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Securitization of US-CHINA Relations: A Catalyst for Confrontation

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Abstract

Securitization theory, an emerging perspective in the contemporary international system where states view their relations with other states through this theoretical framework. This theory explains how one state shape a non-security issue into a security issue. The United States for the past few years has been portraying China as an existential threat to its vital national interest and the interests of the global community at large. This threat perception and cold war mentality have been portrayed at all levels and in every discourse, with some intellectuals trying to link this to the ‘Thucydides Trap’. The study uses qualitative research methodology, relying on secondary data from different articles, book journals, interview transcripts, and other important sources. Discourse analysis has been used to analyze secondary data. The purpose of this paper is to understand and comprehend how this relationship has been securitized, evolving from engagement to confrontation. The study also seeks to determine whether such construction of China’s image is empirically justifiable or is merely based on rhetoric and propaganda to contain its rise. Furthermore, it explores how the potential of securitization can increase the intensity of already deteriorating relations between the US and China toward confrontation. To sum up, the importance of securitization and its impact on the dynamics between the two nations has been thoroughly discussed.

Keywords: bilateral relations, confrontation, securitization, security issues, thucydides trap

Introduction

The relationship between the United States and China has been marked by a combination of collaboration and competition since the conclusion of the Cold War in the early 1990s. Both nations have strengthened their economic relations via substantial trade and investment, but disagreements over intellectual property rights and trade imbalances have put pressure on their competitiveness. Even if there have been occasions of military cooperation,

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there are also conflicts in places like the South China Sea. Human rights ideologies continue to divide people, while worries about cyber security and intellectual property theft temper technological cooperation. The intricate relationship between the two countries is defined by this careful balancing. Despite the presence of all these issue areas the relationship between US and China somehow represented an approach towards cooperation and competition since the end of Cold War in early 1990s. The United States pursued its ideological foreign policy of remaking the world in its image even after the Cold War ended and it emerged victorious in the last ideological conflict without facing any significant opposition. The underlying ideas in this process were the promotion of democracy, capitalism, and greater membership for international organizations (Taureck, [2006](#)). With this ideological mindset, the United States started its “engagement policy” towards China with the hope that more cooperation would help China to open up to the world and embrace a capitalist economy. The rationale behind this was that more economic development would lead to democratization, and China would eventually become a responsible democratic country. According to various scholars, the pursuit of this ideological foreign policy has contributed to the rise of China and consequently the decline of the United States of America’s global dominance. America should have adopted a pragmatic foreign policy based on issues important to the national security of its country; on the contrary, it pursued an ideological foreign policy that led to many undesirable outcomes, like the promotion of democracy in the Middle East and elsewhere (Baldwin, [1997](#)).

The engagement policy of the United States greatly benefited China as it went from a poor agricultural country to a complex industrialized society producing almost all-important products with international reach. Over the years, from its opening up to the world market, China has grown enormously and become one of the most powerful political, economic and military power. The most important part is that China had never resorted to war during its rise, and the rise is almost completely peaceful with very little or minor conflicts (US-China Economic, and Security Review Commission, [2019](#)).

The significant rise of China within a very short span of time ignited fear and mistrust in the bilateral relations. The perception of China as a responsible world player changed towards a “strategic competitor” at best,

and an “existential threat” at worst. United States now considers China as an existential threat to its survival and the survival of the international system which is based on American principles. The change from positive engagement towards an existential threat is not based on empirical evidence; rather, it shows the subjective construction of threat so that the rise of China can be checked by employing extraordinary measures like a trade war and actual military standoff in case China tries to take over Taiwan by force and undermine the international rule-based system. The Securitization of economic, political, and military relations may further deteriorate the tense relations and increase the possibility of further escalation (Nyman, [2018](#)). A successful handling of the situation will be to de-securitize areas where there is a possibility of cooperation like economic interdependence, hence facilitating an environment of peaceful coexistence from which both countries can equally benefit.

Securitization is the process through which threats are created through discourse so that extraordinary measures against that threat can be justified. As the US labels China as an existential threat to international order, the US tries to justify it by portraying China’s negative side to the international system. The securitization theory doesn’t rule out the possibility of conflict or cooperation; rather, it presumes that both scenarios are possible. Further securitization of issues like economic, political, technological, and cultural relations through the prism of security may worsen the situation (Holbraad & Pedersen, [2012](#)).

Problem Statement

The Securitization of bilateral relations is perceived as nontraditional security issues. As China's economic and military power continues to rise, the United States has increasingly viewed China as a strategic competitor and a potential threat to its national security interests. To address these concerns, the US has adopted a policy of securitizing its bilateral relations with China, framing them in terms of national security and treating them as a potential source of conflict. However, this approach has been met with criticism from some who argue that it could lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of conflict and undermine important economic and diplomatic ties between the two countries. Therefore, the study will thoroughly explore the effectiveness and potential consequences of the US securitizing its bilateral relations with China, and examine alternative approaches to managing this complex relationship that balance national security concerns with the need

for economic and diplomatic cooperation. This study will also give a detailed understanding of the process of Securitization and what would be the consequences of labeling something as an existential threat. Furthermore, it provides an overall analysis of the different issues in bilateral relations and to some extent try to give solutions for diffusing a possible confrontation.

Research Question

- What is the securitized strategy of US?
- How US is securitizing its relations with China?
- What is the application of Securitization theory in issues of power politics?
- Is the perceived Chinese threat based on empirical evidence, or is it primarily rhetoric aimed at containing China's rise?

Research Objectives

- To analyze the securitized strategy of the US
- How is the United States employing securitization concerning China?
- This study aims to understand the application of Securitization theory in issues of power politics
- To analyze whether the Chinese threat is based on empirical evidences or just a rhetoric aimed at containing China's rise.

Significance

This paper provides an in-depth understanding of securitization and the consequences of labeling it as an existential threat. Furthermore, it provides an overall analysis of different issues in bilateral relations among United States and China. To some extent, it attempts to provide solutions for diffusing possible confrontation. This study also contributes to the literature regarding the issues between US and China, which will be helpful to better understand the relations between these two major powers.

Literature Review

A large body of literature on US-China relations has looked at various aspects of the relationship political, economic, military, technological just to name a few. However, more recent literature on bilateral relations is

dominated by the idea of US-China rivalry in a world where the status quo power is declining, and a new emerging power (China) is rising (Medeiros, [2019](#)). Therefore, according to Mearsheimer ([2018](#)), the contemporary debate around US-China is all about one important question, is war inevitable or not?

For over a generation, the United States has engaged China in the hope that it would open up to the world and transform into a responsible democratic country. Optimism increased after the disintegration of the USSR, and both politicians and intellectuals of that time supported engagement policy with China. The period of engagement brought enormous prosperity and development to China making it an important global player within a few decades. In the book, “*Engaging China*” leading Chinese specialist Thurston ([2021](#)) provides his insight on the engagement period, highlights various hard-won successes and genuine distrust that plagues the relationship.

During the last decade, the American perception of China underwent a total transformation. Several factors contributed to this change, including China becoming the world’s 2nd largest economy and its political and diplomatic influence increasing all over the world. The engagement policy has been termed “a strategic Blunder” (Mearsheimer, [2018](#)). Terms like “Strategic Competition”, “Strategic Rivalry”, “Existential Threat”, “Thucydides Trap” and “China Threat” became prominent issues. President Trump declared a “trade war” on China, accusing it of spreading the Corona Virus. The Trump administrations Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said “The relationship with China should be based on the principle of distrust and verify”. He also remarked, “*The diplomatic opening orchestrated by President Nixon nearly half a century ago had ultimately undermined American interests*”.

There is no denial of the fact that the engagement policy has led to China’s immediate rise, as the policy was based on an ideal assumption. The US’s pursuit of ideological foreign policy has had serious consequences for its credibility and status as a world power (Mearsheimer, [2018](#)). As the Chinese threat was politicized after 2010, a new literature emerged that mainly focused on the inevitability of conflict and how such conflicts could be managed. In his book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides Trap?*, Graham Allison argues that the emergence of a new power disrupts the status quo or balance of power, hence leading to conflict

with the established power. By studying 15 different cases, he concludes that in 12 out of 15 instances the situation resulted in confrontation. Hence, he says that the “Thucydides Trap” is unavoidable. However there is a flaw in this argument as none of the 15 cases he studied occurred in an environment of mutually assured destruction.

Another significant book “*After Engagement*” traces the origin of the rivalry between the two in 2010. In this book, Dleslie and Goldstein (1997) argue that aspects like China’s military modernization, its advancing technology, economic and political influence, and disputes like the South China Sea may serve as potential security concerns for the US and the international community. In recent years, a report published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation under the title “*The China threat*”, concluded that counter-intelligence and espionage efforts emanating from the government of China and the Communist Party are a grave threat to the economic well-being and democratic values of the US. Hence during this period from 2010 to 2020, we see a dense literature of research articles and books on the threat that China poses to the survival of the United States and the security of the international community. Graham Allison in his book *China Vs America: Managing the Next Clash of Civilizations* (Allison, 2017) looks at the conflict between the US and China through Huntington’s theory of the Clash of Civilizations”. Many statesmen and American politicians like Mike Pompeo look at the rise of China in an apocalyptic sense.

Overall, the literature up till now is focused on either realist interpretations like that of Marshiemer and Graham Allison who are concerned about the inevitability of war or at limited war fought for third parties, or in response to events that are not directly concerned with both the countries. On the other side of the spectrum are those liberals who think conflict is avoidable and both countries can peacefully coexist as laid down by Kevin Rudd (2022) in his book “*The Avoidable War: The dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict Between US and Xi Jinping China*. He argued that both the great powers could coexist peacefully by using a process he termed as “managed strategic competition”

It is beyond any doubt that we are living in an anarchic system with a multipolar configuration, but it does not mean that conflict is inevitable, and the state of anarchy can’t be managed. As Wendt (1992) points out that anarchy is what states make of it.

The United States has to objectively assess the situation to determine whether China is an existential threat to its survival and act accordingly. Few researchers and scholars now believe that China doesn't pose an existential threat to either the existence of the United States or the security of the international system. In an article published in *Foreign Policy*, Micheal D. Swaine argues that *China does not pose an existential threat to the United States* (Swaine, [2021](#)). Politicians, military officers, and pundits take turns to highlight this issue but according to Swaine, the threat perception is not based on empirical data. Wong and Myers ([2020](#)), under the title "*Officials Push US-China Relations toward Point of No Return*" asserted that US government officials use rhetoric and criticism against China to get support in domestic elections, according to the other it was President Trump Policies that started a fundamental strategic and ideological confrontation between the two major powers. According to Li ([2021](#)), a famous Chinese western educated scholar, China is the only country in history which gained such huge amount of power without firing a single bullet or invading another country, so he doesn't see China's rise as an existential threat to the US (Shah, [2023](#)).

While the majority of research is concerned with the causes of confrontation and the possibility of conflict, no organized piece of work has been done on the process of Securitization, the process through which threats are being created through discourse so that extraordinary measures against that threat can be justified. As China being an existential threat to the US and international order cannot be justified by empirical evidence, actors like government officials, politicians, and pundits try to frame it as such to divert resources, attention, and focus toward that specified threat. The Securitization theory doesn't rule out the possibility of conflict or cooperation, rather it presumes that both scenarios are possible. Further Securitization of the issue like seeing economic, political, technological, and cultural relations through the prism of security may exacerbate the already tense situation (Song, [2015](#)).

The American perception of China as an existential threat is not only based on China's rise but also on a long history of animosity and distrust against Asians. In his book "*Has China Won*" Mahbubani ([2020](#)) argues that the animosity against the Asian nation is rooted in 'Yellow Peril' a racist metaphor that regards East Asians as an existential threat to Western world. In "*The Myth of American Exceptionalism*" Hodgson ([2009](#)) argues

that Americans believe that their political, economic, and moral values are superior to all other nations; therefore, they should be considered universal and admired by all. This sense of exceptionalism is wrong and is a barrier to understanding issues through reason. In a nutshell, looking at the relationship through a zero-sum game and a cold war mentality will further worsen the situation; therefore, a process of de-securitization is required in areas where there is a possibility of cooperation like trade, climate change, terrorism, and nuclear nonproliferation.

Theoretical Framework

The research revolves around the importance of discourse such as, speeches and written documents to understand how a particular issue becomes a security concern and what would be the consequences and implications of such securitization. Hence, the most suitable theory to analyze and explain the security competition and its implication is securitization Theory. This theory asserts that security is a self-referential activity, which means that labeling something as a security issue transforms it into one. It includes key components such as, a securitizing actor (United States), a referent object (Survival of the State) and an existential threat (China). This theory also proposes that the issue being securitized may not necessarily be a genuine threat but is constructed as such for the interests of the securitizing actor.

Securitization theory is a framework developed in the field of International Relations to explain how certain issues are perceived as "security issues" and are therefore subject to exceptional measures, such as emergency powers or military actions. The United States has been securitizing its bilateral relations with China, especially in recent years, through a lens of strategic competition. This securitization has been largely driven by the US perception that China's rise as a global power presents a significant challenge to its strategic interests and dominance in the international system. In the case of the US-China relationship, the US is currently the dominant power in the international system, with significant economic, military, and diplomatic resources. China's rise has challenged this dominant position, and the US is seeking to use its power to maintain its strategic advantage.

For example, the US has securitized the issue of territorial disputes in the South China Sea because it sees China's actions in the region as a

challenge to its dominant position in the Asia-Pacific. The US has deployed military assets to the region and conducted freedom of navigation operations to challenge China's claims. Similarly, the US has securitized the issue of economic competition because it sees China's economic rise as a threat to its economic and strategic interests. This has led to the imposition of tariffs by the US and retaliatory measures by China, which have had significant economic implications for both countries.

Securitization theory has its roots in the Copenhagen School of academic thought proposed by Buzan (1983) in his prominent work *People, States and Fear: National Security Problems in International Relations*. Buzan published his work in 1983 in which he broadens the idea of security by including non-traditional issues, such as security problems (Taureck, 2006). By broadening the definition of security, he pointed out various types of security which include military, economic, environmental, societal and political security. He believed that military security is not the only type of security, rather it is a broader concept encompassing all the aforementioned areas.

Ole Weaver, a major contributor to this school of thought, asserted that security is a self-referential activity, emphasizing that labeling something as a security issue makes it one (Balzacq, 2011).

According to him, Securitization theory consists of a few major and inter related concepts. A Securitizing Agent is an actor who has the capability and power to frame something as a security threat. A Referent Object is something that needs to be protected, and faces an existential threat from any other entity, and the most important element in securitization theory is the relevant Audience (Floyd, 2011). Central to the securitization theory is showing the Rhetorical Structure of decision-makers when framing an issue and attempting to lift the issue above politics. This is what Securitization theorists call a Speech Act, issues are constructed as security threats by political or other actors through rhetoric to convince the relevant audience and to justify emergency measures.

According to Swaine (2021), it has become a cottage industry in Washington and in parts of Europe these days to highlight the ways in which China threatens the U.S, Western and Asian interests, politicians, military officers, and pundits. Take turns describing the dangers posed by

Beijing's expansionist and aggressive military, implacably hostile ideology, predatory economic and tech policies, and insidious overseas operations.

S President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken still depict China as a major challenge to the entire 'rule-based order' and a threat to the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism which is now, according to Biden, at an "infection point" (Swaine, [2021](#)).

Politicians and officials in the US contend that China is attempting to weaken US positions on these matters and seeks to replace them with their fictitious objectives. These circumstances may not constitute an existential danger to the United States, but U.S. politicians and officials depict them as such in order to secure partnerships with China in these sectors and justify extreme steps to restrain China's ascent (Balzacq, [2019](#)).

There is no conventional threat to the continental United States today. This clearly shows that this presentation of China as an existential threat is mainly concerned with threat construction and securitization. Emma Ashford an adjunct assistant professor at George Town University says that the last time the United States did such securitization of an issue was before the start of the war on terror which led to the disastrous Afghan war which continued for almost 20 years with significant damage to the U.S (Floyd & Croft, [2011](#)).

Securitization theory does not assume that security issues are based on empirical evidence, rather it sees the importance of securitizing actors in presenting something as a threat to the relevant audience and a successful securitization means the audience will acknowledge the presence of an existential threat to the existence of a referent object. The referent object should also be something significant that the audience believes requires protection such as, the existence of the state, freedom, economic independence, etc. (Williams, [2010](#)).

The Era of Strategic Engagement

Foreign policy of the United States has historically revolved around key concepts like 'engagement', 'appeasement', 'isolation', or protectionism. In recent decades 'engagement' has been the most commonly practiced policy in the White House. The main reason behind this policy was that the U.S. could control and modify some of the unsavory states like China and Russia only through engagement.

The policy of engagement seen as the most logical option for a state of global influence and power, by engaging with countries it was believed could bring about positive outcomes in their domestic and foreign behavior (Lieberthal, 1984). / Engagement, however, is a complex and multifaceted concept that goes beyond establishing relationships. Robert Suetting, one-time member of the Clinton administration's National Security Council, once remarked that engagement has been "overused and poorly defined by a variety of policymakers and speech writers". Given the complexity and diverse interpretations of the concept, a deeper understanding is necessary (Panda, 1997).

Engagement

It would not be wrong to say that 'engagement' is one of the most consistently used words in the American foreign policy. Many scholars believe it to be the most effective way of modifying the behavior and actions of aggressive states. However, the problem with understanding 'engagement policy' is that it has been defined by various scholars in different ways. Some scholars take a broader view, others a narrower one, and some even equate it with the policy of appeasement (Chang, 2000). For example, Gordon Craig and Alexander George in their book *Force and Statecraft* said that "*constructive engagement...is essentially a policy of appeasement*". But both of these concepts are different from each other, appeasement signifies a diplomatic policy in which a state grants political, material or territorial concession to an aggressive power to avoid any sort of confrontation. Whereas engagement is a policy of normalizing diplomatic, economic, political, cultural or military relations between two previously disengaged or partially engaged countries (Hipp, 2012). Engagement is a means to an end, a policy that wants to realize greater contact and normalization by peacefully modifying the domestic and foreign policy outlook of the targeted state by the engager state (Panda, 1997).

Building the Narrative: Rationale for Strategic Engagement

After looking at the warming up of relations between the two states in the late 1960s one could argue how two hostile and significantly opposing ideological states form an alliance or come close to each other. The relationship till 1968 was characterized by mutual distrust, hostility, and aggression, then why suddenly did both countries agree to normalize

relations with each other? This is a complex question because multiple factors were involved in bringing about the talks or initial contacts (Tucker, [1998](#)).

The US Politicians, Policymakers, and to some extent intellectuals perceived the convergence of China and U.S interests in the context of the Cold War (Chang, [2000](#)). Lieberthal and Jissi ([2012](#)) pointed out six important premises behind America's engagement with China:

1. The type of stability and progress which would come when the Chinese state meets the needs and demands of its people would be beneficial not only for the United States but to the whole Asian Region. A breakdown of the government would produce tragedy at home and problems abroad.
2. The introduction of a market-based economy would produce a larger middle class and hence would help in bringing about a liberalizing effect.
3. America had a fundamental interest in persuading China to follow the international rule-based system.
4. The U.S had a strong national interest in convincing China that they are not inherently hostile.
5. Diplomatically U.S would support 'One China Policy'
6. Maintaining peace and prosperity in Asia is in America's core interest and active US engagement in the region was vital to pursuing that goal.

Discussion and Results

Period of Securitization: From 1990s to 2010

From 1950 to 1969, the basic characteristic of relation between the U.S and China were of 'Hostility' and 'Confrontation'. The two countries virtually had no constructive engagement in any area, except the two countries fought against each other in the Vietnam War, which of course cannot be regarded as some sort of positive engagement. The two countries were hostile to each other because of their perceived image of each other. On the one hand China perceived U.S as an imperialist power who was trying to encircle China and on the other hand U.S perceived China as a Marxist-Leninist country that wanted to destroy the established free world order with communism. This period of hostility continued till the 1970s.

But the situation changed in the late 1960s and early 1970s when both countries started normalizing relations chiefly because of the geopolitical changes which were happening at that time. The two countries perception about each other changed, and the U.S leaders and policy makers started to count the benefits of engaging with China, many criticized the ‘isolation policy’, and the public also became convinced and supported the idea of engaging China. After the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1979, a series of economic reforms and good relations with the West kick started the Chinese economy under Den Xiao Peng. China helped the U.S in checking the Soviet influence in Vietnam, Cambodia and Afghanistan and most importantly the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and declaration of independence by its previous union members, China lost the strategic value as a checker of Soviet expansion.

The groundbreaking event however was the Tienanmen Square incidence of 1989 in which the PLA cracked down on the student protests and killed a few hundred people, this gave a very negative perception of China as a greatest foe of Human Rights and individual freedom.

Although China lost its strategic value as a counterweight against Soviet Union, but its economy had tremendously boomed at the point in time, there were concerns about China’s economic rise (Chang, [2000](#)). Because of this new development three different perspectives emerged regarding US-China relations;

The “Pro-incorporationist”

The scholar believed that the Americans should accommodate China and incorporate it fully into the international community (Overholt, [1994](#)). He believed that China has a unique non-expansionist culture and that its interdependence on the international system would make it more cooperative.

The “Pro-conditioning”

This perceptive assumed that China’s power projection capabilities are still very limited, in addition to her internal problems she cannot challenge the position of the U.S, therefore believed that China’s interest should be accommodated but its behavior should also be conditioned (Goldstein, [1997](#)).

The “China Threat Theory”

This theory assumed that China in the course of time will challenge the status quo and undermine the stability in Asia (Friedberg, [1993](#); Samuel, [1996](#)).

J. H.Y Chang in his article “China-US Relations: The Past as Looking Glass” argues that American congressmen mostly believed in the China Threat theory but the U.S government at different times adopted different outlooks towards China since the 1990s; therefore, we have seen many ups and downs in the US-China relations. It means the factor which plays a major role is that of “Perception”.

Towards Securitization

Although there were concerns about the rise of China and the threat it posed to U.S’s national security and the security of the world, but Securitization is a different phenomenon. According to this theory when you label something as a security issue, your interaction towards that particular object changes, the change may be positive or negative, but it definitely changes the issue from being a political one to a security one. The same thing happened in the context of US-China relations during the Trump administration. During his administration the United States started to view every aspect of the bilateral relationship (Political, economic, military and cultural) through the prism of security and considered China as a National Security threat in all these areas.

President Trump in a remark said “I view China in many different ways but right now, I am thinking about trade, but, you know, trade equals military”. This statement by the U.S president shows that he started to view non-traditional security issues through the prism of security. He believed the economic rise of China would bring about militarization of China and it would be a threat to the U.S security. The U.S politicians and policy makers were just trying to present a negative image of China and the threat it posed to the national security of America specifically, and to the security of the world in general. “China is a threat to the world in a sense because they are building a military faster than anybody and frankly, they are using US money,” remarked by Trump (Sempa, [2022](#)).

These remarks by the U.S politicians and policymakers were an effort to lay the groundwork for taking action against China and to preserve US dominance in the world by containing the rise of China, it was a sort of

speech act. During the 75th annual U.N. General Assembly meeting, mostly held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic in New York, Sept. 22, 2020. The U.S President blamed China for the outbreak of Covid-19 and even called it the “Chinese Virus”. This was also an attempt to downgrade China’s global image.

By regularly demonizing China and the Chinese Communist Party as a biggest threat to the U.S security and prosperity, U.S politicians even shaped the public opinion in support of the China threat theory. According to PEW research institute, over the past few years from 2018 onwards, the perception of China as a partner has decreased significantly and now majority of the people see China as a competitor or at worse an enemy. The reason they hated China are many but most American cited the human right issues and economy. Although these are the prominent issues but underline this change of perceptions is the state desire to contain China and maintain the status quo, a U.S lead world order (Turcsányi & Qiaoan, [2020](#)).

Figure 1

Stance on Bilateral Relation with China

Majority supports a more assertive stance on bilateral relations with China across a range of issues

% who say the U.S. should ...



% who ___ limiting Chinese students studying in the U.S.



% who say it is more important to ...



Note: Those who did not answer not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Feb. 1-7, 2021. Q20, Q50 & Q55.

“Most Americans Support Tough Stance Toward China on Human Rights, Economic Issues”

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The Implications of Securitization

The pioneer of Securitization Theory, Ole Weaver, believes that Securitization is a tradeoff. This means that by framing something as a security issue, you gain urgency, resources and probably the consent of the masses. However, there is also a downside. By perceiving an issue as a security threat, you adopt a specific mindset and consider the issue as a given, something unavoidable. It means the policies formulated afterwards will align with that specific outlook about that issue, even if it involves another state.

Keeping in line with the assumption of Securitization theorist President Trump saw U.S relationship with China through the prism of security, whether that was about economic security or technological security. He even refused to talk to the Chinese President (ChiacuBrunnstrom

Economic Impacts

The period of strategic engagement and partnership brought tremendous prosperity in China. Half a billion people were lifted out of poverty, their living conditions were improved, life expectancy increased, and above all, more than 90% of the population became literate. Among these significant changes, China's ascent to the position of the second-largest GDP country stood out, sending shockwaves through the U.S., with Americans starting to perceive their superpower status as being threatened. The volume of US-China trade has grown from a few billion dollars in the 1970s to 500 billion dollars in 2020. According to the Office of the United States Trade Representatives: Executive Office of the President China is the largest trading partner of America, accounting for 559.2% in total bilateral trade. Out of this amount, the U.S exports to China accounts for \$124 billion, and Chinese exports to the U.S almost equals to \$437 billion. So, there was \$310 billion trade deficit in the bilateral relations which the trump administration eagerly tried to minimize by imposing extra tariffs on Chinese imports. The office also says that U.S exports to China supported an estimated 758000 jobs in 2019.

However, looking at the economic relationship through the prism of national security will further exacerbate the already deteriorating relationship towards further hostility.

Figure 2
US-China Trade War



Political Impacts

With the strained relations in terms of trade and technology, the political relations also deteriorated. After a long period of engagement and consensus on many issues including Taiwan. Relations took a downward trajectory starting from the Trump administration.

Trump's alleged China for espionage, stealing of intellectual property, occupying illegal territories in the Pacific, militarizing the South China Sea, cracking down on human rights and interfering in the U.S. internal affairs. Although the majority of these accusations are based on propaganda and rhetoric. In a statement he said, "They've ripped off the United States like no one has ever done before," as he decried the way Beijing has "raided our factories" and "gutted" American industry, casting Beijing as a central foil he will run against in the remaining months of his re-election campaign.

The securitization of bilateral relations lead to unhealthy political relations. Trump even expressed reluctance to talk to the Chinese president. With this every aspect of the political relationship also became confrontational, like America started placing greater focus on Taiwan. President Biden in his recent address said they will go to the extent of using military force in order to prevent China from taking over Taiwan.

The South China Sea is also the bone of contention between the two countries. The U.S believes that China is militarizing the region and is a threat to free navigation and trade in the area China on the other hand believes some of the Islands on the South China Sea are historically part of its territory and wants to claim them. Because of the growing influence in the South China Sea of China, the U.S first introduced its policy of “Pivot to Asia” which was not much successful because of U.S entanglement in other issues.

During Trump administration, the QUAD, a new quadrilateral security alliance, was established among Australia, India, and U.S and Japan. This alliance is an attempt to counter China’s influence in the Indo-pacific region. Another alliance AUKUS was formed also to counter China, consisting of countries like Australia, United Kingdom and United States of America. While the U.S already had allies like South Korea, Vietnam, Japan, Philippines and other East Asian countries around China, it fostered more comprehensive and security-based relationship with these countries in recent years just to contain China’s rise (Rasheed, [2020](#)). China strongly opposed the actions by the U.S and called them as a threat to regional security. A Chinese diplomat termed the QUAD alliance as “Asian version of NATO” (Rasheed, [2020](#)).

Is China an Existential threat

The perception of China Threat is being exaggerated in ways that, as with the Soviet threat in the cold war, and terrorism post 9/11, are counterproductive for foreign policy strategy and distort domestic politics in dangerous ways. Before going into the details of whether China constitutes an existential threat or simple national security threat to the U.S. or the international rule-based order, we must understand what a ‘National Security’ or ‘Existential Threat’ actually is.

National security, in general, refers to the ability of a country’s government to protect its territorial integrity, sovereignty, the protection of its citizens, its economy and its important institutions. Now anything which endangers the territorial integrity, sovereignty and wellbeing of a country will constitute in a broader sense a ‘National Security Threat’.

As far as concept of ‘Existential Threat’ is concerned, it is something which threatens the very existence of a state or its population. It reflects a

more pessimistic view of a threat emanating from the history, perception and experience of country towards another which it considers as such.

In recent years, it has become a cottage industry in the west especially in the United States to present China as an existential threat and a national security challenge not only to the security of U.S, but to the world and the international rule-based system in general. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand and evaluate the validity and objectiveness of these claims and to find out whether these allegations have any objective/substantive basis or merely rhetoric and propaganda to contain China's economic and political rise.

US National Security

The conception of national security and the perceived threats to it is a subjective phenomenon. States tend to frame something as a threat to their security based on their assessment and experiences. It is not necessary that the threat outlined or perceived by an actor must be considered a threat for another actor. For example, China may be a big security threat to the U.S but countries like Pakistan, Russia and other third world countries may not consider China as a threat to their security or to the security of the world. As America is by far the most powerful country in the world both in terms of its military and economic might, it considers other countries which compete with it as some sort of security threat to its dominant position. Simply put, the U.S is a status quo power, and is reluctant to let any emerging power challenge its dominant position.

Militarily

Mr. Nabeel Hussain, a lecturer at department of Strategic Studies, National Defense University said "China is not a significant military threat to the United States, it may be threat if we took economy as a variable". Nowadays it is a common bipartisan consensus in the U.S that China's military, more proper to say, the People's Liberation Army has become more aggressive abroad and posing a threat to the United States and its allies in the Asia Pacific region. Now by following this argument we can assume two possible conclusions; first, China's military poses direct threat to the territorial security of the U.S, and second, the PLA is a major threat to the U.S allies in the Asia Pacific like Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Taiwan and others. Besides these there are many U.S military bases near the Taiwan

Strait, in the South China Sea, and in Japan, which also supposedly are in danger from the PLA.

Now come to the first assumption “China poses a direct military threat to the U.S”, this argument has no objective foundations. Although China’s military has modernized but it still significantly lags behind U.S in terms of aggregate military hardware and operational skills. U.S has far superior air force, a highly capable Navy, and a substantial nuclear arsenal compared to China. And if we compare the defense spending of both countries, we see a huge gap of more than \$500 Billion. As of 2020 the Chinese military budget is \$270 Billion with 7% increase in the current year (Kang, [2022](#)), and the recent report by the U.S government release the amount of defense spending for the FY2023 which is \$773 Billion (McCusker, [2022](#)).

In areas like Cyber War, Counter space and nuclear warfare China has improved but according to the report does not present a significant threat to the U.S and its allies. China’s military capabilities are only better suited for any combat near the Taiwan Strait, and it still lags behind the U.S even in the Taiwan Scenarios. The reports also assert that China should and must have superiority in all of the aforementioned operational areas if it wants to achieve its supposedly aggressive goals like dominating the region or invading Taiwan to merge it into the main land.

Economic threat

Mr. Nabeel Hussain argues that China poses a major economic threat to the United States, and in coming 20 to 30 years it will threatens U.S national security. He highlights the immense interdependence between the two countries in terms of trade, suggesting that China can inflict economic damage on America by blocking access to its market intentionally. This study agrees with his assumption that there is great amount of economic interdependence, but this does not mean China will humiliate or intimidate U.S through economic coercion. Because such an act would harm China more than the United States, given the U.S is a far greater market for Chinese exports than China is for the U.S.

The greater emphasis of US-China competition and rivalry, always seeing and advocating the relationship in a zero-sum game, has led to the securitization of relations between the two countries. The American politicians especially Donald Trump initiated this process of demonizing

China and representing it as a threat to the American people and the world and said the only way forward is to tackle with issue with an iron fist.

In 2010 China became the world second largest economy in terms of GDP only after the United States, Since then, China's economy has boosted on regular basis and its advancement in science and technology is overwhelming with serious advancement in cutting-edge technologies like AI, Robotics and consumer goods like smart phones, machines etc. Chinese advancement in these fields alarmed the U.S policy makers that it's economic and technological dominance is under threat. Now despite competing fairly with their Chinese counter parts the U.S policy makers are trying to paint China's rise as unfair and a security risk to the United States (Resnick, [2001](#)).

The United States confronted China on the following alleged allegations:

- China is using unfair trade practices.
- China's technology is a threat.

A Threat to the International Rule Based Order

China is in an evolving position and have not reached at a point where we can illustrate that it has completely ignored the international rule-based order (Pal, [2021](#)).

The current international order is based on liberal ideology which upholds national sovereignty, democracy, human rights, rule of law, free and fair trade, freedom of navigation, freedom of expression and determination and above all multilateralism in this globalized world.

China is a revisionist power and it is trying to change the status quo by challenging the status quo power. The Unites States, according to her looking in this way China constitute not only a threat to the United States but to the international system itself.

The United States considers China's autocratic system as a threat to the international order. The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a statement said that "China is the only country who has the power and intention to reshape international order and undermine peace and stability. Beijing's vision would move us away from the universal values that have sustained so much of the world's progress in past 75 years".

Examining each of these arguments, we see that most of them are based on rhetoric and propaganda. Since normalizing relations with U.S. China has demonstrated more tolerance and adherence to international law and practices. Although China is seen as a major state violating human rights in Xianjiang and Tibet, it has no record of human rights violations elsewhere in the world. In contrast, United States is involved in massive human right violations in Middle East and other parts of the world in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and others.

To conclude China's aims are appear predominantly economic, they want to rise as a major world economy, they want self-sufficiency, they want a better life for their people, and above all, they want a world based on equality and justice.

Conclusion

The examination of the bilateral relationship between the United States and China reveals that the period of engagement was not a strategic blunder, as some scholars have argued. While there have been criticisms, it is essential to acknowledge the significant positive impacts that engagement has had on both countries and international relations as a whole. The opening up of China ushered in a momentous era, integrating a billion people into global economic, political, and diplomatic networks. This move led to the substantial reduction of poverty for nearly 800 million Chinese individuals and transformed China into a global economic powerhouse, contributing around 20% of the world's GDP. The resulting complex manufacturing chains created jobs worldwide, enhancing economic competitiveness, and fostering growth. The bilateral trade between the two nations surged from \$4 billion to \$500 billion, generating employment opportunities and augmenting purchasing power. Moreover, China's advancement in education and healthcare has furthered its contribution to global well-being.

Contrary to prevailing narratives, an objective analysis demonstrates that China does not pose an existential threat to the United States or its allies. While concerns have emerged from China's economic rise and certain political actions, it is imperative to recognize the disproportionate emphasis on the notion of a threat. In terms of military might, the United States maintains a substantial advantage over China, ensuring a balance of power. Economically, the United States remains the preeminent global force. The

growth of China's economy does not inherently undermine the United States; rather, it contributes to the complex interdependence of the global economy. Viewing China's rise as a zero-sum game oversimplifies the intricate dynamics of a globalized world.

Politicians often exhibit a tendency to inflate perceived threats, leading to an exaggeration of China's role on the international stage. The historical oscillation in the United States' perspective towards China, from ideological hostility during the Cold War to strategic partnership and now a renewed sense of hostility, highlights the political dynamics shaping the narrative. While concerns exist regarding China's intentions, it is crucial to critically assess claims that paint China as an existential threat. The narrative of China's dominance rests on rhetorical foundations rather than factual evidence.

The securitization of the United States-China relationship has transformed public discourse and policymaking, expanding the scope of security to encompass economic, technological, and cultural dimensions. This paradigm shift has contributed to a widespread perception of China as a significant national security threat, even among the public. Such an approach has the potential to amplify tensions and distort the understanding of the true nature of the bilateral relationship. Policymakers must adopt a balanced and nuanced perspective that considers the multifaceted nature of global interactions.

In conclusion, a comprehensive examination of the United States-China bilateral relationship reveals the multifaceted dynamics at play. While engagement has yielded substantial benefits, concerns about China's rise have at times been exaggerated. The discourse surrounding China's threat, shaped by political rhetoric and securitization, warrants careful consideration. To ensure a stable and productive bilateral relationship, both countries' leaders and policymakers need to navigate these complexities with a balanced approach that prioritizes cooperation and understanding over fear and misperception.

Recommendations

This study cannot deny the fact that the world is changing in terms of global powers, therefore, the new powers are centralized, especially on the economic aspect shifting towards the Asian region, in which China and India have become two big powers. Both countries have enormous potential

in terms of economic development and innovation. Therefore, a normal political relationship between the two countries is very important for its stability and prosperity.

The United States must look at the economic, technological and other types of relationships between the two countries through the lens of normal political and diplomatic issue not something as threatening to the U.S national security and the world order. The two countries must devise a comprehensive strategy for resolving bilateral and international issues through negotiations and compromises. However, U.S should not react furiously with these situations and making policy blunders, the U.S should carefully weigh the threat posed by cutting edge Chinese technologies like 5G, it should not over react by banning the Chinese telecommunication companies all at once this will have a negative effect not only on China but also on the United States businesses because China is still significantly depended upon American parts for its manufacturing base.

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