

**“HISTORY WILL SURELY NAIL WASHINGTON ON THE
PILLAR OF SHAME”**

Foreign Policy Rhetoric of the Global Times

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Master's Thesis
Political Science
Department of Social Sciences
and Philosophy
University of Jyväskylä
Fall 2023

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

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| Title "History Will Surely Nail Washington on the Pillar of Shame" Foreign Policy Rhetoric of the Global Times | |
| Subject Political Science | Degree submitted for: Master's Thesis |
| Month and year September 2023 | Number of pages 101 |
| Supervisors Sergei Prozorov, Pekka Korhonen | |
| Abstract This thesis analyzes the rhetoric of the English-language edition of the Global Times, which is a Chinese foreign policy-focused tabloid under the ownership of the People's Daily, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China. The Global Times is known for its nationalist and hawkish editorials, which are often widely reported in the Western media. A selection of editorials from 2021 are examined with the help of Chaïm Perelman's rhetorical theory, in conjunction with recent academic and other literature related to the discussed topics. The Global Times saw the United States as China's greatest global challenge and Washington's influence was regarded as crucial in international affairs overall as the "puppet master" behind all the Western and West-aligned countries. China's rise was seen as inevitable, while the US was portrayed as being in a deep internal crisis, while its "hegemonic" global position was also in decline, as showcased by the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Notably, the traditional roles of China and the United States were reversed: China was portrayed as the new champion of globalization, free trade and international cooperation, while the latter was increasingly divided, selfish, and paralyzed. China was depicted as its own type of democracy that was more goal-oriented than the declining Western democracy. China's success in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and eliminating absolute poverty furthermore showed the superiority of its model. At the same time, China respected international rules, upheld the authority of the UN and didn't intend to replace the US-led global order, instead Beijing focused purely on its own development. | |
| Keywords China, rhetoric, foreign policy, international politics, United States, Global Times | |
| Depository University of Jyväskylä | |
| Additional information | |

JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

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| Tiedekunta Humanistis-yhteiskuntatieteellinen | Laitos Yhteiskuntatieteiden ja filosofian |
| Tekijä Kimmo Laine | |
| Työn nimi "History Will Surely Nail Washington on the Pillar of Shame" Foreign Policy Rhetoric of the Global Times | |
| Oppiaine Politiikantutkimus | Työn tyyppi Pro gradu -tutkielma |
| Aika Syyskuu 2023 | Sivumäärä 101 |
| Ohjaajat Sergei Prozorov, Pekka Korhonen | |
| Tiivistelmä Tämä tutkielma analysoi Global Times -lehden englanninkielisen version retoriikkaa. Global Times on ulkopoliittikaan keskittynyt tabloidi, joka on Kiinan kommunistisen puolueen pää-äänenkannattajan Kansan päivälehdessä. Global Times on tunnettu sen nationalistisista ja hyökkäävistä pääkirjoituksistaan, jotka usein huomioidaan länsimaalaisessa mediassa. Tutkielmassa tarkastellaan valikoimaa pääkirjoituksia vuodelta 2021 Chaïm Perelmanin retoriikkateorian avulla, yhdistettynä viimeaikaiseen akateemiseen ja muuhun kirjallisuuteen, jotka liittyvät käsitelyihin aiheisiin. Global Times piti Yhdysvaltoja Kiinan suurimpana globaalina haasteena ja Washingtonin vaikutusvallan nähtiin olevan ratkaisevassa asemassa kansainvälisissä kysymyksissä ylipäätään sen ollessa "takapiruuna" kaikkien länsimielisten maiden takana. Kiinan nousu nähtiin väajämättömänä, samalla kun Yhdysvallat oli syvässä sisäisessä kriisissä. Sen "hegemoninen" kansainvälinen asema oli myös heikentymässä, minkä perääntyminen Afganistanista osoitti. Huomionarvoisesti Kiinan ja Yhdysvaltojen perinteiset roolit oli käännetty pääläelleen: Kiina esitettiin globalisaation, vapaakaupan ja kansainvälisen yhteistyön esitaistelijana, samalla kun Washington oli jakaantunut, itsekeskeinen ja lamaantunut. Kiina esitettiin omanlaisenaan demokratiana, joka oli päämäärätietoisempi kuin heikkenevä länsimainen demokratia. Kiinan menestys koronaviruksen vastaisessa taistelussa ja äärimmäisen köyhyyden poistamisessa lisäksi osoitti sen järjestelmän ylivoimaisuuden. Siitä huolimatta Kiina noudatti kansainvälisiä pelisääntöjä, ylläpiti YK:n auktoriteettia ja ei pyrkinyt korvaamaan Yhdysvaltojen johtamaa kansainvälistä järjestystä, vaan sen sijaan se keskittyi vain omaan kehitykseensä. | |
| Asiasanat Kiina, retoriikka, ulkopoliittika, kansainvälinen politiikka, Yhdysvallat, Global Times | |
| Säilytyspaikka Jyväskylän yliopisto | |
| Muita tietoja | |

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1 INTRODUCTION

My master's thesis analyzes the rhetoric of Global Times' (Huanqiu Shibao, 环球时报) editorials from 2021. The Global Times is a Chinese tabloid under the ownership of the People's Daily, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China (CPC). It's known for its hawkish and confrontational editorials, which are often quoted by the Western media. The more aggressive tone differentiates it from the mostly dreary and dry Chinese mainstream media. The Global Times was established in 1993 and it launched an English language edition, the topic of this thesis, in 2009.

At the time of writing in 2023, the CPC is now the longest-reigning communist party in history. Few scholars in 1991 would have expected it to still be in power on its 100th anniversary thirty years later, let alone arguably in a stronger position than during any other era of the People's Republic of China (PRC). After all, in the early 1990s, "the history had ended", as the political scientist Francis Fukuyama put it; the Soviet Union had collapsed, in China the Tiananmen protests had been crushed and Western political and economic institutions had won the competition of rivaling social systems. However, the CPC learned from the crises of the Soviet Union and other authoritarian systems and contrary to predictions, China's political system hasn't collapsed nor has it even become more like that of the West. If anything it has become more authoritarian in the 2010s. Overall, China's political system has shown great capability to adapt as well as show continuity during great social and international change. China has followed its own path both in economics and politics, without caring much about what outsiders think. Today, an increasingly assertive China is openly stating that its decades-long economic success is due to its political system.

In regards to its political system, China can be described as a party-state in which the party and the state function as one entity in practice, while formally being different organizations. The CPC itself doesn't like this concept because of the implication that the party holds the reins of power and not the people, and it's banned in public de-

bate for this reason. At all levels of the government, there are representatives of both the party and the state, and the party is always in a higher position. At times, however, both positions are held by the same person or entity, which has two slightly different titles with slightly different missions. In practice, the highest decision-making body is the Politburo Standing Committee of the Central Committee of the CPC, which currently consists of seven members. Nominally the highest entity however is the Party Congress, held every five years.¹

1.1 Strategic Rivalry

China's economy has been growing very rapidly since its reform and opening-up period began in the late 1970s. Generally speaking since the end of the Cold War, Sino-US relations were stable and China kept a relatively low international profile until the 2010s. However, the international situation has been rapidly changing since then, as China's economic scale has reached a level where it's able to challenge the global predominance of the United States. At the same time, Chinese foreign policy has become increasingly assertive. This became especially clear after Xi Jinping rose to power in 2012. Today, China is seen as the undisputed number one challenger to the US-led global order in the US, whereas in China, the United States is regarded as an increasingly hostile power that is trying to keep China down. In this context, the so-called Thucydides's Trap, a term popularized by Graham Allison, is based on the idea that a war is likely when a resentful rising power, in this case China, challenges the existing great power, referring today to the United States. This notion has been disputed, as China has also benefited from the existing international order, but it and the overall power transition is one of the most important questions in International Relations (IR) today.²

When it comes to China's international outlook, the Beijing consensus is an increasingly discussed potential alternative to the Washington consensus and US-led world order that was initially mainly developed by Western scholars. However, the concept has now spread to the party rhetoric as well. The latter focused on liberalization and the reduction of state power, the former in contrast highlights the importance of innovation and sovereignty. For a long time, the Chinese government was wary of proclamations that it would attempt to spread its model outside of its borders. During Xi's tenure, however, Chinese leaders have increasingly confidently hailed the advantages of China's political and economic systems. This confidence has further increased due to Western crises, like the financial crisis, the European debt crisis, and finally COVID-19. The Beijing consensus has been especially hotly

¹Mattlin et al. 2022, 85-97.

²Lanteigne 2020, 143.

debated in developing countries as China has increased its influence in Latin, America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Central Asia. Beijing doesn't have as many preconditions for economic cooperation as Western countries, which makes it especially appealing to other authoritarian countries.³

After the end of the Cold War, Deng Xiaoping proclaimed that China would not take a leading position in international affairs, but instead would keep a low profile. At the same time, it rhetorically supported the creation of a multipolar world order. From the Chinese perspective, the existence of blocs was a historical leftover. In the early 2020s, the Chinese leaders still urged the West to abandon their "Cold War mentality." The 1990s were a challenging time in US-China relations, and the so-called "China threat theory" was increasingly popular among American foreign policy theorists. However, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 changed US priorities. A few years later in 2003, the "China's Peaceful Rise" slogan was coined by Hu Jintao. It was almost a direct counter to the American hegemonic war theory. This thesis was however already abandoned in 2004. It was regarded to be too optimistic and as such, even working against its intended goal of showing China as a peaceful developing country. Consequently, it was replaced by the "peaceful development" and "harmonious world" principles. During Xi's tenure, these were supplemented with additional slogans of China as an "important and responsible country," which pursues a "community of common destiny for mankind" and practices a new kind of great power diplomacy that benefits all countries and not only China.⁴

China officially strongly denies the existence of a bipolar world with China as one of the poles, despite increased assertiveness. This can partly be explained by China's need to appear as a moral great power. In Chinese thinking, bipolarity is connected to Cold War-era power politics, whereas multipolarity is said to enable the realization of moral principles in addition to economic and scientific progress. The Chinese leadership has consistently taken a negative attitude towards the G2 or any other similar entities that would potentially recognize its status as one of the two superpowers on the global stage.⁵

"Keeping a low profile," the slogan during Deng Xiaoping and for a few decades afterward, was intended to ensure a peaceful international environment for economic development. However, Xi has taken a different path as China's leadership's confidence has grown. The new slogan, "striving for achievement," reflects this change. Beijing is no longer fully satisfied with the state of the world. Instead of passivity amidst changes in the international situation, China is now

³Lanteigne 2020, 11, 67, 78-79.

⁴Mattlin et al. 2022, 269-274.

⁵Zhou 2019, 23-24, 29-32, 37.

taking the initiative in actively shaping its external environment. Overall, in the Chinese foreign policy rhetoric, the concept of core interests is constantly mentioned. The exact definition varies, but at the general level core interests include safeguarding the political system and national security; maintaining national sovereignty and territorial integrity; and securing continued economic and social development.⁶

In the 2020s Chinese leaders openly talk about the superiority of their political system, the “China model,” and how other developing countries could learn from it. Beijing has also taken increasingly tougher measures in what it considers its periphery, in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong. Furthermore, Xi has underlined the importance of soft power. This demonstrates that the leadership is disappointed about the lack of respect towards China and its global position internationally. To improve its soft power, China is attempting to increase the profile of its own media content internationally and develop home-grown theories in social sciences, including in IR. Soft power also serves the “Chinese Dream” because it’s thought to improve national prosperity, promote national rejuvenation, and increase national happiness. That said, when it comes to China’s soft power efforts, the party’s interference and repetition of the party line are seen as limiting factors by many observers.⁷

During the first decades of the reform era, China largely focused on internal economic and social development. In particular, after the 2008 Financial Crisis the situation started slowly changing, however, and China is acting increasingly confidently. In contrast to his predecessors, Xi has in many ways stressed the importance of foreign relations. The massive Belt and Road initiative, the creation of the National Security Commission, China’s active role in the founding of several multilateral international institutions, and the creation of China Global Television Network (CGTN) are examples of this. Some Chinese diplomats have also actively supported an increasingly assertive approach, especially since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, showcased by their active and at times even verbally aggressive use of foreign social media like Twitter. These diplomats have been named “wolf warriors” after a Chinese action film series. Some Western observers have warned that this kind of approach is harmful to China itself. It has been popular among domestic audiences, however, and the Global Times has praised wolf warriors as the true voice of Chinese public opinion.⁸

⁶Yan 2014, 153-155, 166; Chen & Liu 2019, 63.

⁷Mattlin et al. 2022, 292-293.

⁸Dai & Luqiu 2022, 254-256, 258-259; Lanteigne 2020, 40, 114.

At the same time, the nature of China's political system has been changing. One defining feature of the system as it stands today is that public image has become increasingly important as China's international role has grown. In this environment, old organizations have been retrofitted for new roles and the number of foreign policy actors has increased quite rapidly.⁹ This increase has been described as a major problem in decision making and it has given opportunities for public commentators, among them foreign policy hawks, to influence events. Today, there's more space for, hawkish and otherwise, public commentary, and the role of *Global Times* is an important part of this development.¹⁰ Overall, the relationship between the media and the foreign policy-making process has become more interactive and symbiotic. The media "helps shape the agenda for foreign policy-makers, narrow down the set of policy options, change the pace of policymaking and implementation, and influence the direction of the final decision."¹¹ However, the government is still in control and if a need arises, it takes control back "through various internal and external mechanisms."¹²

In China, propaganda refers to political information transmission and enlightenment. From the point of view of the party-state, the concept doesn't have a negative connotation as it does in the West, where it's understood as biased and often untruthful messaging. For the party-state, propaganda is messaging through which it communicates to citizens how things really are and what and how they should be thought of and discussed politically. In this way, individuals and society are shaped towards the right kind of civilization. In the mid-1990s the ownership base of news organizations changed, and only the *People's Daily* and *CCTV1* remained under the direct ownership of the state, which led to commercialization. This in turn led to a massive increase in the number of publications. The internet media has changed the media landscape further and China has also started exporting its media content as part of the "go abroad" strategy. As a consequence of commercialization, scandalous reporting, and investigative journalism increased as a way to increase audiences. That said, the state has again increased its control in the 2010s. As a result, today the state is in a dominating position, but the relationship is situational and nuanced.¹³

There is an ongoing debate on whose views does the *Global Times* actually represent. According to the long-time editor-in-chief, Hu Xijin, the publication reflects the real, but private, opinions of party officials amid growing nationalism in the country. Although Hu doesn't personally write all the editorials himself, he used

⁹Jakobson & Manuel 2016, 105.

¹⁰Jakobson & Manuel 2016, 105-108.

¹¹Wang & Wang 2014, 216.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Mattlin et al. 2022, 191-195.

to closely monitor the process behind their editing and publication before his retirement in December 2021. Hu's view is disputed, however, and some argue that even though the interests of the government and the publication do often overlap, they are by no means identical and the more assertive editorial line is due to its being more commercially oriented than most official publications. Its position under the People's Daily allows it more leeway, especially when it comes to international affairs.¹⁴

Analyzing the Global Times is important because it's one of the main Chinese publications aimed at international audiences and there are reasons to believe that it at the very least represents the views of Chinese nationalism, which is becoming increasingly influential in China's foreign policy. As China's international influence grows at a rapid pace and its relations with the US and the US-led international system become increasingly strained, it's crucially important to understand how China sees the current state of the world and how it wants it to be changed.

IR theory offers different explanations for the development of US-China relations after the Cold War. One theoretical framework is that of realism, and today John Mearsheimer is one of the most influential proponents of it. Furthermore, it has also been argued that Chinese scholars and policymakers "think about the world in realist terms." For that reason, especially considering that the Global Times represents the more nationalist voices in the country, it's worthwhile to consider how this intensifying rivalry is seen in Mearsheimer's writings. Mearsheimer (2021) argues that after the end of the Cold War, the US was the sole superpower without any peer or arguably even near-peer rivals. China was still poverty-stricken and weak. However, it had a lot of potential, considering that China's population was more than four times larger than that of the US' and it was also undergoing an economic reform; population size and economic strength being the two main ingredients of military power. Based on the theory of offensive realism, stronger China was inevitably going to confront the US and its position in Asia, so it was in Washington's interests to slow China down. Despite this, the opposite ended up happening, and the US tried to integrate China into the global system, based on what Mearsheimer calls "misguided theories" about liberalism's certain victory and the outdatedness of great-power competition, as both Democratic and Republican presidents followed a policy of engagement. The result of this policy was a disaster from the American point of view, as China ended up becoming more repressive domestically and increasingly ambitious abroad, leading to a rivalry and the end of unipolarity.¹⁵

¹⁴Larson 2011; Huang 2016b.

¹⁵Kyeyune 2023; Mearsheimer 2021, 1-9.

Somewhat surprisingly, Mearsheimer writes that this Cold War is also more likely to turn hot, contrary to the common view because dividing lines in the Pacific are less clearly demarcated than the Iron Curtain. China acts exactly as one would expect based on the theory of realism. No one can blame China for aiming to dominate Asia and become the most powerful state on earth; the US acts exactly in the same way. And now it's finally determined to stop China's rise, which inevitably leads to competition and conflict, which in Mearsheimer's words is the "tragedy of great-power politics." While this rivalry was inevitable, the pace and extent of China's rise was not. In fact, engagement is possibly the biggest strategic blunder by any country for some time, as no equivalent instance of great power emboldening the rise of its rival exists, and it's now too late.¹⁶

Great powers are condemned to engage in competition because no higher authority exists on the global stage. The best way to survive in an anarchic world is to be the most powerful actor, which in practice means being dominant in one's own hemisphere and ensuring no other powers dominate their near abroad. The US foreign policy has followed this logic since its inception and today China is acting based on this same principle. A democratic China would be no different. However liberal triumphalism assumed that peace could be preserved and strengthened by spreading democracy, promoting an open economy, and strengthening international institutions. Beijing was expected to become part of the US-led system eventually. In Mearsheimer's view, the level of support for this strategy in Washington was remarkable considering the risks involved. The Trump administration finally abandoned this policy in 2017, and Biden has maintained the stance of his predecessor since becoming president in 2021.¹⁷

1.2 The Global Times

As mentioned, during Xi Jinping's tenure, the concept of soft power has been emphasized in China. The concept of discourse power often appears in Chinese commentary in connection with this. It describes what types of speech are dominant in the field of ideas and values. This is increasingly seen as an area of life and death for the Chinese political system. China has a need to control the narrative on its rise. This is one of the reasons why Global Times is published in English as well. In addition, scholars are invited to create Chinese international political theories as alternatives to Western ideas. Both are seen as ways for China to increase its discourse power. Discourse power is just one component of comprehensive power, a multifaceted view of great power competition. Overall, China's soft power is still

¹⁶Mearsheimer 2021, 1-9.

¹⁷Ibid.

way below its potential, however. But in China, it is regarded as an arena of ideological great power competition, as well as a part of its ideological and political security.¹⁸

China's public diplomacy strategy has focused on promoting its culture and foreign policy as a way to increase its soft power. In the reform era, the three major goals have been to portray China as a hardworking country that is aiming to improve the living standards of its people; a stable and responsible economic partner that should not be feared; and a responsible member of the international community that contributes to world peace. Since the 2000s, during the rise of the "China threat" theory in the West, China's policymakers have been promoting the peaceful rise argument through a charm offensive, which hasn't always been successful as Western suspicions have been strong. In this context it is unsurprising that in addition to the official charm offensive diplomacy, there has simultaneously been a more pessimistic belief about the country's relationship with the West. This realist, conservative point of view hasn't often been exhibited overtly in official statements or diplomacy, but it has never been too far away from semi-official narratives, even already during Deng's low-profile era.¹⁹

Research suggests that Chinese leaders are under heavy domestic pressure to act belligerently internationally and as a result, they cannot allow themselves to appear weak with foreign rivals. Despite advanced censorship methods, modern communication and social technologies mean that nationalistic sentiments and news can spread rapidly online. In countries like China, the responsiveness to public opinion is due to a concern for regime legitimacy and the Chinese public is paying increasing attention to foreign affairs.²⁰

The Global Times is a daily tabloid that focuses on foreign news. Its English-language version was created in 2009 with a goal to improve China's "international media capacity." Its editorial viewpoint has been called nationalistic, hard-line, anti-Western, ideological, and "echoing the Party's policies." Some have argued that it's part of China's news strategy that is explicitly challenging Western media's trustworthiness and authority. Originally established as a Chinese-language publication in 1993, it became a daily in 2006. The Global Times is one of the most widely read newspapers in China, with a daily circulation of about 2.4 million copies in 2011, and "arguably China's most influential outlet for foreign and international news". Western media regularly cites and comments on the newspaper when reporting on China-related events.²¹

¹⁸Vuori 2022, 56-57.

¹⁹Huang 2016a, 145-147.

²⁰Fang et al. 2022, 28-31.

²¹Liu 2022, 1-2; Huang 2016a, 143.

When exploring the *Global Times*' ideological position in the Chinese context, it's necessary to give an overview of the Chinese political spectrum. The CPC defines the political center and Deng Xiaoping placed the party mainstream in it in 1992, and this has continued since, but there are fluctuations based on the chosen emphasis. For example in the early 2000s, the party's economic reforms brought it closer to the liberals. In the 2010s, in contrast, it has moved closer to the left, as building the social safety net has become more important and Xi's leading position has been justified in ways that at times resemble those of the Mao era. In the 1990s and early 2000s, China's political center was called neo-conservative. While the prefix is no longer widely used, the nature of the political center hasn't changed much. Neo-conservatism can be considered a neo-socialist party ideology that has been stripped of Marxism. It supports economic reform, the leading position of the party, emphasizes strong state and central government, and is rhetorically committed to the newly defined socialism. At times conservative statements are not even tied to the neo-socialist language, and instead, their views can be justified by referring to China's national interest and the importance of economic growth. Chinese conservatism emphasizes stability, incremental reforms and opposes radicalism. Democratic reforms are seen as a danger to the achievements of the reform era. Return to old socialism, as demanded by the left, is seen as equally harmful. But necessary reforms that make governance more efficient and enable continued economic growth are welcomed. Chinese conservatism is also strongly nationalist. That said, the left is no different in this regard.²²

Conservatives are proponents of an economically and militarily strong state that is led by a central government that holds its ground against Western pressure and economic and social change. It also highlights the distinctiveness of the Chinese culture in relation to the West, especially the US. Western examples are not to be blindly copied. The economic crisis in 2008 especially increased debate about China's uniqueness. Some supporters of the distinctiveness thesis argue that the rules of others don't apply to China. China's own development model is the best way for it to develop. Some conservatives also believe that the Chinese political system is superior to the Western pluralistic model. But not all conservatives agree. On the right of the spectrum are the liberals, represented especially by the economic liberals, but some also push for democratic reforms. The latter group however is organizationally weak and its activists have been jailed. On the left wing are the so-called neo-Maoists, who want to return to Maoism that favors workers and farmers and limits foreign influences. They are however also strongly nationalist. While there are no free elections or party system in China, understanding the political

²²Mattlin et al. 2022, 72-74.

spectrum is important in the sense that the party-state follows public opinion closely and it can also be assumed that similar dividing lines exist within the party itself.²³

In academic literature, the *Global Times* is commonly regarded as a very nationalistic and conservative publication that defends China's political system and attacks its geopolitical rivals like the US and Japan. In many studies it has been regarded as an example of bad public diplomacy for its hawkish editorial stance, damaging China's international reputation in the process. Moreover, according to Susan Shirk, professor of international relations at the University of California, the *Global Times* represents some "undertones" of China's foreign policy and actively mobilizes nationalistic public opinion on foreign policy and then feeds it back into the foreign policymaking process. However, in the view of Huang (2016b), this criticism has generally been overly Western-centric and moralistic. He argues that the *Global Times* has "complex public diplomacy implications that may not be so easily seen through a liberal lens". He argues that in fact the intention of the *Global Times* is to be a part of the foreign policy debate from a Chinese conservative perspective. As such, its contribution "to the debates on China's changing worldview and domestic politics should not be ignored or underestimated".²⁴

Huang (2016a) argues that out of all Chinese publications, the *Global Times* has played the most influential role in conveying national concerns. While it exploits international tensions for profit it has also achieved a position as China's most authoritative conservative voice of public diplomacy. It also differs from official mouthpieces like *Xinhua* and *CCTV* by being a marketized, semi-official publication that doesn't necessarily represent the official foreign policy, while still being authoritative. In this context, a "dual-track public diplomacy strategy" has materialized in China. On the one hand, government-controlled public diplomacy emphasizes diplomatic and polished "positive propaganda", while on the other hand, there's the more straightforward, conservative public diplomacy represented by the likes of *Global Times* and one that has filled a vacuum in China. Huang states that this also questions the traditional view of China as an authoritarian monolith. This active role of non-state and semi-official actors is not a part of some tightly crafted plan by the government, but instead an inevitable result of a socio-political process that has been ongoing since the 1990s. The publication's rise is partly explained by its "courageous but pragmatic pushing of the boundaries of China's traditional party journalism and media censorship". It correctly recognized China's problematic relationship with the West after the Cold War and Tiananmen protests, combined with the growing national pride during China's rise as a global power.²⁵

²³Mattlin et al. 2022, 70-78.

²⁴Huang 2016a, 144-145.

²⁵Huang 2016a, 147-148.

The Global Times in general is not a believer in China's official charm offensive strategy or the concept of soft power more generally. Instead, in the publication's view China needs to become a true global power for Western views to change. The sense of superiority can only be challenged once China achieves enough hard power. A positive national image is not achievable in the short-term for this reason. According to this perspective, the stronger you become, the more friends you will have. Consequently, public diplomacy is not just about image-building but more crucially about engaging in debate with the West. Therefore the Global Times provides foreign observers with a different viewpoint that reflects China's changing worldview and thinking compared with its dull traditional style. According to the editor-in-chief Hu Xijin, Chinese officials should be less shy when debating with their Western counterparts and they should not be influenced by Western criticism and respond in a confident manner. Only then can China achieve "harmonious" relations with the world.²⁶

It is argued by Huang (2016a) that the rise of the Global Times has actually been similar to the developments in the US, where conservative think tanks and publications have become increasingly influential. The Global Times enhances Western understanding of changes in China as the country strives towards alternative modernity. This type of public diplomacy in the Chinese context could be understood as a form of democratization of foreign policy, with increased participation of domestic audiences in foreign policy formation and debate. The publication's main target audience has always been domestic audiences. Even the English edition, which notably has more domestic news than the Chinese edition, first and foremost targets Chinese and foreigners living and working in China. Furthermore, the Global Times is aware that if its articles are savvy or controversial enough, they will reach a global audience through the Internet and Chinese correspondents in the West. Its role in the demystification of foreign policy issues in China is unique. Until recently, Chinese media's coverage of foreign relations was boring and overall lacking, closely following Xinhua's official news releases. This began changing in the mid-1990s, as the CPC championed the "socialist market economy". It has become arguably the most important voice of China's conservatives on international affairs. The editorial style is conservative but unconventional, which is widely considered a strength. Most of the readership is well-educated and high-income. It has a unique ability to unite China's state, media, and public agendas from a conservative point of view.²⁷

²⁶Huang 2016a, 149-151.

²⁷Huang 2016a, 152-154.

As well, the Global Times has been increasingly involved in debates with its liberal competitors on many important domestic issues. The overall sense of national identity and worldview it presents particularly in its editorials reflect the mainstream ideas of the country's political-intellectual elite about both the "prospect of a new international order not dominated by the West, and a Chinese modernity that differs from the Western model"²⁸. It aims, by combining both the domestic and external dimensions, to justify and strengthen the legitimacy of the Chinese government's policies. According to Hu Xijin, the publication "looks at both international and domestic issues by placing them in the context of China's global rise and examining how they interact"²⁹. The competition with liberal-minded media has arguably been its biggest challenge. Despite its economic achievements since the initiation of the post-Mao reforms, the party has also gone through an "ideological bankruptcy" and it has been under constant pressure from liberal opponents both at home and abroad.³⁰

Traditionally, China's official media has only been able to respond with outdated communist rhetoric and by avoiding debate, depending more on repression and control. In the 2000s, however, confidence has grown about an alternative Chinese modernity, a process in which the Global Times' role has been big. Its central arguments have been that there might be problems, but the one-party system is the most suitable for China's conditions; further reforms are needed to contain corruption; human rights are defined by a country's cultural traditions, national interests and its level of economic development; China as the world's most populous developing country faces unique challenges, and balancing between development and social stability. Now liberals face a smart and confident conservative opponent.³¹

The Global Times also at times tackles sensitive issues, like reporting extensively on the anniversary of the Tiananmen protests, which is taboo. It argued that the complex domestic and international context should be taken into account. Moreover, the publication claims that the general silencing of the debate on the events had allowed the country to focus on development. As well, the nation was now much more politically mature and confident than in 1989, while issues remained. According to Hu, despite the sensitivity of the issue, the Global Times didn't inform the authorities about the reports before their publication, while limiting readership to those who were less touchy about the topic, and therefore it was published only in the English edition.³²

²⁸Huang 2016a, 154.

²⁹Huang 2016a, 154.

³⁰Huang 2016a, 154-156.

³¹Ibid.

³²Huang 2016a, 157.

The purpose of the Global Times and its public diplomacy role more specifically has two intentions: first, to show both the international and domestic audiences the realist worldview that argues peaceful rise and charm offensive are meaningless without realist thinking and real, hard power. Secondly, it offers a realistic conservative viewpoint on modernity. Adopting Western-style democracy is not realistic, highlighting the importance of collective interest. In the view of the Global Times, China shouldn't care too much about Western standards. Hu asserts that China will gradually achieve a hybrid form of democracy that combines both Chinese and Western features and fits into China's conditions, while not offering details.³³

1.3 Thesis Structure

This thesis focuses on the China-US rivalry first and foremost. This is justified because the US and China are by far the dominant states in the international system today. Moreover, this is the view of the Global Times and its editorials as well, both inexplicitly and explicitly. The US is regarded as China's biggest external challenge and Beijing's relations with any other country are almost without exceptions analyzed in the context of China-US rivalry. Furthermore, when it comes to countries that China has tensions with, it's the US role that is seen as crucial even within these frictions. In other words, in the coverage of the Global Times, Washington is the "puppet master" behind all the Western or West-aligned countries and their worsening relations with China, be they the EU and its member countries, Australia, Japan, or Taiwan.

The Global Times published 420 editorials on its English-language website globaltimes.cn in 2021. At first, I read all of the editorials and afterwards I selected twenty-seven most relevant texts for the thesis. From each of these, a quote containing sections of the text was marked off, corresponding to themes that were dominant in the coverage throughout the year. The rhetoric of these quotes was then analyzed and their contents discussed in the context of recent peer-reviewed scholarly articles and other literature about the same theme.

Thematically, the thesis is divided into two main chapters. The first discusses the Global Times' view on the situation in China. It examines the coverage of both China's domestic situation and the developments of its political system and then moves on to foreign policy questions. The final subchapter concerns the question of the so-called core interests, a theme that highly stood out, as separate from both

³³Huang 2016a, 159.

domestic and foreign policy. The second main chapter analyzes the *Global Times*' opinion on the state of affairs in the United States. The publication closely followed its supposed internal crisis, and this is the focus of the first subchapter. The external affairs section is then divided into two subchapters: the first one discusses the overall developments in US foreign policy in the context of its supposed "hegemonism" and expansionism, and the second one explores the state of its alliance system.

1.4 Methodology - Chaïm Perelman's Rhetorical Theory

Rhetoric is the technique of persuasion. As a discipline, rhetoric studies communication that is argumentative and aims to influence. Rhetoric is usually divided into classical and new rhetoric. The former focuses on the speaker, while the latter emphasizes the relationship between the speaker and the audience more.

In this thesis, I will be applying the rhetorical theory of Chaïm Perelman (1912-1984), who was a Polish-born Belgian philosopher and argumentation theorist. Perelman was one of the most influential originators of the new rhetoric. Perelman published two major works on rhetoric: *Traite de l'argumentation - la nouvelle rhétorique* (translated into English as *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*) in 1958, and later in a more condensed form in *L'Empire rhétorique* (translated as *The Realm of Rhetoric*). Perelman himself described his theory as a general theory of persuasion, and as such it is a good fit for the *Global Times* as well.³⁴

Central to Perelman's understanding of rhetoric is that argumentation proceeds informally, and not according to strict rules of formal logic. Moreover, these arguments are always aimed at audiences, and the purpose of argumentation is to increase the audience's adherence to a given thesis. This means that the argument's premises must also be acceptable to the audience. In argumentation, ambiguity is inevitable because the language and the terms used are open to multiple interpretations. Furthermore, the relationships between different concepts and attitudes used in the argument are created by verbal techniques that are distinguishable from each other.³⁵

These aforementioned techniques can be divided into two categories: liaisons, "which allow for the transference to the conclusion of the adherence accorded the premises," and dissociations, which separate elements that are usually tied together. There are three different types of liaisons: quasi-logical arguments; arguments that

³⁴Perelman 1982, 101.

³⁵Perelman 1982, x.

are based on claims concerning the structure of reality; and arguments that establish the structure of reality. Liaisons are central in Perelman's theory of argumentation, while dissociations usually appear in philosophical thought.³⁶

Quasi-logical arguments imitate logical and mathematical demonstrations, but are less rigorous. They aren't intended to prove logical demonstrations but instead produce stronger or weaker arguments that can be reinforced with other types of arguments if deemed necessary. Contradiction and incompatibility are quasi-logical techniques. In formal logic, one can prove that a statement is false if it contains both a proposition and its negation, that is, a contradiction. However, in general argumentation and in ordinary language there are nuances that make the contradiction just an apparent one instead of real. In real life, incompatibilities, not contradictions, are experienced, which forces one to choose between rules. The fear of ridicule or disrepute makes people try to avoid incompatibilities in their statements. According to Perelman, the best way to solve the conflict is to sacrifice one of the two conflicting rules or at the very least dissociate the two ideas from one another.³⁷

Identity, definition, analyticity, and tautology are also quasi-logical arguments. Making a definition, claiming to identify the expression with the term to be defined is a form of argumentation. Every time an idea can be defined in multiple ways, definition means making a choice. For Perelman, all analysis is directional, "for it aims to make certain expressions interchangeable by leading the audience toward conceptions that conform to what the speaker has in mind" and by ignoring different interpretations. As such, both making definitions and interpreting the implications of those definitions are arguments. Tautology refers to the pointless repetition of familiar phrases like "business is business" or "A penny saved is a penny earned". However, to Perelman, these are only apparent tautologies, as they actually attempt to differentiate the terms that are supposed to be identical. In rhetoric, these are used to cause several meanings to adhere to the same word.³⁸

Reciprocity and the rule of justice are quasi-logical arguments as well. According to the latter, "beings in the same essential category should be treated in the same way". It's considered unjust to behave differently in two comparable situations. The argument of reciprocity is similar, but is instead more of a two-way connection, necessitating that all which applies to one should also apply to another.³⁹

³⁶Perelman 1982, 49-50; 126.

³⁷Perelman 1982, 53-55, 60.

³⁸Perelman 1982, 60, 63-64.

³⁹Perelman 1982, 66-67.

Arguments of transitivity, inclusion, and division is another group of quasi-logical arguments. In transitivity, if a connection exists between A and B and C, then the same connection also exists between A and C. In the argument of inclusion, something which is a part of a bigger category belongs to or is subordinate to that category, concept, or frame. Argument by division divides a topic or theme in different ways, and by doing so gains a certain effect of perspective. Dividing into two pieces increases opposition, and dividing into many increases dissemination. Such argumentation also includes the dilemma, meaning a situation where two unpleasant situations are presented. Moreover, there are also arguments a pari and a contrario. Comparing one thing to another and stating that they should be handled in the same way is a pari argument, or handling them in a different way is a contrario.⁴⁰

The final group of quasi-logical arguments is weights and measures, and probabilities. The former is a quasi-logical argument when real weighting and measuring by using an exact unit of measure is not used. Such arguments can still be persuasive if it appears that the person making the comparison can be supported by verification. Comparisons always impose a hierarchy in which one thing is placed higher than the other. Arguments of probability aren't necessarily based on statistics either, rather humans tend to use certain patterns based on experience, for example preferring many options over a few, or certainty over uncertainty. According to Perelman, quasi-logical arguments by themselves are rarely enough, and as such they need to be supplemented by arguments based on the structure of reality.⁴¹

The second group of argumentation techniques after quasi-logical arguments are arguments based on the structure of reality. As soon as elements of reality are associated with one another, it is possible to base argumentation on this connection, allowing moving from what is already accepted to what one thinks should be accepted. In other words, the already accepted structures of reality are applied to a specific situation. The structures are divided into two groups: liaisons of succession and liaisons of coexistence. In the former, phenomena of the same level are connected, for example cause and effect, while in the latter things belonging to unequal levels are in connection to each other, such as the relation between the person and his acts or between an essence and its manifestations. This type of argumentation requires that the audience agrees with the presented premises. In arguments based on the structure of reality, the person and his acts are in constant interaction. The person is also responsible for his actions at all times and they can have an impact on his or her reputation. However, at times the connection can be severed. Perelman uses an example of a criminal who develops a lethal poison. The

⁴⁰Perelman 1982, 70-75.

⁴¹Perelman 1982, 75-80.

fact that its developer was a criminal doesn't make anyone doubt the poison's efficiency. Based on this act-person liaison, there are also other liaisons of coexistence, like for instance how national groups as entities are manifested through their members. Other techniques based on the structure of reality include symbolic liaisons, double hierarchies, and differences of order.⁴²

Arguments to establish the structure of reality is the third group of argumentation techniques. Argumentation by using examples assumes the existence of certain regularities "of which the examples provide a concretization". In other words, the argument moves from the specific case towards a generalization. Examples should be reasonably varied. Illustration, on the other hand, doesn't establish any new rules but instead gives presence to an already accepted rule. It can be a historical event as well as a fictitious, imagined case, for example. The specific case, in addition to being an example or an illustration, can also be a model that should be imitated. The argument by model indicates that the authority and its prestige guarantee validity. Consequently, those who become models must focus on what they say and do. The anti-model, in contrast, is a distortion, something that should be shunned. Lastly, there are analogies and metaphors. The basic structure of analogy is "a is to b, as c is to d," for example "old age is to life what the evening is to the day." However, unlike mathematical equations, an analogy is not based on the equality of two relations but instead on their similitude. To Perelman metaphor is a condensed analogy, for instance, "old age is an evening".⁴³

When it comes to dissociations, they are characterized by the opposition of appearance and reality. This dissociation can be applied to any idea, by making use of the terms "apparent" or "illusory" on the one hand, and "real" or "true" on the other. This can be seen in terms like "apparent peace" or "true democracy" to point out the absence of peace or democracy. Other adjectives based on the appearance versus reality pairs are, among others: opinion versus truth, artifice versus nature, convention versus reality, and subject versus object.⁴⁴

For Perelman, all argumentation aims at gaining the compliance of minds, which requires a common language and a wish to enter into a conversation. The set of those a speaker wishes to address may vary considerably, but it is always short of all human beings. It's a rationalistic and scientific illusion that facts speak for themselves and that adherence is inevitable regardless of inclination. Identifying the audience is not simple and it's even more difficult in the case of the written word, as in most cases it is impossible to identify the readers with complete certainty.

⁴²Perelman 1982, 81-82, 90-91, 96-98, 101-105.

⁴³Perelman 1982, 106-108, 110-114, 120.

⁴⁴Perelman 1982, 134.

Perelman defines audience as “the ensemble of those whom the speaker wishes to influence by his argumentation.”⁴⁵

There are two types of audiences: the particular, and the universal. The particular audience is the grouping to be influenced, not merely the group physically in attendance. The universal audience consists of any number of sensible and capable people, and it may be all of humanity. These two types are mental concepts that the speaker constructs. The purpose of the universal audience is that it helps in choosing the arguments and it also serves as a norm or standard for distinguishing good arguments from bad ones. The distinction depends on the speaker’s intention, not on the number of persons who hear the speaker: does he want the compliance of some or every sensible being?⁴⁶

The universal audience is universality and consensus envisaged by the speaker, to the agreement of an audience which should be universal since we don’t need to take into contemplation those which are not part of it. According to Perelman, philosophers, for example, always claim to address such an audience. However, the universal audience isn’t a divine mind, but each speaker characterizes the representation he himself holds of the universal audience that he is trying to convince. Moreover, each individual and each culture has its own understanding of what the universal audience actually is. The universal audience can also be used to exclude individuals who are not highly valued.⁴⁷

The purpose of argumentation is to act as an alternative to force. Argumentation is intended to influence an audience, to alter an audience’s beliefs or dispositions through discourse, and it tries to achieve a contact of minds instead of forcing its will through restrictions or conditioning. Furthermore, argumentation does not aim only to achieve a purely intellectual agreement. Argumentation often tries to encourage action, or at least it tries to create a disposition to act.⁴⁸

⁴⁵Perelman 2008, 14-15, 18-19.

⁴⁶Perelman 2008, 85-92.

⁴⁷Perelman 2008, 102-107.

⁴⁸Perelman 1982, 11-12.

2 GLOBAL TIMES AND CHINA IN 2021

One defining feature of the coverage of the editorials during 2021 was the overall stability of China's domestic situation generally, at the very least outside of Hong Kong. The next Party Congress was to be held only next year as well. So China's domestic matters were in that sense not so intimately followed, and mainly the COVID-19 policies were on the agenda. That said, 2021 was the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party of China, and this inspired the Global Times to eulogize the party's governing achievements even more than usual.

2.1 China's Political System

Global Times' editorials in 2021 clearly showed that the China versus US systemic rivalry was accelerating. Throughout the year, the publication focused on the perceived advantages of the Chinese political system over its Western rivals as the COVID-19 pandemic raged on and the US was experiencing a challenging political transition from Trump to Biden. Overall, Chinese society was portrayed as being collectively united and full of vitality and potential. Time was on China's side and the crisis-ridden US was increasingly unable to compete, at the very least not fairly.

2.1.1 Chinese Democracy

In Chinese texts, the multi-party and pluralistic nature of its political system is often highlighted. In China's "socialist democracy", as it's officially called, there are four formal "democratic institutions": the National People's Congress; the eight legally-permitted official parties, which are a part of the CPC's united front strategy, that

participate in the Chinese People's Consultative Conference (CPPCC) through which their views are heard; and regional and grassroots level self-government. The constitution also formally guarantees certain rights to citizens, including the freedom of speech. In the language of the party, using these channels is called orderly political participation by citizens.⁴⁹

From the CPC's point of view, this type of formal involvement is supposed to maintain order and prevent chaos, which is one of the greatest evils according to the Chinese leadership and is also referred to in the editorial. Critics attest that most of this kind of participation is either manipulative or at most symbolic because citizens are taught the "correct" way of thinking and they are required to take part in the political "theater". Election campaigns are also almost non-existent and the parties have poor demographic representativeness. That said, from another perspective this type of participation contains features of consultative authoritarianism. Furthermore, especially locally there has been a genuine increase in the forms of consultative channels like local congresses and village meetings during the reform period, but they're still not particularly common. Moreover, local-level officials have only few incentives to innovate with such governance experiments, as they don't directly show up in personal report cards, which determine career advancement.⁵⁰

Although the domestic situation in China was generally stable, the centenary of the CPC in 2021 was a great opportunity for the Global Times to both look back on its historical achievements as well as praise its continued relevance as the guiding force of the whole Chinese political system. Notably, and consistent with Chinese messaging in general, China wasn't considered to be an authoritarian country, despite having less individualistic values than the West, but instead its own type of democracy that moreover was more goal-oriented than the Western alternative.

As we welcome the centenary of the CPC, it is of enormous historical significance for China to present to the world its basic political system. People across the world can see more clearly that the CPC and other political parties follow the principles of long-term coexistence, mutual oversight, sincerity, and sharing the rough times and the smooth. They have created a multiparty cooperation system in which the CPC exercises state power and the other parties participate fully in the administration of state affairs under the leadership of the CPC. [...] China's political party system has notable Chinese characteristics and is highly approved by the Chinese people. They will not forget that after the 1911 revolution, China copied the Western parliamentary political system, which resulted in severe social chaos. [...] The white paper points out that the CPC is in a leading position, while non-CPC political parties participate in state governance under socialism with Chinese characteristics. They are not in opposition, nor are they bystanders or outsiders. [...] This political system closely united all political parties and non-affiliates toward a common goal, effectively

⁴⁹Mattlin et al. 2022, 178-181.

⁵⁰Mattlin et al. 2022, 178-181.

mitigating the risks of inadequate oversight in one-party rule, and the problems of power rotation and destructive competition among multiple political parties.⁵¹

This editorial uses arguments that establish the structure of reality, with emphasis on the unique characteristics of the Chinese political system that make it superior to Western alternatives, with its combination of more autocratic or collectivist, and democratic features. How exactly this works is not mentioned, however. The premise here is that the Western type of system is not a good fit for China's conditions, and it acts as an anti-model, something that should not be imitated. Furthermore, the historical background of China's political system and its development is a quasi-logical argument with its comparisons between two totally different historical periods: the early 20th century and the 2020s. It's also important to note that the post-Qing Republic of China after 1912 wasn't really a democracy even by the Western standards of the day. But this type of scapegoating of democracy by authoritarian countries is noteworthy, as it's somewhat similar to how the post-Soviet Russia of the 1990s is often viewed in Russian commentary today, as another similar example.

While meritocracy, or a merit-based system, wasn't the term that was used by the Global Times in this particular editorial nor even more generally, it could be argued that the existence of such a model was inexplicitly implied, distinguishing China from its competitor. Chinese scholars in particular have suggested in the 2000s that China has built its own superior meritocratic model of governance. In China, cadre career development is based on success, and as a result, the best and brightest take the leading positions. However, the cadre appointment system still contains a lot of discretion and exceptions. Also, the importance of personal networks and even the purchasing of appointments are common issues. Hence the system is only partially meritocratic, but it's undeniable that constant evaluations and the system built around that means the leading cadres have plenty of governing experience.⁵²

It's furthermore also implied with the 1911 comparison that the CPC has corrected China's past mistakes. When it comes to the overall narrative of China's past and the CPC's historical mission, there's a paradox of growing confidence and the humiliations of the past. The century of humiliation was a period from the 1830s until the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, during which Western powers and Japan intervened in Chinese affairs while it was internally weak. This period is constantly mentioned in official messaging, as it's a major part of modern Chinese identity. It's presented as a cautionary tale and the CPC is portrayed as the saviour of China from Western subjugation. This narrative also legitimizes the political

⁵¹Global Times 2021h.

⁵²Mattlin et al. 2022, 127-129.

system and promotes nationalism. Sovereignty is put above everything else, and the outside world is often viewed with suspicion.⁵³

Overall, the editorial could be regarded as a decent summary of how the Chinese political system and especially the CPC's role within it ideally functions from the Chinese perspective. The significance of it is that the text is a clear example of how China is increasingly competing with the Western liberal democratic system. As usual with this type of Chinese formulations, it however remains vague and doesn't go much into details. It emphasizes that the Chinese political system is very much a Chinese innovation, despite its Marxist origins, unlike the experiments during the Republican era, combining the best of both worlds. China under the guidance of the CPC has learned from history and as a result, both home-grown and Western features have successfully been integrated together. This type of emphasis on unity and on a lack of opposition and competition however goes strongly against the Western notions of good governance.

While it remains unclear how democracy is supposed to work without competition, the same theme about the advantages of China's political system continued in December, when the State Council released a white paper on Chinese democracy. In the document, the Chinese leadership aims to justify why its "whole process people's democracy" under the leadership of the CPC serves the Chinese people's interests and works better than Western democracy. One way to read the document is that the Chinese leadership also feels pressure to justify its legitimacy based on democratic concepts. However, in China, the term has a very different meaning than in the West.⁵⁴ According to the analysis of the Global Times, it convincingly showcased the superiority of the Chinese political system.

According to standard democratization theories, it's almost inevitable that the growing middle class will eventually start demanding democracy. In China, there is a large and growing middle class, but nothing indicates that their demands for democracy have increased. If anything, the opposite is true. According to one study, income and education levels positively correlate with support for the political system. It seems likely that the middle class is worried that any potential political reforms would bring instability. Furthermore, many of the middle-class professions are directly connected to the party-state. Since the announcement of the Three Represents theory by Jiang Zemin in 2001, the party has actively recruited the middle class and the highly educated into its ranks as a way to merge them into itself and to buy their support for the system. In a sense, there's a social contract

⁵³Kaufman 2010, 4, 27.

⁵⁴Mattlin et al. 2022, 323.

between the party and the middle class, in which the rising living standards and improved career opportunities are exchanged for loyalty and support.⁵⁵

The CPC has always considered its governance system as being democratic, but different and superior to the Western model. However, the 2021 conception of “whole-process people’s democracy” was the first time it offered a detailed formulation of its own democratic system in an attempt to counter the hegemonic status of Western liberal democracy. Xi first used the term in 2019, and it was incorporated into law in March 2021. The National People’s Congress in particular has aimed to improve its position by enthusiastically promoting its role in the functioning of this new type of democracy. It was declared to be an improved version of China’s existing socialist democracy and connected to Xi’s other ideological innovations like the “common prosperity,” which focuses on equality. The term people is motivated by the party’s new emphasis on the Maoist mass-line tradition. It also appears that international audiences were prioritized, and the announcement of the white paper was just days before Biden’s Summit for Democracy, which Beijing, including the Global Times, labelled as an anti-Chinese bloc. In this context, it seems democracy itself has become an ideological weapon between the two rivalling powers. Simultaneously with the white paper, several articles discrediting American democracy appeared in the Chinese media as part of a global propaganda campaign.⁵⁶ This was clear in the Global Times’ coverage as well.

China is also the first large-scale society in the world to practice whole process people’s democracy. The publication of the document has challenged the US and West’s monopolistic definition of democracy, marking the further clarification of human beings’ various practices of democracy. China’s economic and social construction continues to make world-renowned achievements, people’s comprehensive rights are also continuously improving. [...] American democracy, as a representative of Western democracy, has shown serious inefficiency after more than 200 years of over-consumption. It cannot provide motivation for resolving even the most prominent problems in the US. [...] Elections themselves have become the sole feature of its democracy, and winning the election has become the overwhelming goal of political parties and politicians. With US society is being torn apart, it is increasingly politically uneconomical to work on solving problems. [...] Whole process people’s democracy puts the government in a position that it should work to maximize people’s welfare. Our democracy is designed to address real world problems, ranging from poverty, air pollution, to curbing the spread of the pandemic, and alleviating power shortages. [...] For those forces who are slandering us, we want to say: Compare your achievements with ours, you will find yourselves stuck in stagnation, and then you will know your democracy is no longer worth bragging about.⁵⁷

⁵⁵Mattlin et al. 2022, 320-322.

⁵⁶Wang 2022, 60-64.

⁵⁷Global Times 2021j.

Here the editorial attempts to establish the structure of reality. China's political model is portrayed as a valid form of democracy that is more effective in addressing practical, real world problems than the Western model. In contrast, the West is stagnating. There is also quasi-logical argumentation about the inefficiency of American democracy, which is supposedly the reason for US over-consumption, mixing up political and economic systems. Furthermore, there are also elements of dissociation, as Western democracy, specifically in the US, is portrayed as only an apparent or pseudo-democracy, whereas the Chinese model is its real and true embodiment. Arguably the whole concept of "white paper" is a way to increase the legitimacy of the presented arguments, and show that China is increasingly offering its contributions to political science and alternatives to Western ideas.

Wang (2022) points out that China has no lack of political scientists who are able to make refined ideological arguments against the US. As China rises, it's increasingly motivated to challenge Western political concepts. From the early 2000s onwards, the Chinese leadership realized it needed to promote the understanding of its political system internationally. Also, after experimenting with local elections, the focus on social stability and the outbreak of so-called color revolutions like the Arab Spring in 2011 forced the CPC to bolster its position as the leading force in Chinese society. Since then, it has justified its position by emphasizing output legitimacy instead of input legitimacy. The whole-process people's democracy continues this but increasingly aggressively and assertively. The whole-process nature of it is an attempt to distinguish the Chinese democracy from the procedural tradition of Western liberal democracy and its supposed focus on short-term electoral results, while in contrast the Chinese model advances people's well-being comprehensively. The most important standard for evaluating democracy is the ability to solve real world problems, i.e. it's consequentialist. There's no longer an aim to build bridges, instead, the concept functions as a protection for the CPC and as a way to attack the American model as well as to promote its own system internationally.⁵⁸

The Global Times editorial is clearly a part of this promotion campaign for China's own political and theoretical concepts. In line with this, the Western liberal democracy and its supposed shortcomings are harshly reproached. In this narrative, constant elections achieve nothing and moreover they don't even define democracy. In contrast, China is democratic because it successfully solves practical, real world issues. The approach of the Global Times on this issue is consistent with Wang (2022) and it's clear that the assertiveness and promotion of China's own solutions in increasingly confrontational as well. As the editorial is about the centenary of the CPC and its achievements, there's little in common with Western conceptions. It's

⁵⁸Wang 2022, 60-64.

almost as if democracy is simply regarded as being synonymous with good governance and that is also why China calls itself democratic.

2.1.2 China as the Human Rights Model

In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic and its global impact remained high. In regards to China, it had several geopolitical undertones. In the *Global Times* and its editorials, praising China's response to the epidemic was a dominant theme throughout the year. It was more generally an important factor in Chinese self-image. The Chinese portrayal showed both that Beijing's governance model was superior and that human rights were better realized in China than they were in the US. As a matter of fact, Western and especially American pandemic policies were depicted as total failures that had destroyed their international reputation. The reputation was supposedly further tarnished by the constant attempts to scapegoat China amid calls for investigations on the origins of the virus. China was not to be blamed for anything, and the US was only trying to shift attention from its own shortcomings. The US death toll was constantly mentioned and became something of a symbol for its overall decline.

Stumbaum (2022) argues that during the pandemic, the CPC "went in to overdrive to manage the global narrative on the origins of the virus". This appeared as an opportunity to portray Western democracy as incapable and its own model as an elixir that was far superior. Simultaneously, however, the situation increased pressures to deliver and maintain a high level of economic development. During the pandemic, it was important for the party to appear strong and in control of the overall situation. Furthermore, the issues the US faced during the Trump administration and its failures in the handling of COVID-19 led to changes in China's plan. Earlier the intention was to become a power equal to the US, but now it aimed to become the unrivalled primary great power in the world. Xi made this clear during the 100th anniversary celebrations of the CPC. The pandemic also overall emphasizes systemic rivalry between the West and China.⁵⁹ The *Global Times* shared this sentiment.

China has taken the lead in bringing the epidemic under control, which gives it a huge comparative advantage over other major countries. However, this is the national performance at the macroscopic level. For Chinese society itself, and especially for many individuals, the impact and difficulties of COVID-19 are real. China's policies this year still need to address these practical problems without compromising the quality of their solutions. One of the biggest gains of Chinese society in 2020 is the increase in its political

⁵⁹Stumbaum 2022, 6-7.

confidence. Chinese people have seen the efficiency of China's political system and understood its people-centered purpose through the rare comparability to other countries' responses projected by the epidemic. The long-term image of the US as a world idol has largely collapsed. [...] This year, 2021, is a crucial period for the continuation of Chinese people's self-perception that was achieved last year. To this end, China needs to accelerate the deepening of reform, implement reform measures and take concrete actions to overcome bureaucratic styles of work and formalism. [...] The epidemic has aggravated many old problems and given rise to the imperative of reform, which has become a key word of this era.⁶⁰

This argument is trying to establish the structure of reality by implying that the successful fight against the pandemic has given China a "huge" comparative advantage over its rivals. The argument that the state of COVID-19 in different countries is directly comparable is debatable and arguably a quasi-logical argument. There's also dissociation between a Chinese policy response that produces confidence and the one, in the US, that does not. Overall, this pride over the successful measures by the government against the epidemic was one of the most important recurring themes in the editorials throughout the year.

Although the Global Times constantly extolled China's pandemic response, it has been asserted that COVID-19 is a good example of how fragmented authoritarianism works. It also shows that there exist problems and conflicts between different regions within China. It's important to note that after SARS-epidemic of 2002-2004, the readiness was good in principle. After the first diagnosis in Wuhan in November 2019, the local party administration prohibited reporting it to the national database, probably due to its underestimation of the virus, in addition to the expected negative impact on the local economy. Rumours were silenced on social media and on the internet as a whole in the name of maintaining stability. However, the information finally spread to the central government in December 2019 and it informed the WHO. However, the dangerousness of the virus was still downplayed. Despite this, major measures were taken. After Xi's speech in December 2020, Wuhan was quarantined. Zero Covid policy meant that negative test results were required for many services. To circumvent the limitations of fragmented governance, mass campaigns were initiated, which in some ways resembled Mao-era actions. This is a typical anti-disaster measure in China in general. Only when the General Secretary gave the order to act, did the lower levels dare to proceed. The Zero Covid measures became the most important evaluation criteria as guidance was followed very rigidly at the local level.⁶¹

⁶⁰Global Times 2021a.

⁶¹Mattlin et al. 2022, 148-151.

This editorial is noteworthy because it is somewhat different from the typical narrative about the pandemic by the Global Times as it openly discusses challenges and problems, although very vaguely. It looks back to 2020 and COVID-19 is linked to the need to continue reform, which is a standard buzzword in Chinese political argumentation. Interestingly it's argued that the pandemic makes it possible to directly compare the Chinese political system and prowess to other countries, and as a result, the US has utterly failed the test and collapsed, which is a very strong term. The editorial is also one indication of how the whole process people's democracy formulation is being actively used in the Chinese media, in this case by highlighting the related people-centric nature of the Chinese political system.

In addition to the pandemic, human rights issues have been a long-term point of contention between the Western powers and China. On this front, the latter had also something to celebrate in 2022 in the form of poverty alleviation, and the Global Times editorials praised this achievement as well. Beijing announced that China had eliminated extreme poverty in late 2020, and in Chinese messaging this was seen as a very useful tool that could be used to promote China's political system. The Global Times opined that fighting against poverty was the highest level of human rights action.

When it comes to the overall human rights debate, Chan (2013) points out that Western countries have long criticized China's "unwillingness to subscribe to international human rights norms, the rule of law and liberal democratic practices." While China has been described as a "consultative authoritarian regime" that recognizes it needs support from the population, it's still willing to quell dissent and keep political power in the hands of the CPC. This raises questions about whether authoritarianism, which is different from totalitarianism, is incompatible with human rights and democracy, or is the Western model the only viable path. Chan (2013) points out that in contrast to the West, where human rights are individualistic and the greatest safeguard against arbitrary state power, in China communitarian rights and obligations take priority. Confucian tradition, as in the rest of East Asia, is an important moral, social, and juristic influence. The institution of family is particularly essential, and the principle of filial piety forms the foundation against which authority, above all the state, in all situations is understood. Chinese Marxism has only strengthened these tendencies, instead of challenging them.⁶²

It's noteworthy as well that China's denial of human rights abuses means that its international reputation has been affected and it doesn't deny the validity of the concept of human rights. China highlights its status as a developing country, meaning that economic, social, and cultural rights are more important than civil and

⁶²Chan 2013, 645-650.

political rights. Furthermore, it stresses that human rights are the internal affairs of states. Any interventions will lead to conflicts and endanger world peace. However, its role in global peacekeeping has grown massively. What in any case seems likely is that that foreign criticism of China's human rights practices only strengthens the legitimacy of the government, and as such shaming it has been unsuccessful. Overall, Chinese governance has been quite successful based on different indicators, especially compared to countries with a similar level of development. Moreover, contrary to the common view that there have been no political reforms in place of economic development, China has actually strengthened self-government at the local level.⁶³

While the Chinese constitution guarantees basic rights like freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and so on, they are set as conditional in the constitution. The rights are respected only if they don't harm China's national interest and security. Moreover, they are not to endanger the state, state organs, or other citizens' interests and security. In practice, this means that these rights are not respected and officials in the end determine what is allowed and what is not in the field of human rights. This is strongly connected to maintaining the power of the CPC.⁶⁴ To the *Global Times*, however, it was the elimination of poverty that proved that China was on the right track.

This is the most unforgettable and unpretentious humanitarianism. China is a socialist country and its people-centered approach is not a rhetorical slogan, but its true commitment. It has taken several years and successive steps in this great cause, which has never been seen before in the history of China and mankind. [...] At the international level, China's declaration of eliminating absolute poverty in the country coincided with the climax of fierce attacks on China's human rights by the Five Eyes alliance countries such as the US, the UK, and Canada as well as some other Western countries. When the US and other countries are playing up "political and human rights" in China, China has made concrete achievements in eliminating poverty. While the US death toll from the COVID-19 epidemic has reached 500,000, China has successfully protected its own people. This is an unprecedented collision between "saying" and "doing" in the field of human rights. [...] To live is to live with dignity. This is the strongest desire of the Chinese people, and it is also the cornerstone of the Chinese people's collective view of human rights.⁶⁵

This editorial uses argumentation to establish the structure of reality. China's people-centered strategy is not just a slogan but a concrete reality. As examples, poverty alleviation and protecting their health against a dangerous pandemic are used as the highest possible instances of human rights. The premise here is that so-called "political rights" are not a priority in human rights issues. China achieving its

⁶³Chan 2013, 669-673, 676-679, 689.

⁶⁴Paaermaa 2019, 52-53.

⁶⁵*Global Times* 2021n.

rightful place and its people reaching a level of high living standards, especially materially is the main goal. Chinese people are again described as a monolith, a single, fully unified entity. This is a collectivist view of China and arguably human societies as a whole. The argumentation establishes a particular view of reality, one in which China's approach to human rights is superior to the Western model. Comparing China's poverty alleviation with the COVID-19 death toll in the US is furthermore a quasi-logical argument.

Success in the battle against poverty, similar to its fight against COVID-19, is used to showcase the superiority of the China model and its practical nature. The US and its closest allies demonize China and its human rights record as their own people die in droves, whereas China quietly achieves unprecedented feats. Its political system is once again focusing on practical and relevant issues to the average people, whereas the Western countries' criticism is at its harshest at the same time, implying that they are jealous and just want to ruin the party, so to speak. Just as with previous editorials, the elimination of poverty is used as evidence for the superiority of the Chinese system as well as the inferiority of the Western, especially American, social model.

From a critical perspective, it's however important to keep in mind that the definition of poverty is relative and varies from country to country. Yan (2016) points out that while China's poverty line has consistently risen to a higher level, it remains low by global standards. Furthermore, studies indicate that the official Chinese poverty line is so low that the real rural poverty is much higher than official figures would suggest. In addition, while economic growth is a prerequisite of poverty alleviation, the worsened distribution of income in China has offset its impact somewhat since the 1980s.⁶⁶

That said, it's undeniably true China has been in a league of its own when it comes to a decrease in absolute poverty. Most of the poverty alleviation globally has taken place in China in recent decades. Regardless, problems remain and the World Bank's absolute poverty line of \$1.90 US a day is still low. As well, it's debatable whether absolute poverty was actually completely eliminated by the end of 2020 as planned, due to COVID-19. Poverty alleviation may have also been artificial in the sense that it involved moving people from one area to another to even out the averages. Overall, the poverty issue in China is difficult. It's strongly connected to the place of residence, taxation, welfare services, and the education system. Treating cities and countryside differently in China has its origins in the 1950s when the Hukou system was created. It has also been influenced by the form that Chinese capitalism has taken, for example through the important role of migrant workers. The government

⁶⁶Yan 2016, 12-13.

is aware of the issues and reforms have been initiated, but many of them have failed due to local opposition and corruption. The high level of inequality is far from Communist ideals in general. Relatively speaking, China's economic growth has benefited the state and industry more than ordinary citizens, and investments have been kept artificially high to this day.⁶⁷

2.1.3 China's Superior Competitiveness

As the already discussed editorials have shown, generally the Global Times was very confident about China's prospects against the US. In this comprehensive narrative, China was destined to outstrip US power. This argument was further strengthened in editorials that dealt with the overall causes and reasons behind this outcome. These showed essentialist ways of thinking, arguing that the Chinese people have certain permanent attributes and in contrast, the Americans lacked them, among other types of reasoning.

At the general level, there are different theories for China's economic success. One perspective is that the Chinese highly value education, and they are traditionally hardworking and industrious. Its progress can also be compared to the historical development of the rest of East Asia, as well as the success of the Chinese diaspora around the world. Another viewpoint, one that is especially popular among the Chinese leadership, particularly among its conservative mainstream, is that China's economic decision-making system is unique, and success without it wouldn't have been possible. During Xi's tenure, China has emphasized the importance of the party, political system, and state-led economy for its economic miracle. At the same time, the role of businesses and the outside world has been downplayed. Chinese economists on the other hand do stress the significance of the opening up and integration to the global economy, foreign investment, and the opportunities given to private companies. Both of these arguments can also be regarded as the two sides of the same coin. It also remains to be seen whether the label of "the era of new socialism (with Chinese characteristics)" will be decisively different from the earlier reform era.⁶⁸ For its part, summing up China's advantages in its competition with the US, including in economics, the Global Times highlighted several aspects.

China is destined to move forward. We have some long-term cultural and institutional advantages. The US should view them objectively and respect its strength, instead of trying to suppress them in a conspiratorial and evil way. China has always been about some strengths of the US and tried to learn from them. In turn, the US should correct its attitude.

⁶⁷Mattlin et al. 2022, 243-248.

⁶⁸Mattlin et al. 2022, 213-215.

China has realized rapid development and will maintain a faster growth than the US for a period in the future. Here are some basic reasons. Ordinary Chinese people are very hard-working, able to endure hardships, and strive for progress. [...] The Chinese population is over four times that of the US. And the demand of consumption is growing, becoming a lasting potential that the US cannot compete with. [...] China's political system, which has been repeatedly attacked by the US, combined with China's cultural traditions, has helped China achieve effective organizational and mobilization capabilities. [...] The uninterrupted history of civilization has shaped the grand historical view of Chinese society, which is the reason that the Chinese people can have strategic calm in the face of the crazy suppression and "extreme competition" of the US. A few decades or a century may seem like a long time to Americans, but to the Chinese people, it is just a short span.⁶⁹

Here is an argument to establish the structure of reality, using several examples. To strengthen the overall argument, the cited examples are varied, some are based on the supposed nature of the Chinese people, while others are based on economic and other indicators of national strength and scale. China is presented as the country with cultural and institutional advantages, and more potential for growth. As a result, China is destined to outmatch the US. Moreover, there are arguments based on the structure of reality, based on the facts of China's population and the growing consumption in its economy, a liaison of succession connecting phenomena of the same level. Overall, the editorial attempts to establish a certain reality of China's strengths, features that the US should properly understand and take into account, which should lead to changes in its policies towards China.

The editorial contains standard tropes of Chinese messaging, although the combination is interesting. The usage of population figures is noteworthy in the sense that it's somewhat uncommon for the Global Times to use concrete, indisputable numbers to support its argument, as is the case here with the population comparison. All in all, the several examples, based on the permanent, essential characteristics of its people, the overall national scale, its political system that has exceptional organizational capabilities, and the thousands year old civilization give China a competitive edge, and are so insurmountable that the US should just accept this and stop its increasingly desperate attempts to stay ahead.

2.2 China's Foreign Policy

Domestically, China's political system is presented as superior in the editorials. When it comes to foreign policy, Beijing is a responsible stakeholder who doesn't seek hegemony but is prepared to protect its interests. This at the basic level is standard Chinese argumentation but the Global Times emphasizes certain aspects

⁶⁹Global Times 2021w.

more than most other Chinese mainstream publications, including criticism of the US-led global order and Beijing's readiness to hold its own what the publication regarded as Washington's hostile encroachment.

2.2.1 Law-abiding China

Regarding the competition with the US and China's integration into the global system, the Global Times argued that China was following rules without issues, in fact it was more committed to international norms than the US. The reform period indicated China had successfully internalized global rules, and the standing of the UN should be respected. It's the US that is increasingly disrespecting the rules and interests of other countries. It appears that the Trump era is especially used to portray the US as an international pariah of some sort.

To be honest, China is not afraid of competition with others, no matter how fierce the competition might be. China has always been serious in abiding by international rules. It is the most ideal state for China's development that all countries compete with one another in accordance to the rules. This is not a high-profile empty talk, but the deepest part of China's values. Almost all Chinese elites have fought their way through the harsh rules of gaokao, or college entrance examinations. Respecting the rules is in the blood of the Chinese nation. It has become our starting point of dealing with international rules. China's reform and opening-up period can be seen as a long march for the country to understand and integrate into the international rules. [...] Washington's neglect of rules has repeatedly shocked the international community. Rules apply to all countries. The system of United Nations should be the most authoritative starting point of the international rules. But which country is more respectful to the UN, China or the US? Which country has more conflicts with international multilateral organizations, China or the US?⁷⁰

The argument attempts to establish the structure of reality by implying that China has always respected rules and refers to several examples. China and the US are contrasted as polar opposites: based on its history and culture, China respects rules, while the US does the exact opposite. The US and its role in building the post-WWII order is not mentioned at all; the US is dissociated from the international order and law. Interestingly, the role of the UN is highlighted, which is a common theme in Chinese rhetoric. It's the UN that determines international law, not the US and its allies that don't represent the majority of the globe. In this sense, the UN is the most respected authority in the global system. This type of appeal to authority is an argument based on the structure of reality. That said, overall the use of historical and cultural references establishes the structure of reality in support of the argument that

⁷⁰Global Times 2021i.

China respects international rules and is not seeking to rewrite them, on the contrary, it's the US that is now attempting to destroy the very system that it had a decisive role in establishing. In this sense, China is also portrayed as a model, and the US as an anti-model. As well, China as a responsible power is simultaneously dissociated from the negligent US.

Although it's argued more and more that China is challenging the US-led international order and that Beijing is even trying to advertise the superiority of its societal model, this editorial is an example of the opposite approach. The Global Times is trying to show that China is not attempting to recreate international rules and institutions, even though this is done in a well-established way that simultaneously castigates US's role as the self-proclaimed leader and model. It shows that the Global Times isn't purely focused on praising the superiority of China, but in addition to that, it also attempts to create an impression of China as a responsible global power. The United Nations' position in particular needs to be maintained, which is of course in Chinese interests, as it often gets support from developing countries on issues like human rights, and Beijing is also one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council.

2.2.2 China and the West

In regards to China-EU relations, the new European China policy was specified in the "EU-China Strategic Outlook" that was published in 2019. The document considers China a partner, competitor, and systemic rival at the same time. Le Corre (2019) points out that when it comes to the European Union's China policy overall however, there's a lack of unity among member states. Some want to focus on trade relations, while others want to prioritize politics, security issues, and human rights. Beijing's approach appears to be uncertain as well, as while it's clear that in its relations with the EU, China wants to maximize economic, technological, and political benefits and prevent the emergence of a united trans-Atlantic bloc, Lungu (2023) argues that China has taken hardly any concrete steps to achieve these goals. As a result, the relations continue to develop, in Lungu's words, on "autopilot". He concludes by stating that the political environment in both China and the EU makes any detente unlikely. China is increasingly confident in its narrative that China is becoming strong, and as such it feels it doesn't need to take the initiative. Nevertheless, neither side wants to adopt a strategy of confrontation either, despite

the geopolitical situation. Consequently, both sides settle for talks and meetings that won't change the trend of increasing tensions.⁷¹

Related to this, what China should do with the US-dominated West was another major theme in the editorials. Overall the Global Times was convinced that the US wouldn't be able to unite all Western countries, especially the European countries, against China. This appears to be an overall consistent approach in Chinese foreign policy, and there's hope in Beijing that the EU countries will follow the US in its containment of China.

Their [the US and the West] GDP accounts for more than half of global GDP. Their discourse power is overwhelmingly dominant. Thus, they have a monopoly on how controversial issues are interpreted and defined. The US is desperate to turn its conflict with China into a collision between the West and China, and the Biden administration in particular has done everything possible to achieve this goal. China should try to distinguish the China-US conflict from friction between China and the West. It should prove to the world that these things are strategically different. [...] It is worth mentioning that the US has some natural advantages in pulling the Western camp to pressure China. First, the West is a de facto alliance based on ideology and values. [...] However, the Achilles' heel of this US strategy is that the confrontation between China and the West that the US has been promoting goes against globalization - the trend of the times. And this confrontation requires Western countries to pay the price by sacrificing their own development opportunities and a wealth of actual benefits. However, China and the West are not in a zero-sum relationship. [...] That gives China an important opportunity to break the united front between the US and the West. [...] In order to achieve this, China should first adopt different policies toward the US and its allies, while at the same time treat members of the Five Eyes alliance and other Western countries differently. [...] We need to try to play down the so-called China-West frictions and talk more about the China-US conflict. [...] China needs to strengthen its ties with developing countries and continuously increase its bargaining chips in dealing with the West.⁷²

Some of the argumentation here is based on the structure of reality. The West is still economically dominant due to its massive combined GDP, and as a consequence, it still dominates international media and soft power, a liaison of succession. In this way, it's implied that China needs to grow its economy still further until it's able to challenge this Western dominance. Furthermore, a viewpoint is presented that there's a possibility to separate the US from the rest of the West and in this way strengthen China's international position and make sure the West cannot unite against it. This is argumentation by division, which is a quasi-logical form of argumentation. In addition, there are still some more arguments based on the structure of reality, like the sentiment that the US's advantageous position is due to its de facto alliance system among Western nations. Also, the often repeated

⁷¹Le Corre, 2019; Lungu, 2023.

⁷²Global Times 2021f.

argument that the US, when it's trying to gang up on China with its Western allies, is operating against globalization, which is almost seen as a law of the current state of the global system, is a form of quasi-logical argumentation. Lastly, it is interesting to note that developing countries are seen as a natural counterforce to the West.

In this editorial, the concept of discourse power is referred to, arguing that due to the West's dominant economic position, its soft power is also dominant. While it's acknowledged that in many ways US position as the leader of Western countries is favorable, it's not strong enough to push all countries aligned with it against China. It's furthermore argued that having good relations with China brings actual benefits that no country wants to be without. This shows confidence in China's global position and the irresistible appeal of its economy and markets, despite the still openly acknowledged overall dominant position of Western economies. According to the Global Times, it's not the whole of the West that is the problem, but the Five Eyes countries that are most aligned with the US. It's also made clear that there should also be a contingency plan, which possibly implies that China's trust towards West shouldn't be unconditional; maybe there are even fears that a rift and break-up is somewhat inevitable. Either way, the Global Times sees the developing countries as China's natural reference group, despite its growing global power and influence.

Moreover, it's mentioned for the first time that globalization is inevitable and that China fully supports this process. This is especially noteworthy during and after Trump's presidency, and it can be regarded as a role reversal: the leader of the international order is increasingly isolationist, while China, led by a Communist party, was in isolation for decades and arguably even throughout its history, is now ready to take the US mantle. Xi Jinping himself has defended globalization with the same exact words just days before Donald Trump's inauguration: that it's the historical trend of the times. Back then, the irony of the world's most powerful communist presenting himself as a champion of globalization was widely noted. This Chinese strategy of prioritizing opening up the economy further and integration with other countries combined with innovation has been set to continue.⁷³

2.2.3 China and Russia

It can be argued that the increasing rapprochement of China and Russia is the most important challenge of the US-led international order, and it has been one of the

⁷³McKinney 2017, 709-710.

defining features of international affairs in the last decade. Kirchberger (2022) posits that the bilateral relations between these two countries have undergone rapid change in a relatively short period of time, and similarly, the perception of Western scholars regarding them has shifted. Whereas earlier many Western experts saw the relationship as a “marriage of convenience,” the increasing scope of the cooperation and its potential to challenge Western interests has led to some rethinking. Questions however remain to what extent this is only signaling and symbolic gestures instead of real deepening trust. In this context, the deepening of military cooperation especially, an area that was previously seen as too sensitive, can be seen as an indicator of increased trust. Furthermore, it can be argued that in the geopolitical climate of increased competition between democracies and autocracies, the Western focus on sanctions and embargoes has had the unintended consequence of pushing China and Russia closer together.⁷⁴

Nonetheless, the increased cooperation needs to be balanced with important constraints that have historically limited rapprochement between the two Eurasian powers, including Russian fears of Chinese economic domination, both countries’ partnerships with third countries, like India and Vietnam in Russia’s case, or Ukraine in China’s, and the importance of historical conflicts. Of course, complete consensus between alliance members is not realistic to begin with, as for example the hostility between Greece and Turkey can attest. Moreover, in Europe, the long-standing hostility between historical rivals has been overcome. Already decades ago, Zbigniew Brzezinski had feared the potential alliance between Russia and China as the worst possible outcome for the US. Some have argued that there’s no genuine like-mindedness between the two and that the partnership is only driven by interests. In contrast, some have pointed to the increasing scope of defence cooperation and technology sharing. Furthermore, recently there have been coordinated foreign policy behavior could indicate that China and Russia have similar strategic outlook and worldview, united by the desire to end the unipolar international order, as was already outlined in their Joint Declaration in 1997.⁷⁵

After the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the defence cooperation increased as did major energy projects like Arctic LNG, and other types of natural resource exploration. Even if Russia was forced to do this due to a lack of alternatives, this does indicate some level of increased trust. Considering moreover the ways in which the economies complement each other, and other synergies, including in energy security, and their opposition to Western-led order, greater partnership can’t be discounted. Crimean annexation overall seems to have been an inflection point, after which the Russian government reassessed the earlier fears of a takeover either

⁷⁴Kirchberger et al. 2022, 2-7.

⁷⁵Kirchberger et al. 2022, 2-7.

demographically or military, and the potential Chinese copying of military technology, both of which were determined to no longer be relevant. This positive and optimistic re-evaluation appears to have also taken place in China.⁷⁶

It appears that external pressures in the form of great-power competition with the US explain the shift in how Russia is viewed in China, where it is now seen as a partner against the US-led West. It's of utmost importance for China to keep its strategic rear safe. Bekkevold (2022) argues that the realist school of international relations and balance of power theories best explain the growing ties between China and Russia. In realist reading, the stability of the system is based on a balance of power and economics is less important to national security than military power. Few bilateral relationships have changed back and forth as dramatically as the China-Russia relations, and there has been no single continuous narrative in China or Russia. Beijing's choices have mainly been shaped by the relative power position of China and Russia and systemic pressures from great power competition. China and Russia reached an agreement on border disputes in 2004, which signified that for the first time, China had no security threat to its northern border, and its strategic rear was safe, thus enabling it to focus more on naval build-up.⁷⁷

China has been aware of Russian concerns when it comes to the growing power gap between the two powers, and consequently, Beijing has practiced a policy of reassurance vis-a-vis Russia during the whole post-Cold War period. This has been highly successful, although it has been helped by Moscow's worsening relations with Washington. In 1996, Jiang Zemin and Boris Yeltsin established a strategic partnership, but this remained limited until the 2000s. The recent rapid improvement is the result of two dynamics, one bilateral and one systemic. During the 1990s and 2000s, the two countries put in place a relatively solid foundation, in the form of a border agreement, the 2001 friendship treaty, and regular high-level exchanges. Simultaneously with the improving bilateral dynamic, the US challenge and the formation of a new bipolar world have further improved relations.⁷⁸

After the Ukrainian Crisis that began in 2014, Russia used China as a counterweight against the US, while at the same time, the China-US relations were also worsening with Washington's pivot to Asia, and as a result, Beijing used Russia as a counterbalance to perceived US encirclement. China sees a partnership without a formal alliance as having lower costs and greater returns, and without defence obligations, and this suits Beijing perfectly. As China's power has grown, so have its international ambitions. On the other hand, with the increasing naval competition

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Kirchberger et al. 2022, 8-9; Bekkevold 2022, 46-47, 49-50, 53-54.

⁷⁸Kirchberger et al. 2022, 8-9; Bekkevold 2022, 46-47, 49-50, 53-54.

between China and the US, the focus on maritime build-up helps to maintain good relations with Russia despite the growing power gap. Moreover, the emergence of a bipolar system forces other states to choose sides.⁷⁹

The Global Times regularly criticized the US for its alliance policy, which was regarded as a historical relic from the Cold War, and also exclusionary and confrontational. In contrast, the China-Russia relations were at times presented as an example of a bilateral relationship that was an improvement over the so-called outdated Cold War-era model, as it was not an alliance but something that was superior to existing alliances. More generally, the situation in Russia was covered in a sympathetic light, and it was seen as a victim of constant US meddling, just like China.

The most influential bilateral relationship in Eurasia is the China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era. China and Russia understand the weight of their ties. When the two sides continue to deepen their relations, they also take care of feelings of other countries in the region modestly and in a restrained manner, reiterating that the relationship between Beijing and Moscow is a partnership, rather than an alliance. To be honest, no country in the region can stand alone against either China or Russia, let alone fight against the two powers at the same time. It would be disastrous for any country which tends to confront China and Russia through forging an alliance with the US. [...] If the US relies on its alliance to solve the problem caused by its outdated hegemonism, it will be a crazy act. On the contrary, China and Russia's move to forge a new partnership rather than an alliance is displaying their confidence, and is more in line with the spirit of the era.⁸⁰

The argument is attempting to establish the structure of reality, a view of the world in which China and Russia are strong powers, and any alliances they are facing are inevitably going to fail in their objective. The China-Russia partnership is steady, rational as well as peaceful, while US attempts at upholding its hegemonism are "crazy acts" in contrast. This argumentation also utilizes the technique of dissociation between China and Russia on the one hand, and the US and its allies on the other. The latter's behaviour is hegemonic, which is labelled as outdated as if it's against the law of history in a way, which is quasi-logical. Moreover, the China-Russia partnership is also portrayed as a model relationship between two great powers in the post-Cold War global order that is rapidly changing.

The editorial shows that in the Chinese self-image, China has a moral high ground when it comes to foreign affairs, and as a result, it doesn't enter into alliances that strengthen its international influence over others and target third countries. China is not tied to a historical baggage that contains plans for domination and building of blocs, and others have nothing to worry about. That said, the editorial arguably also

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Global Times 2021e.

contains a passage that could be interpreted as a veiled threat: other countries shouldn't try to confront either China or Russia as they are strong enough to handle any coalitions. As such, for China, the role of any partnerships with other countries is purely defensive, and this is contrasted with what the US is doing, which is basically a mirror image of the Chinese approach.

2.2.4 China-led Coalitions

Since the end of the Cold War China has emerged as one of the biggest critics of the continued existence of great power blocs and competition. During the presidency of Barack Obama, China proclaimed as its goal a new type of great power relations, which consisted of mutual respect for each other's interests, avoidance of conflicts, and win-win cooperation. However, the US gradually stopped using the term. In the Chinese view, China-US relations differ from the Cold War in four different ways: first, China's nuclear deterrent is much smaller than that of the US; second, the economies of the two countries are highly dependent on each other; third, they share security interests like the fight against terror, climate change and pandemics; and fourth, the two societies are closely connected both socially and culturally. From the Chinese point of view, the US should promise that it won't attempt to change China's political system, while China would promise that it's not seeking to upend the US-led global system or push it out of East Asia. This indicates that China appears to be against the Cold War era opposing blocs.⁸¹ This opposition was very clear in the editorials of the Global Times.

China's hostility towards US-led alliances notwithstanding, Beijing has been increasingly active in building and supporting international organizations that function as alternatives to the Washington consensus. As such, while regionalism has been in something of a trouble in Europe due to Brexit, China-led regionalism has continued to expand. This has generally been overlooked in the West, however, since the Chinese type of regionalism looks totally different from the regionalism that the EU has promoted, and thus it's not recognized by them. These Chinese efforts in part led to the reinvigoration of the Quad by the US, with Australia, Japan, and India. In general, a deepening competition between the US-led alliance system and Chinese-led regionalism can be discerned.⁸²

China is generally following an intergovernmental approach toward regional security governance instead of a supranational approach to integration. It appears

⁸¹Vuori 2022, 45.

⁸²He 2019, 79-80.

that in the context of US-China rivalry, China uses regional institutions and global multilateral organizations to weaken the US alliance system and expand its global supply chains and global power overall. This includes the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) grouping, a multilateral institution spanning several continents. China also aims to increase its global financial power through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and strengthen supply chains and connectivity through the BRI's infrastructure build-up. Overall, China has supported existing institutions that function against protectionism, while at the same time building new ones. This type of regionalism is a counterbalance to the US alliance system.⁸³

The Global Times in 2021 editorials also discussed the situation in the ASEAN (Association of South East Asia) several times. Generally, it was seen as an area in which the US, an outsider, was trying to expand its influence as part of the strategy to contain China. In 2014, China announced its "dual-track approach" to the South China Sea disputes. According to this strategy, any disputes should be resolved through negotiations by countries directly involved, and the peace of the region should be jointly upheld by China and ASEAN, in contrast to its earlier insistence on a purely bilateral approach. However, in 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague declared that China had broken the UN's Convention on the Law of the Sea. China boycotted this arbitration. Nonetheless, China has re-evaluated its policy regarding the South China Sea, which was threatening to undermine China's BRI and other initiatives. For this reason, China is now attempting a "salami" strategy, which aims to achieve control of the South China Sea gradually, step by step.⁸⁴

In summary, instead of counter-alliances, China has employed a regional strategy that aims to "weaken and modify the logic of the US alliance system." However, while this has arguably eased tensions to some extent, it's not an effective institutional alternative for managing the rivalry between the two powers. China's hierarchical and state-centric approach to regionalism has its limitations due to the fact that it has mainly instrumental value to China in its quest to achieve a great power status; as such, regional governance and organization are not among its main goals. China's unwillingness to deepen traditional security cooperation, for example in territorial disputes in the South China Sea, has maintained or even strengthened US influence in Asia. This type of regionalism needs to prove that it's capable of managing disputes and conflicts, like in Afghanistan.⁸⁵

⁸³He 2019, 80-84.

⁸⁴He 2019, 87-88.

⁸⁵He 2019, 93.

According to another perspective from the Chinese point of view, regionalism is a response to the failure of global reform. The so-called “politics of resentment” regarding Western-dominated financial institutions, as well as the lesson of the global financial crisis has deepened regionalism in East Asia. As China isn’t able to reform the existing status-quo institutions, it has been aiming to increase economic interconnectedness through the likes of AIIB, the New Development Bank, and the Belt and Road Initiative. In Chinese strategy, these institutions are both on top as well as beside the existing organizations. Doing this allows China to have a leadership role that is proportional to its economic size. This type of fragmentation of the international system wasn’t China’s choice, but it was forced to adapt. All in all, while still promoting globalization, it’s now doing it at a more regional level.⁸⁶

The structure of the Chinese political system, in which the state and business interests are in many ways connected, in addition to China’s ambitious political-economic projects, has had a major influence on the new rise of terms like geopolitics and geo-economics in international politics. Geo-economics was coined by Edward Luttwak in the early 1990s. According to him, states tend to act “geo-economically” because they are by their nature regionally defined units, which are built to defeat one another on the global stage. Geo-economics and similar terminology have especially been connected to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. It was launched by Xi in 2013. Programs like the Silk Road Initiative and the 21st Maritime Silk Road outlined different routes from China to Europe, trade routes that would bring new possibilities not only for poorer countries but also to the western regions of China. The vision is to create a new kind of interdependence, which would improve regional stability and trust towards China. In addition to the land route, a sea route is also supposed to bring mutual benefits in the form of trade connections between Asia, Africa, and Europe, uniting them into one economic entity, which in turn would strengthen multipolarity and economic globalization.⁸⁷

As already mentioned, in addition to the China-Russia partnership, the Global Times also highlighted the superiority of the aforementioned Chinese efforts in building international and regional organizations and institutional frameworks. In the view of the publication, these were described as being full of potential and growth, whereas Western ones were in an inevitable decline. One specific editorial compared the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to NATO specifically in the context of Afghanistan. The SCO was, consistent with other argumentation by the Global Times, focused on practical, real problems, instead of power games like the West.

⁸⁶McKinney 2017, 719-720.

⁸⁷Mattlin et al. 2022, 255-258.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was founded by China and Russia in 1996 and it includes four Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) plus India and Pakistan. It has been able to manage border conflicts in the region despite criticism. Considering the relationship between China and Russia, it has been regarded as an alliance that is aiming to counter Western influence, while in fact it doesn't have the functions of a full-scale alliance. In effect, China has explicitly insisted that it should not target third parties. Xi announced in 2018 that China would train 2,000 law enforcement officers to reinforce peace in Afghanistan. In contrast to Brexit, SCO's expansion has continued and in addition to its members, it has several observer states and dialogue partners like Belarus, Iran, and Turkey. China has however been wary of Iran's and Turkey's full membership.⁸⁸

In the 20 years since the SCO's establishment, the West has been constantly badmouthing and questioning it. Proud Westerners believe that the SCO will not last long, but the SCO has walked a path far beyond their expectation. Today, the SCO has become the most extensive and populous comprehensive regional cooperation organization worldwide. It is full of vitality. On the contrary, NATO, the largest political and military organization led by the West, is regarded as experiencing a "brain death" by itself. Why? Fundamentally, it is because the SCO is practicing real multilateralism which is the common interest of everyone. The original intention of the SCO was to seek consensus and win-win situation. It aims at resolving problems, not to unite to deal with anyone, nor is it a geopolitical tool dominated by a major power. [...] The SCO's positive role and NATO once again constitute a sharp contrast regarding the Afghan issue. NATO is indeed an expert in causing havoc. The US and the West ran away leaving a mess in Afghanistan. Now the SCO, out of a high sense of responsibility, comes to help Afghanistan. It's clear which one is good.⁸⁹

This argumentation is based on the structure of reality that highlights the achievements of the SCO over NATO and other Western alliance structures. The combined population and size of the member countries in the SCO are presented as reasons for its growing importance and success. A liaison of succession where greater resources lead to better outcomes. In this narrative, The SCO's multilateral approach is superior as it takes the interests of all the impacted countries into account. The Afghanistan situation is mentioned, which is arguably a quasi-logical argument, considering the involvement of the two parties in the conflict is vastly different and hardly comparable. Furthermore, comparing NATO to the SCO as a whole is similarly debatable, considering their differences as the former is a military alliance and the latter a more general regional organization. There are also rhetorical questions that emphasize SCO's positive contributions to regional and global security.

⁸⁸He 2019, 84-85.

⁸⁹Global Times 2021p.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 gave a lot of ammunition to the Global Times when it came to US foreign policy and its failures. Interestingly a quote by French President Emmanuel Macron about the “brain death” of NATO is used to support the argument. In this instance, the withdrawal from Afghanistan is used to show that Washington only spreads chaos, while in contrast China and its partners’ efforts are needed to settle the mess the US has left behind. This type of direct comparison with NATO is noteworthy as it shows that China has increased its international profile. On global responsibility, China not only comes out on top but is pretty much the exact opposite of the US.

2.2.5 China-US Trade War

The US-China trade war that was initiated by the Trump administration in 2018 was no longer as dominant in the editorials as a few years earlier, but the Global Times did conclude that the US had failed in its objectives. The publication reflected on the release of Meng Wanzhou, Huawei’s Chief Financial Officer in September and its symbolism. She was straightforwardly seen as a victim of political persecution. In this narrative, her release showed once again that the US was a shameless rule-breaker and that China had become too strong to be bullied by any country.

The trade war that began in 2017 signified the beginning of a new stage in China-US relations. Donald Trump ran for office on a protectionist platform, and after becoming president he directed an investigation against China’s trade practices and policies. It’s noteworthy that the resulting extremely critical report focused on technology transfers, instead of trade imbalance. As a response, at first, the US imposed duties on \$34 billion worth of Chinese imports in July of 2018. China retaliated and the tit-for-tat escalation ensued with the exchange of tariff hikes until Trump and Xi agreed on a truce in late 2018 and the countries began working on a trade agreement. From the Chinese perspective, manufacturing and exports were its growth model that guaranteed a very high rate of growth from the late 1970s onwards. Growth has gradually slowed since then, which is in part a natural by-product of an increasingly developed economy. Nonetheless, Xi coined the term “Chinese Dream” in 2012 and it primarily consists of two parts: first, to achieve a moderately prosperous society and second, to accomplish China’s great rejuvenation.⁹⁰

In connection with these objectives, it’s important to discuss two strategic projects. First, the Belt and Road Initiative was introduced in 2013. Its main focus is

⁹⁰Chen et al. 2020, 904-905; Kwan 2020, 55, 60.

connecting China, Russia, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa to increase integration and attract investment and trade along the routes, as mentioned. For its implementation, China created the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Second, Made in China 2025 is Beijing's industrial strategy that aims to make China an advanced industrial power by integrating next-generation IT with manufacturing. It focuses on areas like IT, robotics, aerospace, and pharmaceuticals. Its goal is to increase the share of domestic parts and materials from 40 percent to 70 percent by 2025, and consequently decrease reliance on foreign technology.⁹¹

After the unveiling of the Made in China 2025 strategy alarm bells were ringing in Washington. In this context, it's important to note that China overtook the US in overall R&D (research & development) spending in 2018. China's science and engineering workforce has also grown much larger than that of the US. At the same time, the output of China's high-technology manufacturing industry was growing much faster than the US's own, while Beijing also outpaced Washington in the production of information and communications technology. In fact, Trump's push for "fair trade" aimed for much more than reducing the trade deficit with China. The US also demanded that China should give foreign companies more access to its internal market, stop forcing technology transfers from American companies, strengthen intellectual property protection, and remove subsidies from its state-owned enterprises (SOEs). In his statements, Trump explicitly stated that he would stop the process of China overtaking the US economically and technologically. Trump also signed a bill that attempted to counter China's Belt & Road Initiative. For these reasons, Chen et al. (2020) argue that the trade war was not about trade imbalance but it was rather a technology war, which aimed to limit China's technology sector and as a consequence weaken its global influence.⁹²

US dissatisfaction was also a reflection of systemic differences, as the Chinese system deviated widely from those of the West. As well, the trade war signified a shift from the decades-long engagement to decoupling. In general, the US accused China of being an unfair trader, while the Chinese criticized the US for its assessment of seeing China as a threat. Kwan (2020) posits that both sides are correct to some extent. From the US perspective, while China claims to be a defender of trade and global trade, it's actually the most protectionist and mercantilist economy in the world. Furthermore, the CPC practices direct control of the economy and in China law is an instrument of the state, including in economic policy. Moreover, its industrial policies depend on massive market-distorting subsidies. From the US point of view, Made in China 2025 was set to reinforce governmental control of the

⁹¹Chen et al. 2020, 905.

⁹²Chen et al 2020, 905-906.

economy while it also intended to favor Chinese companies over foreign companies in priority sectors, distorting global markets. The US trade deficit with China had grown to over \$400 billion by 2018, representing almost 50% of the total US trade deficit. From the Chinese perspective, the real motive was simply to contain China and the accusations about unfair trade practices were just an excuse.⁹³

After the Trump-Xi meeting in December 2018, China promised to balance its trade with the US, and further open its market to both domestic and foreign investors. It also enacted bills that took into account other US concerns. Beijing furthermore replaced the Made in China 2025 with a more market-oriented approach, which also allowed foreign companies greater access to its technology sector. In the midst of the trade war, the US enacted sanctions on Huawei and filed criminal charges against Meng Wanzhou, its chief financial officer, allegedly for breaches of sanctions against Iran. Due to strong US pressure, countries like Australia and Japan also banned Chinese telecommunications equipment from their 5G networks. While China appeared willing to make a deal with the US, it was not ready to limit subsidies for its SOEs, which remained important employers. Furthermore, they had a dominant role in “Made in China 2025” and the “Belt and Road Initiative.” Chen & et al. (2020) conclude by stating that in a world in which technology is increasingly important, these types of rivalries could lead to a Thucydides Trap.⁹⁴

Regarding the case of Huawei, the US had treated it as a threat to national security already in 2012, citing risks involved with allowing its hardware into US communications networks, specifically pointing out the possibility that the Chinese government could use it for espionage. In December 2018, Meng Wanzhou was arrested in Canada at the US’ behest, for violating US sanctions on Iran. Then in May 2019, Huawei was added to the US Justice Department’s Entity List. This practically bans Huawei from buying parts and components from US companies. On the same day, Trump banned US companies from using Huawei’s telecommunications equipment. In addition to Huawei, ZTE, China’s second-largest telecommunications equipment provider was targeted with sanctions already in 2016, but these were temporary after the company agreed to US demands. However, afterwards more Chinese companies were added to the entity list and universities limited their collaboration with Chinese scientists. In response, there were indications that China would use its dominance in rare earths as a counter, and it also created its own entity list.⁹⁵

As the case lasted for more than 1,000 days and caused a global sensation, the result has also effectively safeguarded China’s national dignity. [...] At the peak of the China-US trade war,

⁹³Kwan 2020, 55-58.

⁹⁴Chen et al. 2020, 906-908.

⁹⁵Kwan 2020, 66-67.

the US was beginning to attack Chinese high-tech companies. The arrest and the subsequent accusations were undisguised political persecution. [...] Meng's arrest broke some basic rules in the international order and stimulated the action of major power competition. The damage caused is far reaching. We hope that when Meng's case comes to an end, Washington will reflect on their choices: Did they frighten and defeat Huawei? Did they intimidate China? No. The only effect of this case is to show the world how brutal the US can be to reach its political purpose, and how the US has ignored the rules. The case will be an eternal stain on the US. [...] Alstom paid a huge fine and was forced to sell its core business to the US' General Motors. In comparison, Meng and Huawei are much luckier. It is China's national power that shaped this final result. A country will be surrounded with more troubles as it gets stronger, but only a strong country can enable us to deal with those troubles with dignity.⁹⁶

This editorial first of all uses an argument based on the structure of reality when discussing Meng's case as political persecution that broke basic international rules that are commonly accepted among nations and peoples. Meng's and her case has become a symbol. Moreover, the editorial argues that as a result, the US reputation will forever be tarnished as a brutal rule-breaker. In contrast, it was China's growing national power that shaped the outcome. China is presented as both a strong as well as a dignified country, while it is implied that the US is in contrast increasingly weak and undignified. Overall, the narrative is that Meng's case was unjust and politically motivated, and China proved to be a strong power that takes care of its citizens.

The editorial indicates well that the China-US economic tensions had not eased despite the decline in the trade war. The piece strongly connects the economic conflict with US's overall geopolitical objectives. The editorial particularly emphasizes China's confidence as well as its capabilities as a great power. China's situation is contrasted with France and its rolling stock manufacturer Alstom, which was fined extraterritorially and its senior executive jailed by the US in 2013. In the view of the Global Times, China is one of the very few countries that are able to face the US. Considering China's history and the importance of the so-called Century of Humiliation in the national psyche, it's clear that Meng's release fits perfectly in the narrative that the CPC has successfully safeguarded China's honor on the international stage.

2.3 China's Core Interests

In addition to domestic and foreign policy, the third distinct theme that was prominent in the Global Times editorials concerning China were the so-called core interests. In Chinese parlance, core interests are aspects of Beijing's policy that are regarded as its internal matters and as such are not open to negotiations let alone

⁹⁶Global Times 2021g.

concessions. Of these, three in particular recurred throughout the year. Relations between mainland China and Taiwan deteriorated in the late 2010s. This was noticeable in the coverage of the *Global Times* as well. The rhetoric was confrontational and hawkish, emphasizing the readiness of the People's Liberation Army. The situation in Xinjiang had similarly heated up and in 2021 the publication was forced to counter Western accusations about Chinese policies in the province. Similarly, China tightened its grip on Hong Kong after the protests of 2019-20, and the *Global Times* harshly opposed what it perceived as Western interference. Notably, the situation in the South China Sea was generally stable, and the editorials didn't actively comment on it.

2.3.1 Taiwan

From the Chinese point of view, the core interests are part of its sovereignty, and as such not a business of foreign powers. In these matters, Chinese leadership's room for maneuver is small, and nationalism is highly influential, especially among young people. This is no coincidence but a result of a conscious policy after 1989 in particular. Therefore the Chinese leadership is between a rock and a hard place when it comes to the core interests. More specifically, Taiwan and the South China Sea are de facto not in Chinese control, and consequently, they are matters of international concern more than the other two regions. This is another example of how internal and external security are closely connected in China. The Chinese Civil War never officially ended, and the Republic of China survived on the island of Taiwan with US support. To balance its recognition of the People's Republic in 1979, the US Congress enacted the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, which obliged the US to ensure Taiwan's defence. In practice, this has meant that the US sells weapons to Taiwan and maintains strategic ambiguity about the true extent of its support for Taiwan. For the Chinese leadership, the question of Taiwan is an open wound and reminds them of the fact that the legitimacy of the CPC is not complete.⁹⁷

China for its part enacted an anti-secession law 2015, which requires military intervention if Taiwan moves towards de-facto independence. The tensions have increased after the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) Tsai Ing-wen was elected president in 2016. The DPP has its origins in the opposition movement against the nationalist Kuomintang. Its platform focuses on the Taiwanese identity and democracy. It considers Taiwan to be in practice independent already. China's One Country Two Systems, which was also offered to Taiwan as a model for reunification, was a political innovation that long seemed a functioning and pragmatic

⁹⁷Mattlin et al. 2022, 306-309.

move. However, the National Security Law in Hong Kong weakened its reputation considerably. From this perspective, there are reasons to believe that the Chinese leadership no longer believes in peaceful unification. For a long time, there was a quiet agreement between China and Taiwan that as long as Taiwan didn't move towards formal independence, the PRC wouldn't interfere in its de facto independence and separate existence. This has however changed after Tsai Ing-wen became president.⁹⁸

Trump, despite his preference for transactional diplomacy, has been called the most pro-Taiwan president since the de-recognition of the island in 1979. During his tenure, the US lawmakers, with a bipartisan consensus, pushed for several pro-Taiwan bills, among them initiatives that increased contacts between US and Taiwanese officials as well as an act that increased support for those few countries that still recognize the Republic of China in Taiwan. While the US had followed a liberal engagement strategy vis-a-vis China since 1972, the Trump administration acknowledged the futility of this approach. In the context of intensifying competition between China and the US, Trump responded with policies aimed at strengthening Taiwan's international position short of recognizing its independence, and Biden has continued this approach. Chen (2020) posits that this is due to a combination of internal and external factors: more inward-looking domestic politics in conjunction with nationalism, as well as increased tensions between the two powers. In addition, Taiwan's technological capabilities in the form of the semiconductor manufacturer TSMC make Taiwan increasingly important strategically.⁹⁹

According to Ye (2022), Taiwan has become the most sensitive point on which the United States and China could be pulled into the Thucydides trap. As part of the US containment policy toward China, it has revised its Taiwan policy from traditional strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity of elevated US-Taiwan relations. In Biden's trinity framework of confrontation, competition, and cooperation Taiwan serves as a strategic card that has no place for cooperation. In a change from Trump, the Biden administration is further trying to enhance this through a multilateral framework involving its European and Asian allies. The Biden administration utilizes value-oriented diplomacy to encourage its allies to increase their involvement in the Taiwan Strait. Robert Kaplan has pointed out that the US could lose its geopolitical dominance in the Indo-Pacific region if China takes control of Taiwan because this creates a gap in the first island chain, a set of archipelagos next to China's coast. Furthermore, it has also been argued that if the US abandons Taiwan, this could cascade due to lost credibility leading to a collapse of its alliance system. Overall,

⁹⁸Mattlin et al. 2022, 310-313.

⁹⁹Chen 2020, 397-400, 427-428.

Biden's approach creates more strategic pressure on China than Trump's, making it difficult for China to respond due to the internationalization of the issue.¹⁰⁰

From the Chinese point of view, this means that its anti-external interference policy needs to match or even surpass its earlier focus on the anti-secessionist movement that was mainly concerned about moves toward independence in Taiwan itself. While the vast majority of states around the world have respected the One-China principle for decades, political relations and interactions with Taiwan have increased greatly in recent years, mainly by the US and its allies. Beijing sees this purely as a containment strategy aimed against China. Moreover, to many Chinese policymakers, it appears as if Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen and the DPP are attempting to gain independence by relying on foreign interference. The incremental internationalization has convinced Beijing to increase its military, political, and diplomatic pressure.¹⁰¹

The situation in the Taiwan Strait was heating up noticeably in 2021, and the Global Times published several fiery editorials that highlighted the hopelessness of Taiwan's position and warned that China was prepared to intervene militarily at any time. It was also strongly implied that the US was the puppet master behind the increasingly defiant "Taiwan island". Notably, the outgoing US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo became something of a bogeyman as he relaxed restrictions on meetings between American and Taiwanese officials, among other similar moves, just before Trump's term ended, and consequently, he was labelled as a "lunatic" by the Global Times. Nothing similar was directed at any other person in such a short period of time, which shows how sensitive the issue of Taiwan is to China.

Taiwan and the US should be sent a message: Do not misjudge or underestimate the Chinese mainland's determination and will to defend its territorial integrity and to severely punish the reckless acts of "Taiwan independence" forces. If the island of Taiwan and the US regard the previous US administration's last-minute acts as a new starting point of their ties and continue to promote "Taiwan independence," it is predictable that military conflicts will be triggered across the Taiwan Straits. [...] The mainland has abundant power to do so. The 1.4 billion Chinese people are especially united in defending their territorial integrity. "Taiwan independence" means war – this is not only the declaration of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), but also the common attitude of all Chinese people. The DPP must not take any chances. [...] Taiwan authorities are small and they must be aware of current affairs. But they are ignorant of current affairs and cling to the US and its Indo-Pacific Strategy, believing they can do whatever they want or even become a "country" with US support.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰Ye 2022, 473-475, 501.

¹⁰¹Xin 2023.

¹⁰²Global Times 2021r.

This quote establishes the structure of reality. Taiwan is not a real country nor is it independent. This is a dissociation between (the mainland) China and Taiwan. Taipei is just a puppet of the US and a component in its grand strategy. Its standing is contrasted with China: the latter is “small,” and it’s facing a massive united force, “the common attitude of all Chinese people.” Taiwan is just an island, and as such, a region of China. This is an inclusion of part in the whole, which is a quasi-logical argument. Taiwan belongs to a larger category that is China and it’s subservient to it. The premise here is that the current situation, where Taiwan de facto functions as a separate country, has no relevance at all. Its government doesn’t even have a shred of legitimacy.

It’s interesting to note that the pieces regarding Taiwan were by far the most aggressive editorials the Global Times published in 2021. This fits perfectly with the notion of core interest as it’s understood in the Chinese context. Furthermore, unlike Xinjiang and Hong Kong, Taiwan isn’t under China’s de facto control, which makes it a foreign policy issue and as such a zone of direct China-US rivalry. The US role was indeed seen as the most important cause behind the growing tensions in the Taiwan Strait, potentially the strongest tool of Washington’s containment policy against Beijing. Moreover, the agency of Taiwan, and certainly of its people, was heavily downplayed. The exceptionally militaristic rhetoric, especially by the standards of China’s official media generally, is also noteworthy and shows that despite generally emphasizing the peaceful nature of China’s rise, the issue of Taiwan was a glaring exception.

2.3.2 Xinjiang

The Uyghurs are a Turkic people who are predominantly Muslims and they are indigenous to northwest China’s Tarim Basin. Today, the Uyghur homeland is a part of China as its Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The local authorities have established a tight security state in order to increase security in the area. China’s Belt Road Initiative that connects China to Europe intersects the region. Beijing’s efforts in Xinjiang are also a part of the goal to increase state power. Camps in general are used to incarcerate “problematic” groups. Sean Roberts posits that the Global War on Terror is the root cause of today’s situation in Xinjiang, allowing Uyghurs to be labelled as terrorists. While it’s true that some incidents against the Han Chinese have occurred, they are not comparable to what is being done to the minority, which in his view amounts to a forced assimilation and even cultural genocide. David Tobin adds that the Chinese policy of treating identity as a matter of security has only worsened the situation. There is a paradox: Uyghurs are an inalienable part of

the Chinese nation and a security threat at the same time. This contradiction leads to the Chinese state becoming insecure, which consequently leads to harsh policies. Tynen however points out that the state in China is not monolithic and that Xinjiang policies have a lot to do with local authorities.¹⁰³

It's clear that economic development didn't remove ethnic tensions, and unrest, terrorism and separatism increased in the 1990s in China, especially in the two most important autonomous regions Tibet and Xinjiang. In 2008 and 2009 the riots were especially severe, which led to tighter monitoring and restrictions on minority cultural rights. During Xi's tenure, the minority policy has been assimilative first and foremost. Especially in Xinjiang, the 2014 terror attacks led to one to two million Uyghurs being sent to re-education camps. Generally speaking, the minority policy is based on the notion that ethnicity and culture need to support official guidelines. Independent ethnic expressions, especially political ones, are not allowed. Violence, or in Chinese parlance counter-revolutionary armed rebellion, in the region was originally caused by China's strict religion and minority policy in combination with the independence of Central Asian states from the Soviet Union, which has served as inspiration, in addition to the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan. In the early 2000s, these influences had died down.¹⁰⁴

However, after 9/11, Chinese policy immediately changed, and Xinjiang was connected to the Global War on Terror. In China, separatism was equated with terrorism, and The East Turkestan Islamic Movement was added to UN and US terror lists. Even after the Obama administration ended the War on Terror, the anti-terror campaign has been continued by China. However, the War on Terror weakened the basis for Western critique of China in this matter. After a pause, the battle against counter-revolutionaries heightened up again in the 2010s with the rise of ISIS. Consequently, there were bomb, knife, and vehicle attacks in Xinjiang in 2014-15. The Chinese government responded by reforming anti-terrorism legislation and the first anti-terrorism law was enacted in 2016. This permitted anti-terror operations inside China as well as abroad and an anti-terror campaign in Xinjiang was launched, which led to the sending of one to two million Muslims in the region to "re-education camps". According to Western critics, this amounts to cultural genocide.¹⁰⁵

From the Western point of view, Xinjiang is important in the context of human rights, which have been a controversial issue in China-US relations for decades. At first, it was only the US criticizing China's policies, but gradually Beijing began to

¹⁰³Tynen 2022, 360-364.

¹⁰⁴Mattlin et al. 2022, 206-207, 297-299.

¹⁰⁵Mattlin et al.. 2022, 297-299.

fight back. From China's perspective, Xinjiang has become an increasingly volatile national security issue, which justifies suppression, surveillance, and "re-education" of over a million Uyghur Muslims. During Xi Jinping's presidency, the Muslim minority of Xinjiang has been under constant watch by the Chinese authorities. At first, the "re-education" aimed to replace the Muslim culture with the dominant Han culture. Some indicators suggest the Uyghur birth rate is being suppressed by forced birth control and sterilizations. Moreover, some Uyghurs are sent to other provinces for forced labor after the completion of "re-education". In response, some Western countries have imposed boycotts and sanctions.¹⁰⁶

In addition to Taiwan, the issue of Xinjiang was particularly fraught in 2021, after the US and Western countries strongly criticized the human rights situation in the province after China took harsh measures against what it perceived as potential terrorism and separatism, as already mentioned. In contrast to Taiwan and Hong Kong, US interference per se was seen as less of a threat, but instead, the situation in Xinjiang was used to damage China's reputation. In response, the Global Times attempted to defend Chinese policies and argue that the taken measures were necessary.

The violent and terror activities in Xinjiang a few years ago went almost out of control. Should it be stopped with strong measures? China's results-oriented Xinjiang governance has achieved the goal of peace and stability, and Xinjiang hasn't reported terror attacks for several years. Such a Xinjiang or Chechnya and Syria-like Xinjiang, which one can better protect human rights? If they say what Xinjiang did was wrong, then do they have a plausible way which can eradicate terrorism and ensure Xinjiang is not made into a hell of human rights at the same time? Have they ever been successful in governance in Iraq, Libya or Syria? The political virus they spread to the world is as detrimental as the novel coronavirus. [...] As China squabbles with the US-led West, the situation in Xinjiang gets better and consolidated, which serves as strong evidence.¹⁰⁷

Here the argumentation is quasi-logical, offering two simple options: either a peaceful and stable Xinjiang or a Xinjiang plagued by violence and terror similar to Chechnya or Syria. It's also comparing regions that are arguably not directly comparable to begin with. The series of questions and comparisons challenge the views of those who criticize China's governance in Xinjiang. The measures taken are presented as necessary preconditions for peace and stability in the region. There are historical comparisons made between Xinjiang and countries that the US has intervened in. A strong contrast is made between Xinjiang and areas that the US has tried to stabilize. The term "political virus" is arguably an allusion to COVID-19, which in the Global Times' argumentation is seen as another US human rights failure. Rhetorical questions are used to strengthen the argument. China is also

¹⁰⁶Gurtov 2021, 83-86.

¹⁰⁷Global Times 2021d.

portrayed as a model in anti-terrorism, and its efforts have led to an improved situation in Xinjiang, while the US and its interventions are anti-models, which have been nothing but failures, thus there's also argumentation that establishing the structure of reality.

This editorial on the situation in Xinjiang shows well how stability is prioritized in Chinese political rhetoric. It's furthermore one of the strongest ideals when it comes to human rights, i.e. there are no human rights without stability. Following this logic, in the view of the Global Times, the measures by the Chinese government have actually strengthened human rights in the province, not undermined them. While the situations are arguably hardly comparable, the alleged consequences of US foreign policy are contrasted with the situation in a region that is an integral part of China. From one perspective, merely making such comparisons puts China in a bad light, which surely isn't the intention of the editorial. On the other hand, however, it's clear that in the case of Xinjiang as well, the perceived failures of the US war on terror and other interventions in the Middle East and North Africa are useful material that can be utilized in anti-American rhetoric. The allusion to COVID-19 is also once again used for the same purpose, reinforcing its importance as a symbol of a complete US failure in human rights in the eyes of the Global Times.

2.3.3 Hong Kong

The aftermath of the Hong Kong protests was still a major part of the editorials in 2021. Hong Kong elections were becoming freer gradually until 2014 when the central government's increased involvement led to protests by the so-called Umbrella Movement. These protests returned in 2019-2020, after the Hong Kong government tried to enact a law that would have made it possible to extradite suspects to continental China. This led to large protests. China's National People's Congress enacted the National Security Law in response, which in practice ended the separation between the two systems. It curbed Hong Kong's independent juridical system, free press, and freedom of speech. In addition, a new election law was enacted in 2021. Through it, the central government is able to in practice control the Legislative Council in Hong Kong, based on whether the candidates are "patriots" or not. Most influential democracy activists were either arrested or left the country.¹⁰⁸

The Hong Kong protests of 2020-2021 attracted global attention. Over a million people protested against the Fugitive Bill. Afterwards, protests continued and

¹⁰⁸Mattlin et al. 2022, 143-147.

escalated. The fugitive bill was first proposed by the Hong Kong government in February 2019 and it would have allowed the extradition of fugitives to territories such as Mainland China, which didn't have extradition agreements with Hong Kong. Pro-democracy activists were concerned that this would undermine the "one country, two systems" principle that had been in force since 1997. Hong Kong's rising localism was indirectly behind the growing protest mood, with its goals of preserving Hong Kong's autonomy and identity against what was regarded as Beijing's increased encroachment.¹⁰⁹

It has been argued that since Hong Kong's handover in 1997, China has developed massive economic and business interests in this Special Administrative Region which is a major global financial center. Thus, it's considered important to Beijing both economically and from a soft power perspective. However, while it's undoubtedly true that Hong Kong has mattered greatly to Beijing for these reasons, this importance is rapidly declining. At the beginning of the reform period in 1978, Hong Kong accounted for 16% of Chinese GDP. By 2020, this had declined to 2%. Since Xi's rise to power in 2013, China's development trends have also gone against the decentralization of the previous three decades. This has also decreased Hong Kong's importance while at the same time also increasing ideological tensions between Mainland China and Hong Kong. Considering Hong Kong's diminishing role vis-a-vis Mainland China, the future of its autonomy is unlikely to be bright.¹¹⁰

John Mearsheimer constructed the theory of offensive realism to explain great power competition. His theory is based on five assumptions: that the international system is anarchic, that offensive military capabilities of states are crucial, that there's uncertainty of other states' intentions, that survival is the primary objective of states, and that states are rational actors. Based on these assumptions, the tensions between a potential hegemon and an existing hegemon result in an intense security competition that engulfs the entire world, just like during the Cold War. Based on offensive realism, Fong (2022) posits that Hong Kong, as a global city, has been an arena of security competition between China and the US throughout the decades and varying states of bilateral relations and power balances between the two powers. In the 1950s and 1960s, as well as during the relative rapprochement period from 1970s to 2000s, it was a geopolitical buffer zone that both Beijing and Washington attempted to transform into their own outposts. Even after 1997, China took advantage of Hong Kong's separate legal status to advance its economic interests, by channelling foreign capital and trade.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹Liu 2020, 2-3.

¹¹⁰Liu 2020, 3-4, 16-18.

¹¹¹Fong 2022, 252-255, 262, 265.

Fong (2022) furthermore argues that the intense security competition since the 2010s has transformed the previous buffer zone into a geopolitical hot spot in 2019-2020. For China, Hong Kong has been the gray area between domestic and foreign policy. CPC's one central aim has been to prevent any Western subversion of the mainland through Hong Kong. Furthermore, Beijing gradually moved from a restrained strategy to a proactive strategy of strengthening central control in the 2010s. Washington's approach was initially low-profile. Reflecting the Obama administration's slow-moving change in its global strategy. Hong Kong's transformation into a geopolitical hot spot was completed during the Trump years. The Anti-Extradition Bill Movement and then the imposition of a National Security Law in June 2020 led to both sides abandoning their restrained competition over the past six decades. Beijing tightened its grip over the region, while Washington strengthened oversight through the enactment of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act that in turn increased national security concerns in China, leading to changes in Hong Kong's autonomy, which finally led the US to end its certification of Hong Kong's autonomy and sanctions against both China and Hong Kong.¹¹²

In conclusion, as Mearsheimer predicted, China's new status as a potential hegemon led to increased security competition. Beijing is structurally incentivized to become increasingly assertive, prompting pushback from the US. Unlike earlier, now both powers have strong incentives to confront each other non-compromisingly. Already existing security competition and high-profile support from US politicians for the protest movement meant that the situation had become a national security threat for Beijing in which the US was seeking to separate Hong Kong from the mainland, prompting it to take strong action. Its increased power also means that the leadership doesn't feel constrained by previous international arrangements regarding Hong Kong's autonomy. China feels itself to be powerful enough to redefine Hong Kong's position. The US, on the other hand, interpreted this as a revisionist action that undermined the US-led rules-based international order.¹¹³

On Hong Kong, the recurring theme of the Global Times was the contrast between the Chinese mainland, which was trying to root out foreign meddlers from the Special Administrative Region, and the Western powers that attempted to separate Hong Kong from the rest of the Chinese 'motherland'. The weakening of Hong Kong's autonomy and its stronger integration into the Chinese mainland were seen as inevitable and natural processes, and any controversy was only a result of Western (in this case, particularly by the UK and the US) influence operations.

¹¹²Fong 2022, 273-274.

¹¹³Fong 2022, 274, 277-279.

Hong Kong affairs are now judged by two logics: one is closely shaped around the rule of law and the fundamental interests of the city's people; the other is aimed at subverting Hong Kong's constitutional system, pushing the city against central government and toward the West. Washington and some Western forces are trying to turn the latter logic into universal "political correctness." But they are doomed to fail. The HKSAR is not under their control, and it's clear they are interfering in China's internal affairs and have a malevolent aim to destabilize the city. Let time be the final judge. The justice of history will never be on the side of secessionists within HKSAR or external forces that support them.¹¹⁴

Two binary opposites for Hong Kong's future are presented. The will of the people in Hong Kong (as well as the will of the people in all of China, as implied) and legality are contrasted with the Western aims. The editorial asserts that Western meddling is an important factor in the situation and also that it will fail as laws of history, are against it, which is a quasi-logical argument. In a way, similar arguments are used in the US, when politicians and commentators refer to "the right side of history" in political rhetoric.

This dichotomy between drawing closer to China and falling victim to US meddling was present in nearly all editorials that concerned the situation in Hong Kong. China is portrayed as being on the side of law and order, while the US is only trying to create chaos. Hong Kong democracy activists were also labelled as traitors and agents of hostile foreign powers. Overall, the argument that the situation was a done deal and that stability had returned to the region was also a central theme in these editorials. In a way, there was a contradiction between the narrative that the US and other countries could do nothing to change the situation and the warnings that they should stay away from Hong Kong. This could be viewed as a sign of some underlying anxieties.

¹¹⁴Global Times 2021m.

3 GLOBAL TIMES AND THE UNITED STATES IN 2021

In the Global Times editorials, the US was seen as internally weak and externally aggressive. The challenges of the presidential transition from Trump to Biden were used to argue that the US was in a deep crisis. The US efforts to build and strengthen alliances were regarded as a desperate measure that simply tried to prolong its hegemony while simultaneously intensifying global tensions. All in all, the US was portrayed as being pretty much the exact opposite of China in every way.

3.1 The US's Internal Crisis

For over a decade, Chinese intellectual elites have increasingly confidently promoted the thesis of America's internal economic and political decline. It first rose to prominence during the 2008 global financial crisis. Another surge was after the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the related rise of populism and anti-globalization. During 2020-2021 there was yet another build-up during the perceived failure in the fight against COVID-19, the Black Lives Matter protests, and the chaos after the Presidential elections. According to many intellectuals and opinion pieces, this showed that China was on the right path, while the US system was in a deep self-inflicted crisis.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵Blanchette 2021.

3.1.1 Decline and Polarization

The Global Times also pointed at the divisions and polarization within American society as potentially the single biggest issue plaguing the US according to the editorials throughout the year 2021. Similar to how in its view the decentralized decision-making system is flawed to the core, it argued that the very essence of the democratic system was not up to the task. Now it's up for debate how divided the US is compared to its past, but the publication makes no comparisons to the 1960s, or any other era, to support its argumentation.

An editorial published in April sums up Global Times' criticism of Western political systems. While the article used the term "Western", it was obviously mainly aimed at the United States. In this reading, the Western system as a whole had peaked and their democracy had led to growing chaos. Worst of all, the system was difficult to reform and aggressive in its foreign policy. The rise of China had furthermore destroyed the West's self-confidence.

Western political systems are getting increasingly rigid, inefficient, and are declining. They are in urgent need of profound systematic reform. No one wants to challenge them, but they need to challenge themselves. [...] First, it is clear that the internal development impetus in the West has been declining. This is not because their level of economic and social development has reached its peak. [...] Nevertheless, the nature of profit-seeking capital has severely confined the country in terms of investing resources in economic activities that promote benefit for the entire society. [...] Second, Western-style democracy has, to some extent, led to political disorder. Confrontation among various forces keeps causing grave social cleavage that hinders the normal functioning of society. [...] The competitiveness of Western countries is declining, and the main reason lies within themselves. However, they come to the absurd conclusion that China "has stolen their lunch." [...] Fourth, it is hard to reform Western systems. Some have tried but failed. [...] Fifth, Western countries are arrogant and lack self-introspection. [...] Their understanding of democracy, freedom, and human rights is getting more and more extreme. They are keen on self-righteousness and brutal denial of explorations of governance outside the West. [...] Sixth, represented by the US, Western systems are becoming barbaric, disregarding international laws and rules, turning their back on convincing people through virtue, and worshipping hard strength only.¹¹⁶

There are a series of observations about the supposed failures of the Western political system that function as a very distinct and strong form of argumentation aiming to establish the structure of reality, working only if one shares clearly anti-American and anti-democratic premises. Continuing with the theme that Western "disorder" is a bug and not a feature, these arguments presuppose that democracy and pluralism are not desirable. Quasi-logically it also points out the decline of the

¹¹⁶Global Times 2021q.

Western (or American) political systems without giving any specific examples, based on impressions. The internal development impetus could be referring to economic growth rates, for example, but it must be noted that they are not directly comparable between countries and also depend on the level of the country's development. For instance, it is easier for less developed countries to grow faster.

This editorial shows China's growing confidence in its path and in the belief that the West, the US in particular, is in decline. The comparatively slower economic growth rate is used to prove this. Interestingly, and in contrast to Western scholarly literature on the matter, it is the West that has not been politically reformed, not China. The West is also close-minded, still believing in its own superiority, despite evidence to the contrary, and incapable of learning from Beijing despite its successes, implying that China is in contrast open to foreign, including Western influences and it's constantly implementing reforms, which a common talking point in the Chinese argumentation.

What's more, despite the decline, the West is also an externally belligerent rule-breaker, and its position is purely based on hard power, not on cultural appeal or high moral standards, implying again that China, contrary to criticism, is actually maintaining global stability and principles. So even though the editorial appears explicitly to be a criticism of the West, it can also be interpreted as a way to promote the superiority of the Chinese political model and foreign policy, in which it has taken the role that the West is considered to have had. It's also worth noting that this type of argumentation is unlikely to be convincing to Western audiences, considering that one would need to accept premises that are quite alien to Western mainstream understanding of politics. This is common in the argumentation of the Global Times, but may be particularly noticeable in this editorial. So in this sense, the rhetoric is certainly not appealing to a universal audience.

When it comes to specific events that showcased how deeply in crisis the US was, the US Capitol riots in Washington D.C. were a significant incident at the start of the year, and the Global Times commented on them actively. This political crisis had a lot of symbolic value, which was clear from the publication's coverage; in fact the Global Times went as far as to state it indicated that the whole US political system had disintegrated. The dominant theme was schadenfreude for what was regarded as a just punishment for the US's supposed involvement as well as support for Hong Kong protests a few years earlier.

It's clear that US democracy offers what has been called a "target-rich" environment for China and its messaging about the perils of democracy, as a certain level of turbulence is a definitive part of its political system. The dramatic events of January

6 were a perfect showcase for the superiority of the Chinese model over the Western alternatives. That said, it has been argued that the overall Chinese response was relatively muted. The reason for this is paradoxically the Chinese obsession with its own domestic stability. Any type of protest movement or even insurrection can be contagious, and the Chinese government is very aware of this fact. Previously, Chinese media responded slowly and feebly to the Charlottesville white supremacist riots in 2017, and in many ways, the coverage of the Capitol riots was consistent with this approach. Moreover, the instability in Xinjiang had intensified, which has made Beijing even more careful.¹¹⁷

Overall, all major party publications promoted the same message: that (Western electoral) democracy leads to chaos. Eisenman & Grizzell (2021) propose that in addition to opportunistic US-bashing by China, this type of rhetoric also reflected an anxiety that Beijing too would experience an even more violent and destabilizing power transition in the future, in the context of Xi's increased power and the upcoming 20th party congress in October 2022. In addition to this, the bigger issue appeared to be what would happen after Xi at some point in the indeterminable future. The PRC has a history of difficult power transitions. Despite the fact that the problem appeared to be solved after term limits were enacted and succession institutionalized, CPC's governance has once more become personalized during Xi Jinping's tenure, and term limits were removed after the constitution was changed in 2018. For this reason, the confident Chinese reporting hides the concerns of Chinese elites.¹¹⁸ The coverage of the Global Times, however, was even more outspoken than other Chinese publications in this instance as well.

Some US political figures denounced the Capitol chaos as an attack on US democracy, as if the country's democracy is still intact, and attacks mainly come from outside. But it represents an internal collapse of the US political system - this is where the seriousness of the problem lies. [...] Every country has its own weaknesses and problems. Political degradation in the US is not necessarily an incurable disease. Perhaps the real problem plaguing the US is that the country's elites are too arrogant. They believe a lean camel is bigger than a horse, and no matter how rotten US democracy is, it is still superior to other countries' political systems. US political figures are also selfish. They are unwilling to take the lead in pushing for genuine reforms. They only shout empty slogans such as "change" and "we can" to fool voters.¹¹⁹

Previously, the Global Times seemed to criticize the very essence of Western-style democracy. However, this time it concludes right away that the democratic system that used to exist was no longer functioning. The editorial attempts to dissociate the US from democracy. By stating "As if democracy is still intact," the Global Times

¹¹⁷Zhong 2021.

¹¹⁸Eisenman & Grizzell 2021.

¹¹⁹ Global Times 2021c.

implies that the US is not what it proclaims to be or what it used to be. That said, it appears to give some leeway as well when it states that not all is lost and the “disease” – which could be interpreted as an allusion to the COVID-19 pandemic – is not terminal. The quote highlights one of the dominant themes of the editorials: that the US is hopelessly arrogant and is not willing to learn from others. In this case, maybe it should take inspiration from China and its stability and order. Interestingly, contrasting a lean camel with a horse, in addition to being an analogy and as such an argument that establishes the structure of reality, appears to be a Chinese proverb, which may not be immediately idiomatic to non-Chinese readers.

Continuing with the theme that despite the apparent decline, the US and its leadership remained arrogant and presumptuous, the Global Times now added that in place of reforms, it only offered meaningless politicking. Furthermore, this type of rhetoric could indicate, with its highlighting of the internal nature of the crisis, that the publication believed the country would be less able to focus on foreign policy and as such, on the competition with China going forward, at least for some time. Moreover, this was an opportunity to showcase how Beijing wasn’t involved in US domestic disputes, meaning that Washington should be less focused on it.

While it had been very critical of Trump in the past, the Global Times used the President’s Twitter ban following the riots as another indicator of the flaws and double standards of the American system and its values. It also was regarded as a great indicator of deepening polarization within the country. The “silencing” showed the “real face” of the US and the real limits of freedom of speech, which was defined by those in power. Now that Trump had lost his, it was easy to deny his freedoms by the pro-Democrat social networks.

Trump’s Twitter ban is noteworthy in the Chinese context due to Beijing’s regulatory crackdown against Chinese tech giants. This process began in November 2020, when the government halted the initial public offering of Ant Group and afterwards launched an anti-trust investigation into its affiliate Alibaba Group, which is China’s largest e-commerce company. Rapidly growing and according to some within the CPC, irresponsible, tech companies were seen as a potential political threat. According to some Chinese scholars, Trump’s ban was a cautionary tale for Chinese decision-makers. It showed that internet companies could not be allowed to achieve an information monopoly. Moreover, due to the existence of so-called “super apps” like WeChat, de-platforming in China can have severe consequences, as it will lead to losing access to many important services, like mobile payments, and as a result, these apps have almost become utilities, making them almost mandatory. This necessitates increased regulation, both to strengthen political control and protect consumers. All online activities are monitored and recorded by these companies.

This so-called big data is valuable economically, but it's also an increasingly important tool for governance.¹²⁰

The difference between the US and China and how their governments control the internet is of course vast. In the US, social media companies have a constitutional right to control their platforms as private entities. Furthermore, the focus is on stopping the spread of information that might lead to violence or the spread of disease, while in China the government's control over the internet is wide-ranging.¹²¹ In the context of Trump's ban, the relevant thing for the Global Times was that the US was supposedly going against its founding ideals.

Does the silencing of Trump breach the principle of freedom of speech? No matter what the first amendment says, that Trump cannot express his opinions on social networks and lost the right that every ordinary American enjoys definitely violates the principle of freedom of speech endorsed by US political elites. "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." This is how the US, as "the beacon of freedom," has lectured the world. In fact, the political connotations of freedom of speech has been concealed by the discourse power of the US and the West. Freedom of speech does have political and ethical boundaries. The silencing of Trump unveiled this true essence of freedom of speech.¹²²

This is an argument about the structure of reality: Trump's ban means that there's no freedom of speech in the US. Furthermore, the true essence of freedom of speech has been hidden by the discourse power of a superpower. Trump's ban was clearly a good opportunity to imply that the US didn't follow its own principles. This argument can be countered by the obvious fact that freedom of speech has never been without boundaries and very few proponents of the concept argue against this, though perhaps somewhat more so in the American tradition.

This editorial is an example of the popular Chinese talking point that the US doesn't really abide by its own ideals and that this is hidden by the dominant position of the country. While not made explicitly clear, this could indicate support for the belief that as long as China becomes the most powerful country in the world, its political system and policies don't matter, and the level of measurable hard power will also eventually determine the level of its soft power. Consequently, there's no need to make adjustments on that front, and China's cultural rise is similarly inevitable as its rise as an economic and military power.

¹²⁰Ye et al. 2021.

¹²¹Ibid.

¹²² Global Times 2021aa.

3.1.2 The COVID-19 Disaster

When it comes to the US's overall capability to handle crises and implement political reforms, some have criticized the federal system of the US, positing that its decentralized nature isn't able to effectively act in a large-scale crisis. These critics use China as a model, arguing that only its centralized and authoritarian system is quick and ruthless enough. Allen (2020), however, argues instead that it wasn't federalism that prevented the US from achieving success in its fight against the pandemic, but the issue was governance, more specifically President Trump. That said, Trump wasn't "acting in a vacuum," and the American democracy as a whole, while structurally sound, has lost its common purpose. In principle, the federal system should be a strength, not a weakness, as it provides flexibility and enables different responses in different areas. However, Trump was slow to act and failed in his duty of public education about the crisis. In a way, he declined to use to power that he had as the most important public educator and motivator to drive the whole country towards a common goal.¹²³

Similar to how the Global Times praised China's response to the pandemic, one of the major themes was the bashing of the US's COVID-19 policies. In this narrative, the US simply lacked an efficient crisis response system that would work well at the national level. Furthermore, COVID-19 was a human rights failure that had permanently tarnished Washington's international reputation. The Global Times also published several editorials about the US military base Fort Detrick in Maryland and how it was the real origin of the virus, in a counter to Western accusations against China's role in the matter.

According to Bahi (2021), modern statecraft in a global context is characterized by non-state actors and de-territorialized threats such as epidemics and climate change. For this reason, geopolitical analysis has expanded in scope. This has become increasingly important due to globalization and threats that transcend borders. This is especially clear in the case of COVID-19. Global interconnectedness increased the spread of the virus, while anti-pandemic measures underscored the continued central role of the state. Considering the limited capacity of the World Health Organization, the role of individual states, especially China and the US was highlighted. These types of global threats transform the provision of national public goods like health into transnational goods whose provision requires international cooperation. COVID-19 amplified the competitive dynamic between the US and China which in turn affected the provision of global public goods. Geopolitical zero-sum thinking means that the two powers were first and foremost concerned with

¹²³Allen 2020.

their relative gains and both tried to take advantage of the crisis by increasing their international profile.¹²⁴

Based on hegemonic stability theory, the existence of a dominant power willing to lead in providing global public goods is crucially important. However, due to the absence of enforcement authority, states take care of their self-interests and act as free riders. During the Trump administration the US became less willing to provide public goods and no other power could fill the vacuum. Bahi uses the concept of the Kindleberger trap to describe this state of affairs. Charles Kindleberger argued that the Great Depression of the 1930s was the result of US isolationism and failure to provide public goods even after it had overtaken the UK as the leading global power. In today's context for the Kindleberger trap to occur, both the leader and the rising power need to forfeit their leadership. This would indicate that the leading power currently still has power but is unwilling to use it, while the rising power is still lacking in capability. Joseph Nye has spoken about a "disruptive danger," a period in which China acts as a free-rider like the US during the 1930s. However, China has actually been expanding its role as a provider of global public goods; in fact this is one of the priorities of Xi's foreign policy, but certain issues in domestic governance, like lack of transparency, still limit its global role. As well, China still underscores that it's a developing country that is not trying to achieve global leadership. The situation is made worse by the adversarial relationship between the US and China.¹²⁵

Considering their competition for global dominance, COVID-19 further exacerbated tensions between the two powers. China and the US have engaged in a propaganda war or a "battle of narratives" over who is the most efficient international power in responding to COVID-19. China has disputed its responsibility for the origins and spread of the virus by spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories, blaming the US. The US, for its part, has tried to put the blame solely on China by referring to the "Chinese virus." Washington used this tactic to distract attention from its own failures and to highlight its transparency. That said, China also emphasized the efficiency of its political system. Overall, the crisis shed light on competing political systems, on authoritarianism versus liberalism. In this sense, China tried to promote its image and status. However, the US didn't act as a counter-model per se, the response rather showed a lack of internal coordination and competition between different entities for supplies. The crisis did show how US decentralization decreases central state capacity. However, Trump's personal impact was arguably important as well.¹²⁶

¹²⁴Bahi 2021, 77-78

¹²⁵Bahi 2021, 77-80.

¹²⁶Bahi 2021, 82-84.

The economic competition intensified too, and decoupling became a new buzzword. The absence of cooperation regarding COVID-19 shows the rise of nationalism and great power rivalry, as competing powers have often cooperated like the US and the USSR on smallpox eradication. Even the US and China cooperated on Ebola during the Obama administration. While the US leadership was obvious in the fight against HIV/AIDS when it dominated global funding. COVID-19 on the other hand didn't only show the absence of cooperation but in fact intensified great power competition. China utilized a particular form of soft power when it conducted mask diplomacy and sent medical delegations and scientific research teams to Europe. Bahi (2021) calls this "competitive generosity" that did not lead to cooperation.¹²⁷ The following editorial makes this clear.

The weakness of the US government's capability to handle a public crisis really makes one speechless. No wonder the US administration has been trying hard to hold China accountable for the COVID-19 epidemic in the US - Washington can barely do anything else. The US lacks a national system in which the entire country can be mobilized in the face of a certain crisis. The US federal government does not hold direct authority above state governments, and it lacks appeal to grassroots Americans. Moreover, partisan divisions can be seen everywhere. The epidemic exposed the serious lack of ability to adjust and allocate large amounts of resources for a major goal, such as an epidemic fight.¹²⁸

In this quote, the Global Times is attempting to establish the structure of reality by arguing that the specific case of the US COVID-19 response proves that the country is unable to handle crises that require the attention of the whole society. It's the very premise of the argument that the US as a constitutional federation is flawed by definition, possibly implying that China as a more unified state has the superior model to handle these types of issues. Furthermore, there are many other aspects that are not mentioned, like the speed and scale of US vaccine development and deployment.

The editorial indicates that China's centralized model is the superior alternative and that nothing similar could happen there. This is curious considering the already mentioned nature of fragmented authoritarianism and the role local officials had in the spread of the virus and the way COVID-19 policies were implemented in China. This existence of local initiative and influence could be spun into a positive thing, especially for Western audiences, so it's noteworthy how the editorial focuses on the ideal of China as a unified entity as a way to clearly separate and distinguish China and the West and their policies.

¹²⁷Bahi 2021, 86-90.

¹²⁸Global Times 2021y.

3.1.3 China Obsession

Moreover, the *Global Times* focused on how the US was supposedly increasingly worried that China was going to overtake it economically and technologically, and as a result, it was constantly mentioned in domestic political debates there, even when things like infrastructure spending and technological development were the main topics. In this context, it also aimed to separate China from a similar behaviour and try to make it look like the more rational of the two competing powers, one that was only focused on its own development, without obsessing about phantom foreign threats and challenges.

Research indicates that concerns about China were a rare area of policy where Republicans and Democrats were in agreement. While some commentators argue that the China challenge will force Americans to unite, based on some research this assumption could be mistaken. In political science, the notion that external threats increase unity internally has a long history, based on the idea that a group unites when it's threatened by the enemy "other". However, looking at historical examples from the 20th century, there appears to be little evidence that security threats consistently decrease polarization and instead, the responses were based on existing partisan fault lines. As the negative partisanship, or the dislike of the opposite party, grows, Republicans in fact have more incentives to criticize Biden's China policy. While a majority of Republicans and Democrats see China as a threat, there are major partisan differences on how the US should respond. Polarization increases the distrust toward politicians of the opposing party and as a result, the skepticism towards other party's leadership in a crisis also increases. All in all, this doesn't mean that the existence of a foreign threat can't reduce polarization, but it's not inevitable. However, one area of bipartisan cooperation is investing in new technology to compete with China.¹²⁹

In this context, the US Innovation and Competition Act was adopted in 2021 showed that even in divided Washington the challenge of China against US technology leadership was an increasingly bipartisan issue. Although its investment of \$250 billion in technology paled in comparison to Beijing's trillions, however it could be argued the US couldn't nor should it compete directly with China in state investment. For this reason, the bill aims to promote traditional US strengths, like interconnectivity between the academic world, government grants, venture capital, and free markets. It's betting that the US will be able to replicate its earlier success and compete with China's statist strategy. Furthermore, it also aims to limit China's ability to take advantage of US openness and transparency and limit foreign

¹²⁹Myrick 2020a, 948-953; Myrick 2020b.

investment activity. The act works in tandem with efforts to secure supply chains and partner with like-minded allies like the Quad.¹³⁰ Consistent with the theme, there have been other similar bills under discussion, like the America COMPETES Act and especially the Strategic Competition Act of 2021, which labels China a strategic competitor in multiple areas.

China is something the US politicians and political elites must mention whenever they make speeches. This is in sharp contrast to the fact that Chinese leaders never say anything about the US when talking about domestic affairs. [...] When China's economic scale will surpass that of the US has never been a subject of China's governance. The US has not only taken China as a target, but also been obsessed with this mentality. There are probably two main reasons. First, the American elites have lost their confidence and become petty-minded. They cannot accept and feel nervous that other major power is gradually approaching the US in terms of strength. The momentum that China's economy is catching up with the US is beyond their tolerance. [...] The US is politically polarized. Fierce bipartisan struggle in the US has been seriously obstructing agenda. Hyping the "China threat" has become the cheapest and most effective way to mobilize. [...] It needs to be pointed out that Chinese society in general has a greater inclusiveness to Western institutional elements than the US has toward Chinese institutional elements. We are more open-minded than the US side.¹³¹

The US is supposedly obsessed with China, whereas China is nowhere near as fixated on the US. China is also more open-minded and it's willing to take positive influences from the outside. Contrary to its traditional role, the US is increasingly isolating itself from the rest of the world and its influences. This could also be seen as an example of dissociation and separation between China and the US, which also recurs often in the publication's argumentation. It emphasizes the differences between American and Chinese approaches and between the behaviour of politicians in Washington and Beijing. It's a common feature of Chinese messaging in general. In the Chinese view, China simply focuses on its own development and it's not fixated on power games, while the US is increasingly aggressive and interventionist. However, considering the fact that China is also increasingly growing its international footprint, this type of contrast between the two powers is debatable.

This type of rhetoric that focuses on the purported decline in US confidence inversely shows that China's faith in its own path has grown. The editorial is another attempt to show that Chinese leadership and politics in general, in addition to being collectivist and united in their goals and purpose, are pragmatic and that ideological biases or emotions don't have an impact on its decision-making. One aspect that also goes against the Western literature on China is the notion that Beijing is open-minded and willing to receive influences from the West and not a country that is

¹³⁰Harrington & McCabe 2021.

¹³¹Global Times 2021v.

growing wary of Western infiltration and increasingly underlining ideological purity.

Washington was similarly “obsessed” with China regarding its economy. Moreover, its economy’s foundations were not stable either, according to the Global Times. It argued that a massive stimulus package would lead to major problems in the future, like inflation and shortages. Furthermore, the US was trying to compete with China by using methods that were not suitable for its domestic conditions and its people lacked the spirit of the Chinese.

Most of the US major infrastructure construction was driven by the private sector. Now the Biden administration is trying to take that over with an American-style “planned economy.” This is a move trying to re-engineer the dynamics of the US economy, using its weak spots to back one of the country’s most daunting tasks. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US government has repeatedly proposed large-scale stimulus. The country with dollar hegemony has used its “endless money” to issue various kinds of subsidy. This has created a scenario where people can live on subsidy without going to work. [...] It is tantamount to a fairy tale to revitalize US competitiveness relying merely on a stimulus bill. The US has its advantages, but if it wants to be as competitive as China in some spheres, it should turn American people into people who are as diligent as Chinese and turn American officials into being as responsible and hard-working as their Chinese peers.¹³²

The usage of the concept of “central planning” in connection with the US economy is very noteworthy, and it shows how in the portrayal of the Global Times, China is the new champion of traditionally American-led endeavours like globalization and free trade. In this example, this is turned on its head, and the US is shown in a similar light as pre-reform period China. In this way, there’s an ironic reversal of roles between the US and China, as well as dissociation. The editorial suggests that in actual fact the US isn’t a market economy at all, while China, which used to be a closed economy, has taken its mantle as the driving force behind the global economy. US status as the most influential market economy and the economic engine of the world is only apparent, in reality, the roles have been totally reversed and it’s now China that is the responsible economic power. Moreover, the Global Times argues that in a way the problems in the US are manifestations of its essence that is inferior to the current-day China and its enterprising spirit.

This editorial is maybe the most clear example of the narrative that China and the US have changed places and that the latter was in an irreversible economic decline. Moreover, the two countries are seen as fundamentally different; the US can’t simply copy China’s policies and achieve the same results. Subsidies and other similar interventions are apparently sound in the context of China, but not in the US, but the

¹³²Global Times 2021k.

reason for this isn't made clear. What's more, the Chinese people as a whole are also superior to their American counterparts, who are lazy and inefficient by comparison. This type of language is quite striking, implying that not only is the Chinese political system regarded as superior but also its populace – although the part about how the US should turn the Americans into people who are as diligent as the Chinese could indicate that this conscientiousness is the achievement of the political system. This certainly reflects a comparatively collectivistic approach to society.

Biden's \$1 trillion infrastructure investment plan was indeed billed as critical due to the challenge China posed. It's important to point out that the amount doesn't include what the private sector, states, counties, and cities would be spending, however. China spent \$8 trillion on infrastructure only in 2020, during which time the US federally spent \$146 billion. However, direct comparisons are very misleading, and in less populated Central and Western China infrastructure remains relatively undeveloped. That said, justifying infrastructure investment with China's threat can certainly be a good strategy to reach a bipartisan consensus on the matter. It was also justified by American lawmakers as a way to show China that the US was not in decline.¹³³

Moreover, despite the publication's emphasis on China's reform-mindedness, in reality, the situation is more nuanced. When it comes to reform orientation of the Chinese political system, the Xi era has brought mixed signals. At first, it appeared that Xi would speed up economic reform. Some reforms have indeed been initiated, for instance, financial markets have been opened and the one-child policy has been relaxed. Domestic consumption has also become increasingly important and China has become less dependent on exports. However, SOEs have again become more important as well and they are prioritized in many ways and the state's role in the economy has overall grown. According to Michael Pettis, this is inevitable because only state decisions are able to maintain necessary economic growth in China. However, at the level of rhetoric, reform-mindedness is still very much emphasized. That said, many of the reforms aren't reforms in the Western sense as they're not liberalizing, instead increasing the control of the party-state. For the Chinese leadership and Xi, markets are not an intrinsic value per se, but instead, they have instrumental value: to achieve higher efficiency and economic growth. Also in this context, the heightened international tensions are important, and China is aiming for higher self-sufficiency as a consequence.¹³⁴

¹³³Kine 2021.

¹³⁴Mattlin et al. 2022, 228-230, 237-243.

3.1.4 The Biden Administration – Continuity and Diffidence

When it came to its US coverage much of the Global Times' attention was focused on the new administration. The expectation was that things would remain roughly the same as before, but at the same time, it was acknowledged that Biden prioritized US alliances more than his predecessor.

Mori (2021) points out that the Biden administration has set out three priorities in its “strategic competition” with China. First, it aims to set and shape global norms and international agenda to advance US interests and reflect its values, which requires it to restore US credibility and reassert its reform-minded global leadership. Second, to deter China it will strengthen the US alliance system and invest in defence in a smart way. Third, it prioritizes domestic investment in to outcompete China in the long term. It has been noted that the administration's strategy initially lacked the regional component. However, after the withdrawal from Afghanistan, several initiatives, like the AUKUS and the strengthening of the Quad, a grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the US, were revealed. Moreover, it highlighted balancing against China especially militarily, and upholding a “rules-based” order.¹³⁵

Combining both of these elements, it tries to promote coalition-building and common standards. In addition to AUKUS, central to the security aspect is the concept of “integrated deterrence,” referring to enhanced integration and coordination, including non-military areas, between the US and its allies. China's investment in theater offensive capabilities (or Anti-Access/Area Denial, A2/AD) is forcing the US and its allies to strengthen interoperability. Consequently, the US is also set to increase its military presence in Australia. Washington is also attempting to realign supply chains to make them more secure in critical areas like semiconductors and pharmaceuticals, but this will require subsidies. Quad can be described as a “multi-function order-building vehicle.” Biden elevated it to the heads-of-state level in an online summit in March 2021. It provides regional public goods, securing supply chains and setting standards in technology.¹³⁶

However, regarding regional trade orders, problems remain due to domestic political considerations on both the right and left. If engagement remains limited, regional countries will probably drift more towards China. During the Alaska meeting in March 2021, both sides harshly criticized each other. However, as tensions on Taiwan continued to rise, the attempts to re-establish dialogue with China increased, and during his call with Xi, Biden emphasized that Washington

¹³⁵Mori 2021, 78-80.

¹³⁶Mori 2021, 80-85.

was ready for competition but it did not seek conflict. At the same time, the Chinese were against labeling the relationship as competitive. Several US officials referred to “guardrails” that would reduce the possibility of conflict. Mori (2020) argues that this is part of a conscious effort to ease tensions by the Biden administration. From the US perspective, this is so-called “responsible competition,” combining US investment in its national strength and cooperation with its allies, while at the same time continuing to engage with China.¹³⁷ Notably both of these areas, investment in national strength while being “obsessed” with China, and the setting of “guardrails”, were harshly criticized by the Global Times, the latter because it was regarded as only advancing US interests.

On the role of China, the Biden administration’s coalition building appears to be aimed at building a regional order in US terms, and this would help it to gain the diplomatic high ground, which in turn would compel China to follow rules and cooperate on issues like infrastructure, health, and climate. The main objective in the short term is to minimize the risk of conflict. Secretary of State Blinken summed up the US approach in March 2021: Washington should be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be. The US should also engage China from a position of strength.¹³⁸

The ultimate goal and underlying premise of the Biden administration’s approach towards China however remains unclear. In the debate related to these goals, a few possibilities are identified. Advocates of competitive coexistence believe that in time it’s still possible to shape China’s behaviour as long as Washington is able to hold the line. This wouldn’t entirely discard the earlier engagement model. Others put faith that when China eventually peaks, Washington will still be in a position of strategic pre-eminence and that this will not lead to a more aggressive Beijing that will “lunge for long-sought strategic prizes before its fortunes fade.” Mori (2021) writes that the Biden administration may believe in the possibility of moderating China’s behaviour if it’s faced with push-back from a coalition on various issues. But he further posits that Washington should make it clear whether moderating Chinese behaviour or waiting for China to internally change is its main goal.¹³⁹

According to Bisley (2021), there has been much more continuity than change in Biden’s Asia strategy. Public statements highlight that the US’s long-term commitment to the region remains rock solid. They also make clear that Washington intends to maintain its primacy, while not directly addressing the challenges and risks that China’s rise brings. The emphasis on its partners and allies is on the one

¹³⁷Mori 2021, 86-93.

¹³⁸Mori 2021, 88-89.

¹³⁹Mori 2021, 96.

hand a necessity considering that the US is located outside of the region, and it's also a power that regards military strength as the central tenet of its regional influence, as it has done for decades. However, this emphasis can be seen as an inexplicit rebuke to both Trump and his America-first approach, and to China which has no similar alliance network, instead in its place it only has North Korea. Bisley concludes by stating that even though a consensus on the challenge of China had seemingly been reached, shifting focus to Asia from the North Atlantic and the Middle East was going to be a challenge. Moreover, Beijing enjoyed structural advantages due to its location. As well, in the fields of defence and strategy maintaining the distinction between competition and confrontation was bound to be difficult.¹⁴⁰

At 100 days of Biden's presidency, the Global Times offered an analysis of the beginning of the new administration and its impact on China-US relations. US policy toward China was described as being roughly similar to before, as mentioned, but more discreet than during the Trump administration. This was the overall view of the publication on Biden and his foreign policy, although at times it was more optimistic, mostly on the eve of meetings between Chinese and American officials. This sentiment never lasted for long, however.

While US economic and technological policy toward China continues, the Biden administration has taken the political war against China to new heights. It has mobilized allies to jointly exert pressure on China, and has made some progress. Washington has set a bad example in the West by viciously smearing governance in Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region as "genocide." It is now creating a strategic posture to contain China that is no lighter than it was under the previous administration. But the Biden administration clearly has more scruples than the Trump administration, the approach of the latter was often impulsive and brutal. The new government in Washington advocates competition, cooperation as well as confrontation with Beijing at the same time. [...] Washington seems to want to stabilize competition between China and the US for the moment, creating fewer new fronts of substantive confrontation between the two countries so that it can spend some time sorting out its internal affairs and regaining strength to defeat China. [...] China must develop. This is what the US elites are most afraid of.¹⁴¹

The argument aims to establish the structure reality by implying that the US is increasingly hostile to China and is utilizing its allies increasingly effectively to contain China's development. This is also another example of dissociation, as China is portrayed as a country that is only focusing on its development; in fact, this is the most effective method to counter the US. At the same time, the US is unable to do the same. The easing of tensions is only Washington's apparent goal, in reality, its planning ahead and its internal development is only a plot to defeat China. This is noteworthy because at times the Global Times argues it impossible, or at the very

¹⁴⁰Bisley 2021.

¹⁴¹Global Times 2021b.

least not practical, for the US to focus on its internal development, which in contrast is portrayed as China's best weapon in its competition against the US. It's as if Biden's more discreet approach is notably different from Trump's.

This editorial sums up the overall view the Global Times, and seemingly the rest of the Chinese English-language media has on the Biden administration and its foreign policy. Nothing has fundamentally changed from the Trump era, and China simply needs to keep doing what it has done before. Moreover, the piece indicates that Beijing is not entirely convinced that the US isn't capable of reforming and developing itself. More generally the editorial recognizes that the challenges and pressures from the US and its allies have increased and that it's necessary for China to uphold its development momentum. It's clear that China's own development is a central goal of its foreign policy and this has not changed from the Deng era despite increased assertiveness.

Biden's presidency however did not change the overall sentiment of the Global Times when it came to US' domestic crisis. Writing about the July 4 Independence Day festivities, the Global Times concluded that the US was at its least confident stage during the nation's 245-year history, and it depended increasingly on underhanded methods to uphold its global position. The overall impression is of a hegemonic power in decline, both at home and abroad.

The Biden administration has been desperately searching for US achievements today like trying to sift bronze from a pile of dirt. [...] After being established as a nation for 245 years, now the US is in its least confident stage. The malpractice of party politics has seriously eroded the efficiency of the US democratic system. [...] The world has seen clearly that the US is in fact a country where social Darwinism prevails. Capital is like its locomotive. [...] The interpretation worked when only the US and bits of the West were entering modernization. But as some emerging economies, notably China, developed, US confidence in its path began to falter as never before. [...] The US still maintains certain power to rally countries internationally, but such rallying power is realized through coercion, even intimidation, rather than through convincing allies and developing countries. In the past, the US had sufficient capital and resources to make public goods, function as the world's economic engine and be the top international aid provider. But now the US has become increasingly selfish, openly using international tools that it controls to expand American self interests.¹⁴²

By arguing that the US was at the least confident stage in its history, the editorial establishes reality by way of example. Due to the symbolism of the 4th of July, there are also elements of illustration in this type of argumentation: even during Independence Day the nation is mired in doubts and unease. However, properly measuring "national confidence" during different time periods in this way is

¹⁴²Global Times 2021s.

extremely difficult if not impossible with any kind of accuracy, but it fits with the general theme of the US that is in relative decline vis-a-vis China and increasingly worried about its global status. Similarly, the Global Times doesn't offer any supportive evidence to its argument that the US is not providing aid to other countries on a scale that is used to.

This editorial shows that in addition to portraying itself as a virtuous power, China is also presenting itself as a country that is at the very least pursuing economic equality despite the current reality. It's a socialist country where markets are not in control of the economy, and even less of the state and its policies, but instead the government, or rather the party rules. In this overall narrative, the Global Time also asserts that the rise of China, and other developing countries, signifies the end of the "end of history" that was expected to ensure that the liberal democratic model would have no alternatives. Now that such alternatives have appeared, the US is incapable of psychologically handling or accepting that, destroying its confidence.

China used to be risk-averse and it avoided aggravating relations with big powers. This has now changed, and Chinese officials are practicing what could be called "performance-nationalism". Beijing considers assertiveness to be rational, as they believe that non-Western countries are on its side and developing countries are increasing their influence. At the UN, for example, most member states support China and they see it as a crucial source of economic and technological support. They are also increasingly confident that the US is in an inevitable decline, and consequently, China is now simply inflicting "calculated doses of pain" to "shock Westerners" into accepting that the old order is ending. According to China, on the global state multilateralism should not give special legitimacy to liberal values, and forming alliances by using democracy as a pretext should be condemned. Some believe that the values the current order is built on simply hinder China's rise and as such shouldn't be followed. Those Chinese officials who think that should be more diplomatic are outnumbered by those who blame China's declining popularity, at least in the West, on Western jealousy of China's success.¹⁴³

The editorial is a reflection of China's growing assertiveness as the US has become increasingly aware of the challenge Beijing poses. Chinese officials in their statements point out how it has accepted and been influenced by Western technology for decades, but it hasn't changed its political system as a result. In contrast, the US is worried about Huawei. The US feels less secure now than at any point since the end of the Cold War at the very least, and in a way it can be argued that the US and China have changed places.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³Economist 2021.

¹⁴⁴Zhu 2020.

3.2 US Hegemony in Trouble

In addition to its domestic woes, the Global Times also closely followed the developments of the US on the global stage. Washington was a hegemonic power that spread chaos everywhere it went, but simultaneously its failures were becoming increasingly apparent. The US was overextending itself and its military spending was unsustainable in the long run, which in the Global Times' argumentation was the exact opposite of China's approach to these issues. Its policy was overall portrayed as increasingly erratic, which the publication attempted to argue made it undependable even among its allies.

3.2.1 The Withdrawal from Afghanistan

In late summer, the events in Afghanistan caught the attention of the publication. The hasty withdrawal was portrayed as a symbol of the decline in the US national strength and a huge blow to its credibility. According to the Global Times, the defeat in Afghanistan made Washington's security guarantees to its allies increasingly meaningless, and it was implied that this also meant that Taiwan's situation was hopeless. Overall, it was seen as a major geopolitical shift with implications that extended far beyond the borders of the war-torn country. Considering that it had commended the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's role in Afghanistan, it's notable that in this instance China's responsibility was heavily downplayed.

While the Global Times editorial downplayed China's ambitions in regards to Afghanistan, Manish & Kaushik (2023) argue that China has long-term strategic and economic interests in Afghanistan which require it to cooperate with regional partners like Pakistan and Iran as well as the new Taliban regime in Afghanistan. First of all, it's in China's interests to expand the Belt & Road Initiative and in particular the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor into Afghanistan to achieve the first move advantage in the country. Secondly, Afghanistan's large rare-earth reserves could be important for China's future development. Thirdly, it's urgent for China to secure peace and stability in the region. Chinese experts overall are optimistic about China's potential role, and it has the capacity to become the most important outside player in Afghanistan. Due to China's unique capabilities in infrastructure construction, China is in a special position to provide Afghanistan

with investment, which would give access to massive mineral deposits. China shares a border with Afghanistan so ensuring stability is its main concern. This is especially important due to the fact that the East Turkistan Islamic Movement has made Afghanistan its haven, and as such the situation is connected to Xinjiang.¹⁴⁵

Moreover, considering Xi Jinping's overall foreign policy aims, Afghanistan is also an opportunity to showcase Beijing's image as a responsible great power. It's also important to solidify China's backyard. There's a possibility to play the hero where Washington failed. China has never been involved in conflicts in Afghanistan unlike other great powers and it has a policy of non-interference. For this reason, China's image is friendly in Afghanistan, so all parties involved are more willing to accept China's involvement. As well, based on Foreign Minister Wang Yi's idea of "constructive intervention," China has become more proactive. Recently Chinese media has been whitewashing the Taliban and its links with terrorism, emphasizing its role as a nation-builder. China has also been willing to engage with Taliban even if it hasn't recognized it yet, in the form of official diplomatic visits. China is known to be very pragmatic in its diplomatic dealings, and practically all kinds of regime types are acceptable.¹⁴⁶ The editorial however focused on the impact the withdrawal would have on Washington's reputation.

In the meantime, the US' desperate withdrawal plan shows the unreliability of US commitments to its allies: When its interests require to abandon allies, Washington will not hesitate to find every excuse to do so. A country as powerful as the US could not defeat the Afghan Taliban, which received almost no aid from outside, even in 20 years. This defeat of the US is a clearer demonstration of US impotence than the Vietnam War – the US is indeed like a "paper tiger." From another perspective, the US' defeat is even more humiliating than that of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The Najibullah government in Kabul held out for more than three years after the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan, where the anti-government guerrillas were heavily armed and supported by the US. However, the Taliban defeated the US on its own. [...] In reality, the main source of terrorist activities that were rampant in Xinjiang a few years ago was the US and the West. [...] China has no will to fill the vacuum the US left behind in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁷

The editorial is based on the structure of reality, arguing that the Afghanistan withdrawal indicates that the overall US alliance system is totally dysfunctional and that the US obligations mean nothing to it or to its international ambitions. The viewpoint that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is even more humiliating than the Soviet withdrawal in the late 1980s is dubious at best. That said, it's true that the Mujahideen was supported by the US and other foreign powers, while the Taliban was not, and the pro-Soviet government stayed in power for years afterwards. But

¹⁴⁵Manish & Kaushik 2023, 60-67.

¹⁴⁶Manish & Kaushik 2023, 68-71.

¹⁴⁷Global Times 2021x.

considering the scale of Soviet losses and the impact the war and the withdrawal had on the stability and arguably the ultimate fate of the Soviet Union, it's not clear how these two situations are directly comparable. So this is also a quasi-logical argument, an argument of reciprocity, in which two arguably asymmetric situations are directly equated with one another. Interestingly, referring to the US as a paper tiger has its origins in Mao Zedong, and the slogan sums up the Global Times' overall impression of Washington quite well.

It's clear that the Afghanistan withdrawal was a great opportunity for the Chinese messaging to portray the US and its global position as being in a rapid decline. The withdrawal was regarded as an exceptional failure even historically: much worse than the Cold War era withdrawals of both the US and the Soviet Union. Most importantly, however, it was used to argue that even US allies had no reason to trust Washington and its security guarantees. In another editorial, this was directly connected to the situation in Taiwan. Obviously such rhetoric is very useful for China's own ambitions. While the Global Times still very much emphasized that Beijing wasn't going to move in after the US left, consistent with the overall narrative of non-interference, the weakening of US alliance networks was bound to be beneficial to Beijing, especially when it comes to its core interests. On that note, it's noteworthy how the situation in Xinjiang was connected to Washington's policies and in a way with the US presence in Afghanistan as well, and very unceremoniously to boot. The editorial could be interpreted to indicate that some Chinese policymakers think that the withdrawal benefits Beijing at least indirectly in both Taiwan and Xinjiang.

3.2.2 Washington's Overextension

Continuing with the theme of the US's declining global position, China was portrayed as the restrained party in the competition between it and the US. Beijing was against extreme competition and it promoted international rules and stability, as well as the UN charter. The US was the exact opposite, a "hegemonic" predator that attempted to create "small gangs" consisting of its puppet allies that tried to uphold Western domination of the world. Washington saw the world through black-and-white Cold War-era glasses that divided the world into democracies and autocracies.

Hegemony is the lifeblood of the US. The US is still the world's most powerful country in terms of comprehensive strength and has super-dominance over the world. The problem with Washington is that it is too greedy. Its demands for hegemony have far gone beyond its capabilities, and the US has fallen into an unprecedented sense of crisis and confusion. As such, the strength of the world's strongest country seems to be not enough to meet its demands, and a large deficit in mobilization capability appears. The following are what the

US is most worried about. First, the continuous development and expanding strength of China will challenge the US' overwhelming advantages. [...] Second, the US alliance system is not as useful as it appears to be, with some important allies only responding to Washington in ideology but reluctant to take real actions to support Washington in encircling China.¹⁴⁸

The argumentation tries to establish the structure of reality. It presents a particular view of the world and the relationship between the US and China. This is also yet another dissociation and a way to differentiate China from the US. It's based on the narrative that the US is overextended, but despite this, its international ambitions are limitless; its demands for hegemony have surpassed its real capabilities. While still the most powerful nation in the world, the US doesn't have the resources to involve itself everywhere. The advantages that the alliance system gives it are only apparent too, as is the unity of those alliances, in reality, they're unable to act in unison. As such, there's also dissociation between US ambitions and its capabilities, as well as between it and its nominal allies. While the US global alliance system appears as strong as ever, Washington's allies are not prepared to destroy their relationship with China. As mentioned earlier, the Global Times appeared to be confident that the West wasn't united enough to gang up on China.

This editorial, while it outwardly only contains criticism of the US and its global position, is arguably also simultaneously extolling the merits of China's foreign policy indirectly. Alliance systems, despite their appearance, aren't really useful at the end of the day, and Beijing doesn't need them. Moreover, it opposes hegemonism and such China doesn't have to worry about overextending itself. In the final analysis, what really matters is the aspiration and drive that a country has for its internal development, and this is regarded as China's biggest strength. It doesn't need to do anything else, and the victory is inevitable.

It can be argued that overall China is aiming to highlight multipolarity and avoid the idea of new bipolarity. In Chinese analysis, the world has been moving towards multipolarity since the 1990s, despite the fact that during the 1990s and 2000s it openly admitted that the US was the only superpower. Now the argumentation in support of multipolarity has again returned after the unipolar moment, as a so-called uni-multipolarity. In the Chinese view, bipolarity is associated with power politics and the use of military force, while multipolarity enables moral principles and economic and scientific progress. Furthermore, bipolarity only benefited great powers, whereas multipolarity will advance the interests of most countries. That said, there's growing discussion about new bipolarity, that is among the US and China, but in China, this alternative is condemned. The problem for China is that if it is acknowledged as one of the two poles, this would go against the proclaimed anti-

¹⁴⁸Global Times 2021o.

hegemonism. For that reason, China's partnerships and friendship treaties are never called alliances. This is a way for China to rise while it simultaneously remains against hegemony.¹⁴⁹

3.2.3 US Military Budget as a Bubble

The US military budget in particular was seen as a symbol of its hegemonism and inevitable decline. The allocated sum was massive, but it was also pretty much the only thing Washington still had going for it. However, unusually for a Chinese publication, the *Global Times* also glorified China's military strength, but in a limited manner. It argued that China was prepared to defeat any adversary, including the US, in areas close to it, including around Taiwan and the so-called First Island Chain, or the first chain of islands out from the Asian mainland, but that it didn't have any grander ambitions. China was never going to enter into an arms race either, but its steady economic growth ensured sufficient defence spending.

What the US wants is absolute security. One of its meanings is that it can overwhelm other major powers' will on key issues at critical moments. This is a completely unrealistic goal. The US still feels anxious despite the fact that its defence budget is far ahead. Washington always feels that the defence budget should grow. The US national defence has in fact gone beyond the traditional military field, pursuing the overflow of various functions to maintain global hegemony. The US economy is increasingly relying on the hegemony of the US dollar and the country's dominant position in international politics and ideology. [...] China will not be in an arms race with the US. The increase in China's defence budget and military strength is the natural result of economic development and technological progress. [...] China does not have the will to challenge the US worldwide, but we cannot allow the US to act arbitrarily in the Western Pacific, especially in China's coastal waters, to harm China's interests. [...] The big bubble of the US military expenditure will eventually burst. It cannot be a compensation for other declines in US competitiveness for long. Time will prove this.¹⁵⁰

In this view, the US pursuing absolute security and hegemony over the interests of other nations. In contrast, China's growing military strength is merely a result of its economic and technological progress, rather than an attempt to upend the international system. Another attempt at dissociation between the two powers: China is not aiming to increase its influence. It's strongly posited that the overall US competitiveness is declining, and its hegemony cannot be maintained forever. That "time will prove this" is a quasi-logical argument.

¹⁴⁹Vuori 2022, 46, 55-56.

¹⁵⁰*Global Times* 2021t.

In this editorial, China is, in the view of the Global Times, detaching itself from hegemonic competition with the US. In fact, Washington and its defence policy is seen as almost irrational. In this narrative, the US has no real threats and its military is only a tool that advances its hegemonic interests. Economically and technologically China is portrayed as being already confident in its capacity to withstand any US pressure, and militarily its goals are modest and fully based on the two other capabilities. Washington has chosen the exact opposite approach, where its economic and technological position has gradually weakened, and consequently, its military position will decline as well, despite the fact that no country, China included, is going to challenge its position. There's simultaneously confidence in China's overall path, including its military strength, but in a way that simultaneously downplays its ambitions.

Even though China generally downplays its military capabilities, in some ways Beijing's and Washington's military capabilities and in particular the level of investment allocated for defence might be more comparable than is usually thought. It's undeniable that the US's overall global power projection capabilities remain dominant, and in nominal dollars, the US military budget remains over three times higher than China's. However, if China's budget is adjusted by taking into account lower prices, in other words by using purchasing power parity (PPP), which is relevant considering it nowadays mostly designs and manufactures its own equipment, China's defence budget would be two-thirds of the US level. Furthermore, in the US the cost of pay and benefits, including for veterans, require huge expenditures. According to one calculation, as a result of this, the military procurement budget on new equipment and capabilities has a relatively much higher share in China's military spending, which means it was already at 50% of the US level in 2017, even before the sum was adjusted for PPP, and the gap has only narrowed since then.¹⁵¹

3.3 The US's Cold War Mentality - Its Alliance System

The developments between the US and its alliances in various fora were closely monitored by the Global Times. Overall the concept was regarded as an outdated relic from an earlier era, while China avoided constructing such confrontational mechanisms. The G7 didn't compare to the earlier might of Western powers, the founding of AUKUS showed little more than the desperation of the US, and the

¹⁵¹Freedberger Jr. 2018; Wang 2017; Robertson 2015; Chase, et al. 2015.

relationship between Washington and Tokyo was compared to the Axis of the Second World War.

3.3.1 Irrelevancy of the G7

One of these forums was the G7 group of countries, consisting of the US, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Canada and Japan. While principally an economic forum of the most developed industrialized states, all seven countries were aligned with Washington. As a result of this, in the context of intensifying competition between the US and China, its geopolitical importance was growing as well, and Washington sought its support. As such, it's unsurprising that according to the Global Times, the G7 was just another US tool in its containment of China.

The G7 grouping's first meeting since early 2020 was held in June, and its agenda was dominated by China, despite it not being a member of the organization. Biden attempted to convince US allies to take a tougher approach to China on questions like Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and the COVID-19 origins investigation. In line with the Biden administration's approach, several guest countries, including Australia, were invited to the summit.¹⁵² While a united front was presented, there were some disagreements on important issues, including funding the challenge to China's Belt and Road Initiative, called Build Back Better for the World. Things had rapidly changed in a few years, as the communique of the previous summit didn't mention China at all. This time the communique was much more Cold War-esque, strongly criticizing both China and Russia and proclaiming the West as an ideological rival to autocracies.¹⁵³

The G7 countries proclaimed themselves as the inspector of democracy. But they have neither the international legal basis nor moral ground for doing so. They can do nothing if China gives a snort of contempt to this statement. The Trump administration has largely exhausted its tricks of exerting pressure on Hong Kong affairs, leaving the new administration with nothing more than empty words. To the US, Hong Kong is the cheapest card to play, so it played it hard, bringing in its allies. However, their trash talks have further devalued their efforts, and their repetitious cliché is as stale as the menu in a chain store. China survived the aggressive troops of the Eight-Nation alliance in 1900. The G7 does not have that kind of power and dominance these days. Chinese people would be amused by such a contrast, and those countries that were part of the Eight-Nation Alliance may feel sorry for themselves nowadays.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵²Gan & Westcott 2021.

¹⁵³Sanger & Shear 2021.

¹⁵⁴Global Times 2021l.

The West's power today is compared to its past influence, and as such this argumentation uses historical comparisons. Implying that their criticism doesn't have a legal basis seemingly suggests that only the UN should determine international law, which is a standard Chinese position, as Beijing is supported by many developing countries there. Overall there's also the implication that as the West is no longer as powerful vis-a-vis China as it used to be, it has no right to criticize China's actions. Also contrasting the G7 to the Eight-Nation Alliance by stating that the comparison would be "amusing" is an example of ridicule in order to make the argument more effective, and such a comparison is also quasi-logical.

This editorial contains an interesting historical comparison. Not only is the G7 a group of countries that have seen better days, so to speak, and their influence overall is in decline, but it most importantly refers to the alliance that intervened in the Boxer Rebellion and marched on to Beijing, pillaging it in the process. The piece furthermore ridicules the whole concept of comparing its supposed modern-day equivalent, showcasing how China's position vis-a-vis the West has improved. This could be interpreted as an attempt to show how China, under the leadership of the CPC, has overcome the Century of Humiliation, restoring Beijing's reputation and international position. What's more, it also shows how the West has declined in power, on the other hand, and there's no longer anything it can do to stop China's resurgence.

3.3.2 AUKUS

After the Afghanistan withdrawal, US President Joe Biden, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson jointly announced the founding of the Australia-UK-US Trilateral Security Partnership, or AUKUS. The first declared aim was to provide eight nuclear-powered submarines for Australia. This was the first time since 1958 that the US had provided nuclear submarine technology to other countries. According to Shi (2022), the US military alliance system is increasingly integrating military, scientific, and industrial capabilities, signifying the beginning of the world's division into blocs. The AUKUS is a new way for Washington to connect with its allies and it also functions as a bridge between the Atlantic Ocean and the Indo-Pacific region. Based on the statements of the US Congress' AUKUS Caucus, it's a "global maritime alliance and maritime community which aims to contain China."¹⁵⁵

In the early 2010s, Australia hoped to act as a bridge between China and the US. In 2014 the two countries established a "comprehensive strategic partnership" and in

¹⁵⁵Shi 2022, 248-250.

2015 they signed a free trade agreement and Australia joined the AIIB. Australia believed that it wouldn't have to pick between China and the US. However, Chinese acquisitions in Australia began drawing attention, both from Australia and the US, and Canberra's security concerns outweighed its economic priorities. In the following years, Australia banned Huawei from participating in the country's 5G network and Australia heavily criticized China on COVID-19's origins. Australia is willing to play an increasing role in the US's overall strategic framework and it's located fairly far away from China, and as such it's able to conduct long-range deterrence.¹⁵⁶

The three AUKUS countries have very close historical and cultural connections, as well as values. When it comes to international politics, they share the same aspirations, among them upholding maritime superiority. The three countries are attempting to create a military, scientific, and industrial community, as well as establish a defence supply chain that excludes China. This will make the US alliance system more closed and explicitly more hostile to China. Moreover, while the US offers nuclear protection to Japan and South Korea, it has never openly done so for Australia. The AUKUS nuclear submarines are a way for it to provide Australia with non-nuclear strategic deterrence due to the submarines' long-range strike capability, and this does not violate the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. The AUKUS can be interpreted as an experiment of a new US strategy of "integrated deterrence" that utilizes allies and their capabilities, combining both conventional and nuclear deterrence. First and foremost, the AUKUS is unique because it's the first agreement in history that allows a non-nuclear-weapon state to acquire nuclear-powered submarines without nuclear weapons.¹⁵⁷

In addition to the G7, the founding of the AUKUS alliance was not well received by the Global Times either. Similarly, it was also seen as both an indicator of US decline and an example of its alliance system that was increasingly outdated. This new alliance was also regarded as a sign that the alliance system was becoming increasingly polarized and unequal, depending on each country's readiness to submit to US diktats regarding China policy.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, one interesting feature of the Global Times' analysis was that it saw China as the new defender of previously US-promoted aspirations, like globalization, international rules, and global trade. Values that the US had supposedly increasingly abandoned. The following quote is also an additional example of this type of argumentation.

¹⁵⁶Shi 2022, 250-252, 259-263.

¹⁵⁷Ibid.

This new trilateral alliance highlights the Anglo-Saxon ancestry, making all other US allies strongly feel an order of distance and closeness with Washington. The Five Eyes used to be the alliance within the US' foreign alliances, and now even the Five Eyes are left with only "three eyes," not to mention how far behind European countries such as France and Germany would rank in the US' list. [...] The term "Indo-Pacific" was rarely used in the past. But now, the US has made it the world's most popular geopolitical phrase. However, different countries have varying interests in the region, and most of them maintain close ties with China. [...] The forming of AUKUS at least revealed that the US lacks confidence in its strategy of widely roping almost any country into an anti-China united front. [...] In addition, the US wants to make Australia an example of a "faithful lapdog" for others to see: Listen to everything the US says and the US will even give you nuclear submarines. [...] In just a few years, the US has developed two alliances or quasi-alliance mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region: AUKUS and the Quad. Such flip-flopping is probably unprecedented in geopolitical history. [...] The US is doomed to pay the price if it doesn't follow the laws of the globalization era, and stubbornly attempts to draw history back and start Cold War-style confrontation. [...] Washington flaunts its strength on the spur of the moment, but history will surely nail the incumbent US government's ugly move on the pillar of shame.¹⁵⁸

In this line of argumentation, the founding of AUKUS consequently means that the US is losing confidence and is desperate, a liaison of succession and an argument based on the structure of reality. The US is no longer strong enough to stand on its own and it has to push its allies to act against China. The mentioning of laws of globalization is once again a quasi-logical argument. This is a dubious concept to begin with, but it's intriguing to note how China is portrayed as the new defender of globalization in several editorials. This was especially noticeable during Trump-era. There's also an attempt at division, trying to separate some US allies from the others. It's suggested that there's a hierarchy among its allies and that the distance between the US and some of its European allies is growing.

Although this article isn't directly about the organization, it shows well how the Five Eyes, an intelligence alliance comprising the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand was something of a bogeyman for its perceived extreme hatred and virulence towards Beijing. Overall, it's clearly an attempt to portray US foreign policymaking as volatile and unstable, due to its frenzied attempts at creating different and overlapping mechanisms. Moreover, it's also an attempt to separate US allies from each other, by insinuating on the one hand that Washington was only interested in puppets, and on the other that a pecking order existed within the alliance system, based on each country's hostility towards China and its strategic importance when it came to US' containment of China.

¹⁵⁸Global Times 2021z.

3.3.3 The US and Japan

In the context of China-US rivalry, the situation in Japan was also relatively closely covered, as its political and economic importance in East Asia was acknowledged. However, Washington's dominant position vis-a-vis Tokyo was strongly underlined. The Global Times argued that increasingly it was China and the challenge it posed that united the two countries. The US-Japan relationship was portrayed as kind of a polar opposite of the partnership between China and Russia.

Japan has become the country in Asia that follows the US policy of containing China most closely. There are two reasons for this: First, as mentioned above, the US has so far maintained its military occupation of Japan and it can be said that Japan's diplomacy is only at "semi-sovereign" level. It's unlikely for Japan to contradict the US. Second, Japan is the Asian country that most wants to contain China. The biggest "shared value" between the US and Japan is actually jealousy and hatred they both have against China's strong development momentum. The US' hegemonic thinking can't accept its status being matched by China, while Japan can't accept becoming "second-class country" compared to China, again. Has Japan forgotten how many times it inflicted devastation on China? Has China ever truly harmed Japan and can Japan cite an example? [...] The US-Japan alliance could evolve into an axis that can bring fatal disruption to Asia-Pacific peace, just like the Germany-Italy-Japan axis alliance before and during the WWII. [...] They always emphasized "rules-based," but the rules should refer to those made by the UN, rather than those defined by the US and Japan.¹⁵⁹

If China-Russia relations are a model, then the US-Japan alliance is portrayed as an anti-model, an argument establishing the structure of reality. Chinese partnerships with other countries are not outdated alliances, but instead partnerships that are not aimed against other countries. Also, the US-Japan alliance is compared with the Axis powers of World War II, presupposing that it could be equally destabilizing to the international order, which is a quasi-logical argument equating the two alliance systems in two different historical eras and contexts. Two rhetorical questions are used in a row to strengthen the argument. Similarly to earlier argumentation, this also gives the UN a position as authority above the US as the guarantor of international law, which is a standard Chinese viewpoint and an argument based on the structure of reality.

It's made clear that Japan isn't a fully sovereign or independent state. Nor is it really Western when it comes to values, and Japan's observance of them is only skin-deep. In reality, what increasingly unites the two countries is their opposition to China. Furthermore, as usual for Chinese publications, the historical transgressions of Japan are mentioned and even emphasized, while in contrast, China has never done harm

¹⁵⁹Global Times 2021u.

to Japan. As such, Tokyo had seemingly nothing to worry about as Beijing was “returning” to its dominant position, which is also consistent with Chinese messaging about non-interference and peaceful rise. In addition, equating the US and Japan’s alliance with the Axis powers is another way to remind Tokyo of its past but also it arguably shows how in the Chinese nationalistic narrative Japan’s actions during the Second World War have not been forgotten, on the contrary they are still heavily emphasized.

In contrast to the Global Times’ confrontational editorials, He (2022) points out that Japan has actually been able to avoid China’s diplomatic coercion for the most part because of its uniquely advantageous bargaining position, due to its economic and technological strength as well as its important role in “an emerging security network in the Indo-Pacific.” This was further highlighted during the Trump administration, as China faced domestic and international challenges. However, this is only a short-term policy and the Chinese elites don’t feel any more positive towards Japan than in the past, nor do they feel the need to make concessions in territorial disputes or other issues. Overall, a challenging international situation, made worse by the pandemic, created space for a temporary detente between China and Japan. He concludes by stating that as Japan’s example shows, due to the US-China rivalry, that it’s possible for those countries that have traditionally had challenging relations with China to improve their relations with Beijing if they can identify and acquire “certain key leverage points.”¹⁶⁰

To elaborate further, after 2014 Japan was spared China’s wolf warrior diplomacy despite Japan’s status as one of the most important US allies and long-standing disputes between China and Japan. This is the case even though Japan is the only country in Asia that has banned Huawei from its 5G networks and also the country in the region that has criticized China’s handling of domestic issues like Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang. Beijing has refrained from explicit threats of retaliation. Japan for its part, while being critical, attempted not to provoke China while at the same time staying close to the US, a delicate balancing act during the Trump administration. For instance, while Japan did ban Huawei, it didn’t explicitly ban all Chinese firms from telecommunications networks, and as a result, it didn’t join Washington’s “Clean Network.” Japan in general is regarded to be more successful than the US in its attempts to selectively engage with China, while at the same being in competition. Japan’s unique advantage is its geographic proximity to China, combined with its economic and technological capabilities. Moreover, to derail anti-China containment, Beijing seeks to at least delay confrontation with Japan, until its regional dominance is assured.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰He 2022, 100-104.

¹⁶¹He 2022, 101-109.

Considering that China's leadership made it very clear that the China-Japan relationship could only operate on China's terms and that Beijing was not ready for any compromises, it's not surprising that the thaw was indeed only temporary, He surmises. In June 2021, Japan jointly with the US identified Taiwan as a "country" that the two countries would be ready to defend. China in response quickly turned hostile and strongly protested these statements. At the same time, Chinese scholars reminded Japan of China's inevitable rise and warned Tokyo to tread lightly. Furthermore, China, together with Russia, sent warships through the narrow Tsugaru Strait separating Hokkaido from Japan's main island, although this was also a response to the AUKUS announcement. It's after all the spirit of Xi's diplomacy to "give absolutely no tolerance when we ought to be unkind" and to avoid war, China must be prepared for one. He concludes by stating considering the tactical short-term nature of China's conciliatory moves, the cyclical pattern of China-Japan relations is set to continue.¹⁶²

¹⁶²He 2022, 122-123.

4 CONCLUSION

The Global Times reported on foreign affairs and internal situations in both China and the United States actively throughout 2021. The publication offered a nationalist narrative on these topics, and the editorials offered a view of China that was increasingly confident in its own path and the superiority of its political and economic model. That said, this type of nationalism is clearly connected to (neo-)conservatism in the Chinese context, with its focus on a centrally governed state with a strong economy and military that stands up to US pressure, while maintaining the distinctiveness of Chinese society and development model.

Generally speaking, China's expansionist aims were consistently denied and downplayed, while on some questions, like Taiwan, its readiness and capability to use force if necessary was acknowledged, which is somewhat unusual for Chinese rhetoric. Overall, China was portrayed as a responsible great power that advanced the interests of all countries, but especially those of developing countries. Beijing was not going to impose its model on others, and in fact it was still willing to learn from the experiences of other countries, but it was not going to bow down under US pressure.

The UN was proclaimed as the highest international authority. Simultaneously it was implied that the US didn't respect this position, but instead attempted to create and strengthen alliances, which weren't properly representative, and in fact as a concept wholly outdated. As such, China was not even interested in similar mechanisms, but instead, it focused on true multilateralism that respected the voices of developing countries as well.

China's rise is seen as inevitable. Despite this, the US and other countries have nothing to worry about because Beijing doesn't have imperialist aims. China's development is simply a result of its steady economic and technological

development. Furthermore, it's in the interest of other countries to see a successful China, which also means that Washington won't be able to force other countries to join its anti-China front.

Overall, the China versus the United States dichotomy was very noticeable in the editorials of the Global Times. The US is perceived as China by far the most important challenge, and in fact Washington is trying to contain Beijing at every turn. However, in the narrative of the publication, China has become too strong, and there's really nothing Washington, or for that matter other Western countries, which for the most part don't even want to contain China, can do about it anymore.

The US and China are also portrayed as very different types of international actors. The former is expansionist and hegemonic, and it's desperately trying to maintain its international position, while the latter is only trying to develop. China also has no global ambitions, certainly not militarily, and the US is furthermore increasingly unpredictable great power and even its allies no longer fully trust its security guarantees.

The main issue is between the core interests of China, be they in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, or Taiwan, and the US hegemonic goals, which means that it has to intervene everywhere, despite the fact that these are purely China's internal affairs. As such, conflict could be inevitable, but there's really nothing Washington can do, as Beijing's strength and determination on these issues are unbreakable.

One interesting feature of the editorials is that the traditional roles of the US and China have been in a way reversed. It's now China that is the defender of globalization and free trade, while Washington is increasingly selfish and isolationist. The US is actually increasingly obsessed with China, and only keeping Beijing down is what matters from its point of view. Beijing is ready for fair and stable competition, but Washington is trying to cheat at every turn.

All types of alliances are regarded as Cold War-era relics that are outdated. China instead offers its superior alternatives that take the interests of all countries into account, and as such they have a much brighter future. If anything, alliances and their growing number, meaning they overlap, is only a sign of US desperation as its hegemony declines. China needs to only develop and wait, and its success over Washington will be inevitable.

The US in general is portrayed as being in a deep internal crisis, made worse by political polarization. The only thing that can unite the population is the China

policy, and as such it is relentlessly used to enact different policies. However, this only shows the US's weakness and its inevitable decline if it doesn't change course.

Perelman's rhetorical techniques proved to be useful in analyzing the editorials of the Global Times. A wide variety of techniques were used, often combining quasi-logical arguments with other kinds of techniques to make argumentation more effective. Overall, the role of arguments that establish the structure of reality were in a commanding position, moving from the specific case towards generalizations.

Noteworthy overall were dissociations that attempted to distinguish China from the US. China is dissociated from expansionist and hard power policies, while the US is portrayed as their embodiment. China is the new defender of global stability and order. While the capabilities of the countries are roughly symmetrical in most ways, China takes no part in great power competition in any traditional sense, it simply focuses on its own affairs. It still, despite growing confidence, practices the policy of non-interference.

The rhetoric and argumentation establish the structure of reality in which China has its own type of democracy that is superior to Western alternatives. It solves practical issues, like the COVID-19 pandemic and the elimination of poverty successfully. Its foreign policy is responsible and it respects international rules. The US, on the other hand, is mired in a crisis of its own making and it needs to stop being obsessed with China's progress.

Other arguments are based on the structure of reality, such as the fact that the Western countries still retain their leading position in global affairs, but that this status has considerably diminished and as long as China maintains the policies that have been successful so far, it will eventually overcome this challenge. Furthermore, the failures in Afghanistan, for example, show that the US's global position has almost collapsed and that it's not to be trusted even among its allies.

In Perelman's rhetorical theory, the audience plays a central role. When it comes to the Global Times, it can be argued that at times the publication aims to receive the adherence of "every reasonable being" as imagined by it, or the universal audience. This is the case when it portrays China as a moral great power that doesn't seek to overtake the United States or the global order. Much more often, however, it's clear that the Global Times and its rhetoric is realistically only going to appeal to a particular audience that shares anti-American, anti-liberal democratic, more collectivist, and statist premises. In addition to the Chinese audiences and foreigners living in China, as mentioned by Huang (2016a), one could imagine some people in developing countries being more receptive to this type of rhetoric.

In the future, researching the differences between the English and Chinese language versions and their editorials could be a worthwhile topic of research. Or comparing the Global Times to more liberal, in the Chinese context, publications. Considering China's growing global influence, it's in general important to analyze Chinese foreign policy discussions and the ways in which it sees China's position vis-a-vis the US developing. Further research could also take into account China's own rhetorical tradition and how it impacts Chinese publications and their articles.

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