

COMPETITION FOR EAST ASIA – BALANCING STRATEGIES OF THE USA AGAINST CHINA

Attila Mezei, Ph.D. Student

Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary

ABSTRACT

China has been a rising power in East Asia for decades. The end of the Cold War and the increasing effects of globalization brought the country in the forefront of attention on the international scene. The economic importance of the East Asian giant cannot be denied. Its economic power has been translating into a powerful tool to upset the balance of power tremendously. China has been expanding its influence around the globe and challenging the status quo more than ever before.

The United States, the strongest state in the current international system has to pay attention to the increasingly assertive China. The USA uses several strategies to mitigate the threat China poses to the world order that the USA built. The structural forces of the international system, the Covid-19 pandemic, and American domestic politics make the threat of rising China more challenging.

In my paper, I try to identify the balancing strategies of the United States in the 21st century against China. In my opinion, the application of neoclassical realist school of international relations can foreshadow the possible paths of the conflict. The United States of America has to use a wide variety of balancing strategies in order to counter the threat.

A heavier reliance on allies is inevitable for the United States if it wants to contain the increasing influence of China around the globe. The USA should increase its hard-, soft-, and asymmetrical balancing methods mixed with smart power strategies to remain on the top of the international system.

In my opinion, the showdown between China and the United States of America will be inevitable in the medium term. If the USA uses its position right, the peaceful containment of Chinese ambitions is possible. The successes of the above-mentioned strategies will decide how the competition of these two countries shapes international relations in the coming decades.

***Keywords:** balance of power, world order, neorealism, neoclassical realism, international relations*

INTRODUCTION

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the supremacy of the United States has not been questioned for a long time. The constantly changing nature of the international system and the different economic growth rates produce rising and declining states that upset the balance of power.

In the contemporary era, China seems to be the most important challenger of the United States. Both of these countries have a large population and vast economic potential. Furthermore, China integrated into the world economy more, than the Soviet Union was during the Cold War, when the USA had to deal with that threat. In addition to the economic power of China, the appeal of the USA seems to be in decline as well.

The chance of a direct confrontation between the two countries seems low in the short run. There were times in history (for example in the 1950's) when China was weaker, but conflict seemed much more possible. [1] However, this does not mean that conflict cannot and will not occur in the end. The United States has to utilize balancing strategies to mitigate the threat China poses and diffuse the rising power's challenge. Otherwise, China will assert its dominance around the globe, and tries to replace the United States as the most influential state in the international system.

EAST ASIA

In the beginning of the 21st century, the Middle East (including Afghanistan) seemed to be the most turbulent region where international relations experts should focus. Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen etc. were the countries where foreign interference, civil conflict, terrorism and a number of political and economic problems upset the status quo in the region.

However, the hotspots in the Middle East were contained and the disturbance did not spread to other regions on the globe. Al Qaeda, ISIS and other terrorist organisations have not carried out major operations in the West for years. In addition to that, the migration crisis is no longer a major problem in the West.

Thanks to these quagmires, the United States lost its willingness to be keen on putting boots on other countries' ground. The costly fiascos turned the population and several politicians away from the world. President Donald J. Trump and his democratic opponent Joe Biden both have been campaigning on a more domestically focused platform. The Trump administration did not changed the situation either in Ukraine or in Syria. It reversed course in Iran, but the hostility did not escalate too much. [2]

The region that is the main focus of America now is East Asia. A rising power with a strong leader has been starting to challenge the balance of power in the

region. China and its president Xi Jinping started to spread its wings to become a regional hegemon. The economic power of China is enormous. It can make investments in other countries on a significant scale. The so-called advantages of backwardness helped China to reduce the distance between it and the United States in the past few decades. [3]

Meanwhile, entrepreneurs from all over the globe have been seeing a lucrative investment opportunity in the East Asian giant. The West with its emphasis on human rights and “universal” values did not make a huge impact when it comes to the question of foreign direct investment. Major Western companies outsourced operations to China facilitating its rise. The region is home to several important economically rising powers and a huge portion of the human population lives there. Any great power needs the markets of the region and influence in East Asia can highly affect international politics and vice versa. That is the reason why the USA cannot let China push it out of the region.

BALANCE OF POWER

As neoclassical realism would suggest as the relative power of a state rises, it will seek influence abroad. This is clearly the case with China. [4] The country has always been an important state in terms of economic performance for a long time. Only the industrial revolution in the West could diminish China’s relative economic power. The Chinese national sentiment was hurt by the century of humiliation, and with economic reforms since the 1970s; the dominance of China in East Asia has been continuous. [5] Meanwhile, the United States has been the dominant economic power since the end of the 19th century and it has the most advanced military to back it up as well. The clash between these countries are inevitable in my opinion. The question is how this clash will look like. Economic competition for markets, armed conflict or even total war?

Both countries possess nuclear weapons, thus making total war in the 21st century almost unthinkable. The major economic powers of the world have not clashed with each other since the Second World War (except proxy wars, and minor skirmishes). [6] The government and the public slowly, but surely has been seeing China as a serious competitor for dominance in East Asia, instead of a regular trading partner.

The United States uses limited hard balancing, soft balancing and asymmetrical balancing techniques to counter this threat. These techniques involve coordinated military activities, informal ententes and covert support for non-state actors to restrain the power of China. [7]

Naval exercises on the South China Sea are excellent examples for limited hard balancing in order to deter China for claiming the territory as its own lake. Soft balancing entails institutional tools as well. The public opinion of the international community cannot stop an aggressor to expand its sphere of

influence, as the case of the League of Nations proved, but it can increase the cost of said behaviour.

China needs trading partners around the globe to grow its economy. Human rights violations in Xinjiang, aggressive posture in the South China Sea, anti-democratic measures in Hong Kong etc. slowly increases the cost of foreign direct investment. Major multinational corporations has to maintain their good public image if they want to be profitable, especially in the West. The “Made in China” label on a product has changed meaning a few times in the last decades. During the 20th century, it meant cheaper and lower quality products compared to items from the West or Japan. In the last few decades, the Chinese manufacturing industry improved a lot thanks to Western companies outsourcing jobs to East Asia, therefore providing know-how to Chinese firms. In addition to that corporate espionage and the low level of intellectual property rights helped China improve quickly. The reforms started in the 1970’s paid off for the 21st century. Now, the “Made in China” label can change once again, meaning a product comes from an aggressive regime that suppresses people.

This could deter companies from investing. Western countries and regional rivals of China can utilize this opportunity by diverting these investments to their own countries therefore strengthening their own positions vis-à-vis China.

CHINA IN THE WORLD

China has become more and more assertive in the world. Its economic influence paired with political goals cause problems. The authoritative system is not attractive in the eyes of the West as a model. China is a continent-sized country with more than a billion people within its territory. Geography and demography help China to extend its dominance since it has an outlet to the Pacific Ocean and its land borders are quite secure.

On the North, Russia borders China, but China with its immense population numbers threaten the Russian territory, which is scarcely populated. Russia has nuclear weapons and quite advanced military, but its demographical numbers do not seem to threaten the Chinese positions. In the Western side of the country, China neighbours the Central Asian countries, which are eager to receive capital to advance their economies. On the Southern side of China, the Himalayan Mountains make warfare very challenging and keeping a potential foe (India) at bay. In the East, there is the South China Sea, South-East Asian countries and Taiwan with American support that challenges the positions of the country.

The challenges China has to tackle in order to advance its position are located in the East and Southwest. Taiwan is a major issue where the national interest of China, and decades of American diplomacy will potentially clash. The American attitude towards Taiwan is a de facto defence pact that ought to deter China from taking the island. China tries to deny statehood from Taiwan (successfully). The

American navy has to carry out naval operations and make informal and verbal assurances to Taiwan in order to show its commitment towards the independence of the island. [8]

Chinese aggressive measures such as the crackdown in Hong Kong or in Xinjiang region show the major human rights problems the Chinese system produces. The more Western-oriented Taiwan does not see mainland China a state that it should join voluntarily. China started to forget that power politics are not always the best way to achieve goals in international politics. Smart power strategies, such as using diplomacy, institutions, economic influence and culture may prove to be more successful in the 21st century. [9] Voters in democratic countries pressure politicians when it comes to the question of international relations. As neorealist theory predicts, foreign policy is influenced not just by systemic factors, but by domestic ones as well. The East Asian giant has been making it more difficult for itself to achieve certain limited goals.

BALANCE OF POWER AFTER THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has been altering the balance of power in international politics since the beginning of 2020. The pandemic has been ravaging economies all over the world and causing disturbances around the globe. This major health crisis has shown how different the international arena is now, compared to its previous form in the 1990's or early 2000's.

The United States with its inward looking population and nationalist president did not make the necessary preparations to counter the spread of the virus in the United States. The incompetent response of the USA made international cooperation very hard against the virus. The primus inter pares does not behave as it should be, if it would like to maintain good relations around the globe.

Poorer countries that need assistance whether it be in the economic or healthcare sector are looking for patrons and allies to weather a storm like the coronavirus. If they cannot hope for support from the USA, they will look for leadership elsewhere.

The Chinese government initially tried to downplay the severity of the virus, but eventually with drastic measures managed to stabilize the situation. Later, when the virus reached Europe, it sold medical equipment for them. Meanwhile, the United States did not step up in the international field, and did not utilize the international institutions to handle the crisis. The UN, the IMF, the World Bank, the WHO etc. could have been a major player in a crisis where the whole globe is affected. Instead, it seems that the United States started to isolate itself from the rest of the world. President Trump wants to get out of the WHO, and the American government attempted to divert the vaccine projects in other countries to its own gains. [10] These seemingly selfish and unproductive acts damage the public

image of the United States in a time, when soft power capabilities are a necessity to bloodlessly resolve conflicts.

BALANCE OR BANDWAGON

The countries in the East Asian region have to choose a strategy when it comes to China. Balance the rising power or bandwagon with it. These two options have several advantages and disadvantages as well.

Bandwagoning yields more gains in the short term. It means siding with China and letting investments flow freely and tightening economic cooperation with the country as much as possible. This strategy brings faster economic development. China can make enormous investments in a smaller East Asian country boosting its GDP in the short term to gain political leverage over it.

However, a close alliance with China comes at a cost. China is not a satisfied country, it has claims in the South China Sea, and inevitably, it will clash with other powers, most likely directly or indirectly with the USA in the foreseeable future. This clash will most likely bring economic sanctions that can hurt the allies of China as well. Furthermore, since many countries have clashing national interests with China, the relations with anti-Chinese countries will deteriorate which can isolate a country which bandwagons with the East Asian power.

Balancing strategies seem to be the more prudent choices especially in the long run. The defence of the status quo means for some countries, defending the national interest. The status quo's main defender is the United States. It is active in the region that is the reason why East Asian countries should look for the USA when they are trying to defend their positions against China. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei and Indonesia are threatened by the aspiring Chinese ambitions. India and Russia are both in a position where balancing should be considered. They are both nuclear powers, which gives them more security, and India and China has been already clashing over some border disputes. [11] If India would not like to see increased Chinese influence around the Indian Ocean, it had to take steps that are more active. Russia cannot ally with its former Cold War rival the United States, especially because they have clashing interest in Europe and in the Middle East. The case of Ukraine and Syria clearly show why Russia sometimes sides with China, especially in the UN Security Council. However, the threatening proximity of China will force the hands of Russia if China focuses more on the northern regions of the country.

RESULTS

THE RETURN OF GREAT POWER POLITICS?

The United States has been the strongest economic and military power since the end of the Second World War. The Soviet Union tried to balance the power of

the country, but in the end, this struggle resulted in the dissolution of the USSR. The 1990's brought a seemingly unchallenged primacy of the United States, some declared it to be the era of unipolarity. [12]

This unparalleled superpower faced several non-state actors such as Al-Qaeda, which diverted the attention of the international relations scholars from conflicts between state actors to conflicts between state and non-state actors. The quagmires of Iraq and Afghanistan tied up American forces and attention. Meanwhile, state actors resurfaced as a challenge to the status quo. Russia has been an active player, especially in Ukraine. The Russian threat is nothing new to the United States nor is it a substantial foe in the sphere of American influence. Russia may regain some of its former sphere of influence especially in Eastern Europe, but NATO member states are located in Europe to mitigate the threat Russia poses. It is highly unlikely that Russia could achieve much besides keeping Belarus and Ukraine out of the Western alliance.

The other major challenger is the rising China. The United States has to devote a substantial amount of attention and resources in order to stop the spread of Chinese influence around the globe. China is a continental-sized power with steadily improving technological capabilities that can seriously threaten the status quo the USA built in the 20th century. Most prominent example of the Chinese ambitions is the overseas military base in Djibouti. [13] A military base outside of China can bolster the power projection capabilities of the country tremendously.

The United States has to use hard balancing strategies, such as naval exercises, and arms build-up in order to match the coming blue water navy of China. Aircraft carriers are excellent tools to patrol the Western side of the Pacific since the United States is located many miles from the shores of East Asia.

Soft balancing strategies such as trade agreements, economic sanctions and cultural diplomacy can strengthen the position of the United States as well. China is more and more assertive and its aggressive actions can be counterproductive. The United States as the bulwark of human rights and Western style liberal democracy can gather allies in several countries and territories such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and even in mainland China for example in Hong Kong. A country with internal turmoil is always weaker than a unified one. If China has to deal with its internal ethnic minorities such as the Uighurs in the Xingjian region, and the pro-democracy advocates in Hong Kong, it is much harder for Xi Jinping to focus on applying pressure abroad.

Asymmetrical balancing strategies include using non-state actors against China in order to increase the cost of gaining power. The above-mentioned ethnic minorities and ideological allies of the West can be bolstered, and encouraged by the United States to rebel against the authoritarian Chinese rule.

In my opinion, with these strategies, the United States can maintain its primacy in the international system. However, the cost of these measures are enormous. The American public is not that eager to project the influence of the United States all over the world as they were before. The cost of several foreign interventions made the public disillusioned. I believe the solution for this problem is the relinquishing of responsibilities around the globe where the national interest of the United States is not, or barely involved. In my opinion, it is time to rely on the alliance system instead of going in alone. The European countries can contribute more for the defence of the continent against Russia. Furthermore, France has already carrying out anti-terrorist operations in Africa. [14] With the help of the USA's allies, the unipolar world ceases to exist. Multipolarity and great power politics can reappear in the coming years, although the United States could remain the strongest player in the system. In my opinion, without sharing the responsibilities to counter every threat, the United States cannot maintain its positions and fight several threats at the same time with success.

CONCLUSION

The competition for dominance over East Asia between the United States and China is a major conflict in the 21st century. As the relative power of China increases, its ambitions are increasing as well. This systemic pressure pushes the United States and several East Asian countries to either bandwagon or balances the rising threat of China. The more prudent behaviour is to balance against it with hard, soft and asymmetrical balancing strategies. Unit level factors, such as the disillusioned American population decreases the resources the government of the USA could utilize in order to counter this threat. The previous costly and failed foreign interventions pushes the United States to rely on allies more heavily than before. The coming decades will show whether the United States can keep its influence, markets and positions in East Asia. Curbing Chinese ambitions by increasing their costs with balancing strategies is the best way to keep the competition for the region under control. The USA have to carefully devise its strategies to reach its foreign policy goals, otherwise, the domination of East Asian would mean the end of the American supremacy in international relations.

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