that is created specifically for them without even realizing that their inalienable right to know is quietly deprived from them.

As a result, for the most part, the Chinese netizens remain segregated from the wider world (if they do not want to or do not know how to bypass the national firewall, i.e. the derogatorily dubbed “*Great Firewall of China* (zhongguo fanghuo changcheng: 中国防火长城)”, also known as the GFW in short). Western digital tech-giants, such as Google, Facebook and Twitter (now X) have long been banned in mainland China due to political and security considerations (Griffiths, 2021). Only higher-ranking governmental officials have the prerogative to access and use these popular Western digital platforms instead of the multitude of regular Chinese netizens (ibid.). The irony here is self-evident.

In the (often informal) Chinese political discourse, the Western powers are frequently mocked as the “*paper tiger* (zhilao hu: 纸老虎)”, which means someone or something only has a scary appearance with no effectual inner ability. Nevertheless, in reality, Western ideologies and influences are treated very seriously by the Chinese political authority. The Chinese political regime is clearly aware of the subversive potentiality of these non-orthodoxy ideas from foreign sources to undermine the social cohesion and stability in the Chinese society from bottom-up (America Magazine, 2017). From the perspective of the Chinese political authority, these provocative Western ideologies are simply sugarcoated bullets used by the Western powers to sentence the Communist China to death. If they can successfully infiltrate into the unprecedentedly open and rapidly transforming Chinese society, they will possess the unimaginable ability to alter the minds of the Chinese populations and assimilate their values and behaviors in order to achieve the insidious “*peaceful evolution* (heping yanbian: 和平演变)” step by step.

The “*paper tiger*” metaphor is rather interesting in its own right. However, it does not seem to accurately describe China’s Western opponents, if not adversaries. From a neutral and objective point of view, the global West still represents a superior or better accepted model of governance and development compared with the non-mainstream and alternative *China Model*. The Sino-US competition is a fierce battle over different systems and values at more fundamental level (Wang, 2024). Western powers, notably the hegemon, are known to be ideologically provocative and manipulative whenever engaging in ferocious power game against non-Western opponents (such as during the Cold War period). The paradoxical reality is, if China is deemed as a threat to the global West, then, unfortunately, the West is also perceived as a constant threat to China’s indigenous value system and authoritarian governance the other way around.

To conclude this subsection, compulsory patriotic education for the younger generations (esp. after the political upheaval in the late 1980s) (Lall, 2010), state-sponsored political propaganda and technology-leveraged public opinion management in China do work well together to create a quite solid shield to deter the encroachment of Western ideologies and political narratives through various, especially digital, means, including the notoriously contagious *China Threat Theory*. These techniques deployed to tame the political opinions in China have transformed and improved after many years of “*learning-by-doing*” experimentation, which is one of the most explainable reasons why the Chinese political authority could still effectively unite the stratifying Chinese populations living in the Information Age and resiliently withstand crisis after crisis since 1949.

The ideological shield imposed to guard the Chinese society and the Chinese populations is a strategic countermeasure devised by the Chinese political leadership to offset the adverse influences and impacts from the outside. I believe this ideological shield is very likely to be stronger and more protective than many would assume. It could systematically and effectively deter undesirable or unfavorable ideological products, such as the universal human rights protection and political competition and accountability, from smearing the image and undermining the authority of the CCP through globalized discursive circulations enabled by advanced ICTs.

However, I want to add that having an ideological shield in place does not automatically guarantee political submission and voluntary support. There are much more needed to be done by the CCP to ensure its political legitimacy in China and prevent the ruling power from changing hands. The on-going ideological battles over people’s minds and hearts literally have no ending point in reality. The widely accepted concept of the “*soft power*” (Joseph Nye) is believed to be the most cost-effective instrument to gain approval and appreciation. I theorize that the “*soft power*” presents a more natural and spontaneous way to spread ideological influences and governing models across human societies. The ultimate source of the “*soft power*” is voluntary assimilation induced by exemplification and admiration rather than through thoughtfully crafted political propaganda. China’s weak “*soft power*” cannot and should not be compensated by propagandist efforts alone.

8.5. Democracy with “Chinese Characteristics”

The seemingly appealing “*soft power*” also has its strategic limitations. It is non-coercive and less compelling in nature and it normally takes a long time to see the (supposedly positive) results to take shape, which could explain the deficiency of China’s “*soft power*” to some extent. Therefore, we can see that government-sponsored, ideological campaigns are devised to fill the blanks left by authentic “*soft power*” in China, pragmatically and strategically speaking. There exists a whole host of deliberate and forceful methods to popularize ideological constructs, notably the values, norms, principles and idealism that are enthusiastically and persuasively promoted by the US-led Western establishment at international level. Democracy, universal human rights and the rule of law being the top three best known ones among other equally provocative ideologies (such as political accountability, social-political-religious tolerance and the highly inflammatory “*self-determinism*” of ethnic minorities) as the underpinning pillars of Western (esp. the English-speaking, Anglo-Saxon) civilizations.

Democracy (or democratization in some circumstances) has always been one of the most politically sensitive issues to the legitimacy of the authoritarian political regime in China. To many political scholars and professionals based in the global West, China is no way to be qualified as a democracy according to how democracy is defined and practiced in Western political systems (Kricheff, 2018). Precisely due to this reason, many believers of *The China Threat Theory* tend to agree among themselves that more powerful China gets, more dangerous it is to the mainstream Western world constituted by genuine democracies.

Democracy is literally invincible, conceptually speaking. It is an ideological bandwagon that everybody across the board wants to jump onto, including the so-called “*Democratic*” People’s Republic of Korea (the DPRK or North Korea), even though, ironically, this country is literally one of the least democratic states in the world.

Despite having an authoritarian political regime in place, China officially praises the potential merits of democracy. The heavily promoted “*24 Characters (24 ge zi: 24 个字)*” of 12 “*core Socialist values (shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan: 社会主义核心价值观)*” endorsed by the current Xi Administration have proudly included concepts that enjoy almost sacred status in the Western value systems, such as “*democracy (minzhu: 民主)*” and even “*freedom (ziyou: 自由)*” (China Daily, 2017). This might turn out to be unexpected for some rigid-minded observers. However, one should pay close attention to the invariable underlying conditionality that is imposed and enforced to the official approval of these imported values, i.e. they should be a politically conditioned and culturally adapted form of democracy and freedom with the indispensable “*Chinese characteristics*” or, otherwise, they are not fit for the Chinese society.

The peculiar conditionality and insisted localization maintained by the Chinese political authority regarding powerful Western ideological imports revealed two interesting points: **A)** the universality of democracy and freedom does have profound influence and great appeal to the Chinese populations in spite of their western origin. Outright denial and rejection of these values are not sensible from a strategic point of view; and **B)** the Chinese political leadership seems wanting to tame these ideologically provocative Western ideas and adapt them into the idiosyncratic Chinese socio-political realities to suit its own political agendas and purposes.

Constant vigilance and persistent resistance of the Chinese political authority towards Western-style democracy as well as the Western political system (especially political plurality and the checks and balances of the three powers) are not diminishing over time. To this very day, the Chinese political authority still claims that the political system in China is superior than that of the Western democracies in certain respects (Jacques, 2021; Lin, 2020). With the miraculous resurrection of China from destitution and chaos in the last a few decades, many started to wonder that maybe there are indeed some legitimate reasons for China’s bold claim of systemic and institutional superiority after all (Subramanian, 2011).

However, according to Xinhua.net (新华网), a tongue piece of the Chinese political authority, President Xi Jinping publicly stated that “*each country is unique with its own history, culture and social system, and none is superior to the other*” when he was addressing the World Economic Forum Virtual Event of the Davos Agenda on the 25th of January, 2021. He further commented that “*no two leaves in the world are identical, and no histories, cultures or social systems are the same.*” The judging criteria of a functioning and enabling social system he believes are: **A)** the fitness of the system to accommodate distinctive national conditions and experiences; **B)** the voluntary support from its own people (or from the governed); and **C)** the provision of political stability, social progress and higher quality of life (i.e. raising the living standard) to all peoples.

These sensibly intelligent and diplomatically skillful remarks, again, have revealed the pragmatic governing style of the Xi Administration (in consistence with his predecessors) and the eclectic political philosophy upheld by the current Chinese political leadership. According to the formal statements from the Chinese political leadership, China is not intended to compete with the global West through its idiosyncratic mode of governance and unique path of development and modernization, at least not officially (China Daily, 2015; Gao, 2023; Li, 2021; Xi Jinping, cited by Aytakin, 2022). Nevertheless, the Chinese political leadership has also made very clear that it does not tolerate any foreign attempts to de-legitimize the political authority and prestige of the CCP in China, not to mention instigating purposeful

regime change in the country (Li, 2021). This should be cautiously recognized as serious warnings from the CCP in the strongest terms to reject and deter the democratic crusade instigated by the US-led West coalition against China.

8.6. Western-style democracy in crisis and China's "third way"

As discussed briefly, the passionate struggles over democracy (or democratization) by competing great powers are actually fierce competition between strikingly different governing mechanisms and models. The global West, in particular the US, demonstrated exceptionally strong strategic eagerness to forcefully universalize and popularize its value system and institutional establishment to the rest of the world (Dobson and Marsh, 2007; Green, 2012). The ultimate agenda is to bring (the universally desired) peace, political accountability and economic prosperity in all parts of the planet (Poppe, 2019).

Nevertheless, despite the self-proclaimed goodwill and sympathetic intention, the West is often perceived to be judgmental and having a detectable sense of superiority when engaging with non-Western or even anti-Western countries (Kimmel, 2018). This rather rigid and immutable approach of the global West to replicate and transplant their successful experiences into a completely foreign environment without taking the local particularities into consideration can not only be controversial, but also ineffective and counterproductive in many cases. This is exactly why China spotted the opportunity and kicked in with its one-of-a-kind "*China Model*". China's unique model has already become an alternative option to the neo-liberal, Capitalist and democratic model dominated by the mainstream West in a global scope.

China is pursuing what I prefer to call the "*third way*" of governance and development. By that I mean it is an atypical model with a fairly high level of hybridity and ambiguity. The country has carefully positioned itself as an alternative model of governance and development (Breslin, 2011; Mitter and Johnson, 2021) for the rest of the world, especially the Global South, to emulate and adopt. This seems to be a contradiction with China's official stance to not compete with the US (or the global West in general) on ideology dissemination, institutional export (i.e. popularization of its own the mode of governance and development to the rest of the world) and global leadership.

From my perspective, this is a strategic deliberation on the part of the Chinese political leadership to intentionally distance itself from the mainstream Western political-economic establishment in order to maintain its unique political identity and defend its one-of-a-kind governing mechanisms. It also wants to reassure the rest of the world that the nature of the Chinese political regime is benign and non-confrontational, even though, many are not so easily convinced by these one-sided declarations from the CCP. In a general sense, China's strategically cunning and inherently ambiguous "*third way*" is apparently not Western-style neo-liberal, democratic Capitalism, yet, it is definitely not Soviet-style, economically rigid and politically repressive Communism either.

The key to demystify the political-economic conundrum in China is to critically understand the indispensable "*Chinese characteristics*". The Chinese political authority has consistently emphasized their salience over and over again through all kinds of diplomatic channels and propagandist campaigns over the years (Hu et al., 2020). This distinctive usage of political language is nothing unintentional or odd. It is indeed a very clear and serious message from the Chinese political leadership to both domestic and international audiences that China will not follow the path of the Western powers, i.e. *becoming a capitalist liberal democracy*, and the country remains constantly vigilant and highly resistant towards purposeful Western assimilation (Nau and Ollapally, 2013) or even peaceful evolution in all the possible forms and representations (Garver, 2016).

Unexpected to many, the authentic Chinese style of governmentality is much more flexible and adaptive than that of the global West (Li, 2011). In addition to that, the CCP's unique approach to govern and rule China deserves recognition and even some credits. In many cases, it presents a goal-oriented, problem-solving proposal in alliance (of convenience) with local ingenuity, rather than creating additional problems to an already difficult situation. According to China's own strategic thinking, plurality of modes of governance and development (including the "*China Model*") is simply a fact and should be recognized and respected so as to promote and achieve co-development of all nations and eliminate developmental disparities in a global scope (Van der Putten, 2014).

China's bold rejection to the universalization and standardization of Western values and idealism is both undeniable and understandable. Oftentimes, the real strategic concerns on the part of China are not so much about the ideologies *per se* since they tend to be just a thin layer of sugar-coating in many cases. The real concerns have always been the sinister political agendas embedded in them and the detrimental consequences, such as identity disorientation and collective self-doubt they can cause among the Chinese populations. The latter presents real dangers to the legitimacy of the Chinese political regime and the monopolistic power of the CCP and they are treated very seriously as major targets of China's strategic countermeasures.

My major takeaway from the heated debates over democracy or democratization is that the very concept of democracy is almost universally appreciated and honored across societies and cultures. The conceptual triumph of democracy (esp. after the finalization of the Cold War in the early 90s) in a global scope is simply a piece of historical fact. The trickier issue here is that how democracy is put into practice (i.e. *the implementation of democracy*) in real-life situations.

The occupation of the Capitol Hill on the 6th of January, 2021 by politically-motivated radicals and mobs has severely damaged the image and credibility of the US as the ultimate beacon of Western-style democracy (Kuznia, 2021). The insurrection was largely incited by the provocative influence of Donald Trump himself as the then sitting president and this gruesome incident has literally shocked the entire Western democratic world to its core. After witnessing the incident (second-handily, not first-handily), a large number of political commentators and members of the general public based in China have seriously doubted and mercilessly mocked the American-style democracy, probably more than any time before (Xinhua News, 2023).

In addition to harmless cynicism and casual mockery, many, not exclusively Chinese, have earnestly questioned about the ideological authenticity and practical efficacy of the American-style democratic governance after having witnessed what had happened during Donald Trump's chaotic presidential tenure from 2016 to 2020 and the free-falling approval rate of the Biden-Harris Administration within less than two years in power. Mainstream theorists tend to attribute the "*democratic crisis*" to the rise of populism and anti-establishment mentality in the American society (Crothers and Burgener, 2021), which is quite plausible and intuition-friendly.

However, I want to propose my own theorization here. I believe there is a major inconsistency between the conceptual layer of democracy and the practical layer of democracy. Oftentimes, harsh criticisms of or even attacks on democracy (regardless of its empirical variations in dissimilar societies) are primarily based on controversial cases that indicate how problematic and counter-productive democracy is practiced in real-life situations and how easy democracy deteriorates and decays without diligent maintenance and constant nurture.

Needless to say, democracy does not fall from the sky and it comes with a hefty price tag attached to it. The social costs (in addition to other forms of costs) to practice and implement democracy in reality are almost invariably high and, sometimes, they could even be too expensive to be accepted, such as in the case of the astonishing insurrection on the 6th of January, 2021. The insurrection will always remain to be a deep scar of the enthusiastically promoted American-style democracy and a major piece of counter-evidence to reasonably question about the credibility, viability and superiority of the Western liberal democratic political system(s). Empirical evidences indicated that the appeal of American-style democracy has been diminishing considerably worldwide (Ryan, 2020). Even the younger generations inside the American society have shown a significant degree of indifference towards democratic norms and practices (ibid.).

In the authoritarian world, western-style democracy can be toxic and dangerous. Externally induced democratization with the support from the Western powers is widely believed to be a malicious “*Trojan Horse* (teluoyi muma: 特洛伊木马)” among Chinese officials and strategists (Cheng and Chu, 2020). They collectively believe that Western-style democratization has the nefarious aim to relentlessly infiltrate and corrupt the ideological defense of the Chinese society with the purposes to overthrow the political regime in place and undermine the promising future of China (Gokhale, 2020), just as the infamous “*Color Revolution* (yanse geming: 颜色革命)” (Blaszczyk, 2012) and the “*Arab Spring* (alabo zhichun: 阿拉伯之春)” (Sadiki, 2017) did in the early 2000s and 2010s, respectively.

In other words, the loud and clear voices inside the Chinese academia and political circle are strongly suggesting that the infamous democratic crusade, promoted and instigated by the global West under the leadership of the US, is merely a deceptive disguise worn by the intensifying power politics, against China and other opponents and adversaries. The true reason why China is specifically targeted by the hegemon and its allies is not because the country is fundamentally undemocratic defined by its political nature, but because China is a “*peer competitor*” (John Mearsheimer), or at least a “*near-peer competitor*”, with the potentialities to subvert and undermine the already waning Western domination in a global scope as argued previously.

The common accusation that “*China is a threat to democracy*” (De Lon, 2021) is self-evidently incriminating yet sensationally appealing at the same time. However, to many proud and patriotic Chinese nationals, this argument and its similar variations are absolutely hurtful and unacceptable. They collectively believe that weaving negative and defamatory political narratives against China in the international community is a common strategic technique utilized by the West (Kewalramani, 2021). Even the virtually sacred concept of democracy has been hijacked by the insidious political agenda to relentlessly smear and de-legitimize China’s unique political governance and inimitable socio-economic system (Ong, 2007).

The “*original sin* (yuanzui: 原罪)” (Son and Pempel, 2019) of the over-flowing, anti-China political narratives and the constant attacks on the ruling party are simply signs of strategic desperation on the part of the US to preserve its waning domination in a multi-polarizing world (Pillsbury, 2000; Shambaugh, 2020), according to many disciples of political Realism in China. To them, what the US intends to do is to utilize democracy as an “*honorable justification*” to interfere with China’s domestic affairs, de-legitimatize the CCP and, ultimately, induce regime change that favors the West. Arguments along this line are numerous and commonplace in Chinese political discourses, even including a certain proportion of formal diplomatic rhetoric (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2023) and academic literature (Zhou, 2021).

External China-watchers have reached the conclusion that these aforementioned counter-arguments are well-received by many members of the Chinese general public, especially among a large number of politically enthusiastic, Chinese patriots (Hoover Institute, 2002). Their shared repulsion towards US interventionism (to meddle the domestic affairs of other sovereignties) transcends generational gaps, geographic localities, educational levels and even socioeconomic categories as large-scale opinion polls and surveys have revealed over the recent years (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, n.d.). Meanwhile, the perception of China among Americans also has dramatically deteriorated, especially after the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Devlin, Silver and Huang, 2020). According to the latest opinion poll results from Gallup (2023): “*China viewed favorably by 15% of Americans*” and “*about two-thirds say China’s military, economic powers are critical threats*”.

The sharp rise of psychological antagonism between the Americans and the Chinese; the growing confrontational inclination between the US government and its Chinese counterpart; and the seemingly irreconcilable conflict of national interests between these two competing superpowers are driving them into a doomed and catastrophic collision course. Perhaps, this is a deadly political recipe made with a combination of overly passionate yet not so rational sentiments on both sides. I believe it makes *The China Threat Theory* exceptionally provocative and precarious at the current moment than almost any time before.

Chapter Nine: The US Versus China: the ultimate power game in the 21st Century

Mainstream political professionals publicly endorse the idea that the US and China are inevitable competitors rather than devastating enemies, even though, political tensions and power struggles have dramatically heightened between the two during Donald Trump's one-term presidency and even after. Politicians come and go, administrations renew every four years, but the power game against China remains the same, at least in the limited future that we can possibly predict. It is the ultimate power game in the 21st Century that determines the future outlook and landscape of the transforming global political economy.

When Samuel Huntington (Rose, 2013) first published his monograph "*the Clash of Civilizations* (wenming chongtu: 文明冲突)" in the early 1990s, at which point transnational terrorism and Islamic extremism were incubating and emerging (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2016), I personally do not believe he has precisely foreseen the escalating power struggles (or clashes in his own terminology) between the US and China for the most preminent position in the world in the very recent years, even though, he did cast theoretical recognition to the distinctive and (practically) immutable values, cultures and national characters of a number of Eastern civilizations, including China, Japan and even the Slavic populations (e.g. Russia), with the emerging potential to challenge the US supremacy in the early 21st century (Quinn, 2017). It is true that the term "*clash*" almost never implies any positive meanings. Therefore, whenever it is used signals a turbulent moment of history has arrived again (Strand, 2020).

9.1. The inevitable competition and rivalry between the US and China

The aforementioned inevitability (of inter-state confrontation or even conflicts between the US and China) rests precisely upon the apparent fact that a so-called "*unipolar world order*" does not tolerate two or even more dominant forces (Grondin, 2016). In other words, there should be only one hegemon in the entire world, which is what I call the "*absolute exclusivity* (juedui paitaxing: 绝对排他性)" that defines a genuine and functioning global hegemonic system, meaning, straightforwardly, "*no peer competitor is tolerated*" under all circumstances (Mearsheimer cited in Irvine, 2015).

When a competing state is rapidly growing in power and it possesses the potentialities to surpass the national capacity and influence of the hegemon, a new round of fierce competition and even deeply hostile confrontation between the hegemon and the rising power is almost impossible to be avoided. This assumption is literally the theoretic core of the still fairly popular "*hegemonic transition theory*" due to its explanatory validity. Many sympathizers of the power transition theory tend to support this view. Their judgments are often based on the melodramatic history of the rises and falls of great powers along the timeline (Feng and He, 2020).

Some high-profile scholars based in the US, such as Hal Brands (2020) from Johns Hopkins University, claims a gradual power transfer is exactly what has been going on between the US and China in the recent years and China does have the highly suspected ambition to play a more prominent role in the world (or even achieve global domination) by explicitly stating that: "*it (China) seeks to upend the American-led international system and create at least a competing, quasi-world order of its own*". The current power struggles between the US and China have inaugurated another historical moment for all of us to witness, i.e. a potential "*Thucydides' Trap*" is unfolding right in front of our eyes. I believe it could lead to two possibilities, one is an all-out, inter-state confrontation competing for the "*hot seat*" of global hegemony, and the other one is a milder depolarization of the US hegemony (and, consequentially, multi-polarization in a global scope).

China knows perfectly the consequences of a precarious “*Thucydides Trap*”. Therefore, after trade-offs being seriously considered, the Chinese political leadership has strategically downplayed its unfulfilled ambitions (such as the highly-profile “*Made in China 2025*” Plan) (Chen and Hu, 2019) recently to avoid escalating containment from the US-led global West.

However, many still firmly believe that China is deeply “*dissatisfied*” by its current (political-economic) status in the world. They have cited a large number of convincing evidences, notably China is unhappy about its current specialization in the lower-end, labor-intensive and less profitable segments of the globalized value chains of production (McBride and Chatzky, 2019). The country demonstrated exceptionally strong determination to move upwards towards more profitable and value-adding segments, such as R&D, skill-intensive service sector and patented prototype design etc.

In order to suppress China’s momentum of industrial upgrading and rapid penetration and integration into the globalized production chains, the highly suspected “*economic decoupling*” has emerged as a (mutually destructive) coping strategy from the US and other (still somewhat) hesitant and indecisive members of the West camp (European Union External Action, 2021). At the current moment, the existence of an “*unanimous agenda*” in the pan-West camp to aggressively contain the rising China is an overstatement from my perspective. The EU (especially the continental European great powers, not Britain) is once again sitting on the fence with regard to its anticipated relationship with China under the mounting pressures from the US for political solidarity and strategic support (Crawford, 2023; Lynch et al., 2023). Existing trade deals with China and the access to the enormous Chinese markets combined are simply too lucrative and tempting for, especially large, European businesses to abandon altogether for political or even security reasons (Marsh, 2024), as long as the dependency on China is deemed to be not acute and pose no immediate and significant threat to the Union.

In comparison with the visible hesitance and reluctance of the EU to decouple with China decisively and thoroughly, the US has already started to forcefully suppress China’s momentum to gain more power and influence through a full range of unusually harsh methodologies and punitive measures. These (proactive and preemptive) actions serve no purpose other than satisfying America’s insatiable quench for global domination. However, Russia’s unjustified invasion of Ukraine has greatly altered the strategic mindset of the EU as the war has been on-going since February, 2022 (or some sources even dated back to 2014) with no end in sight. The horrendous abuse of military power by Putin’s Russia has greatly unified the NATO member states and strengthened the transatlantic security alliance with significantly more resource commitment and strategic solidarity. This has caused considerable collateral damage to China due to its controversial rapprochement with Putin’s Russia (to this very day) for risk hedging.

9.2. Is the Thucydides’ trap inevitable?

According to my own observation and judgement, China is literally paying the price for being the only viable “*peer competitor*” in the entire world to the hegemon at this point. The containment from the US with increasing severity and punitiveness is almost impossible to be evaded due to the sheer weight and magnitude of China’s existing national capacity, power and influence. It deserves to be reiterated that the unipolar world order and the hegemonic logic simply do not tolerate the coexistence of more than one superpower, which, unfortunately, is a cruel fact rather than a speculative possibility. From the perspective of the US, China is a free-rider of America’s institutional inputs (Chen, 2014) and it uses the opportunities offered by the hegemon to against it (The FBI, 2022). It is true that China has benefited tremendously from its unprecedented participation and integration into the global political-economic system dominated by the US-led global West. The country has become the

indisputable “*world factory*” (Lau, 2019) and the top trading nation (Razo, 2021) within just three to four decades. In addition, China has also quickly acquired the necessary skills and experiences to maneuver around internationally in order to preserve and advance its own national interests by implicitly and expediently acknowledging the principles and norms of the so-called “*neoliberal world order*” (xin ziyoushuoyi shijiezhixu: 新自由主义世界秩序) established soon after the sudden and dramatic collapse of the former Soviet Union in the early 90s (Gerstle, 2022).

However, what has turned things sour so fast and so decisively is the fact that the Xi Administration has abandoned the long-standing “*low profile strategy*”, namely “韬光养晦 (taoguangyanghui)”, way too prematurely and precipitously. China’s increasingly bold, willful and defiant behaviors in the international community and its growing appetite for prestige and prerogative have promptly alerted the hegemon and a noticeable number of its allies and supporters in the global Western Camp. The technological “*stranglehold*”, such as the increasingly strict AI Chips export ban on China (Tausche, 2023), that we can observe now is indeed a piece of deliberately weaponized, highly destructive economic instrument to castrate the transitioning Chinese economy during a critical and delicate phase of evolution.

I believe the aggressive containment of China by the US is hardly arbitrary and random. In fact, the external containment of China is provoked and aggravated by the irrational nationalism and the deep craving for status and privilege within the Chinese society from the central leadership at the very top to the multitude of ordinary Chinese patriots. I theorize that the mishandling of the delicate balance between a healthy dose of national pride and excessive complacency over China’s abilities to reshape the world at its will is a major attribution to China’s precarious and isolated position in the increasingly unforgiving international environment right now.

Nevertheless, decoupling with China without sustaining major retaliations and self-destructions is easier said than done. According to a significant number of up-to-date researches on global supply chain (sometimes also refers as the Global Value Chain: GVC) disruption or reconfiguration, they agreed that China has already deeply embedded and organically integrated into the existing global economic fabric and infrastructure (Breslin, 2016; Joshi, 2020). To artificially remove or replace China from the globalized production chains could either be, unrealistic or severely self-destructive. It is rather apparent that the alleged threats and risks associated with China in the economic domain are actually grounded on the inconvenient fact that China has already become the indispensable “*world factory*” (Ing and Yu, 2019) and the backbone of global industrial production (Dollar, Huang and Yao, 2020) as the undisputable statistics has conspicuously demonstrated:

“The big complaint globally has been that globalization has led to Chinese dominance of manufacturing and supply chains. As a 2017 European Chamber of Commerce report noted, by 2015, China produced 24 percent of the world’s power, 28 percent of the automobiles, 41 percent of the world’s ships, over 50 percent of the refrigerators, over 60 percent of the color TV sets, over 80 percent of the air conditioners and computers, and over 90 percent of the mobile phones and half the world’s steel.”

In addition to striving to become an advanced and high-income economy, another frequently mentioned dissatisfaction of China actually resides in the political sphere. Many claimed that China is not happy about its inadequate representation, weight and influence in major international institutional establishment, especially international financial institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank etc. Interestingly, China is not the only one having the feeling of dissatisfaction. The US might be upset by the *status quo* as well because the former Trump-Pence Administration has constantly and consistently complained about how the US is ripped off by the so-called “*free-riders*” (be that its allies or competitors) and unfairly treated even

within the well-established international institutions it has founded collectively with other sovereignties.

The most significant case in recent time was the unilateral withdrawal from the World Health Organization (the WHO) by Donald Trump at the height of the pandemic in 2020 and the US funding to the organization has also been halted. The US is the WHO's largest financial donor and the reasons to cut its ties with the organization was due to its accommodating attitude towards China and its inability to thoroughly investigate China as the alleged source of COVID-19 insisted by Trump and his supporters (BBC News, 2020; Rogers and Mandavilli, 2020). In this very case, we could readily see that well-established international institutions and organizations are not immune from the contamination of the power politics between the US and China. Their ability to remain politically neutral or even value neutral is literally far insufficient when facing arbitrary behaviors committed by powerful nation-states. In fact, they have become the battlegrounds and channels for these two most powerful states on Earth to fight and struggle with each other, which, unfortunately, is the opposite to why these institutions and organizations were conceived and founded, initially.

To summarize this subsection, evidences do suggest that both the US and China have a couple of explainable motives to disrupt and re-shape the *status quo* (esp. at international level) in order to secure and advance their own national interests and make the international environment more favorable to their own advantages and benefits. By recognizing this fact, one thing for sure is that the inherently dynamic global power equilibrium is likely to become significantly more volatile and unpredictable in the foreseeable future. This could largely be a direct result of the dramatically increased national inputs contributed by both the US and China in order to sustain their on-going and intensifying power struggles over a wide range of very controversial and highly sensitive issues, such as trade imbalance, national security (especially regarding the integrity of national territories and sovereignty), the mode of political, economic and social governance, human rights (especially minority rights) protection and, more importantly, their expected strategic position in the world.

9.3. Profiling of the American and Chinese political leaderships: a compare and contrast

The central arena of global power politics in the 21st Century undoubtedly belongs to the US and China as argued above. The strategic calculus of the US and Chinese leaderships could largely determine how these two drastically competing forces wish to play the game towards what ends. In this subsection, the highly debated term, “*global leadership*”, is going to be critically re-examined to compare and contrast the US and Chinese leadership styles and their respective capacities. Maintaining or achieving the global leadership is believed to be the ultimate prize for the eventual winner of this new round of fierce competition.

A significant number of political observers and strategists agreed that the national power of the US has been relatively declining over the recent decades (Acharya, 2018). However, others still hold a healthy dose of cautious optimism regarding the hegemon's ability to reinvigorate itself and prolong the existence of the hegemonic system in the limited future (Nye, 2016). Both the US and China have undeniable strategic intention to retain or gain power simply because the world still operates according to the logic of political Realism, to a large extent. Hard power is the most direct and effective instrument to secure and advance their expansive national interests in a much-globalized world with unprecedented interconnections and interdependences among sovereignties and economies.

The intensifying power game between the US and China has almost become a full-fledged reality since the aggressive tariff/trade war instigated by the Trump-Pence Administration in mid-2018. The on-going trade friction between the US and China have caused damages to the domestic economy on both sides. Nevertheless, in comparison, China might have suffered

even more severely than the US because the Chinese economy still relies heavily on export and its ability to hedge the negative impacts from the US takes time to fully develop and put to work.

Regarding leadership, first and foremost, it should not be misunderstood as merely a softened and polite alternative for authority or domination, not even for hard-core Realists, simply because this term does imply voluntary cooperation and mutual trust among the multitude of political-economic agents and entities (Medeiros, 2009; Solomon and Quinney, 2010; Sterling-Folker, 2002). Leadership could manifest in a full spectrum of scales and could take any organizational forms possible (Busch, 2014). The time-honored Realist assumption that the absence of a centralized authority at international level in reality leads many to speculate that, to what extent, the so-called global leadership assigned to the US has existed from a functionalist perspective.

As argued previously, the international institutions and organizations are visibly deteriorating and decaying with the resurgence of great power politics. The unfortunate reality is that international politics is still characterized by a considerable level of disorder despite the presence of well-established international organizations and institutions, such as the United Nations, often due to the divergent and conflicting national interests among competing sovereign entities (Green, 2015). In other words, the existing international organizations and institutions do not function as effectively as the initial collective agenda has idealized and they are likely to be skillfully circumvented or even outright ignored by powerful nation-states in real-life situations.

The most significant, recent case should undoubtedly be Russia's audacious and unjustified military invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February, 2022. Therefore, some theorists suggest that a morally responsible and organizationally effective global leadership could potentially mitigate the undesirable disorder at inter-state level and provide a certain level of stability and regulation to the volatile global system (Sobel, 2013). Arguments along this line give credits to the role the US plays as the so-called "*benign hegemon*", although many others are not easily convinced by this claim (Bergeijk, Okano-Heijmans and Melissen, 2011).

They argue that the history clearly showed that the hegemon tends to resort to hard power whenever circumstances arise, such as the unauthorized and much opposed US military interventions on foreign soils (Leverett and Indyk, 2005; Podliska, 2010; Sterling-Folker, 2002). Realists insist that the arbitrary and abusive behaviors committed by powerful states reveal a *de facto* "*political jungle*" (conglin zhengzhi: 丛林政治) in existence, which reinforces the time-honored realist assumption that states have to compete with one another in order to survive in the harsh reality of a self-help global system (Baldwin, 2008; Waltz, 1979). In this scenario, all states suffer from perpetual insecurity and distrust (ibid.). This anarchic inclination has very persistent effects on the behaviors of all states and, unfortunately, often in the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The former Trump-Pence Administration pursued an unprecedentedly unilateral or ultra-unilateral avenue to achieve the two primary strategic goals President Trump has consistently claimed, namely: **A**) putting America's national security and interests above literally anything else; and **B**) securing America's preeminent status in the international community from whatever challenges there might be. In order to achieve these two goals, the Trump-Pence Administration deployed dramatic measures to compensate the disproportionate institutional costs the US bears to sustain the deteriorating hegemonic system with economic or even pure financial gains from its allies and alignments and aggressively contain China through trade war, economic disentanglement and technology embargo etc. President Trump also demonstrated strong determination to reconfigure any undesirable institutional arrangements in place to ensure that the US remains to be the largest beneficiary of the evolving global

order, if it does exist in some way, somehow. The unique Trump-style political leadership in the US did have seriously jeopardized the already vulnerable internationalism in many detrimental ways.

Instead of focusing on externally-driven issues with huge expenditures, pressing domestic imperatives have gained much more attention and priority in recent years along with the resurgence of populism in the Western world. From a (quasi-) structural perspective, the de-organizational (qu zuzhihua: 去组织化) and/or re-organizational (chong zuzhihua: 重组组织化) tendency in major Western societies is evident. The controversial Brexit (Coleman, 2017) and the resurgence of Mercantilism and various forms of trade protectionism in the US (Martin, 2018) are among the most convincing and up-to-date examples of the increasingly inward-looking mentality in major Western powers and the strong nationalistic sentiment have emerged from within the local society (Schmidt, Shelley and Bardes, 2018).

If David Cameron was opportunist and miscalculated about the willingness of a sizeable proportion of the British people to walk away from the organizational umbrella of the EU, then the rise of Donald Trump at the other side of the Atlantic Ocean signals dramatic changes of policies, strategies and, more broadly and profoundly, institutional establishment at multiple levels. Donald Trump represents a very disruptive or even destructive force to the existing political understructure in the US (Mercer, 2016) and beyond. Trump has made numerous inflammatory remarks throughout his amateur political career, such as he believes the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (the NATO) is obsolete and the persistent trade deficits the US has with its major trading partners seriously hurt the national interests of the US. Trump's arbitrary withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Treaty has seriously shaken the foundation of the paradoxical "*nuclear peace*" during and after the end of the agonizing Cold War. Facing fierce criticisms both at home and abroad, Trump has lightly explained away his impulsive decision by blaming the treaty itself being unfair to the US, namely too much unilateral obligations and too little benefits.

At this point, former President Trump still remains to be a very influential political symbol within the Republican Party with millions of loyal supporters and followers from all parts of the US and even outside of the country. His leadership style is unique and controversial, even though, many believe that he is no way to be qualified as a political leader, especially in conventional senses (Torres and Sable, 2018). Trump seems to be very proud to be a so-called "*game changer*" (gaibian youxi guize zhe 改变游戏规则者) in relation to the political establishment in Washington and even beyond (Ighodaro, 2017). Many attribute the rise of Donald Trump as a one-of-a-kind political phenomenon to the growing populism and anti-establishment mentality in the American society (Fitzduff, 2017; Rackaway, 2017). However, populism is only an externalization of some deep-rooted problems. It is worth pointing out that the alienation of the elites from the masses, the exacerbating inequalities of various kinds and the aggravating economic precariousness are the fundamental causes of the unsettling social disturbances that we could readily observe in the American society right now (Bonn, 2010; Doob, 2017; Saunders, 2013).

It is true that the US was overwhelmed by turbulent changes in the past a few years. The pandemic was probably the only natural one, the rest of others were clearly man-made. Many have seriously expressed their strategic concerns about the significant detriments these dramatic changes could cause to the much-cherished democratic tradition in the United States, as well as the sinking credibility of the already crumbling US global leadership (Monagan, 2016; Williams and Prince, 2018). Whatever the Trump-Pence Administration has done was to dismantle any undesirable power structures in place and carve a very controversial way out of the structural constraints imposed by the existing institutional establishment at all levels. This is an artificial acceleration of institutional decay and potential increase of political entropy, especially at inter-state level, which have reinforced my previous arguments.

Despite being aware of the (presumably) temporary strategic retreat of the US under the Trump-Pence Administration, China did not seem to be eager to claim the global leadership for itself neither, at least not publicly. There are at least two reasons for China's reluctance to claim the global leadership both now and in the limited future: **A)** China is still not powerful and resourceful enough to sustain a global hegemonic system on its own, which has caused comprehensive concerns over the “*Kindleberger Trap*”⁸ (Nye, cited in Shambaugh, 2020); and **B)** China is also plagued by a large number of afflicting domestic issues (esp. economic hard-landing caused by the draconian Zero-COVID policy and its sudden abandonment and intensifying external containment measures, systemic financial risks associated with mortgage-related insolvency and accumulating government debts, demographic transformation, i.e. diminishing demographic dividend as a result of depopulation, and societal instability) as well as national security concerns (esp. regarding Taiwan).

The current Xi Administration in China bears a very distinctive leadership signature too. It intends to restore the time-honored political tradition of the CCP and, at the same time, push reforms (Xi's personally defined and desirable reforms) even further throughout China. As reported by Reuters (Woo, 2023): “*At the October congress, the party made clear that reforms of institutions were needed, including reforms to the financial system, Xi said [...] The overall reform plan will be "targeted, intensive and wide-ranging, touching on deep-rooted interests", Xi was quoted as saying in a speech before the Central Committee*”. President Xi is indeed a reformer despite being often misunderstood. However, the real controversy is that his reforms have significantly deviated from what had been accomplished by his predecessors. It is also worth noting that Xi's decision-making did create an ominous impression that he does not always prioritize economic performance, but the so-called “*common prosperity (共同富裕)*” instead (Wu, 2022b).

It is very courageous if President Xi indeed practices whatever he says. Some of the deepest and darkest wealth accumulations in China are buried deep in the Chinese financial system (Walter and Howie, 2011). The financial sector and banking industry are literally the lifeline for all economic activities in China and they are under the tight control of the Communist power at the highest level (Leng, 2023). In a simple analogy to the substantial financial reform in China, you are expecting to see severe blood loss if you decide to cut the artery wide open for whatever reasons. Xi's bold actions and inconsistent policies have added additional unpredictability to the future of the transforming Chinese economy at a critical turning point of continuous development and upgrading. The *China Threat* may own a good proportion of its notoriety to the rise of Xi in the past decade. I tentatively speculate that Xi's unfathomable power and authority in China may also lead the rising superpower to an unexpected direction with unforeseen outcomes.

To summarize, the dissimilar leadership styles and strategic calculi have contributed considerably to the heating competition between the US and China. After longitudinal observations, it becomes obvious that both the Trump-Pence Administration and Xi Administration have resorted to what I call the “*conservative nationalism (baoshou mingzuzhuyi: 保守民族主义)*” to consolidate their political support back home. This similarity shared by the US and Chinese leaderships is unlikely to foster mutual understanding and strategic cooperation between these two proud and powerful nation-states. On the contrary, it only fuels the intensifying competitions and rivalries between them.

Mutually destructive power struggles tend to escalate across all the three critical dimensions (i.e. military, economy and soft power) since the strong desire and ambition to remain to be or

⁸ The Kindleberger Trap attributes the failure of the international system to the under-provision of global public goods.

become the world's most powerful nation-state is more than evident on both sides. However, strategic self-restraint and policy prudence can help to stabilize the situation and prevent the outburst of an apocalyptic confrontation between these two major nuclear powers and global economic engines with catastrophic consequences to both of them as well as the rest of the world. All in all, the current Biden-Harris Administration is only a nuanced extension of Trump's aggressive China policies and strategies under better diplomatic disguise. We should also seriously consider the possibility that Donald Trump is very likely to make a comeback in the 2024 Presidential election.

Chapter Ten: interdependence and China's expanding influences in foreign territories

China's national power and hidden potentialities should not be viewed in isolation. China knows perfectly well how to build foreign relationships and how to benefit enormously from them once established. China's outward behaviors on the world stage are constantly under the scrutiny and judgement of the US and its Western allies, especially after its unfulfilled ambition was revealed. China does have an exploitive and self-serving motive or agenda to weave its own web of inter-state interrelationships and interdependencies across all critical domains so as to advance its own national interests, such as having more support in the international community and substituting the market losses it has suffered in the Global North with alternatives. In this chapter, I shall elaborate on it in more depth and detail.

10.1. A China-centered global economic web

China's spreading influences across the globe, especially in terms of its increasingly strong economic ties and trade relationships with other countries and economies, have built the foundation of a bundle of China-centered global networks according to a significant number of political observers (Cho, 2022). Interdependence is a well-established and very popular concept in the theoretical branch of Institutionalism within the realm of International Relations (IR). To the institutionalists, it is the defining feature of the extremely complex webs of interrelated interests and reciprocal relationships among numerous political-economic agents and entities that manifest across all levels of observation and theorization (Jones, 2013; Keohane and Nye, 2012).

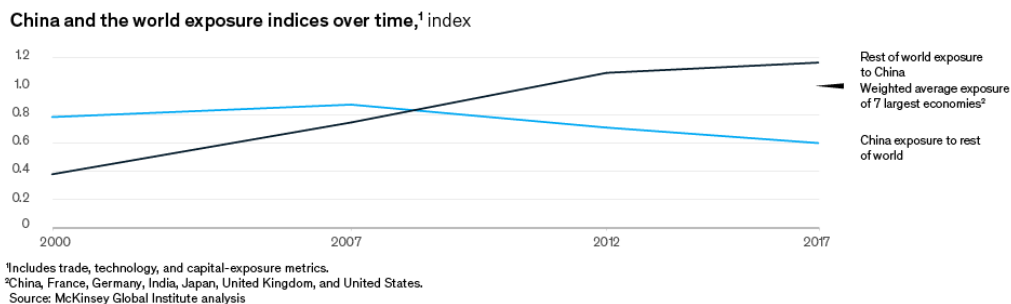
It is virtually true that almost no state could stay one hundred percent self-contained in the Age of Globalization, not even the most powerful ones, such as the US, or the most isolated ones, such as North Korea. In reality, many states rely upon critical foreign supply of energy and other (strategically important) resources, such as agricultural products (Hansen, Gale and Jewison, 2015) and minerals (National Research Council, 2008). Also, many of the pressing global issues definitely require cooperation and collaboration among nation-states, such as fighting against transnational terrorism, coping with extreme climate and environmental degradation, recovering from massive financial and/or economic crisis and, needless to say, containing the COVID-19 pandemic in solidarity etc.

Based on extensive empirical evidences, the mutual needs between China and the rest of the world are self-evident. However, McKinsey's Exposure Index below (**Illustration Twenty-six**) shows the transforming propensity that China has been reducing its external dependence roughly after 2007, while the rest of the world has becoming more susceptible and exposed to China's influences more than any time before. The interpretations of the chart could conceivably vary from different strategic perspectives and stances.

For the believers and supporters of *The China Threat Theory*, this means China has already become an indispensable global player that the West simply can neither live with nor without, which reveals the ultimate strategic dilemma to the intricate Sino-US decoupling or de-risking (qu fengxianhua: 去风险化) proposed by the EU. The essence is that if the US (and other Western powers) depend too much on the Chinese market(s) for their exports as well as the so-called "*red supply chains* (hongse gongyinglian: 红色供应链)" for critical manufacturing outputs from Chinese sources, then the risks associated with the "*China factor* (Zhongguo yinsu: 中国因素)" (Šebeňa, Chan and Šimalčík, 2023)" will increase considerably whenever China chooses to coerce, attack or retaliate economically. Some even referred China's unexpected and aggressive economic punishment on the tiny sovereignty and economy of Lithuania for displaying interest in forming a closer relationship with Taiwan as the "*supply chain weaponization*" or "*informal secondary sanction*" (ibid.). Therefore, exposure to China

does have an obvious downside. This is what *The China Threat Theory* has explicitly suggested from the very beginning.

China has been reducing its exposure to the world while the world has been increasing exposure to China.



McKinsey
& Company

(**Illustration Twenty-six:** China has been reducing its exposure to the world while the world has been increasingly exposure to China; **Source:** McKinsey & Company)

10.2. Imperialistic America VS a China-centered global tributary system

Building a mighty empire across extensive territories seems to be the ultimate dream of powerful nation-states throughout the human history. Both the US and China are frequently condemned as imperialistic powers by the multitude of critics (Frymer, 2017; Metcalf, 2012; Wallenfeldt, 2013). The classic imperialism is characterized by the expansion of territory of the imperialist power. This type of territorial expansion is often driven by brutal military invasion to and occupation of the colonized countries, such as in the cases of the European colonial powers in the 18th and 19th centuries (Joseph, 2017; Thomas, 2010).

In comparative terms, the US as well as China does not have a heavy colonial heritage as the European major powers do, such as Britain, France and Spain. Nevertheless, many have pointed out that the US represents a distinctive form of imperialistic power that is significantly differentiated from the European colonial powers. The hegemon has achieved an unprecedented domination in literally all parts of the world after the historical victory of the Allies in WWII and the demise of the Communist Soviet Union in the early 90s. The so-called “*unipolar world*” (danji shijie: 单极世界) dominated by the US has become a full-fledged existence almost immediately after. Even though, the territorial boundaries of the US remain roughly constant over the decades (Burns, 2017), many argue that territorial expansion is definitely not the only defining feature of Imperialism (ibid.). The so-called “*American Empire*”, in fact, takes a much more subtle form and, one should bear in mind that, it, fundamentally, contradicts with the US constitution, which is the ultimate source of legitimacy in the US (Burns, 2017; Statham, 2002).

The US has numerous military bases in literally all the strategically important localities on the planet for all the controversial reasons (Vine and Winchester, 2015) and the strong presence of powerful US-based multinational corporations and financial institutions could be easily found in each and every major market there is (Gilpin and Gilpin, 2006). In addition, the US has literally dominated all the well-established international organizations and institutions, from the International Monetary Fund (the IMF: guoji huopi jijin zuzhi 国际货币基金组织)

to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (the NATO: beidaxiyang gongyue zuzhi: 北大西洋公约组织), with the incomparable capacity to enforce rules upon other states in order to advance its own national interests in all parts of the world (Skidmore, 2011).

These are among the convincing evidences of a peculiar form of global imperialism invented and sustained by the hegemon itself. Achieving global domination with economized use of coercive force and strategic resources yet harvesting tremendous benefits at the same time are exceptionally tempting to all the major powers out there (Little and Smith, 2006). It is fair enough to say that governing a unipolar global system with cost-effectiveness marks a new era of imperialism (ibid.). The US, in many ways, was and probably still is a very “*smart power*” (Joseph Nye) with skillful combination of equally impressive hard and soft powers. It spares no effort to preserve the existing global system in order to secure its globally extended national interests (Nye and Olivieri, 2012).

Having been on the sweetest spot for decades, it is understandable that any substantial challenge to the hegemonic status of the US would almost guarantee subsequent containment and retaliation in all the possible forms. China is clearly aware of the immense beauty of this seemingly quite justifiable approach to dominate the world (Enright and Hoffmann, 2008), even though, the country used to go a great length to obscure its real strategic agenda from time to time.

Nevertheless, the seemingly glorious US global domination does involve a dark downside. The US has stuck in a self-created swamp of a series of military and non-military crusade in the Middle East in the names of anti-terrorism and democratization with astronomical expenditure and considerable damage to its image, reputation and credibility (Anderson and Stanfield, 2018). The US has virtually lost the moral high ground it used to occupy, i.e. *as the leader of the Allies*, largely due to unauthorized (by the UN Security Council) military interventions on foreign soils, notably the invasion of Iraq and supporting the anti-government forces (albeit selectively) in the Syrian civil wars. The infamous “*Arab Spring*” instigated by the US-led Western coalition has seriously destabilized the entire Middle East and caused enduring turmoil in local societies (Brennan, 2016). Many blame the chaotic situation in the Middle East to the abuse of military power by the hegemon and its lack of moral considerations and strategic rationalities.

Clearly, the hegemon wants to free itself from the seemingly never-ending obligations in post-intervention state-rebuilding with gigantic resource commitment to focus elsewhere (Maswood, 1990; Spitzer et al., 2013; Zuberi, 2009). President Biden’s hasty, chaotic and disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan in August, 2021 has officially ended a genuinely exhausting, hugely expensive and virtually fruitless foreign military operation over a period of two decades (The United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2022). Many believe it to be a strategic fiasco (Nast, 2021), maybe it is. However, according to State Secretary Blinken’s public remarks, pulling out from Afghanistan was to focus better on China (Czuczka, 2021). This has conspicuously revealed the true intention of the current White House. The *China Threat* has apparently become the top priority amongst all foreign affairs. Everything else should take a secondary position, especially in terms of strategic attention and resources allocation.

In order to out-compete China and preserve America’s global domination, the US leadership needs to embark on major investments in and transformations of its domestic base. In order to do so, the Biden-Harris Administration needs to gain the approval and support from the American general public. However, what the American people are desperately wanting at this point are anything but astronomical public spending on massive infrastructure building and transformation (namely the Build Back Better agenda proposed by Joe Biden) and hugely expensive social programs etc. Instead, they want the hardships in their daily life to be

alleviated by the government, such as: **A**) bringing down the run-away inflation at historical height (Reuters, 2022b) and resolve the critical and acute retail shortage of necessities caused by disruptions of the global supply chains (the GSCs); **B**) healing and uniting the sharply divided and brutally ruptured American society contributed by ideological polarization; and **C**) combating against rampant crime, drug trafficking and gun violence to restore social order and normalcy. Other concrete and urgent demands, such as more secure and better-paid jobs (Zuberi, 2009), debt-free education (McPherson and Schapiro, 1991) and affordable medical care (Niles, 2018) and so forth are also anxiously waiting to be effectively addressed by the Biden-Harris Administration.

Therefore, these aforementioned imperatives within the US society can conceivably redirect much of the attention and resources back to the homebase. The hegemon's ambition to sustain the "*American empire*" and contain the *China Threat* can be constrained by the will of the people through democratic mechanisms, such as demonstration (ideally but not always peaceful) and voting. The situation in China is comparably similar. The Chinese state is also under significant pressure to (temporarily) hold back unnecessary and resource-consuming foreign adventures (such as the massive One Belt, One Road infrastructure building projects along the Eurasian land corridors and sea routes as well as colossal foreign aids and investments in resource-rich African countries) to focus more on pressing domestic imperatives, such as high urban youth unemployment rate, low confidence in China's economic prospect, weak internal (in addition to external) demand and the melting real-estate industry that can trigger systemic financial crisis, etc.

To summarize, China's national ambition beyond its physical borders is self-evident and almost undeniable. The country's official foreign policies and its covert overseas operations have become a major strategic focus to the US authority and the American intelligence community. On the surface, China has always been an enthusiastic promoter of multilateralism in the international community, regardless of whatever self-serving motives and agendas the country might actually have. The Chinese political authority has consistently claimed over the years that China does not have any intention to form political alliance with other foreign sovereignties, i.e. *the non-alliance foreign policy* (Zhao, 2016). However, China's strategic rapprochement with Putin's Russia in the recent years does suggest otherwise.

In addition, the Chinese political leadership knows perfectly that building supportive and productive relationships with foreign states is strategically critical to China's ambition to become a full-fledged global superpower. I theorize that a key technique to achieve this formidable goal is to develop interdependence and mutual interests with foreign political-economic agents and entities, both sovereign and non-sovereign in nature. It is worth pointing out that institutionalists have long recognized the fact that interdependence is prone to be asymmetrical in reality and the so-called "*asymmetrical dependency* (buduicheng yilai: 不对称依赖)" is a critical source of power and influence for larger and more powerful nation-states (Fong, 2019), including China.

Based on extensive empirical evidences and close observations, many believe a China-centered global tributary system has been emerging to eventually replace the declining American global hegemony through cross-border economic activities and trade relationships (Cai, 2022). Whether or not this will definitively happen is anybody's guess. However, one thing for sure is that both the US and China want to project their national power globally, as long as the domestic consent is ensured. In the following two subsections, the drivers of China's international expansion and how the rising superpower skillfully weaves an intricate web of mutual interests with foreign actors and entities will be briefly discussed.

10.2. The drivers of China's explorations of international markets

Many political economists agreed that China's (imperialistic) expansion into foreign territories is almost inevitable because the Chinese economy is deeply stuck in an undesirable situation of over-capacity (Wang and Miao, 2019). Exploring international markets seems to be the only viable way out (ibid.). Excessive industrial productions in China have already dragged the prices down to the extent that profitability is ultra-thin or even financially unsustainable (Garlick, 2019). The enormous amounts of steel and cement produced by China year-on-year are literally impossible to be absorbed by domestic consumption alone (ibid.). These are just two well-researched examples among many others.

According to the latest statistics released by the World Steel Association (October, 2022), *“predicted that steel production in China will remain at the level of the forecast for 2022 – 914 million tons. At the same level and unchanged in relation to 2022, demand for steel in China is expected in 2023 – 914 million tons”* (Grigorenko, 2023). The Chinese authority ordered a reduction of steel production by Chinese producers to artificially rebalance the demand and supply. It also attempted to reverse the huge losses the Chinese steel producers have sustained to maintain their majority market shares in the global marketplace (S&P Global, 2023). The situation is rather similar for the Chinese cement industry. According to World Cement (2023),

“Even as the Chinese economy begins to recover in 2023, with the easing of its Covid-19 lockdowns, demand for cement is expected to decline slightly. This is mainly due to the struggling real estate industry and the smaller number of new infrastructure projects. It is expected that from 2024 to 2025, infrastructure requirements will continue to drop and China's cement demand will fall further. It is predicted to fall below 2 billion tons in 2025”.

In general, the persistent overcapacity problem of China's heavy and light industries is unlikely to be fundamentally solved or, at least, turned around, if the domestic demand remains roughly unchanged, quantitatively speaking. This piece of inconvenient reality does motivate and fuel China's ambitious expansion into foreign markets, such as building massive infrastructure projects along the *“New Silk Road”* (xin sichouzhilu: 新丝绸之路), both on land and via sea routes, to absorb the huge surplus of labors and construction materials back home (Li, 2019; O'Sullivan, 2017). In other words, China has been looking for or even creating consumption in the vast international markets combined so as to sustain its highly distorted and imbalanced demand and supply across industrial sectors.

The imbalance itself can largely be attributed to the administrative obsession of the concepts of *“industrialization”* (gongyehua: 工业化) and *“modernization”* (xiandaihua: 现代化) (Bai and Aglietta, 2013) during the early stage of the socioeconomic reforms in the 80s and 90s. China's notorious economic *“herd mentality”* and distorting policy amplifiers at local levels to impress the central government in Beijing in order to get promotion are significant contributing factors to be noted as well. Is it possible for this afflicting issue of overcapacity to be digested by external sources? Or, should it be fundamentally resolved by further and deeper structural rebalance of China's internal economic composition? These are meaningful questions the Chinese political leadership needs to satisfactorily address with urgency, diligence and, more importantly, efficacy, before the persistent overcapacity problem drags the transforming Chinese economy into a gloomy and unpredictable future scenario.

As the world's leading trading nation of physical goods, China's economic ties with the rest of the world have grown exponentially in the past three decades. According to an up-to-date trade report released by the CSIS (2019) based in Washington D.C., China has already surpassed the US to become the world top trader years ago. The report straightforwardly stated that *“By 2017, China's total trade in goods had jumped to \$4.1 trillion or 12.4 percent of global trade. The US is the world's second largest trader at 11.9 percent of total trade, followed*

by Germany at 7.9 percent.” It also deliberately reminded its audiences that “In 1995, the value of China’s imports and exports of goods totaled \$280.9 billion or 3 percent of global trade”. China literally has migrated from the periphery of the global economy to its center within merely twenty-some years (Shambaugh, 2013).

To some hawkish US-based strategists, today’s China is simply a “peer competitor” (Mearsheimer) that the US cannot afford to overlook and ignore, strategically speaking. China has already built up extensive and intimate (political-economic) ties with many foreign agents and entities across the continents through business interactions, economic collaborations and trade relationships. A China-centered, globally extended web of inter-relationships and inter-dependencies has been gradually (re-) shaping and transforming the landscape of global political economy. It is more of a reality rather than a wild speculation (ibid.). Undoubtedly, this is exactly one of the major issues *The China Threat Theory* is seriously concerning about.

10.3. The Chinese-style global expansion and foreign relation building

What deserves continuous intellectual attention is the strategic agenda shared by both the US and China to weave a self-serving web of interrelated interests across all sorts of artificial boundaries (both physical, such as the national borders and non-physical, such as the distinction between different social systems) to their own advantage and have a larger chunk of the pie, i.e. the outward-looking but internally driven, expansive propensity of major powers.

Traditionally, natural resources and territories are the primary incentives of inter-state conflicts. However, as time goes by, controlling over strategically important global infrastructures has become one of the top priorities for powerful nation-states nowadays. Notably, some of these vital infrastructures are quite intangible and abstract, such as the financial infrastructures channeling the flows of capitals and investments across the globe and the digital under-structures processing, storing and circulating data among all the inter-connected users worldwide. In short, today’s power politics is far more complex and complicated than it was centuries before. New battlefields have been continuously emerging. According to a recent report issued by the Center for International Governance Innovation (Araya, 2022):

“China has ascended from a developing economy into a direct technology competitor to the United States. With 1.6 million 5G base stations and 1.7 billion mobile subscribers, China’s digital economy is now estimated to be worth US\$7.1 trillion. With one-fifth of the world’s population, China is building on its vast consumer base to lead the world in telecommunications but is also developing telecom projects in Africa, Latin America and Europe. Huawei has finalized more 5G contracts than any other telecom company in the world — with half of those contracts in Europe”.

What we can see easily in this timely example is that the Chinese political leadership clearly knows if the country wants to become a full-fledged global superpower in today’s conditions, it has to dominate both the understructure and superstructure of the digital economy in a global scope, even facing external resistances and policy obstructions. As for the global financial system, it is still dominated by the hegemon and the US Dollar (Lahiri, 2023; Tooze, 2021). The chance for China to penetrate is literally very slim in the limited future.

Officially, China maintains its multilateral, cooperative and mutually beneficial approach in its steady international expansion (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, 2024), even though, for sophisticated political observers, this approach is not immune from self-interested strategic calculations and political agendas. China insists on its “non-interventionist” and “non-discriminatory” principles to deal with foreign countries, which, according to official Chinese diplomatic rhetoric, reflects China’s great respect to

other sovereign states regardless of their varied territorial sizes and national capacities (Harris, 2014). In sharp contrast, Western powers openly and deliberately utilize a wide range of political-economic instruments to popularize their ideologies and model of governance and development in the hugely different “*non-Western world*” (Stelzenmüller, 2020). This approach itself is problematic to some extent because superficial emulations of successful Western experiences do not automatically guarantee success in non-Western societies as numerous empirical studies have meticulously documented many of the failed Westernization cases in all parts of the world (Badie, 2000; Mehmet, 2002).

In addition to that, the mandatory conditionality attached to foreign aid from the West, such as ensuring political accountability and clean governance, could significantly hurt the privilege and vested interest of the local political and economic elites (Stokke, 2013). Their resistance to the externally induced reforms is conceivably strong. In this case, China definitely offers an alternative collaborative opportunity since the country repeatedly claims that it will neither interfere with the domestic affairs nor intend to induce institutional transformations in other sovereignties. Obviously, this offer is exceptionally tempting and persuasive to the local political and economic elites. Conceivably, they can secure their privilege and vested interest in their native countries and, at the same time, receive foreign assistance to boost local development in whatever desirable forms to further consolidate their own benefits.

In this sense, China is indeed a competing force to the West. China’s unique political pragmatism and model of governance and development have attracted enthusiastic supporters in many parts of the world, especially across the Global South where attempted and failed Westernization has disillusioned the local societies for many complex and complicated reasons (Badie, 2000; Mehmet, 2002). China’s seemingly non-interventionist and value-neutral diplomatic principle is often accused by the West as “*moral nihilism* (daode xuwuzhuyi: 道德虚无主义)” (Robinson and Shambaugh, 2006). However, China is literally the “*game-changing factor*” in a deteriorating West-dominated global system. This rising superpower openly rejects some of the widely appreciated Western values and principles on a selective basis and tries to exert influences in places where the West does not necessarily have overwhelming competitive advantages.

It is fair to say that China is setting new standards and norms both at home and abroad (Guo and Blanchard, 2010). The Chinese political pragmatism intelligently circumvents undesirable moral and even legal restrictions of virtually all kinds (Yu, 1993). This intriguing political approach focuses solely on the outcome and it is highly dependent on the circumstances. In other words, China’s approach of international expansion tends to be goal-oriented and interest-based, rather than dictated by ideological idealism and moral principles (Sutter, 2013). In general, China’s pragmatic foreign relation-building is highly fluid and adaptive with a surprisingly strong, penetrating ability to the rest of the world (ibid.).

To summarize, interdependence could reduce the likelihood of offensive behaviors committed by states in extreme forms. However, it does not necessarily guarantee a more orderly and peaceful world where great powers still constantly compete and rival with one another with considerable force and ferocity. The logic of the game determines the outcome of the game. Interdependence is an inseparable constituent of the logic itself. The world as we know it has been becoming more and more interconnected over time. At the same time, the complexity of global political economy has also been increasing as a result of that. It is extremely difficult, if not completely impossible, for any politician or government to willfully reverse this trend. Empirically informed theorizations do suggest that “*de-globalization* (qu quanqihua: 去全球化)” and “*re-globalization*” (chong quanqihua: 重全球化) are real and happening due to

great power politics (Van Bergeijk, 2019). However, towards what possible ends and outcomes are still waiting to be seen.

It is entirely possible that the artificial disentanglement between the US and China will crush the idealism that has been enthusiastically propagating and promoting by a large number of “*neo-liberal globalists* (xin ziyou quanqiu zhuyi zhe: 新自由全球主义者)” since the early 2000s. Global integration or simply globalization is experiencing a major setback at the current moment. The world is proliferating rather than converging (as the well-known and often criticized “*end of history* (lishi zhongjie: 历史终结)” proposed by Francis Fukuyama in the 1990s) in the limited future. The world might evolve into two or even more segregated sub-systems that are governed by very distinctive laws and rules in operation, both formal and tacit.

The counter-globalization or anti-globalization force has obviously gained momentum in the US due to the provocative influence of Donald Trump and his administration, even though, not solely. Trump seizes every opportunity to publicly propagate his strong belief that the only possible relationship between the US and China has always been a “*zero sum*” one despite the availability of contradictory empirical evidences (Blanchard and Collins, 2019). If China gains something extra, then it must be at the expense of the national interests of the US. This type of logical reasoning is exactly what *The China Threat Theory* is based on and supported by. It is apparent that the burning flame of *The China Threat Theory* has already been reignited, not by chance but by over-politicization and mutual apprehension to a large extent.

According to direct and indirect observations, the subsequent Biden-Harris Administration clearly has embraced and endorsed *The China Threat Theory* in an explicit, yet less dramatic fashion. This is probably the only political legacy of Donald Trump that has been inherited by its successor. From a retrospective perspective, ironically, Donald Trump’s single tenure has accomplished at least one favor for China’s internally driven, international expansion and foreign relationship cultivation. The Trump-Pence Administration was (almost unconsciously) weakening the strategic position of the US in the international community by adopting an ultra-unilateral, self-serving and short term-focused approach of foreign relationship-building (or, more accurately, relationship undermining). The US has voluntarily alienated its allies and partners during the Trump Era and created more power vacuums for China, among others, to fill if it intends to.

Conclusions:

In conclusion, the increasingly popular *China Threat Theory* is highly complex and inherently multifaceted. It can be examined from different perspectives and strategic stances with contrasting arguments, debates and conclusions. The meanings and interpretations of *The China Threat Theory* are rich and profound, yet inevitably inflammatory. I view *The China Threat Theory* as both a particular stream of political discourse and an unfolding, real-life power game between a relatively declining superpower (the hegemon) and a rising superpower (China). The primary strategic goals for these two fiercely competing superpowers are: **A**) maximize their own national interests within the institutional constraints (both formalized and tacit); and **B**) achieving the most preeminent position and privileged status in their immediate region and even the entire world.

I believe both the US and China value the controversial “*global leadership* (quanqiu lingxiuquan: 全球领袖权)” to a great extent. These two powerful states are both driven by their shared desire to acquire more power and consolidate their strategic position in the international community, even though, how “*global leadership*” is defined and what are the prerogatives and obligations associated with it vary significantly among political theorists, strategists and practitioners. For hard-core realists, the seemingly charming “*global leadership*” could simply be a euphemism for “*global domination*” (quanqiu zhidaoquan: 全球制导权) in reality, although, technically, these two concepts are not equivalents to each other that we could refer to interchangeably when critically examining the dynamic global power politics and political economy.

The *China Threat Theory* explicitly places China in an awkward position as the challenger to the US hegemony and the unipolar global order. The theory has quite a lot propagandist appeal to the anxious and intimidated members of the US-led Western camp, especially those located within the geographic proximity of China in the Indo-Pacific Region. The possible transition of the global hegemonic system from US-dominated to China-dominated is the ultimate speculation of *The China Threat Theory* and the collective belief shared by the loyal disciples of the “*power transition theory*”. The potential alteration of the existing world order to unilaterally benefit China is another accusation *The China Threat Theory* has been propagating, especially considering the fact that China has become much more powerful and assertive in both words and actions in recent years.

I theorize that the constantly evolving world order, first and foremost, is the direct result of the shifting global power equilibrium. The world order is characterized by its perceivable structural quality yet constantly being constructed and reconstructed by the multitude of political agents and entities in a collective manner; second, the world order is actually a manifestation of the time-honored realist proposition- “*politics always revolves around interests*”. This rule of thumb has always been an intellectually productive starting point for and a constant reminder to all political researchers and theorists.

The amount of relative power possessed by the key state-actors (albeit beholden by the domestic imperatives and international influences to varying degrees) and their respective strategic calculus determine the rules and boundaries of the game. However, these rules and boundaries are fairly fluid and highly susceptible to the dynamism of the global power equilibrium. The power-centered and power-oriented approach adopted by Realism could provide critical insights on the origin of the (largely) intangible world order, why it exists and how it evolves over time. My thesis reflects my strong academic disposition that political struggles over interests (whether legitimate/justifiable or not) are literally a universal motive that governs political behaviors, activities and relationships of all kinds. *The China Threat Theory* is just one specific example that my thesis chooses to focus on.

The intensifying power game between the US and China (i.e. the dubbed Cold War 2.0 as mentioned previously) has once again divided the world into two competing camps. The sheer number of nation-states involved is considerable. Among them, some are players and other are simply passive participants because the latter are a group of smaller and less powerful states who do not really wish to make a hard choice between the US and China. However, these countries do have significant roles to play due to the fact that the so-called international community is actually constituted by a large number of fairly small or even tiny-sized sovereign entities. These members of the international community represent the majority in terms of their aggregated number. Smaller states could amplify their voices by combining themselves together and leveraging their united power within well-established international institutions, notably the UN, through the democratic mechanism of voting, even though, only the great powers have the privilege to veto. These more fragmented, sovereign entities also function as mediating agents among the great powers to facilitate and promote mutual understanding and foster peaceful resolution to solve conflict at international level. Their collective contribution to stabilize and harmonize the coexistence of nation-states in the international community deserves strategic recognition and theoretical respect, despite the fact that my thesis has chosen to focus on great power politics.

The deterioration of the international institutions and organizations has dis-proportionally affected the ability of the smaller nation-states to collectively participate into important international negotiations, articulate their appeals and defend their national interests. The invasion of Ukraine by Putin's Russia is a typical example of the failure of international institutions and organizations to prevent military assault of a sovereignty from happening. As a consequence, smaller, weaker and less resourceful nation-states have to seek forming strategic (esp. military) alliance with great powers in order to ensure their national security, such as in the case of Finland joining the NATO not long after Russia's unjustified war against Ukraine broke out on the 24th of February, 2022. Another point deserves reiterating is the fact that the world is not merely an arena of inter-state competition and rivalry (as some old-fashioned, hard-core classical realists tend to insist). Cooperation and collaboration among nation-states are not only crucial but also very much needed, even though, many might argue that they are, in many cases, expedient rather than sincere.

The perceivable structure of the global system is undergoing a major transformation. Many political observers have pointed out that the unipolar world has been gradually dissolving over time. It is increasingly hard for the US to sustain a unipolar global system alone since its national capacities are already over-stretched and its competitive advantages have been diminishing in the recent decades, especially in terms of scientific advancement and technological innovation (Galama and Hosek, 2008). China, among others, is catching up closer and closer. In the post-unipolar world, China, as long as it can maintain or even enhance its national capacities, should be one of the multiple poles out there no matter how controversial its political nature and national behaviors are in the eyes of its harsh critics out there. This is my tentative and cautious speculation of how the world is going to look like structurally in the limited future with the continuous rise of China in East Asia.

The world has also become visibly more chaotic and less orderly with the presence of a considerably higher level of political entropy because the centralizing impulse has been retreating and the trust and mutual understanding among nation-states have also been depleting over time. Intensifying power politics is driving states to bond together (in the form of alliance or *de facto* alliance) in order to leverage the power of their combined strengths, and, simultaneously, incompatible ideologies and conflicts of interests are driving them apart. The vigorous rise of populism and (conservative) nationalism in major powers (not exclusively in the Western world, but also in China to a considerable extent) across the globe have significantly shaped the landscape of their domestic political economy and how they engage in confrontation rather than collaboration with other nation-states. We should never

forget the fact that Nazism was an extreme form of fanatic nationalism emerged within a both proud and ambitious nation-state during a time of crisis in the German history (Harsch, 2000). Sensationalizing the dark side of nationalism might seem to be conspiratorial and detrimental. However, we are currently living in a time of deep and vast crises, once again.

It is noticeable that great powers worldwide are currently having a couple of urgent and afflicting problems on their own: the US is trying extremely hard to reverse its relative decline and reinvigorate its national competitiveness under the risks of persistent inflation and a full-blown economic stagnation; China is suffering from various pathological complications in its own society that violate social-economic-political justice. Pushing reforms further and deeper and galvanizing the sluggish Chinese economy are extremely demanding tasks for the Chinese political leadership to accomplish because they are very easy to fail in real-life situations. The danger of losing public support and civil cooperation due to persistent administrative malfeasance and corruption is also substantial and alarming; Russia is still struggling with its post-Communist, national rejuvenation with shrinking population size, failing economy and stringently imposed sanctions by the West. With the on-going invasion of Ukraine, Russia will almost certainly become even more alienated and isolated in the international community and experience even more severe economic sanctions; Japan shares similar demographic concerns with Russia and the Japanese economy has been stuck in an afflicting stagnation for almost four decades since the 1990s. The high-profile “*Abenomics*” did not seem to have improved the economic situation in Japan to a dramatic degree according to mainstream political economists. Japan’s territorial dispute with China over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in the East China Sea and its sympathetic relationship with the pro-independence Taiwanese government have strategically antagonized Beijing; The EU is facing a very real danger of disintegration due to the highly controversial Brexit. The Union’s deteriorating organizational capacities to effectively deal with serious issues, such as collective security, economic well-being and competitiveness and political sustainability, are also openly and enthusiastically questioned by many political commentators from both inside and outside the Union.

One might argue that any given point of time in the history might seem to be a time of crisis to pessimistic observers. It is true that pessimism does tend to haunt many political observers and analysts. If we look hard enough, we could spot a crisis almost anywhere at any time possible. However, the various symptoms of crises (of all forms and kinds) are too obvious to be ignored altogether. Both WWI and WWII have dramatically ended with devastating losses of human lives and a trail of economic ruins. The Cold War has finally led to the sudden and dramatic downfall of the once powerful Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Peace and development have ultimately championed war and confrontation as history tells us. The likelihood of a Third World War (WWIII) among the great powers equipped with nuclear weapons is literally very slim. So far, no major nuclear power has directly involved into the invasion of Ukraine other than Russia the aggressor, which is a significant piece of proof to show the shared understanding and recognition of the infamous MAD among the major nuclear powers. Extreme forms of power politics through the use of coercive force can be mitigated or even prevented by political rationality and policy prudence. However, the ultimate deterrence remains to be the “*balance of terror*”, such as the nuclear annihilation.

At the current moment, global power politics is still very much alive and even invigorated. The resurgence of *The China Threat Theory* has forced China to adjust its strategies and get prepared for the worst possibility. In a general sense, China has never wanted to be targeted by the US. Unfortunately, China is simply too powerful and capable to avoid or even just delay the aggressive containment from the US and its close allies. In the early 2000s, popular belief boldly claimed that the 21st Century belongs to the rising China (Griffiths et al., 2011). “*Would China continue to rise and replace the US to become the next hegemon by the mid of the*

21st century?" has become an increasingly popular speculation embraced by the enthusiasts of *The China Threat Theory* ever since.

The world is changing as it has always been. A large number of scholars from various backgrounds have agreed that the world is actually undergoing a process of proliferation and fragmentation (Cordesman, 2014; Zhang, 2010; Zhao, 2016). In other words, the unipolar system is deteriorating or even dissolving over time (ibid.) as I have reiterated multiple times in the main body of my thesis. However, what the post-unipolar world will look like is yet to be known clearly. I personally speculate that a multi-polar world order will develop even further in the near future. Whether or not multi-polarization is just a transitioning period towards the re-concentration of power into a bipolar or another unipolar world order would remain to be anybody's guess, including well-informed and educated guesses.

From the shared perspective of the many believers in *The China Threat Theory*, if the global distribution of power and wealth has been gradually shifting towards the advantages of China, then the existing world order is inevitably to be altered and transformed to accommodate the needs and wants of the rising superpower as a direct consequence. Based on the direct and indirect evidences, the US and its allies are extremely reluctant to let that happen right in front of their eyes without doing anything. Given the (increasingly) dynamic and fluid nature of today's politics and economics, the eagerness and desperation to preserve the "*unipolar world order*" dominated by the US might turn out to be wishful and futile due to the fact that the gaps between the US and China in key domains have been closing. China has been in the fast lane of development and modernization for more than four decades. It is already late (but still not too late) for the US-led West to devote full strategic attention to the rising giant resurrected from its miserable humiliation over a torturing century from 1839 to the founding year of the PRC in 1949.

The desperate attempts to reverse the relative decline of the US have almost gone extreme in the recent years. Whenever China gains more power or receives more support (sometimes just respect or attention) from other nation-states, which does not necessarily mean the US loses power and prestige as a result of that, the strategic anxiety and sense of insecurity would readily kick in to alert the US leadership about the (potential) dangers of a more capable and powerful China. The excessive anxiety and insecurity on the part of the US are both self-evident and non-contributory to strengthening its strategic position. I believe the only viable solution to restore the confidence of the US and salvage its "*global leadership* (if it did exist in some forms)" or "*global domination*" is to correctly understand China's strategic thinking and calculus as well as the rising superpower's competitive strengths and weaknesses without any preexisting biases, distortions and prejudices. The US will have to outperform China in all the three critical domains (military, economic and soft as discussed systemically in Chapter Four) by a significant margin if the US indeed has the strong, undivided determination to win the ultimate competition against China for global preeminence at the end of the day.

The US and China do have many striking or even irreconcilable differences. However, these two superpowers do share similar strategic pressures and limitations. The US and Chinese leaderships are expected to expeditiously respond to the strong imperatives that emerge within their domestic society and they are both constrained by the scarce strategic resources at their disposal and the existing international orders and norms. Despite various common concerns and problems, the national behaviors of the US and China also at times align and at other times differ, which are largely contributed by their different ideological beliefs and values, strategic visions and calculus and also the competence, capability and efficacy of the leadership at the very top. The domestic situation in the US is not entirely optimistic and cheerful. Crisis after crisis, the Biden-Harris Administration has stuttered and stumbled all the way down the road. The approval rate of this administration has reached a historically low of 41.3% during Biden's fifth quarter as the sitting president (Jones, 2022). According to the

latest Reuters/Ipsos poll (2023), with the subsiding pandemic in the US and the rest of the world and the aggressive raising of interest rates by the Federal Reserve to bring down the (historically high) inflation in the American society, President Biden's approval rate remained at a rather unoptimistic level, especially considering the fact that he publicly declared that he still plans to run for reelection in 2024 (Gambino, 2023). As for the Xi Administration in China, the situation is also far from invigorating. The sluggish Chinese economy and the melting real-estate industry with the ability to trigger systemic financial crisis are among the extremely afflicting problems facing the Xi-centered core leadership with no easy and clean solutions in sight (Cunningham, 2024).

For those who believe the US and China have already collided, the power struggles between the two are both fierce and dangerous. Neither the US nor China will back down without a strenuous fight since the perceived strategic interests at stake are extremely high. Unlike the Cold War, during which the quantity of nuclear weapons of mass destruction grew exponentially in between the US and the USSR, China has a very different political philosophy as well as an extensive repertoire of techniques and instruments to deal with the US. More importantly, China also has a long-standing political tradition to skillfully mediate, coordinate and network among the multitude of state and non-state political-economic agents and entities in order to effectively achieve whatever intended strategic objectives and goals. This distinctive feature of political practice makes China a more flexible and adaptive player in comparison with the hegemon. The often-criticized Chinese pragmatism has turned out to be a unique strength of the country in real-life political gaming, especially in non-Western or even anti-Western contexts.

Before the pandemic eventually hit the US homeland, China was trying extremely hard to uphold its strategic position and avoid escalation of the already intense trade frictions with the hegemon. In order to achieve that, significant concessions were made on the part of China to reach the “*Phase One*” agreement with the US officials in mid-January, 2020, right before the city-wide lockdown of Wuhan towards the end of January of the same year. From this point of time onwards, both of the US and Chinese leaderships have placed much of their strategic attention on COVID-19 containment and mobilized enormous strategic resources to hedge against the negative impacts of the pandemic to their respective national economy.

This sensitive and tumultuous bilateral relationship between the US and China was stricken particularly hard by the unexpected and ferocious outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan marked a starting point of the public awareness of the rapid spread of the deadly coronavirus in a global scope. This devastating global public health emergency alone has greatly transformed almost every aspect of the so-called normalcy as we know it. Millions upon millions of people worldwide were in the state of utter disbelief regarding what has been taking place, not to mention the climbing infected cases and death toll reported on a daily basis. Wuhan was the first major city besieged by the novel coronavirus in China, and also in the entire world, even though, to this day, the Chinese authorities and health officials insist that Wuhan (or China) is not the origin of the virus (PBS NewsHour, 2023).

COVID-19 has since become an ugly stigma associated with China, especially within the American society. Hate speeches and crimes against ethnic Chinese (or even just Asian-looking people) worldwide have soared due to the popular speculation that the pandemic is the result of a lab-leak from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Many claim that this very institute was conducting highly risky “*gain-of-function* (gongneng zengyi: 功能增益)” researches (that are at least partially funded by the US public health authority as some allegations suggested) (Lerner, Hvistendahl and Hibbett, 2021) without rigorous safety protocol (Zimmer and Gorman, 2021). What makes the situation even worse is the reluctance of the Chinese political authorities to allow international experts of infectious disease to

conduct thorough and independent investigation in China in order to convincingly identify the true origin of the pandemic and the mysterious evolutionary path of the novel coronavirus (i.e. SARS-CoV-2).

When science was not given the chance to provide the much-needed answers, unfounded misconceptions or even vicious conspiracy theories tended to fill the void. China's opaque and secretive political system does not only induce all kinds of blames and accusations, but also fuel the deep anti-China sentiment in the Western world. To many (provoked and agitated) people based in the global West, China is indeed a threat because they believe the country has (knowingly) unleashed a deadly virus to the entire world and caused tragic losses of innocent lives and enormous trauma to millions upon millions of people worldwide. The pandemic has become a very convincing piece of evidence to undermine China's gradually elevating status in the international community and tarnish its image and reputation.

The COVID-19 pandemic was not only a tough test to the resilience of the national economy and the competence of the state, but also a heavily politicized and intentionally weaponized catastrophe to divide state-actors and peoples across the globe rather than unify them in unity. The mounting repulsion towards China supplies endless oxygen to the burning *China Threat Theory* at a traumatic time when sincere and genuine solidarity among states was urgently needed. To the utter disappointment of many, the pandemic seems to have produced more resentment, distrust and misunderstanding among states rather than providing a precious opportunity to unite them so as to fight against the ravaging coronavirus forcefully and effectively with their collective strengths.

To extrapolate from the lack of genuine trust and voluntary cooperation to fight against the ravaging pandemic as one human civilization, the international community is once again subjugated to the possessive logic of power politics. A wide range of (normally non-military) forms and manifestations of inter-state confrontations and power struggles are expected to escalate and proliferate across domains, especially between the US and China. They might appear to be less frightening. But they can nonetheless be highly resource-consuming and mutually destructive to the engaged parties, especially in the cases of trade war, artificial economic disentanglement and technology embargo. If these aforementioned power struggles against foreign agents, entities and sovereignties last long and intense enough, they will inevitably consume an additional amount of scarce, strategic resources and burden the national fiscal budget with little benefit to the multitude of ordinary people in the domestic society, such as improving their quality of life or consolidating their social security.

Meanwhile, excessive and unrestrained nationalism (regardless its multifarious forms and representations in different societies) is a dangerous catalyst to be recognized because it fuels inter-state confrontation and rivalry. The (sometimes unreasonable) hostility towards the (self-defined) "others" is an intrinsic yet negative quality of nationalism embodied in all of its representational variants. As argued in more detail previously, a frequently utilized tool in the toolbox of nationalism is national security. National security is an almost irrefutable justification to legitimize highly controversial political behaviors and actions. It is often abused in real-life situations to take down targeted foreign opponents through unconventionally harsh measures, yet, avoid significant public opposition from the home base. National security is literally the ultimate justification to shield foreign competitions and guard the domestic society from being infiltrated and manipulated by foreign contamination.

Instead of embracing globalization and the outside world with blindfolded eyes, the Chinese political authority is fully aware of the potential challenges coming from the external, such as the invasive "universal values" that have been infiltrating the Chinese ideological system from the global West and the waging "chip war" instigated by the US to castrate the thriving Chinese high-tech industries once and for all, just to cite two highly popular examples here.

From my perspective, these two recent instances given above are definitely not wild conspiracy theories based on little facts and sketchy evidences. It is worth reiterating that threat, often time, implies mutuality and reciprocity. *The China Threat Theory* has deliberately downplayed or even overlooked the “*strategic threats*” the West could possibly pose onto the very survival of the Chinese political regime and stifle the emerging technology-intensive industries in China through tightening technology embargo.

To retouch a bit on the revolutionary potentialities of the powerful Western values and ideologies, it is widely known that human rights, including civil, economic, political rights, are a very sensitive and provocative political idea in China due to its strong ability to de-legitimize the Communist political regime that is well-known for its poor human rights protection records. Universal human rights protection is literally the most irreconcilable difference and disagreement between the US and China, as the leader of the free world and the leader of global authoritarianism, respectively. China has been denounced and shamed over many years for its outrageous human rights violations and the Chinese authorities have always been highly alert about the human rights-related civil rebellion and political activism within the Chinese society.

The Chinese political leadership is situated in a quite uncomfortable and delicate strategic position due to the twin pressures from both the external and the internal demanding for legal protection over legitimate human rights of all citizens. Eventually, “*in March 2004, China added a clause to its Constitution to the effect that the State respects and protects human rights*” (Snyder, 2009). This was obviously an extraordinary institutional landmark for the suppressed civil consciousness in China and a legal recognition to the fundamental civil rights entitled to all Chinese citizens. This has strongly revealed the power and influence of Western ideological crusade and rhetorical dominance and their compelling capacities to shape China’s legal frameworks, institutional arrangements and domestic policies in a much interconnected and interdependent global system beyond the confinements of the national borders.

With the collective inputs from an enormous number of directly and indirectly involved agents and entities, the global political economy nowadays has evolved itself into a bundle of byzantine webs of interdependent relationships, exactly as the neo-institutionalists have been arguing over the recent decades. The direct consequence I believe is that no single state alone, not even the most powerful one, such as the hegemon, has the capacity to resist or defy the operational logic of the global political-economic system, especially considering the fact that globalization has been running deeper over time whether people appreciate it or not. China has been actively engaging in highly productive relationship-building with foreign partners in the recent years, which apparently has revealed its understanding of the logic of the game. In addition to that, China’s internally driven ambition and expansive national interests have already extended far beyond its physical borders. This is exactly the scenario *The China Threat Theory* has been trying to warn the US-led global west about.

It is still too early to say that China will lead the world into an alternative future. However, China is definitely a “*game-changing factor*” to the seemingly standardized and universalized Western model of governance and development. This statement is deliberately devoid of prejudices and biases. China does not necessarily have to play the existing game dominated by the West. The country has other options. Just as Lee Roberts has once said: “*if you cannot win the game, change the rules*”. Others inspired by this quotation have even gone a step further, wittily arguing that if the rules cannot be changed, then start a new game of your choice.

In this regard, China seems to have two faces at the same time, the country is: **A)** a strong supporter of existing international institutional establishment, notably the UN Security

Council; and **B**) an active initiator and contributor to alternative international institutions, notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (the SCO: shanghe zuzhi: 上合组织) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (the AIIB: yatouhang: 亚投行). This particular behavioral pattern demonstrated China's hesitancy to fundamentally reshape the existing international institutions and organization due to the formidable power and colossal resources required, which is obviously way beyond China's current national capacities. Yet, the country still wants to create more room for strategic maneuverings in the international community and cultivate productive and beneficial relationships with foreign countries through China-dominated, alternative institutional frameworks.

It has been extensively observed that the global system has evolved significantly in reactive ways due to the strong presence of the so-called "*China factor* (zhongguo yinsu: 中国因素)". This is simply a fact, not a fault of China, technically. However, many firm believers of *The China Threat Theory* do not agree with this seemingly innocent statement. They have cited a great deal of rather factual evidences, such as the unilateral construction and militarization of artificial islands in the highly disputed waters of the South China Sea (The CSIS, 2016) and arbitrary utilization of economic penalties to politically coerce smaller and weaker trading partners (Hopewell, 2021; Lee, 2021; Sherlock, 2019), to argue that China does not have the willingness nor the commitment to play by the rules whenever they run into conflicts with its national interests. The rising superpower has demonstrated increasingly strong propensity to bend or even invalidate well-established and extensively recognized international norms and rules to serve its own agendas, priorities and interests.

This can be another major irony of *The China Threat Theory*, which is the fact that China is not granted the privilege it desires to be a rule-setter. Instead, China should remain to be an obedient rule-follower. It is rather apparent that the US-led global West has been trying to confine and control China within its own game. But China wants to, either, change the rules of the existing game to suit its own purposes, or, to start a brand-new game of its own. In short, China is deliberately deprived from the legitimacy and right to challenge and reshape the existing international norms and rules established in the current global system for self-serving conveniences. This piece of frustrating reality is obviously a non-recognition to China's rising national status and passionate aspiration. Unfortunately for China, possessing more hard powers does not automatically translate into respect, appreciation and goodwill from other members of the international community. On the contrary, China is facing mounting hostilities from the external with increasing confrontational propensities.

As my *Strategic Filtration Model* indicates, the operational logic and functional mechanism of the global system can significantly constrain the political discretion of China as a sovereignty under many circumstances. From my perspective, state actors are inevitably subject to the influences of their external environment in varying degrees. China should be no exception. More open China becomes, more susceptible the country is to external disturbances and volatilities. Therefore, the Chinese political leadership needs to cautiously trade off the benefits and risks associated with the continuous opening-up and further reform, especially in strategically valued, state-dominated sectors and industries, such as the financial sector and banking industry. Reading the external environment accurately and responding it sensibly are critical to make effective state-level decisions and plans. I tend to believe that the Chinese political authority has gained tremendous experiences and know-hows in this regard after having been in power for more than seven decades in China since 1949.

Like the rest of other governments, the Chinese political regime has a well-practiced strategy to redirect attention to external challenges whenever the internal sovereignty is in crisis. The difference between the internal sovereignty and external sovereignty is subtle yet fundamentally different. It is notable that, in the Chinese political discourses, both popular and formal, external sovereignty is not differentiated from internal sovereignty due to political

deliberations. This cunning technique is methodically carried out by the powerful Chinese propaganda apparatus. A multitude of counter-narratives to *The China Threat Theory* have been systematically engineered and aggressively pushed into the public domain to hedge its negative impacts in an increasingly proactive manner. These counter-narratives are very appealing and easy to be accepted and absorbed by the Chinese general public due to their emotionally charged and intuition-friendly qualities.

The fatal flaw of *The China Threat Theory* as a persuasive narrative is its conceptual ambiguity. This seemingly purposeful allegation does not intelligibly differentiate the Chinese political authority (i.e. the CCP) from the concept of China as a proud nation-state and the collective identity shared by numerous ethnic Chinese worldwide. Precisely due to this conceptual defect, the fanatic nationalism within the Chinese society can be skillfully exploited as a piece of highly effective weaponry utilized by the Chinese political authority to fire back at the over-flowing *China Threat Theory* with force and ferocity.

Apart from China's propagandist hedging efforts, America's "*leading by example*" (The White House, 2022) is also losing its charm over time. The visible deterioration of democracy and dramatic erosion of social cohesion in the American society have generated lots of afflicting confusions and deep concerns among numerous political observers, strategists and practitioners based both inside and outside the US. Is the US still the beacon of democracy and the world champion of institutional superiority? Many started to wonder and reflect upon it with good reasons. The insurrection on the 6th of January, 2021 will always remain to be both an ugly scar and, paradoxically, a badge of honor of the US democracy. It is probably the single most convincing piece of evidence to discredit the American-style democracy in recent years. The exemplary American-style democracy is a benchmark *The China Threat Theory* constantly compares and contrasts with the authoritarian political regime in China. However, the melodramatic 2021 presidential election in the US has gravely shaken the cornerstone of the American political system, as well as the credibility and authority of the American-style democratic governance. At the same time, domestic ideological polarization has unleashed massive chaos and violence into the already traumatized American society that was stricken extremely hard by the pandemic.

Despite all the negativities, I want to argue that this very incident has also demonstrated America's impressive conviction and determination to defend its democratic values and principles and preserve its democratic traditions and institutions from falling apart as the result of a fermenting socio-political upheaval from within. It is universally true that institutions are simply artifacts and they have never been perfect in any given social system at any point of time. Ideally, institutions need constant corrections and improvements, upon the condition that the disruption to social orders and the deployment of coercive measures (including state-monopolized violence) are minimized. The Capitol occupation is the ultimate outburst of anti-establishment surge in the US at an extremely challenging and volatile point of time in the recent American history. I regard this sensational incident as a severe and painful test to the fortitude and resilience of the American-style democracy.

From a fairer and more objective standpoint, the internationally promoted, American-style democracy should not be understood as merely a political instrument or a piece of ideological weaponry utilized by the US (or the West in a more generalized view) to intervene into the domestic affairs of other sovereign entities and instigate civil rebellions against the local governing bodies, if they are somehow deemed to be "*undemocratic*" or even "*anti-democratic*" in nature, therefore, unfit to rule. Objectively speaking, the US does indeed cherish democracy as the sacred ideological core of its political system and it fights extremely hard to defend and preserve it, even at the expenses of social cohesion and stability.

Democracy is not a free gift from God. Sometimes, it seems that the price to practice genuine democracy is almost too expensive to be afforded. Conceptually, democracy is almost invincible. The real challenge for policy and law makers is that how democracy is put into practice in real-life situations and how to institutionalize democracy to reflect the quintessential values and principles of democratic governance. China's apparent resistance to Western-style democracy has earned the country a quite negative reputation in the international community. The very reason why the Chinese political authority is extremely reluctant to let Western-style democracy penetrate into the Chinese society is probably the inconvenient fact that the Chinese political-economic elites (the *de facto* alliance between political capital and economic resourcefulness as a defining feature of Chinese political economy as discussed in more depth and detail in the main body) have accumulated their opulent wealth and enjoyed a privileged status in the Chinese society thanks to the authoritarian governmentality in China.

In other words, the Chinese elites are the direct beneficiaries and firm supporters of the existing political and socio-economic establishments in China, no matter how unfair and controversial the system might seem to be to the vast majority of ordinary Chinese people and critics outside the country. Their wealth, power and status are critically dependent on it. Democratization would inevitably threaten their politically sensitive interests and, maybe, even invite unwanted scrutiny and subsequent reckoning from the Chinese general public. These political-economic elites literally fear to the core to be incriminated for the morally and legally unacceptable activities they have engaged in to become filthy rich by taking advantage of the seriously flawed and deeply corrupt institutions in China. A large number of Chinese elites (notably corrupt government officials in key positions and their close associates) have converted into foreign nationalities and transferred their assets abroad for personal safety considerations (Wong and Zhai, 2023).

Therefore, the Chinese political-economic elites do have their self-serving agenda and calculus to resist, if not outright reject, Western-style, law-based democratic governance. In a similar vein, the resistance to political reform in China is also quite strong because the so-called "*vested interests* (jide liyi: 既得利益)" are simply too great and important to be suddenly abandoned in order to create a fairer, more transparent and more egalitarian system for the majority of the Chinese populations. The instinctual self-preservation of the Chinese political-economic elites is an unmistakable force that holds back any substantial attempts to imitate and emulate Western-style democracy and authentic rule of law (not rule by law) in China.

China does seem to have an ambivalent future. Potential violent and chaotic regime change in China is definitely not a strategically desirable solution to the overflowing *China Threat Theory* due to the country's sheer magnitude and weight in the existing global system. A sudden regime collapse in China will likely unleash unthinkable chaos and tragedies in this vast country and beyond, which is the last thing the Chinese people and the rest of the world expect and want to see. The fate of China and the fate of the CCP are so much intertwined with each other, severing the ruling party from the nation-state is extremely difficult and highly destabilizing. I previously referred this peculiar fact as the "*inseparability between the CCP and China*" or the "*integration of the CCP with the Chinese state*" by political deliberation.

The China Threat Theory is indeed a double-edged sword in many senses. It can seriously damage China's reputation and credibility, and, at the same time, it can also provoke the deep sense of pride and dignity shared by numerous ethnic Chinese worldwide and unite them to defend China's strategic position collectively. In short, *The China Threat Theory* is very likely to elicit defensive backlash towards the propagators of this disrespectful and derogatory political narrative from many passionate Chinese patriots and nationalists. I tend to believe that it is rather unlikely for *The China Threat Theory* to achieve its implicit objective to

disintegrate China from within by destroying the country's credibility and reputation. Yet, quite the opposite, it compels the Chinese populations to seek solidarity and unity among themselves to dispel external hostilities and containment with their collective strengths. In other words, the inflating *China Threat Theory* might not be able to weaken the popular base of the CCP in China by attacking its legitimacy and moral position as some expected.

The China Threat Theory functions almost like a form of rhetorical and ideological fuel to encourage the tightly locked and escalating Sino-US competition. Up till the current moment, the US still has more competitive advantages over China than the other way around, albeit China has been closing the gaps at a steady pace over the recent years. How durable these competitive advantages are, or, in other words, how to maintain and enhance them against the erosion of time and China's fast catching-up are among the strategic challenges for the US political leadership to effectively address with dedication, ingenuity and wisdom. Overall, *The China Threat Theory* is essentially a self-reinforcing feedback loop because more (relative) power China has gained, more realistic and convincing the *China Threat Theory* has become in the eyes of China's competitors and rivals.

To finalize my conclusions, *The China Threat Theory* is born out of a shared psychological unease and sense of strategic insecurity on the part of the US and its like-minded allies in the global Western camp due to their waning global domination. *The China Threat Theory* has regained popularity and momentum since the early 2000s due to China's dramatic accumulation of hard power in all forms, such as economic, political and military, within a fairly short period of time and the country's visibly more defiant attitudes and assertive behaviors in the international community. Nevertheless, I want to remind my audiences that a gun is a lethal weapon but not a murder weapon unless the gun is used to commit a murder. The abundant evidences, both empirical and theoretical, I have gone through do point to varied scenarios and possibilities about China's predictable future and its intricate relationships with the rest of the world, especially the US-led global West. I suppose no one can predict China's future with a hundred percent certainty, including myself, and researchers should generally refrain from making very precise and longer-term predictions because they can fail utterly. I tend to believe that China should be regarded as a real threat if one can provide definitive proof to demonstrate that the country consistently jeopardizes the legitimate national interests of other sovereignties in order to benefit itself and violates the fundamental moral and ethical principles consented in the international community, or otherwise, *The China Threat Theory* would remain to be an open debate, maybe forever more.

Limitations and potential improvements:

My PhD thesis has deliberately prioritized scope over depth because I intend to present a holistic and multifaceted overview of the hotly debated *China Threat Theory* in the context of US-China power game from multiple (cautiously chosen) angles at multiple levels. I am fully aware of the fact that my PhD thesis is not immune from flaws, defects and limitations. Nevertheless, my thesis has strictly followed systematic, methodological procedures and research ethics in order to ensure its legitimacy, validity and credibility.

Due to the extreme complexity of *The China Threat Theory*, I could only explore a number of selective aspects of the research subject and construct relevant arguments within the limited length. For example, the heavily regulated and risk-ridden Chinese financial system should be an important and very topical subject matter that deserves more intellectual attention. However, I did not delve deep into it, despite the fact that the Chinese financial system is literally a hot-spot of all kinds of institutional deformities and distortions according to the mainstream political economists. It, literally, hubs tremendous risks that could bankrupt and paralyze the entire Chinese economy and, subsequently, undermine the Communist political monopoly once and for all.

Instead, the arguments I have presented in the main body of my thesis only intended to highlight two facts: **A**) finance is notoriously parasitical (*in the sense that it does not really contribute to the so-called “real economy (shiti jinji: 实体经济)”*, hence, being economically unproductive) and dangerously greedy (almost everywhere, not exclusively in China); and **B**) the financial infrastructures channeling the movements of capitals and investments around the world have already become another bloody battlefield for a new round of global power game to take place. I did not excavate deep into the nasty universe of financial speculations because I am neither particularly knowledgeable about the tricky financial operations nor it will contribute further to the critical reflections on *The China Threat Theory*, other than the fact that it is a major source of systemic risks and crises.

I strived to be fair and neutral when dealing with a research subject as contentious as *The China Threat Theory*. I agree that China’s own voices should be heard and respected. Therefore, I have given them a fair representation in my thesis. I have included many viewpoints and arguments from well-established and pro-government media in China, such as Xinhua Net, Global Times and People’s Daily. Nevertheless, I want to remind my audiences that they do not necessarily reflect the whole truth and more critical public opinions sometimes. In China, not many people have the courage and proper channels to openly express themselves because, by nature, China is an authoritarian state with extremely low political tolerance towards dissidents, to say the least.

I also want to point out that a huge amount of data and information from Chinese-language sources are highly repetitive (for whatever reasons) and apparently propagandist in nature, unfortunately. Therefore, I have ruled them out. Those I did include in my thesis are mostly from well-established, state-approved media outlets and publishers. The data and information they provide are more credible and easier for me to factcheck and verify against international benchmarks. In addition, I have collected and presented a significant number of quotations from publicly available government reports and documents, as well as public speeches made by high-ranking Chinese government officials, to better support my own arguments and reflections. Another limitation is the inaccessibility of certain high-quality yet sensitive data, such as classified intelligence and transcripts of close-door meetings.

Last but not least, China is a very idiosyncratic nation-state in many senses. Therefore, the conclusions I have reached are not widely generalizable if taking out of their specific contexts. If my PhD thesis is regarded as an elaborate single case study, I would generally accept it due to the fact that my entire research project is very country-specific. It focuses

exclusively on China-related issues and debates. However, the *Strategic Filtration Model I* have devised and presented could be a potentially useful tool for other similar analyses in the fields of political economy and IR. I am confident that the model itself has a significantly higher level of generalizability in comparison with my conclusions.

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