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GRAND STRATEGY IN US AND CHINA FOREIGN POLICY: SEEKING WORLD HEGEMONY OR PROMOTING GLOBAL HARMONY?

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Abstract. The dawn of the 21st century has witnessed seismic shifts in the dynamics of international relations and the global strategies of leading powers. The US and China, as major players in the world arena, confront both shared threats and unique national characteristics for the first time in history. Discussion of a great power's foreign policy typically involves an exploration of its grand strategy. However, interpretations of this concept can vary significantly, influenced by each nation's political philosophy, historical trajectory, and geopolitical priorities. This article aims to elucidate the stable theoretical underpinnings of the US and Chinese global policies, to compare their ultimate aspirations within their grand strategies and the way they seek to achieve these goals, to examine their mutual perceptions in global politics, often marked by misunderstandings, to assess whether the American model of world hegemony and the Chinese vision of global harmony are compatible within contemporary international relations.

Keywords: historical background; foreign policy; grand strategy; world hegemony; global harmony; global order.

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ГЛОБАЛЬНАЯ СТРАТЕГИЯ ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКИ США И КИТАЯ: В ПОИСКАХ МИРОВОЙ ГЕГЕМОНИИ ИЛИ ГЛОБАЛЬНОЙ ГАРМОНИИ?

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Аннотация. В начале XXI в. произошли тектонические сдвиги в структуре международных отношений и мировой политике великих держав. Два гиганта мирового порядка – США и Китай – впервые в истории столкнулись как с общими угрозами, так и с индивидуальными особенностями друг друга. Изучение внешней политики великого государства, как правило, сопровождается анализом его глобальной стратегии. Значение и содержание этого термина могут быть совершенно разными в зависимости от политической философии, исторического опыта и геополитического кода конкретной страны. США и Китай имеют богатую историю и обширную политическую практику, которые влияют на формирование их внешней политики. Целями статьи являются описание устойчивой теоретической основы глобальной политики США и Китая, сравнение конечных (идеалистических) целей американской и китайской глобальных стратегий, а также методов их реализации, оценка восприятия государствами друг друга в мировой политике. Кроме того, в настоящей статье анализируется соответствие американской модели мировой гегемонии и китайской модели мировой гармонии и обобщаются перспективы взаимодействия США и Китая в контексте современных международных отношений.

Ключевые слова: исторический фон; внешняя политика; глобальная стратегия; мировая гегемония; глобальная гармония; мировой порядок.

The lack of an overall strategy makes one a prisoner of events.

H. Kissinger

Introduction

Today, the geopolitical landscape is largely shaped by the US and China. These great powers endeavour to execute distinct grand strategies in their foreign policies, deeply rooted in their national histories, cultures, and mentalities. The primary aim of these grand strategies is to mould the world according to an ideal vision that serves their national interests.

This article offers a comparative analysis of the historical conditions that have shaped American and Chinese grand strategies, identifies their theoretical bases and ideal objectives, and explores the nuances of their practical application. The first two sections analyse the historical contexts that have influenced each nation's grand strategy, emphasising that a profound understanding of history is essential for comprehending a state's grand strategy, as it is inherently tied to its historical experiences [1, p. 13;

2, p. 14]. The third section compares the ideal objectives of these grand strategies, highlighting both similarities and differences. Ultimately, we will address whether the US and China can coexist as global leaders in the 21st century. This research draws on the works of ancient and modern thinkers from Europe, US, and China, including Confucius [3], Laozi [4], Sun-Tzu [5], C. von Clausewitz [6], N. Machiavelli [7], H. Kissinger [8], and contemporary scholars and statesmen such as S. Chen [9], J. Mearsheimer [10], H. Brands [11], C. Layne [12], Xi Jinping [13; 14].

The research findings hold significance both now and in the future, giving the enduring nature of the study subjects, as shaped by the long-standing political cultures of the US and China. These cultures have developed over centuries and are resistant to change due to historical events.

Historical foundations of China's grand strategy: the quest for great harmony

China's grand strategy is steeped in history, tracing back to ancient times with roots in both religious-philosophical and socio-political dimensions. Influenced significantly by Confucianism and Taoism, these philosophies continue to shape the nation's spiritual ethos.

Central to Confucian thought are the concepts of *da-tong* 'great harmony' and *he* 'harmony', 'peace', 'accord', which dictate that a ruler's paramount objective should be to establish just governance, transcending domestic affairs to encompass external relations as well. Confucius articulated this vision stating that the true ruler

considers nothing to be external. This philosophy also presupposes a hierarchical structure in relationships, where subordinates trust and follow their superiors, who in return must respect and care for their subordinates' needs. Confucius eloquently captured this ideal: "The gentleman aims at harmony, and not at uniformity; the small man does the opposite" [3, p. 111].

This vision was further enriched by Laozi, founder of Taoism, who posited: "All beings carry yin and yang within themselves and together create great harmony"¹ [4, p. 58]. Historically and presently, China por-

¹Hereinafter translated by us. – I. K.

trays the pursuit of great harmony as a cornerstone of both its domestic and international policy agendas. This approach suggests a model of leadership that should be voluntarily accepted by the majority, thereby avoiding significant or widespread international discord.

The term *Zhongguo*, the ancient name of China translated as “Middle Kingdom”, reflects the socio-political aspect of its grand strategy. It underscores China’s unique geographical and historical position as a civilisational hub surrounded by what were considered barbarian states. This centrality historically positioned China as a cultural magnet, drawing neighbouring peoples into its orbit as willing vassals. The arrival of foreign trade missions, bearing what was perceived as tributes to the emperor, did little to pique Chinese interest due to the country’s self-sufficiency and advanced state of arts and crafts [15, p. 357]. This sentiment was famously echoed by Kang Yuwei, a reformist of the imperial court in 1898, who noted: “Everything that the West is proud of existed with us hundreds and thousands of years ago” [16, p. 605].

Historical roots of American grand strategy: how the US came to believe in itself

In contrast, the grand strategy of the US was formulated much more recently, emerging prominently in the mid-20th century. However, its theoretical underpinnings can be traced back to the 18th century, intertwining with Protestant values and the ideals of ancient Rome. Data of observations evidence that US’ founding figures initially doubted the nation’s longevity. Yet, by the 19th century, a more optimistic view prevailed, fostering a belief in US’ divine election and historical mission – elements central to American messianism. This belief underpinned the notion that American hegemony served a global good, divinely sanctioned [18, p. 28–33].

Key 19th-century documents such as the Monroe doctrine (1823) and Manifest destiny (1845) outlined regional strategies but lacked a global perspective, instead justifying American leadership in the Western hemisphere. A truly global grand strategy for the US emerged post-World War I, encapsulated in W. Wilson’s fourteen points and the League of Nations initiative. The term “grand strategy” gained prominence in English discourse post-World War I as American strategic thinking expanded in scope [2, p. 7; 11, p. 2]. Following a period of isolationism, World War II marked a pivotal shift. Some European thinkers, particularly British,

From this historical narrative of self-sufficiency China’s confidence in its capabilities and virtues, forming the bedrock of its grand strategy that dates back approximately 3000 years springs. The foundational principles of China’s governance, rooted in Confucian and Taoist philosophies, have remained largely unchanged over millennia. The Cultural revolution (1966–1976) marked a brief deviation, later officially acknowledged as a misstep. China’s foreign policy continues to be influenced by its deep-rooted traditions [17]. Despite its modern communist facade, China essentially represents another iteration of *Zhongguo*. This historical self-sufficiency has enabled China to effectively disseminate its language and culture globally, epitomised by the establishment of Confucius institutes. These institutions bear the name of the ancient philosopher whose teachings still resonate strongly in Chinese governance. President Xi Jinping frequently incorporates quotations from ancient philosophers, historians, and writers into his speeches, underscoring their enduring relevance.

believed that earlier American engagement could have prevented the war. During the Cold War, American values were increasingly seen as a universal beacon, an idea first articulated by J. Winthrop’s “City upon a hill” in the 17th century and revisited in post-war analyses of Germany [19, p. 163–164].

The Marshall plan supported the creation of a prosperous Western Europe, intended to entice socialist states towards capitalism. The metaphor of a city on a hill, later employed by J. F. Kennedy and R. Reagan in their speeches, encapsulated this vision of exemplary leadership.

During the Cold War, the grand strategies of the US and the USSR shared several elements, focusing on ideology, military capacity, political governance (democratic or non-democratic), and economic organisation (planned or market economy). Post-Cold War, American policymakers hesitated to embrace new strategic frameworks [20, p. 347], preferring traditional models despite significant changes in the international arena, notably with China assuming the role of principal challenger. Inspired by Taoist principles (like the sky does not fight, but knows how to win) Chinese strategists aim to enhance the global appeal of Chinese civilisation.

Contemporary approaches, similarities, and dissimilarities in grand strategies of the US and China

The clash between US hegemony and Chinese leadership highlights differing concepts in their grand strategies. Central to Chinese foreign policy is the principle of great harmony, emphasising mutual interests and conflict avoidance, akin to managing a large family. The veneration of ancestors is deeply rooted in Chinese

tradition. Before the “one-child policy” took hold, large families were the norm, with three or even four generations sharing a roof and cultivating a harmonious coexistence. This emphasis on great harmony became a cornerstone of daily life, supported by the tenets of traditional philosophy.

This concept extends beyond domestic life, influencing China's approach to international relations. The world is envisioned as one vast family, where all members must co-exist peacefully. Mutual respect, reciprocal benefit, and a willingness to compromise are seen as keys to shared prosperity. Recognising and delicately handling the vulnerabilities of others is paramount. However, great harmony doesn't preclude leadership. Within a family, the most senior and experienced member often takes the lead. This leadership is not based on brute force, but on contributions to the family's well-being, wisdom accumulated over a lifetime, and the power of a positive example. As one of the world's oldest civilisations, alongside India, to have continuously maintained statehood and its traditions, China sees itself as a potential leader in this global family, naturally reflecting the concept of great harmony in the international arena. This perspective is frequently articulated by president Xi Jinping, who often reminds international audiences that the whole world is one family [9; 13, p. 369]. In a notable 2017 speech at the UN Headquarters, he reiterated: "There is only one planet Earth in the Universe, and all mankind shares one home" [14, p. 512–528].

A distinctive aspect of China's grand strategy is its aversion to the concept of hegemony. In Chinese, the world "hegemony" comprises two characters: one connoting 'tyrant' or 'despot', and the other meaning 'power'. This term is traditionally contrasted with legitimate governance. H. Kissinger highlighted that during the signing of the 1972 Shanghai communiqué, the clause concerning hegemony was pivotal [8, p. 295]. It declared that neither party would pursue hegemony in the Asia – Pacific region. While the US interpreted this as China's renunciation of hegemony, for China, it signified a rejection of the concept itself. Chinese economist D. Daokui Li remarked that aspirations for hegemony, as understood in the Western context, are alien to the

Confucian tradition [21, p. 68]. Intriguingly, China's dismissal of hegemony is largely influenced by the negative connotations embedded in its linguistic expression, despite not rejecting the notion of global leadership, akin to the natural leadership within a large family.

In contrast, hegemony is a cornerstone of US grand strategy. During the Cold War, references to global hegemony were scarce due to the formidable presence of the USSR, the focus was instead on deterrence. The international system then hinged on a balance between two superpowers, each acknowledging its sphere of influence and adhering to both explicit and tacit norms in dealing with its rival. Notions of world hegemony and global leadership after 1991 proliferated in American political discourse. The Cold War triumph was perceived as a historical watershed, setting the course for future US policy. As the unipolar moment dawned in international relations [22], messianic ideologies gained prominence [23; 24]. The pursuit of American hegemony was envisaged alongside the dissemination of Western values such as political pluralism, market freedom, and secularism. However, caution was advised by some scholars, including H. Kissinger, who noted America's historical unpreparedness for these new international dynamics, as it continued to see itself as safe between two oceans, and thus protected from conflict and capable of building peace on democratic principles [25, p. 9]. Others argued that a hegemonic grand strategy could be self-defeating and likely to incite geopolitical resistance [12, p. 5].

Hence, hegemony has remained central to American grand strategy into the 1990s and beyond. The global stage is viewed as a battleground where a hegemon sets and enforces the rules, maintaining order. According to J. Mearsheimer, the ultimate goal for any major power is to achieve unrivalled hegemony [10, p. 2]. The enhancement of a state's international standing is often perceived as an attempt to assert its hegemony.

Ideology and commerce in US and Chinese soft power and grand strategies

US soft power is deeply entwined with messianic ideologies, accompanied by a distinctive ideological flair. This messianism is not novel in US grand strategy but is a continuation of a tradition that dates back to the era of Western colonialism. Nations such as Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Belgium, and later Germany and Italy, were convinced of their divine mission in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. They often imposed their values through coercive means. However, the disintegration of the colonial system revealed that soft power elements – language, education, and trade relations – had deeper and more enduring impacts. In contrast, symbols of hard power, including statues of colonial leaders, were often vigorously eradicated.

The primary hazard of employing hard power is that imposing a universal value can lead to misunderstandings or outright rejection of other values, perceived as barbaric or incorrect. There exists a misguided belief that the ends justify the means and that the descendants of those deemed barbarians will be thankful for these harsh lessons.

Post-World War II, the US successfully "civilised" former adversaries Germany and Japan under extraordinary conditions, reinforcing the notion that hard power could instil certain values. This belief influenced the later artificial revolution theory [26]. However, this messianic idealism soon clashed with realism, another cornerstone of the US political philosophy. Historically, Western thinkers connection between the geographical

location of the nation and its political system, laws, customs, and traditions. Scholars such as Aristotle in tractate "Politics", C. L. Montesquieu in work "On the spirit of laws", and J. Bodin in research "Method for the easy knowledge of history" have argued against the feasibility of an universal value system. In the post-war era, G. F. Kennan contended that Western institutions might be inappropriate for people living under different climatic and societal conditions. He warned that the US would achieve little by treating other nations with emotional disdain [27, p. 135, 147]. His views were echoed by H. Morgenthau, a proponent of pragmatic foreign policy [28].

The dissolution of the USSR and the socialist bloc significantly amplified US messianism, particularly evident throughout the 1990s. Despite S. Huntington's warnings about the potential for clashes of civilisations at cultural fault lines [29], this period saw persistent attempts to "civilise" nations such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya using hard power – efforts which ultimately failed. Historian N. Ferguson has critiqued this approach, stating: "We are making a big mistake if we think there is one

universal model of Western democracy that absolutely everybody is going to adopt" [21, p. 56].

China's grand strategy, guided by the principle of *datong*, employs economic, trade, financial, and cultural methods that collectively termed "soft power" by J. Nye [30]. This approach extends China's influence not only to rapidly developing states but also to regions often overlooked by Western corporations. Such engagement is perceived as fostering harmonious relations, aligned with the vision that the whole world is one family. Concurrently, China enhances its global stature and economic footprint with minimal emphasis on ideological propagation. In contrast, although the US invests significantly in international development, it frequently promotes specific ideological values, unlike China, which adheres to Laozi's maxim: "If you do not despise the people they will despise you" [4, p. 88]. By respecting or remaining neutral towards local political systems and coupling this stance with effective economic policies, China showcases the merits of its civilisation and gains strategic advantages in regions where governance may not meet US democratic standards.

Enemies, partners, friends: how much does hard power matter?

Historically, China has been less inclined than other major powers to utilise military force in its foreign affairs, particularly beyond its immediate borders and neighbourhood. Predominantly, Chinese conflicts have been internal, with rare exceptions such as during the Qing Dynasty in the 18th century when it expanded into Muslim-populated western territories.

The classical rejection of war as a political tool is evident in the teachings of Chinese military strategist Sun-Tzu. His seminal work "The art of war", advocates that war is inherently destructive for both victor and vanquished, draining the state's resources and weakening its power. Therefore, avoiding direct conflict is paramount. The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting: "The best way to fight a war is by disrupting the enemy's plans. In the second place comes patching up his alliances, and in the next to defeat his forces" [5, p. 49]. This philosophy is echoed in various Chinese stratagems that promote indirect engagement and strategic patience – principles like *watch the fires burning across the river* and *wait at leisure while the enemy labours*. Additionally, Taoist philosophy, which greatly influences Chinese strategic thought, prioritises soft power, likening supreme virtue to water: "Water benefits all beings and fights no one" [4, p. 24]. In contemporary terms, China's Belt and road initiative appears to embody these ancient philosophies, though global opinions vary on whether it truly fosters global harmony.

A distinctive aspect of China's grand strategy is its apparent lack of an external enemy in its foreign policy discourse. Chinese policy documents rarely identify

any state as a permanent threat to national security, eschewing the concept of ideological adversaries on a global scale, except in specific regional conflicts such as those near its borders with India or Vietnam. This contrasts sharply with the US, which, shielded by its geographical isolation, never experienced a large-scale invasion and enjoyed the luxury of time to build its domestic power base. Surrounded historically by numerous powerful and potentially hostile neighbours, China has instead learned to cultivate a network of friendly relations [31, p. 240], underpinned by the belief that great harmony precludes the existence of enemies within the family. All issues, according to this philosophy, should be resolved through discussion and compromise.

This Chinese approach to international relations might resonate with the US, which has adhered to A. Lincoln's maxim that a house divided against itself cannot stand.

In terms of alliances, China has not maintained traditional partnerships in its foreign policy. While sharing civilisational values with Korea, Vietnam, and Japan, these relationships do not imply exclusivity. Remarkably, during the Cold War, China shifted from a close alliance with the USSR under J. Stalin to a united front with the US, Japan, and Western Europe in the 1980s. Deng Xiaoping articulated this strategy succinctly: "Chinese foreign policy is based on the principle of self-reliance and independence... China does not play either the Soviet or the American card. It does not allow others to play the Chinese card either" [32, p. 59].

The role of hard power in the US grand strategy is also critical. Western civilisation, influenced by political

realism as depicted by thinkers like N. Machiavelli and C. von Clausewitz, traditionally views war as a natural extension of politics. Unlike Chinese philosophy which extols passivity, Western theory often stresses proactive offensive actions [6, p. 45; 7, p. 47–55]. The concept of an external enemy has been a staple in the US national defense strategies, sometimes serving as a pretext for the deployment of hard power. Over various periods, perceived threats such as world communism, Islamic terrorism, and the rise of powers like China and Russia have been portrayed as formidable adversaries. The absence of such a clear threat post-1991 led to a strategic crisis in the US, leaving it without a “North Star” in an unpredictable global landscape [1, p. 33; 11, p. 195; 20, p. 6]. Conversely, Western Europe, particularly the UK, has traditionally played the role of a steadfast ally. This special relationship has been formalised through participation in various international structures, primarily political and military in nature.

During the Cold War, the grand strategies of the USSR and the US displayed striking similarities: both were marked by messianism, a belief in the universality of certain values, the identification of an external enemy, and a realistic approach to warfare. Consequently, the US found its rivalry with the USSR more straightforward and comprehensible than its current nuanced soft confrontation with China. The distinctiveness of today’s situation lies in the fact that China’s grand strategy does not mirror either American or Soviet models. To navigate this effectively, the US must reengage with both global and national historical studies, moving away from an ahistorical stance [33, p. 4]. Sun-Tzu’s wisdom underscores this point: victory comes from knowing both oneself and one’s adversary. Knowing only oneself results in uncertain outcomes, while ignorance of both parties ensures defeat [5, p. 51]. This highlights the importance of a thorough exploration of both US and Chinese histories and grand strategies.

Is there common ground?

The development of grand strategies in the US and China occurred under different historical circumstances and conditions, leading to notable differences yet also revealing underlying similarities. Perhaps this is because the basic hopes, fears, and aspirations of humanity have remained largely constant over millennia.

Firstly, both nations aspire to global leadership, though not necessarily a shared one. Their political and philosophical frameworks suggest that having a definitive leader enhances system stability and security.

Secondly, both countries emphasise the importance of economics, investment, and trade as pillars of national power. This necessitates an active international policy and adept diplomacy that considers other nations’ interests and concerns. Economic fluctuations anywhere in the world can either strengthen or weaken a nation’s influence, explaining the fierce competition and mutual recriminations between the two countries on these fronts.

Thirdly, both the US and China are highly sensitive to military advancements by other major powers, viewing them as challenges that warrant a robust response. This often leads to military build-ups or exercises that are largely demonstrative. Similar reactions occur in response to sensitive political issues, such as those involving Taiwan.

Another shared aspect of their grand strategies is their active involvement in international organisations, through which they seek to augment and legitimise their global influence [34, p. 242; 35, p. 101–104]. The institutionalisation of global power began with the US post-World War II when it emerged as the wealthiest and most powerful nation. In the 21st century, China has followed suit, initially by establishing regional entities like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Besides, China has increased its investment and influence in long-established international organisations. The escalating tensions between China and the US within the UN, WTO, WHO and similar bodies underscore their intense competition for control over global institutions.

Conclusions

The grand strategies of the US and China have evolved under distinct historical circumstances and reflect the unique characteristics of two different civilisations – Confucian and Western – as categorised by S. Huntington. The theoretical underpinnings of their foreign policy behaviours have been shaped over centuries, embodying divergent worldviews. China’s grand strategy adheres to ancient philosophical principles, prioritising great harmony and the use of soft power while eschewing hard power and the concept of an external enemy. It views the world as a family, which should be led by its eldest and most experienced member.

In contrast, the American grand strategy emerged in the 20th century, an era dominated by hard power. The world wars accentuated the focus on external enemies in its foreign policy, and the collapse of the USSR revitalised messianic notions. Today, US strategy is a complex mix of political realism and messianism, employing both hard and soft power and leveraging the notion of external threats to pursue its ultimate aim of global hegemony.

The likelihood of the US and China sharing global leadership remains uncertain. Attempts by the US to propose a model of joint governance (termed “bige-

mony”) have proven unsuccessful. The concept of Chimerica, introduced by N. Ferguson and M. Schularick in late 2006 and later promoted by Z. Brzezinski and H. Kissinger, has failed to materialise beyond theoretical discussions [36, p. 12]. While China rejects the notion of hegemony, which the US frequently incorporates into its strategic planning, this discrepancy appears to be more than just linguistic. Both nations inherently understand and pursue global leadership, though historically they have viewed it as a role that is challenging to share effectively.

At first glance, the US and China appear too dissimilar to draw any definitive conclusions about the future of the global order. China continues to embrace a broad concept of strategic partnership, avoiding traditional American strategic paradigms such as hegemony, special relationships, and external enemies. A short-term alliance between them seems feasible only under extraordinary circumstances that pose a common threat to their diverse values and vital interests.

The 21st century is shaping up to be an era dominated by a competition for soft power between the US and China. This rivalry is not just about economic or military might, but it is a profound contest for the hearts and minds across the globe. The US, which had a strong

position in the 1990s, saw its advantage diminish in the 2000s due to its own missteps and China’s rising achievements. In this context, the ability to engage respectfully with other civilisations, acknowledging their ancient traditions and governance structures, becomes crucial in any major power’s grand strategy. This also necessitates a reevaluation of the concept of an external enemy.

The question of whether the US will adapt its political strategies in response to global competition with China could be decisive for the future world order. Meanwhile, China, despite its increasing influence, struggles to attract people from diverse cultural backgrounds due to its conservative and traditional nature – a double-edged sword in its rivalry with the US.

The future remains uncertain: will we see the rise of a single global hegemon, or will we achieve a harmonious balance of states? Could China’s pursuit of great harmony unexpectedly usher in global hegemony? Alternatively, might the American pursuit of global hegemony lead us towards greater harmony? The answers are still unfolding, leaving room for optimism. Although the American eagle and tails just like the Chinese *yin* and *yang* represent diametrically opposed forces, they are integral to a unified whole that derives meaning from its diversity.

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