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USA, the overstretched power and the People's Republic of China, the worried power

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Abstract:

The North American hope, once the Cold War was over, to reduce its military presence all around the world, and the possibility to lead from the rear, faded in the face of the challenge that the revived Asian power, the People's Republic of China, poses to Washington. The proliferation of extremely serious conflicts prevents the long-awaited leading from behind, and makes the United States an overstressed power.

The difficulties in the Chinese economy, the persistent tensions with neighbouring countries and with the American naval formations, and the ever present question of the long-awaited incorporation of Taiwan to the map of the People's Republic, all are the cause of concern that the hermetic regime in Beijing can barely hide.

The final state of the reconfiguration of international relations in its transition from Western-style multilateralism to an asymmetric multipolar order will depend on how the two superpowers resolve their rivalry.

Keywords:

Conflictivity, competition, coexistence.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE) or the Ministry of Defence.

Una potencia estresada, EE. UU., y otra preocupada, la RP China

Resumen:

La esperanza norteamericana, una vez superada la Guerra Fría, de rebajar su presencia militar en el mundo y pasar a liderar desde la retaguardia, se desvaneció ante el reto que la revivida potencia asiática, la República Popular China, plantea a Washington en estos momentos. La proliferación de conflictos, de extrema gravedad, impiden el añorado *leading from behind*, y hace de los Estados Unidos una potencia estresada.

Las dificultades en la economía china, así como las persistentes tensiones en sus mares interiores, tanto con los países vecinos como con las formaciones aeronavales estadounidenses, con el foco puesto siempre en la incorporación de Taiwán al mapa de la República Popular, son causa de preocupación que el hermético régimen de Pekín apenas puede disimular.

De cómo solventen su rivalidad los dos gigantes dependerá el estado final de la reconfiguración de las relaciones internacionales en su transición del multilateralismo de corte occidental a un orden multipolar asimétrico.

Palabras clave:

Conflictividad, competición, coexistencia.

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"In my opinion, the fate of humanity depends on whether the United States and China can get along. I think the rapid progress of AI, in particular, leaves them only five to ten years to find a way"

H. Kissinger
17th May 2023.

The collision course on which the United States and the People's Republic of China appear to be engaged is the most decisive factor in the uncertain future of the reconfiguration of the international order. And a kinder possibility does not seem to be on the horizon. Despite certain encouraging signs regarding relations between the two giants such as the opening of military communication channels, undeniable risks remain, such as the future of Taiwan. And, moreover, a question of equal concern on both sides of the Pacific: Will Donald Trump become the President of the United States again?



The United States: the overstretched power

The end of the Cold War, a victory for a Euro-Atlantic community that had lived on the brink of the nuclear abyss for decades, ushered in a state of euphoria, especially promising for the only superpower at the time. The incipient *Pax Americana* was born without an expiry date and the United States was preparing to resize its military presence beyond its borders. In both Europe and the Middle East, a few thousand troops would be sufficient, and even in other less demanding scenarios, something more nominal. This resizing had barely begun when the 9/11 attacks took place, followed by the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq; the failed Arab Spring, with the Syrian war as the most decisive chapter; the emergence of Daesh and the proclamation of the Caliphate; and Russia's war against Ukraine, which began in 2014. And in the Pacific, the challenge posed by the impressive resurgence of the People's Republic of China, a major concern to which Washington would like to devote all its efforts.

Since worries, like misfortunes, never come alone, it is not only China that questions US hegemony. Russia, Iran and North Korea are particularly keen to set fire to each and every one of those scenarios that Washington would like, if not to disengage from, then at least to monitor from the rear, i.e., *leading from behind*. But this is no longer possible. Europe is living through its most critical moments since the now-distant end of the Cold War. The stabilisation of much of the Middle East heralded by the Abraham Accords collapsed on 7th October 2023. In Africa, there is a succession of coups d'état where the common denominator in many of them is the expulsion of the former colonial powers to make way for other actors, especially but not only, China and Russia. On the Asia-Pacific rim, North Korean provocations against neighbouring Japan and incidents between Chinese or Russian and Western naval and air forces are frequent, and Beijing's disputes with the countries bordering China's internal seas (the Philippines, Vietnam...) fuel permanent tension in the region. North America is no stranger to all of these circumstances.

Of all the revisionist powers, it is China that most worries Washington, more than the Soviet Union did at the time. Because America's credibility then was unquestionable; since the USSR never matched its rival beyond military, especially, yes, nuclear matters; and because China today is seen in the White House as a commercial, technological...

and soon, also, military *peer-competitor*. All of which paints a radically different picture from the one imagined during the brief *Pax Americana*.

Far from downsizing its global commitments, the United States inevitably feels compelled to admit that it has become "The overstretched Superpower"¹. Faced with such a challenge, the question circulating inside and outside the country is whether such a fragmented and, according to some analysts, dysfunctional society is best placed to deal with it². America's once-undisputed ability to impose its will has been challenged by the poor results of military interventions over the past two decades, and US credibility suffered a serious blow with the hasty and chaotic withdrawal from Kabul in August 2021. Its deterrence suffers when a sitting president, in this case Trump, claimed that NATO was an obsolete tool, and reiterates this criticism now in his re-election campaign.

The response to such a challenge cannot be long in coming. It is precisely in the military area that this response is most evident: in recent years, US military spending has continued to increase, widening the gap with other countries, including China. This has been aided by the shortfalls in capabilities and stockpiles of material and ammunition of all kinds that the invasion of Ukraine has shed light on. The Biden administration has also stepped up its efforts to counter Chinese penetration in the so-called global south by convening summits of democracies to which it has invited more than 100 countries, or through similar regional initiatives in Africa and Latin America. On a more practical note, the recent presentation of the **India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC³)**, an ambitious bid to oppose China's veteran *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)* also called the new Silk Road, is worth mentioning.

An essential element for the United States to reduce this overstretching is to share the burden with friends and allies, albeit partially. The European Union, the United Kingdom, Japan, South Korea and Australia, and perhaps also India and the Gulf monarchies, to

¹ BRANDS, Hal.. "The Overstretched Superpower". 18th January 2022. Available at:

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-01-18/overstretched-superpower>

Note: All hyperlinks are active as of 13th March 2024.

² GATES, Robert M. "The Dysfunctional Superpower. Can a Divided America Deter China and Russia?". 29th September 2023. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/usa/robert-gates-america-china-russia-dysfunctional-superpower>

³ "IMEC: India and US-led Counter Initiative to BRI", *The Geopolitics*. 25th September 2023 Available at: <https://thegeopolitics.com/imec-india-and-us-led-counter-initiative-to-bri/>

name but a few, will be willing to share this burden, but always according to their own interests which may not entirely match those of the United States, in addition to their fears of alienating the People's Republic of China, a player as fearsome as it is inevitable. And even if there is complete harmony, in terms of military capabilities all of them are light years behind the US, so it is unrealistic to think that these allies can do without Washington in conflicts that require the military deployment, especially when this includes high-intensity warfare. The war in Ukraine once again abounds in this reality. To ease its burdens, the United States requires greater involvement from its NATO allies and increased payment for their own security, now clearly at stake in the face of Russian aggression, and to join it on its collision course with China in the Indo-Pacific waters. Hence, NATO's new Strategic Concept, approved at Madrid in 2022, mentions the challenge posed to the Alliance by the Asian giant.

The major problem for the United States, however, is not just the reluctance of its allies or fears of adversaries, but rather, an internal one. The ongoing fracture within US society not only prevents focusing on the challenges posed by third parties but does not even allow for agreement on how to properly identify and assess the magnitude of the problem. As a result, it will not be easy to be aware of what is at stake, to design the strategies, and allocate the necessary means to achieve the desired objectives.

China: the worried power

The economy has been the Communist Party's greatest trump card in consolidating its undisputed hegemony and legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese population. The crisis unleashed by the pandemic was managed by the government with a draconian policy of disease control during the closure of society in the critical phase and subsequently with the so-called zero-COVID policy. Since then, the bad news has been repeated. The Chinese economy is slowing down steadily, which is to some extent logical as double-digit growth figures could not be sustained indefinitely. The real estate bubble has caused the bankruptcy of the giant Evergrande, and there is no reason to believe that it will be the last. The pandemic and the Party's increased control over the country's economy have strained growth indicators, which point to a soft landing? State interventionism also

casts doubt on the country's solvency for foreign investors, who fear that at any moment the government could implement unorthodox measures⁴.

Several dark clouds are looming in the short term. The next US President, whether Biden or Trump, will persist in the economic and technological war, seeking to disconnect the two economies, which will inevitably damage the Chinese economy. The chronification of the war in Ukraine will continue to trigger new rounds of sanctions against Russia, which are already beginning to expressly include Chinese companies, blamed for their support for Moscow's war effort⁵. A possible closure of the Red Sea trade route, subject to tensions caused by attacks on shipping by Houthi rebels, would not be good news for a trading giant like China either. Neighbouring India, in turn, presents its commercial, industrial, demographic, geopolitical and military credentials on which to base its desire to sit, on an equal footing, at the great power table. On top of all this, there are tensions with almost all the countries bordering China's inland seas, an obligatory trade route for this commercial giant with the rest of the world.

And finally, Taiwan, an illusion that can turn into a nightmare. The island is inalienable for Beijing: the reunification of the Chinese homeland must and will be achieved. It is with this forcefulness that President Xi makes clear his government's determination in this regard. Now that the peaceful option, discredited by the evidence of its failure in Hong Kong, has been closed, all that remains is recourse to more aggressive measures, from economic blockade to military intervention. But the chances of a successful invasion in force clash with the uninspiring example of the entrenched war in Ukraine. Lai Ching-te's victory in January's Taiwanese elections is yet another cold water on Beijing's plans for peaceful rapprochement with the rebel island. In short, it is not clear what to do with Taiwan.

But China will not collapse. Because it is and will continue to be the great global trading power, advancing in its technological race and soon to become a military power as well. The Communist Party, i.e. President Xi, is in full control. And despite the disenchantment

⁴ "Foreign direct investment in China falls to lowest level in decades", *Financial Times*.. 19th February 2024 Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/bcb1d331-5d8e-4cac-811e-eac7d9448486>

⁵ «La UE aprueba el décimo tercer paquete de sanciones contra Rusia, que incluye empresas chinas», *El Economista*. 21st February 2024. Available at: <https://www.eleconomista.es/economia/noticias/12685271/02/24/la-ue-aprueba-el-decimo-tercer-paquete-de-sanciones-contra-rusia-que-incluye-empresas-chinas.html>

that the new Silk Road is causing in some recipients of Chinese aid, China is seen as a friendly power in the global south and leads or drives such powerful initiatives as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) or the recently expanded BRICS+ group.

When two elephants fight...

...it is the grass that suffers. This African saying could well sum up the sentiment of other international actors in light of the seemingly inevitable train wreck between Washington and Beijing. Nothing good can be expected if tensions between the two are not reduced, as their trade and technological war, through the exchange of vetoes and tariffs, and their dispute for world hegemony, inevitably has negative repercussions for international stability, for the progress of the world economy and for the management of transnational crises such as those caused by global warming, international crime, mass migratory movements or the revived arms race, conventional and nuclear.

Two giants in their labyrinth

In the preface to this article, Henry Kissinger expresses his concern that the two major powers are unable to find ways of detente, and not only in the area of artificial intelligence. If not in open cooperation, then at least in damage control mode. For the United States, the only possible way to reduce its overstretching a little would be to reach some kind of coexistence with China. A coexistence that is always tense but peaceful. For China, in turn, the same formula would allow it to dilute some of its concerns.

Whether they want to acknowledge it or not, both powers have good reasons, both internally and externally, to adopt a more pragmatic approach to their relations so that the worst-case scenario does not materialise. Attacks by various Iranian-backed militias against US targets in the Red Sea, Syria and Iraq show that Washington is no longer in a position to arbitrate disputes in the region or to impose definitive measures. That China's only remaining option for reintegrating Taiwan is coercion and the use of force, with all the doubts that this raises, is very worrying: success is not assured, failure would be unacceptable. Increased security efforts by neighbours, as well as closer ties with

Washington, have led Xi Jinping to tell delegates at the 20th Communist Party Congress that "we must be prepared to withstand strong winds, turbulent waters and even dangerous storms on our way".

Henry Kissinger passed away on 29th November 2023. His decisions when he held government responsibilities, or his analyses as an expert on history and international relations, have been highly controversial. His latest prediction, that the world has a meagre window of five to ten years to avoid the unthinkable, should be a powerful wake-up call for the overstretched power and the worried power to sit down and talk and search, together, for the emergency exit. That, or the unknown.

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