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China's Grand Strategy in the Context of the Sino-US Strategic Rivalry

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Abstract. The study focuses on the transformation of China's grand strategy in the context of the ongoing, long-term Sino-US strategic rivalry. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the study of China's grand strategy in global politics. To date, at the international level, the relevant study has been overwhelmingly dominated by the American school and narrative based on American realism. This paper therefore conducts the relevant research from a Chinese perspective. The study explores the evolution of the US China policy and the transformation of China's grand strategy in the context of the Sino-US strategic rivalry. In particular, it demonstrates the linkage between China's grand strategy evolution and the Sino-US relations. Furthermore, it provides an analysis of the implications of China's grand strategy transformation. The research methodologies mainly contain comparative, analytical and inductive approaches. A conceptual framework is outlined, illustrating how the US policy and approaches towards China navigate the Sino-US rivalry and transform China's grand strategy-making and its foreign policy implementation. The author concludes that it is the strategic rivalry and US policy towards China that are transforming China's "grand strategy" from a defensive to an offensive model. Bloc-driven policy is one of the defining factors in the Chinese-American confrontation. However, in the case of the U.S., the obvious anti-Chinese orientation of the blocs created by Washington may cause a negative reaction from potential allies. In turn, China, relying on the states of the Global South, is also building a network of global partnerships in which such structures as the BRICS, which is becoming increasingly attractive to developing countries. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is also a significant player, and if it expands further, it could become the largest military-political bloc in the Eurasian space.

Key words: great power competition, US policy towards China, Donald Trump, Joseph Biden, policy transformation, counterstrategy, foreign policy

Acknowledgements. This article is dedicated to the memory of Joseph S. Nye Jr. (1937–2025), a co-founder of neoliberal theory, a founder of the theory of "soft power" and "smart power," and an authoritative American expert on Chinese studies and Sino-American relations.

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«Большая стратегия» КНР в контексте китайско-американского стратегического соперничества

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Аннотация. Рассмотрена трансформация «большой стратегии» Китайской Народной Республики (КНР) через призму продолжающегося долгосрочного стратегического соперничества КНР — США. В последние годы среди исследователей растет популярность изучения «большой стратегии» КНР в глобальной политике, хотя до сих пор в международном академическом сообществе в изучении этой темы доминирует американская школа, основанная на американском реализме. Задачи исследования — взглянуть на «большую стратегию» Китая с точки зрения самой КНР, изучить эволюцию китайской политики США и трансформацию «большой стратегии» КНР в эпоху стратегического соперничества. В частности, продемонстрирована связь между эволюцией «большой стратегии» КНР и состоянием китайско-американских отношений. Также проанализированы последствия трансформации «большой стратегии» КНР. Методологически исследование опирается на сравнительный анализ. Описана концептуальная структура, иллюстрирующая, как политика и подходы США в отношении КНР управляют китайско-американским соперничеством и трансформируют «большую стратегию» КНР, оказывая влияние на реализацию внешней политики Китая. Автор приходит к выводу, что именно стратегическое соперничество и политика США в отношении Китая приводят к трансформации «большой стратегии» КНР из защитной в наступательную модель. Блоковая политика выступает одним из определяющих факторов китайско-американского противостояния, однако в случае США явная антикитайская направленность блоков, создаваемых Вашингтоном, может вызвать негативную реакцию потенциальных союзников. В свою очередь, Китай, опираясь на государства Глобального Юга, также выстраивает сеть глобальных партнерств, в которой значимую роль могут сыграть такие структуры, как БРИКС, которая становится все более притягательной для развивающихся стран, и Шанхайская организация сотрудничества (ШОС), которая в случае нового расширения способна стать крупнейшим военно-политическим блоком на евразийском пространстве.

Ключевые слова: конкуренция великих держав, политика США в отношении КНР, Дональд Трамп, Джоозеф Байден, трансформация политики, контрстратегия, внешняя политика

Благодарности. Данная статья посвящена памяти Джоозефа С. Ная (1937–2025), сооснователя теории неолиберализма, основателя теории «мягкой силы» и «умной силы», а также авторитетного американского эксперта в области изучения Китая и китайско-американских отношений.

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Introduction

China's rise has become constant in contemporary global politics. The “grand strategy” of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the world's second-largest economy, has attracted the attention of scholars. American scholars have played a leading role in researching China's “grand strategy” at the international level. However, the lack of

attention to China's long history and philosophy has led to a fundamental misunderstanding of China and its strategic intentions by Western scholars. This has resulted in significant distortions in the analysis of China's foreign policy in contemporary international studies.

The decade-long US policy of “containment and engagement” towards China began to change in 2008, which experts consider a turning point in the “power

transition” process between the two countries. Following the financial crisis that year, speculation arose about the possible decline of the West and the consequences of China’s rise. The Obama presidency clearly demonstrated the complexity of Washington’s position towards Beijing in the context of China’s rise. The Trump administration fundamentally rejected the historical tradition of Washington pursuing a balanced policy towards China. The current state of international relations is largely shaped by the perception that Washington is entering a period of “great power rivalry” with Beijing, and that the disunity this rivalry will provoke within the global community will make the U.S. — China standoff comparable to the Cold War era.

Literature Review and Research Methodology

The term “grand strategy” has become increasingly popular in the post-bipolar era. However, there is still no consensus regarding its definition (Silove, 2018). Posen believes that “grand strategy” is a state’s theoretical idea about how to ensure its own security (Posen, 2014). Other researchers have proposed a relatively common definition of “grand strategy” as “a state’s long-term strategy for using military or non-military means to advance and achieve national interests” (Balzacq & Krebs, 2021, pp. 2–4). According to a third definition, “grand strategy” is “the conceptual architecture that determines the structure and form of foreign policy.”¹

In the United States, several approaches to the study of “grand strategy” have emerged: “primacy,” “supremacy,” and “hegemony” (Porter, 2018). The traditional Western approach has tended to examine “grand strategy” and the international order within

the framework of the realist paradigm and the power transition theory, and then to examine how rising powers struggle to change the hegemonic order (Mastanduno, 1997). This approach also helps to explain the influence of the perception of power and threat from the established hegemon on the formation of the “grand strategy” of rising powers.²

Among Chinese scholars, Cheng Yawen defined “grand strategy” as a macro concept (Cheng, 2018). Meng Honghua included the element of “assessment of the strategic environment” in the scope of research (Men, 2020). Dou Guoqing identified the motives for the United States to maintain its global hegemony (Dou, 2024). Wang Jisi ranked China’s priority interests and external threats in the analysis of China’s “grand strategy” (Wang, 2011, p. 68). Song Dexin focused on the theoretical construction of China’s “grand strategy” in the context of China’s rise (Song, 2013, pp. 42–46). Wang Fan focused on the study of the “strategic ranking” of the direction and goals of China’s “grand strategy” (Wang, 2022, p. 1). However, to some extent, the study of Chinese “grand strategy” still remains terra incognita for the Chinese academic community (Men, 2020).

Some Russian scholars believe that China formulates its “grand strategy” by focusing on the Global South and “innovative” international organizations (Grachikov & Xu, 2022, p. 7). Others offer a conceptual analysis of China’s “grand strategy” from the perspective of national interests (Grachikov & Zhou, 2023, p. 75). Meanwhile, other experts have identified the evolution of Chinese scholars’ views on Sino-American rivalry and world order (Sharipov & Timofeev, 2023).

¹ Kahl C., Brands H. Trump’s Grand Strategic Train Wreck // *Foreign Policy*. January 31, 2017. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/31/trumps-grand-strategic-train-wreck/> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

² Doshi R. The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order // *Brookings*. August 2, 2021. URL: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-long-game-chinas-grand-strategy-to-displace-american-order/> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

Great power competition cannot be understood without a historical framework. A century of great power rivalry has prompted Western scholars to conduct analytical studies using different methodological approaches and inductively conclude that competition between a rising power and an incumbent hegemon is inevitable (Gaddis, 1992; Allison, 2017). In the West, the hierarchical model (Organski, 1958) is commonly relied upon to define the “poor” position of a rising power in the international system. It is believed that a rising power may become “revisionist” and “rule-breaker” (Gilpin, 1981; Renshon, 2017; Mukherjee, 2022). Great power competition is based on the traditional approach to power politics, and the intensification of interpower competition is considered an indicator of a paradigm shift in the international system (Miles & Miller, 2019).

Chinese Study in the USA in the Age of Great Power Competition

As early as 2005, A. Goldstein suggested that China’s “grand strategy” was to reshape the world order, emphasizing that China could not remain a status quo power, since its rise would directly change the rules (Goldstein, 2005). Since then, skepticism about China’s rise has grown considerably. The theoretical basis for Chinese studies is largely determined by the American theory of offensive realism, which was later developed by Professor J. Mearsheimer, who argues that China will inevitably seek dominance rather than a peaceful rise (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 368).

Since the second term of President Barack Obama, the interpretation of China’s “grand strategy” in the United States has evolved from statements about China’s “strategic opportunism” to an analysis of Beijing’s alleged “century plans.”³ In the era of Trump 1.0,

studies of China’s “grand strategy” reflected different understandings of the multiple dimensions of this strategy, which was viewed as a global projection of China’s growing comprehensive power (Krieger, 2022). China’s “grand strategy” was characterized as long-term and skillful (Denoon, 2021, p. 21), including China’s cultural diplomacy and the promotion of “soft power” (Nye, 2023). In addition, it was argued that China’s “grand strategy” aims to evaluate the strategic balance of power between China and the United States (Denoon, 2021). It was also stressed that Beijing is seeking to transform the existing world order by shifting from “building a regional order” to “promoting its global leadership” (Doshi, 2021).

In light of the growing polarization that has characterized U.S. society since the beginning of D. Trump’s first term, American experts have changed their understanding of China and their analysis of U.S. policy towards China in the context of Washington’s implementation of a confrontational course towards China. As a result, the nature of China studies under the Trump 1.0 administration has radicalized, shifting from “understanding China” to “countering China.” Major think tanks, such as the RAND Corporation⁴ and the Brookings Institution, have focused on how to defeat China rather than how to deal with it. For example, the RAND report proposed three trajectories of bilateral relations, one of which, “colliding competitors,” could potentially lead to conflicts between China and the United States in the medium and long term.⁵

d_Strategy (accessed: 09.04.2024); Stanzel A., Rolland N., Jacob J., Hart M. Grand Designs: Does China Have a “Grand Strategy”? // European Council on Foreign Relations. October 18, 2017. URL: https://ecfr.eu/publication/grands_designs_does_china_have_a_grand_strategy/ (accessed: 19.01.2025).

⁴ The activities of *RAND Corporation* have been recognized as undesirable on the territory of the Russian Federation (*Editor’s note*).

⁵ Scobell A., Burke E., Cooper C., Lilly S., Ohlandt C., Warner E., Williams J. *China’s Grand Strategy: Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition*. Santa Monica,

³ See: Danner L. The Debate on China’s Grand Strategy // ResearchGate. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299604307_The_Debate_on_China’s_Gran

Another signal of Washington's change in tactics can be reflected in the rhetoric of party-state separation in the study of China: the role of the ruling party in the policy-making process is seen as decisive, which Washington considers a "serious problem" because, as some scholars believe, China's motivation is deeply rooted in the interests of its ruling party (Kachiga, 2022).

It should be noted that history confirms the significant influence of mutual perception on the dynamics of Sino-American relations (Zhu, 2013). The hybrid war launched by the American media-academic complex, radicalizing American perceptions of China in every way, will inevitably lead to the formulation of incorrect research tasks in Chinese studies. As a result, the transformation from doubting and denying China's peaceful rise to conceptualizing the "Thucydides Trap" by American scholars has actually paved the way for the polarization of Washington's China policy and Chinese studies.

Thus, the change in Washington's policy towards Beijing in the era of Sino-US strategic rivalry is based on the effective academic construction of a self-proclaimed strategic consensus of rivalry and an ideology of skepticism towards China. For example, the "debt-trap diplomacy" attributed to China was developed as a hypothesis in 2017,⁶ quickly penetrated into works devoted to the analysis of China's foreign policy. Then, with the instigation of the Trump 1.0 administration, it became the subject of a wide discussion in Western countries that expressed concern about such diplomacy by Beijing, and then migrated into the practice of relations

with China as the main narrative about it. However, Western researchers subsequently debunked and questioned this hypothesis.⁷ Another aspect of US propaganda against China is the discourse of "wolf warrior diplomacy," which views China's diplomatic approaches as tools in the so-called "struggle for global dominance" (Jiang, 2021).

Sino-US Rivalry Made by Washington

The presidency of Donald Trump 1.0 marked the beginning of a long-term rivalry between China and the United States. From a chronological perspective, Washington launched trade, technology, hybrid, cultural, and financial wars against Beijing (Table 1). The United States has taken a more assertive stance in this process, whereas China has adopted a reactive position.

During the first Trump administration, the US Congress reached a bipartisan consensus of "hawks" towards China and implemented "whole-of-government" approaches (see Table 1). In general, the Trump administration 1.0 has undertaken comprehensive confrontational efforts through the following means. First, Washington's endless diplomatic and hybrid efforts to demonize China's global image, on the one hand, and destabilize China's domestic political situation, on the other. Second, the "techno-economic" war and blockade of China using multiple techno-nationalist approaches. Third, efforts to militarily contain China in the Indo-Pacific region with the aim of encircling China. Fourth, the suspension of intercultural communication between societies and the closure of bilateral channels of cultural communication.

CA : RAND Corporation, 2020. (The activities of *RAND Corporation* have been recognized as undesirable on the territory of the Russian Federation. — *Editor's note*).

⁶ Chellaney B. China's Debt-Trap Diplomacy // Project Syndicate. January 23, 2017. URL: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-one-belt-one-road-loans-debt-by-brahma-chellaney-2017-01> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

⁷ Brautigam D., Rithmire M. The Chinese "Debt Trap" Is a Myth // *The Atlantic*. February 6, 2021. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/02/china-debt-trap-diplomacy/617953/> (accessed: 09.04.2025). See also: (Himmer & Rod, 2022).

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Trump 1.0 and Biden’s Approaches to Rivalry with China

Criteria	The Trump Presidency	The Biden Presidency
US policy towards China	– Comprehensive Confrontation and techonomic war – Push back and decoupling	– Targeted competition – Decoupling and de-risking – “Small Yards, High Fence” tech policy
Characterization	Unilateral confrontation	Coalition-driven competition
Main approaches	Whole-of-government	– Strengthen national competence – Strengthen international collaborations with the US allies
China’s national identity	– Revisionist country – The whole-of-society threats (Sinophobia)	– The most consequential geopolitical challenge (political and ideological connotation) – Systematic rival
Consistency with traditional China policy	Significantly differ from the traditional containment policy with ultra-offensive and unilateral approaches	Consistent with the traditional containment policy with offensive realist approaches
Sphere of confrontation/rivalry	All fronts	– Technological rivalry – Ideological confrontation – Financial war (new elements)
Sphere of cooperation	None	Partially on the issues of climate change
Common grounds on the international affairs	North Korea (2017)	Almost no issues
Main International Efforts	Focusing on the US foreign aid and international development approaches, forcing recipient Global South countries to take sides, no specific countermeasures targeting Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)	Focusing on the US-led global network and alliance, formulating military-industrial bloc (AUKUS — Australia, the United Kingdom and the USA) and the tech bloc (CHIP-4) to counter China, and the global initiative (PGII), targeting BRI
Similarities	Opportunities for bilateral cooperation are diminishing, whilst the influence of confrontational policies and approaches is increasing	

Source: compiled by Cheng Guo based on: Issues // Trump White House. URL: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/> (accessed: 10.01.2025); US — China Relations in the Biden Era: A Timeline // China Briefing. URL: <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/us-china-relations-in-the-biden-era-a-timeline/> (accessed: 10.01.2025).

During the Biden era, the level of technological competition between powers increased significantly. The Biden administration adopted the “Protect and Promote” agenda, prioritizing increasing American competitiveness by strengthening domestic production chains and developing technological capabilities. In this context “protect” refers to a comprehensive “decoupling” and “de-risking” strategy to contain China’s technological development and exclude it from global supply and value chains (Table 1). Moreover, Washington also provoked an ideological competition between the two “systems” by mobilizing all the so-called

“liberal democracies” to confront China. At the same time, it can be stated that President Biden took a more targeted approach to China than President Trump’s “scorched earth” tactics.

Overall, the shift in US “grand strategy” due to the rise of China has given rise to the current round of Sino-US rivalry, while the radicalization of US policy towards China has further exacerbated tensions between the two sides. In addition, the Biden era has given rise to discourses about the “dead end” of Sino-US relations and the emergence of a hegemonic stalemate, in which neither side can decisively manage the trends in the international

system.⁸ This has not only made the current state of Sino-US rivalry fundamentally different from other historical cases (Wang, 2021), but also led to a refocusing of the scholarly community from “confrontation” under Trump 1.0 to “competition management” under Biden.⁹ In particular, the use of historical parallels and analogies in the Biden administration’s decision making towards China has become widespread. The most common comparisons of contemporary Sino-American relations have been those of the “Thucydides Trap,” the “sleepwalking” of 1914,¹⁰ and a “new Cold War” (Nye, 2022).

American experts argue that Trump’s policy towards China is a new political approach or an experiment. What is the real impact of this policy on future administrations? Hass argues that, although the Trump administration 1.0 has begun an

experiment in radicalizing and polarizing policy towards China, Washington still has an exit strategy.¹¹ A clear indication of the shift in the priorities of the US “grand strategy” towards competition with China is the criticism of President Biden’s “untimely” intention to change course towards China towards a potential “reset”,¹² voiced in an article in *Foreign Policy* magazine in 2023. Evidence of the more confrontational position of the Republican Party compared to the Democratic Party towards China is also provided in an essay by two prominent Republican politicians on China, in which they call on the Biden administration to move from managing competition to a Cold War position against China.¹³

China’s Grand Strategy in the Context of Sino-US Rivalry

Chinese scholars generally reject the “new Cold War” theory, instead engaging in intense debates around the so-called “strategic competition” (Winkler, 2023). Beijing clearly opposes Washington’s intentions and efforts to contain its development, defining this approach as shaped by the “Cold War mentality.” The PRC leadership adopts the unilateral foreign policy of the United States, which is based on the perception of competition as a defining feature of bilateral relations (Liu & He, 2023).

⁸ Haenle P., Bresnick S. Why U.S. — China Relations Are Locked in a Stalemate // Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. February 21, 2022. URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/02/why-us-china-relations-are-locked-in-a-stalemate?lang=en> (accessed: 09.04.2024). (The activities of the international non-governmental organization *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* have been recognized as undesirable on the territory of the Russian Federation. — *Editor’s note*).

⁹ Kennedy S. U.S. — China Relations in 2024: Managing Competition without Conflict // Center for Strategic and International Studies. January 3, 2024. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-china-relations-2024-managing-competition-without-conflict> (accessed: 09.04.2024). (The activities of *Center for Strategic and International Studies* have been recognized as undesirable on the territory of the Russian Federation. — *Editor’s note*).

¹⁰ In 1914, all the great powers expected a short third Balkan war to clarify the balance of power, but instead World War I broke out. In the words of the British historian C. Clark, the great powers behaved like “sleepwalkers,” waging a destructive war for four years, with disastrous consequences for international relations. See: Nye J. S., Jr. The China Sleepwalking Syndrome // Project Syndicate. October 4, 2021. URL: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/sleepwalking-to-war-with-china-by-joseph-s-nye-2021-10> (accessed: 07.05.2024).

¹¹ Hass R. Lessons from the Trump Administration’s Policy Experiment on China // Brookings. September 25, 2020. URL: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/lessons-from-the-trump-administrations-policy-experiment-on-china/> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

¹² Mitchell A. W. Why Biden’s China Reset Is a Bad Idea // Foreign Policy. June 2, 2023. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/02/biden-china-xi-burns-beijing-reset-detente-election-campaign/> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

¹³ Pottinger M., Gallagher M. No Substitute for Victory: America’s Competition with China Must Be Won, Not Managed // Foreign Affairs. April 10, 2024. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/no-substitute-victory-pottinger-gallagher> (accessed: 11.05.2025).

Table 2. Timeline of China — US Relations, 2004–2025

Year	The United States	China
2004	–	“Peaceful Development” principle
2005	Proposal of the “Responsible Stakeholder”	Anti-Secession Law (Taiwan issue)
2009–2010	G2 concept (Chimerica)	China Rejected G2 and opposed hegemony
2011–2012	The Obama administration pursued a “Pivot to Asia” re-balancing policy as an element of its grand strategy to contain China in the region	The White Paper “Peaceful Development of China” (2011) conceptualizes China’s development principle and strategy
2013	Washington supported Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines in the territorial disputes against China in the East China Sea and the South China Sea	– New Type of Major Power Relations – Neighbourhood diplomacy – Belt and Road Initiative – Community with a shared future for mankind
2015	Washington’s “freedom of navigation” strategy and operations lead to the rising tensions in the South China Sea	– Digital Silk Road (DSR) – China’s defensive measures in the South China Sea
2016	The rising populism globally, represented by Brexit and the Trump phenomenon	G20 Hangzhou Summit: promoting globalization and global governance by contributing Chinese experience
2017	– National Security Strategy and National Defence Strategy in the Trump era: the resurgence of great power competition – THAAD missile defense systems deployment in South Korea – Re-establishment of the QUAD	President Xi Jinping defends globalization and pledges that China will continue to open up and reform at the Davos Economic Forum
2018	– Techonomic war – Hybrid war – Congressional Act on the Taiwan issue	– Polar Silk Road – China undertook countermeasures in the trade war
2019	– Rapid deterioration of bilateral relations – US-backed riot in Hong Kong – Congressional Act on the Hong Kong issue	White Paper “National Defence of China in the New Era” introduced the “foreign interests” concept, emphasizing the importance of interests of the Chinese organizations and institutions abroad
2020	– COVID-19 China demonization efforts – Comprehensive confrontation and escalation – Multiple Congressional Acts on the Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet issue and related sanction – Bilateral relations fell to the lowest point since 1979	– Dual Circulation – Health Silk Road – Mask diplomacy – Vaccine diplomacy – National Security Law for Hong Kong – Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and China — EU agreement on investment
2021	– Establishment of the “democratic coalition” and “Democratic Summit” – US Innovation and Competition Act – Strategic Competition Act – The formation of AUKUS	– Anti-COVID diplomacy, – The first direct dialogue between Chinese and American diplomats since the coronavirus pandemic (the Alaska talks), during which the parties made various accusations against each other, – China recognized the Taliban (banned in Russia) regime as the new Afghani government

End of Table 2

Year	The United States	China
2022	– America COMPETES Act – The Chips and Science Act – House of Representatives Speaker N. Pelosi's visit to Taiwan – Formation of the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment	– China took the countermeasure in response to US official's Taiwan visit and conducted large-scale military exercise in the region – Global Development Initiative (GDI)
2023	– The implementation of the Small Yards, High Fence tech policy – The implementation of re-shoring and friend-shoring policy – Washington escalated the “Chip War” with Beijing	– Iran — Saudi Arabia deal made by China as a diplomatic breakthrough – Global Security Initiative (GSI) – Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)
2024	– Washington accelerated the decoupling efforts – Washington escalated the tech war by targeting the semiconductor and Artificial Intelligence (AI) industry – The new-elected president Trump formed his second administration with a majority of China-hawk cabinet members	– The more frequent implementation of China's head-of-state diplomacy has boosted China's strategic interactions with the world in the post-COVID era – Beijing has tightened its export control rules for critical minerals and dual-use items – The Chancay port in Peru and a new land-sea corridor
2025	– Trump announced his ambitious Stargate Project to maintain American AI hegemony and launch the “AI Cold War” with China – Washington immediately designated <i>DeepSeek</i> as a national security threat and imposed a comprehensive ban – Trump reactivated his tariffs on China	The Chinese AI giant <i>DeepSeek</i> has challenged the American AI dominance

Source: compiled by Cheng Guo based on: The State Council Information Office of the PRC. URL: <https://english.www.gov.cn/> (accessed: 16.04.2025); Issues // Trump White House. URL: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/> (accessed: 10.01.2025); US — China Relations in the Biden Era: A Timeline // China Briefing. URL: <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/us-china-relations-in-the-biden-era-a-timeline/> (accessed: 10.01.2025).

In turn, Beijing generally adheres to the principle of “hoping for the best, preparing for the worst,” and reacts differently to manifestations of strategic competition from Washington (Wang, 2005).

The George W. Bush administration defined China as a “strategic competitor” of the United States, but in light of the events of September 11, 2001, it pursued an “engagement” policy towards China (Winkler, 2023, p. 346). As a result, the George W. Bush era can be seen as a period of prosperity in Sino-American relations (Table 2).

Since the beginning of the Trump presidency 1.0., Chinese officials have

repeatedly claimed the “interest integration pattern” in bilateral ties, emphasizing the importance of “win-win cooperation while rejecting confrontation”¹⁴.

¹⁴ See: Zhong S. Zhongmei yijing xingcheng “nizhongyouwo, wozhongyouni” liyijiaorong geju [China and the United States Have Formed a Model of Mutual Interests Based on the Principle of “You in Me, Me in You”] // Xinhua. March 11, 2017. (In Chinese). URL: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017lh/2017-03/11/c_1120610740.htm (accessed: 28.03.2024); Zhongmei yinggai zuohuoban, erfeiduishou (zhōng shēng) [China and the US Should Be Partners, Not Adversaries] // People.cn. April 28, 2024. (In Chinese). URL: <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2024/0428/c1002-40225292.html> (accessed: 08.03.2025).

Table 2 illustrates China's responses to Washington's policy towards Beijing, reflecting the evolving nature of China's strategic countermeasures into components of its "grand strategy." Since 2013, there has been a gradual increase in tension in bilateral interactions, which has manifested itself both in elements of the "grand strategies" of both countries and in approaches to relations with the opponent. Since 2017, the intensity of the confrontation has begun to increase at a rapid pace. At the policy level, China's three global initiatives are the first ever conceptualized version of its "grand strategy." China's proposal for a "new type of relationship between major powers", articulated in 2013, is a logical response to the American G2 concept voiced in 2009 (Degterev, Ramich & Tsvyk, 2021, p. 216).

The formation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the breakthrough in trade relations between China and the European Union (EU) in 2020 are part of the implementation of China's offensive foreign policy in the midst of a trade war with the United States. Beijing immediately and harshly responded to Washington's increase in tariffs on Chinese goods as part of the trade war unleashed by the second Trump administration. Since then, China's "grand strategy" has evolved into a new model: on the one hand, Beijing has actively implemented its more independent and pragmatic foreign policy, and on the other, it seeks to balance the negative impact of the US's confrontational approach in the context of intensified rivalry.

The "techno-economic" war launched by Donald Trump against China has played a pivotal role in shaping Beijing's "dual circulation" policy, shifting strategic priorities from external markets to the domestic market. In an effort to stimulate national development in response to rising populism and nationalism around the world,¹⁵ this policy has transformed

the PRC from the "semi-periphery" to the "center" of the global economy at the strategic level (Matveeva & Zhao, 2021). In addition, Beijing is promoting "neighborhood diplomacy" at the regional level to hedge the negative impact of Washington's containment efforts through its global alliance network. Consequently, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) became China's largest trading partner in 2020, overtaking the EU.¹⁶

A radical transformation in China's foreign policy occurred in the post-pandemic era. China's support for the Taliban government in Afghanistan in 2021 marks a significant shift in its policy toward a counterstrategy against Washington (Zhang, 2022). In addition, Beijing played a prominent role in its capacity as an international mediator in both the Ukrainian conflict and the Iran-Saudi deal, while Washington, as part of its confrontational policy, fought against both Russia and Iran. In particular, the Iran-Saudi deal reflects China's growing influence among the major powers in the Gulf region. Beijing has gained a strategic advantage in the "geopolitical vacuum," while Washington is rapidly losing influence in several regions in the post-pandemic era.¹⁷

The escalation of the technological rivalry between China and the U.S. has accelerated China's comprehensive efforts to focus on domestic R&D in pursuit of technological self-

[Understanding the "Great Circulation" and "Dual Circulation" Through Several Key Speeches of Xi Jinping] // Xinhua. September 5, 2020. (In Chinese). URL: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/xxjxs/2020-09/05/c_1126455277.htm (accessed: 01.04.2024).

¹⁶ Medina A. F. ASEAN Overtakes EU to Become China's Top Trading Partner in Q1 2020 // ASEAN Briefing. May 15, 2020. URL: <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/asean-overtakes-eu-become-chinas-top-trading-partner-q1-2020/> (accessed: 09.04.2024).

¹⁷ Siu-kai L. Middle East Sees Rising Chinese Influence as US' Declines // China Daily. July 4, 2024. URL: <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/587312> (accessed: 06.03.2025).

¹⁵ Wang Z. H. Kan XiJinping zhejici zhongyao jianghua, nongdong "daxunhuan" "shuangxunhuan"

sufficiency and to promote Chinese applied high technologies through the “Digital Silk Road” among the Global South (Cheng, 2022). Despite Washington’s comprehensive technology blockade in recent years, Chinese high-tech companies have continued to innovate and make progress in key sectors, such as semiconductors and AI. Furthermore, China’s economic model is capable of implementing long-term strategies.¹⁸ The shock of *DeepSeek*’s emergence in the AI industry in January 2025 demonstrated China’s remarkable technological breakthrough and capacity for cutting-edge technological innovation.

Thus, China’s transformation of its “grand strategy” has been driven by the evolution of its defensive measures in response to US policies, the transition from a passive to an offensive model, and a more pragmatic approach to serving its core global interests. Some US experts have acknowledged that US policies are a driving factor in shaping China’s behavior (Fingar & Lampton, 2023), and the tone of China’s foreign policy has become increasingly confident.¹⁹ From a broader perspective, China’s stance is transforming from “strategic defense” to “strategic balancing” in its competition with the U.S. It should be noted that US perception is also currently seemingly transforming. After President Trump’s return to the White House, the defensive nature of China’s strategy was re-evaluated, with some scholars emphasizing that China is undermining US hegemony instead of seeking dominance.²⁰ In turn, Chinese experts

have begun to focus on deeply studying the trends of change in the US “grand strategy” in order to adequately manage their own “grand strategy.”²¹ Since the first presidency of Trump, Beijing has also gained much more experience in dealing with the volatility and uncertainty of Washington’s policy.²²

China’s Grand Strategy Transformation: Implications

China’s contemporary “grand strategy” is heavily influenced by the Tsinghua School, which is led by Professor Yan Xuetong. His theory of “moral realism” proposes a policy-oriented strategy for China’s rise and a national rejuvenation strategy, with continuous political reform and innovation at its core (Yan, 2019a).

Chinese scholars have different views on China’s changing global role in the era of strategic competition with the United States. For example, some researchers believe that China faces two main goals: “modification through leadership” and “modification through cooperation” (Tang, 2018). China’s rise will transform both its global role and the international system as a whole (Yan, 2020, p. 321). China is increasingly focusing on positioning itself and contributing to the formation of a more resilient international system (Allison, 2020; Chen & Zhang, 2020; Yan, 2019b).

In diplomatic terms, China’s concept of “major power relations” signals a diplomatic reorientation towards cooperation with various countries in line with its changing global role, especially in managing relations with the major powers of the Global North.

¹⁸ Partsinevelos D. Can China Become the World’s Top Tech Leader? // MSN. February 19, 2025. URL: <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/technology/can-china-become-the-world-s-top-tech-leader/ar-AA1zlvM0> (accessed: 11.03.2025).

¹⁹ Yan X. Becoming Strong: The New Chinese Foreign Policy // Foreign Affairs. June 22, 2021. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-06-22/becoming-strong> (accessed: 09.10.2024).

²⁰ Latham A., Moeimi A. Unraveling China’s Grand Strategy // Institute for Peace and Diplomacy. February 26, 2025. URL: <https://peacediplomacy.org/2025/02/26/unraveling-chinas-grand-strategy-its-aim-is-to-erode-u-s->

[global-hegemony-not-seek-world-domination/](#) (accessed: 09.03.2025).

²¹ Expert Predicts Four Major Trends of U.S. Global Strategy in 2024 // Xiahuanet. January 19, 2024. URL: <https://english.news.cn/northamerica/20240119/4dec974e22df475a85ff06da178d7a13/c.html> (accessed: 09.03.2024).

²² Yan X. Why China Isn’t Scared of Trump // Foreign Affairs. December 20, 2024. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/why-china-isnt-scared-trump> (accessed: 13.03.2025).

Table 3. Classification of China's Grand Strategy

Criteria	China's Grand Strategy Elements
Core Principle	– Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence – Partnership without alignment – Scientific development – Peaceful rise (the Chinese model of development) – Great National Rejuvenation (Main goals of China's rise)
Core interests	– Domestic interests: political stability and socioeconomic prosperity – International interests: preservation of China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, enhance its global influence – Taiwan issue (Red Line)
Core Concept	– China Dream – Major Power Relations – Neighbourhood Diplomacy (Periphery Diplomacy) – Community with a shared future for mankind (the Chinese version of globalization)
China's Diplomacy of Partnerships	– Major Powers (economic-guided differentiation, countries including the United States, EU countries, and Russia) – China's strategic periphery (China's Grand strategy-guided differentiation; neighborhood diplomacy) – From the "Third World countries" to "developing countries" to "the Global South" (differentiation based on the transformation of the international relations) – Multilateral International Fora (China-led globalization guided Differentiation)
China's Partnership Network (CPN)	– Comprehensive strategic partnership and coordination in the new era (Russia) – All-weather strategic cooperative partnership (Pakistan) – Comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership (18 countries) – Comprehensive strategic partnership (41 countries, mainly from the Global South) – Strategic Partnership (23 countries)

Source: compiled by Cheng Guo based on: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Peoples' Republic of China. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ (accessed:10.03.2025); The State Council Information Office of the PRC. URL: <https://english.www.gov.cn/> (accessed: 10.03.2025).

In the era of pre-strategic rivalry China's foreign policy was defensive (Nathan & Scobell, 2012). For example, the transformation of China's "grand strategy" (Table 3) demonstrates a more flexible diplomacy towards the EU, focusing on mutual economic growth in the post-pandemic era while reducing geopolitical tensions. As a result, EU's policy towards China has gradually transformed after a period of geopolitical instability that exposed divergences on many issues.²³ From 2023–

2024, constructive bilateral engagement and state visits have given a strong impetus to China — EU relations.²⁴

China's decades-long efforts to strategically engage with the Global South have resulted in a comparative advantage in its competition with the United States. The Chancay port, which began operations in 2024, and the new land-sea corridor mega-project in Latin America not only mark a new era

²³ Fix L., Carlough M. The Trajectory of US — EU Relations in a Tumultuous Year // Elcano Royal Institute. July 22, 2024. URL: <https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ari102-2024-fix-carlough-the->

[trajectory-of-us-eu-relations-in-a-tumultuous-year.pdf](#) (accessed: 09.03.2025).

²⁴ Xing Y. Strong China — EU Ties Vital for Global Future // China Daily. January 9, 2025. URL: <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/602096> (accessed: 11.03.2025).

of comprehensive engagement between China and the region,²⁵ but also reveal Beijing's "grand strategy" of building the "port chain" to counterbalance Washington's approach to containing China through the creation of the "island chain."

In the era of China — US rivalry, China's interpretation of its partners' national identity is undergoing a dynamic transformation from a geostrategic to a geopolitical level. Chinese experts have introduced the "interest — threat nexus" model to explore and classify China's partnership network (Liu & He, 2023). Pakistan's exceptional role reflects China's strategic peripheral interest. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan's special role echoes China's Westward strategy,²⁶ shifting the priority to Central Asia and strengthening the China-Central Asia Five Summit mechanism.²⁷

Traditionally, the classification of China's priorities has been determined by trade and economic relations, but at present China's "grand strategy" is being transformed from economic cooperation and partnerships at the level of foreign policy to a strategy of creating non-Western blocs at the geopolitical level in response to the rivalry unleashed by Washington and a coalition of its allies.

Politically, BRICS, which is gaining influence among countries of the Global South, is becoming a decisive force in promoting non-

Western approaches to global governance. China's proposal to expand BRICS reflects the offensive nature of Beijing's block-building policy in response to US bloc-driven policy. The growing problem of bloc rivalry for China mainly reflects security concerns, as Washington has effectively transformed the G7 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) into anti-China alliances, while the Quad and AUCUS are playing the role of "Asian NATOs" surrounding China.²⁸ Strategically, the expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) through the potential membership of more Eurasian states could make it a leading non-Western military-political bloc. China also gains a leading position in the RCEP, which allows it to balance the negative impact of Washington's trade protectionism and decoupling policy and change the global trade landscape. China also focuses on discursive power, representing non-Western powers in the G20.

Modernization is another key component of China's "grand strategy." The BRI originated as part of China's global infrastructure development strategy, which focused on modernization and connectivity. The launch of the BRI has further deepened the economic interdependence between China and 149 countries and 32 international organizations and has contributed to the growth of China's global influence.²⁹ The development of the BRI over the past decade shows its transformation from a "development initiative/plan" in the pre-strategic rivalry era to a "development strategy" and "development model" in the

²⁵ China, Peru Ready to Build New Land-sea Corridor Connecting Latin America with Asia // The State Council of the People's Republic of China. November 16, 2024. URL: https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202411/16/content_WS67383f28c6d0868f4e8ed0cd.html (accessed: 02.02.2025).

²⁶ Wang J. S. Xijin: Zhongguo diyuan zhanlue de zaipingheng [Westward: Rebalancing China's Geostrategy // *Huánqiú Shíbào*. October 17, 2012. (In Chinese). URL <https://news.sina.cn/sa/2012-10-17/detail-ikmxzfmk1459775.d.html> (accessed: 12.04.2025).

²⁷ Wani A. C+C5 Summit: Beijing's Increasing Shadow over Central Asia // Observer Research Foundation. May 29, 2023. URL: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/cc5-summit-beijings-increasing-shadow-over-central-asia> (accessed: 12.04.2024).

²⁸ Green M. J. Never Say Never to an Asian NATO // Foreign Policy. September 6, 2023. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/06/asian-nato-security-alliance-china-us-quad-aukus-japan-australia-taiwan-military-biden/> (accessed: 13.04.2024).

²⁹ The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future // The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. October 2023. URL: http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/zfbps_2279/202310/t20231010_773734.html (accessed: 13.04.2024).

modern era of strategic rivalry. The rapidly growing influence of the BRI among the countries of the Global South provides China with leverage to hedge the negative impact of strategic rivalry and make possible the scenario of a bloc based on the “One Axis, Two Wings”³⁰ concept. The potential formation of a “BRI Club” could create the largest bloc and change the global geopolitical landscape. In turn, the technological component of the BRI, the Digital Silk Road (DSR), plays the role of a digital bridge for the development of technological cooperation and modernization (Cheng, 2022, p. 271).

Conclusion

Having analyzed the transformation of China’s “grand strategy” in the context of the strategic rivalry between China and the United States, the author concludes that it is this rivalry and the US policy towards China that are forcing Beijing to transform its “grand strategy” from a defensive to an offensive model. Moreover, China’s foreign policy implementation is becoming more pragmatic in serving its core global interests and balancing the US’s confrontational approaches to bilateral relations.

The transformation of “grand strategy” is prompting China to become more actively involved in regional and global affairs. The

COVID-19 pandemic has become a turning point in this important shift, with multiple regional crises accelerating the process. Notably, Washington is increasingly focusing on countering China bilaterally, while Beijing is formulating its “grand strategy” and taking countermeasures in a multilateral format.

The transformation of China’s “grand strategy” also determines Beijing’s efforts to create and strengthen global partnership networks in the context of competition with the United States, and to develop cooperation with countries of the Global South within the framework of the BRI. Furthermore, Beijing is starting to prioritize achieving geopolitical goals by addressing a wide range of issues on the global agenda.

Thus, the strategic rivalry between China and the United States has changed China’s geopolitical landscape. On the one hand, Donald Trump, who returned to the White House as President, launched a new round of “techno-economic warfare” against China, announcing the ambitious Stargate project, and resumed the trade war. On the other hand, Washington’s understanding of its revised “grand strategy,” which is largely dominated by the “Cold War mentality,” the escalation of fear around China’s ambitions, and the promotion of rivalry with China as a priority in US foreign policy — all this may alienate some US partners. It is evident that the large-scale tariff changes initiated by Trump, and the diplomatic chaos caused by them, have damaged the reputation of the United States. In this regard, it seems that China will accelerate the process of transforming its “grand strategy.”

³⁰ This concept considers China as the main axis of the Global South, the “Western wing” as West Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, and Africa, and the “Eastern wing” as the countries of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). For more details, see: (Cheng et al. 2019, p. 78).

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