

The power struggle between the United States and China

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"As the United States and China deepen their geopolitical rivalry, the asymmetry in their strategic frameworks threatens to fracture the global system and forces middle powers to redefine their roles."

The confrontation between Washington and Beijing is neither a trade war nor a fleeting diplomatic spat. It is a structural and prolonged contest between two global actors operating under fundamentally incompatible strategic logics. This is not about isolated tariffs or disputes over 5G; it is about clashing conceptions of power, time, legitimacy, and the architecture of global order.

Washington plays on an open and pluralistic board. Its strategy is fluid, reactive, and often constrained by electoral cycles and media scrutiny. Power is measured in quarterly increments—economic growth, job creation, stock market returns, and technological primacy. U.S. dominance is exercised through institutions, alliances, and market rules—or, when necessary, through the ability to rewrite them.

Beijing, in contrast, pursues a long-term strategy grounded in a centralized, civilizational logic. It understands power as a continuous process, rooted in historical grievance, ideological continuity, and structural patience. Unlike Washington, it does not seek electoral validation or open institutions. Its strength lies not in immediate economic growth but in structural resilience, state-controlled social cohesion, and a methodical accumulation of influence across key global sectors.

The contrast is stark. Washington sees Beijing's resolve as expansionist and destabilizing. China, for its part, views containment measures—tariffs, tech sanctions, military pacts—as the convulsions of a declining hegemon clinging to a fading order. This strategic dissonance fuels a cycle of misperceptions and tit-for-tat escalation, reinforcing the belief on both sides that confrontation is not just likely, but inevitable.

This is what Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian, identified as a structural trap: "When a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one, the resulting tension makes war inevitable". Far from a mere historical analogy, this so-called "Thucydides Trap" suggests that conflict between China and the United States is likely—especially in the absence of credible and sustained containment mechanisms.

Not a Cold War Replay

This is not a remake of the Cold War. The U.S.-Soviet rivalry was defined by clear ideological blocs and nuclear deterrence. The present contest with China is far more complex: it combines deep economic interdependence with a rapid technological bifurcation in areas such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and 5G networks. This decoupling is not merely commercial—it has geostrategic consequences, as both blocs build parallel supply chains, digital infrastructures, and military alliances that reflect competing worldviews.

Unlike Japan in the 1980s, China is not seeking accommodation within a U.S.-led order. It is designing an alternative system—with its own rules, institutions, and spheres of influence.

The shift from Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and opening” to Xi Jinping’s “self-reliance and hard work” signals a deliberate move away from economic interdependence with the West. This is not rhetorical posturing: it entails massive investment in domestic technological capacity, strategic minerals, defence-related supply chains, and political loyalty. Xi’s diplomacy toward U.S. allies—from Europe to Southeast Asia—is not about integration but disruption: weakening the coalitions designed to contain China.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration’s selective imposition and suspension of tariffs fits within a broader narrative of “economic nationalism” dressed in the language of reciprocity. The message is clear: the U.S. will no longer abide by the rules of globalization if they constrain its unilateral action. But such a stance carries risks—inviting retaliation, miscalculation, and a shift toward transactional diplomacy among allies who once shared common norms.

Middle Powers at a Crossroads

In this fragmented environment, middle powers like the European Union and Latin American nations are not passive observers. They are being pulled into a polarization they did not choose and must now navigate without compromising their sovereignty.

For Latin America, the imperative is to resist binary alignment. The region’s geopolitical value lies in its ability to diversify partnerships while maintaining autonomy in energy, infrastructure, and digital governance. Succumbing to the U.S.-China dichotomy would reduce Latin America to a mere zone of influence—an outcome it has historically suffered and should now categorically reject.

Europe faces even greater risks. Brussels must transform its declarative rhetoric of “strategic autonomy” into concrete doctrine. Dependency on American security guarantees and Chinese supply chains has left the continent vulnerable on both fronts. A genuinely multipolar strategy—

featuring active industrial policy, scrutiny of strategic investments, and modernization of defence—is essential not only for Europe’s relevance but for the stability of the liberal order writ large.

A Clash That Redraws the Global Order

What we are witnessing is not simply a power transition—it is a clash between irreconcilable visions of how the international system should function. The U.S. and China are not just competitors; they operate within strategic frameworks, normative codes, and end goals that cannot coexist without persistent friction. This asymmetry is what makes the confrontation particularly volatile: there is no shared framework for understanding, no predictable channels of deterrence, and no agreed mechanisms for managing tension.

The coming decade will test not only the durability of U.S. and Chinese power—economic, military, technological—but also the ability of the rest of the world to avoid being drawn into a structural spiral of polarization. The Trump-Xi rivalry is more than a bilateral showdown: it is a systemic reconfiguration with the potential to splinter supply chains, paralyze multilateral institutions, and erode foundational norms of international law.

In this context, the shape of the next global order will depend less on who imposes their will and more on who can reinterpret the rules of coexistence between divergent civilizational models. Middle powers—from India to Brazil, from the EU to Indonesia—are no longer mere spectators or mediators. They are strategic actors whose alliance frameworks, regulatory choices, and technological bets will define the trajectory of the 21st century.

If this rivalry escalates without credible guardrails, it could devolve into a prolonged and open confrontation—with unpredictable consequences for humanity. This is no longer just about trade, influence, or security. At stake is the very manner in which nations will coexist—or collapse together—in an era of fragile interdependence.