

U.S.-CHINA COMPETITION: IS A CHINESE CYCLE OF POWER POSSIBLE?

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Received: May 5th, 2023

Accepted for publication: October 1st, 2023

Abstract: The cycle of power is a theory of international relations developed by George Modelski during the Cold War in order to identify the mechanism of power transfer from one global power to another. To become a world power, a country must fulfil four conditions: a specific geography, a democracy and an open society, a leading economy, and the development of a global strategy. The last cycle of power in modern history was the American cycle, which began at the end of the Second World War and has continued until the present day, with the USSR and China as challengers. Therefore, the US-China rivalry can be seen as a case study to examine the theory of power transition and China's potential to become a world power. China fulfils three of the four conditions proposed by George Modelski in his theory in order to become a world power, but due to the distribution of power in East Asia, China's ability to become a world power remains extremely limited. Moreover, China's incorporation into the international institutional architecture created by the United States is advantageous because it increases the likelihood of a peaceful transition of power between the two countries. However, despite China's ability to create a cycle of power, it will continue to be a second-rank power in the international system, which can lead to political, social, or economic instability. As a result, it will be difficult for the Chinese leadership to create a cycle of power in the future while maintaining its political influence.

Keywords: cycle of power, global war, power transition, US-China competition, world power, Belt and Road Initiative, socialism with Chinese characteristics

Rezumat: Teoria ciclurilor de putere este o teorie apărută în perioada Războiului Rece, creată de către George Modelski, având rolul să prezinte mecanismul de schimbare a puterii de la o putere globală la alta. Pentru a deveni o putere globală o țară trebuie să îndeplinească câteva condiții: o geografie specifică, să fie o democrație și o societate deschisă, să fie cea mai puternică economie și să dezvolte o strategie globală. În istoria modernă, ultimul ciclu de putere este cel american, care a început la sfârșitul celui de-al Doilea Război Mondial, continuând până în prezent, având ca principali competitori - URSS și China. Din acest motiv, competiția SUA-China poate să fie văzută ca un studiu de caz pentru testarea teoriei și pentru a determina dacă China are capacitatea de a deveni o putere mondială. Astfel, pentru a deveni o putere mondială, China îndeplinește deja un număr de trei din patru condiții propuse de Modelski în acest sens, dar din

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cauza distribuției de putere din Asia de Est, capacitatea ei de a deveni o putere mondială este foarte limitată. Pe de altă parte, integrarea Chinei în arhitectura instituțională creată de SUA la nivel internațional, face posibilă existența unei tranziții pașnice între cele două puteri. Dar, în ciuda faptului că aceasta are capacitatea de a crea un ciclu de putere, este foarte probabil să rămână o putere de rang secund în interiorul sistemului internațional, iar acest lucru poate genera crize politice, economice și sociale. În consecință, conducerea chineză se va confrunța cu o provocare în încercarea de a crea un ciclu de putere și, în același timp, de a își menține influența politică.

Cuvinte cheie: tranziție de putere, ciclu de putere, competiția SUA-China, puterea mondială, război global, socialismul cu caracteristici chinezești, Inițiativa Belt and Road

I. Introduction

During the Cold War, power transition theories were developed in order to identify the mechanism by which hegemonic power shifts from one state to another. A. F. Organski developed the first power transition theory based on economic development, describing international system as a pyramidal structure, with the dominant nation at the top, controlling the entire international order and deriving the greatest benefits from the system, followed by the great powers and the other systemic powers. Due to the rapid development of industrialization, the distribution of power within the system often shifts, and war occurs when a great power is powerful enough to challenge the dominant nation and its allies. If the challenger succeeds, it becomes the next dominant power and reorganises the international system; if it fails, it assumes a secondary supporting role, as Germany did after the First and Second World Wars¹.

Robert Gilpin developed the second theory, known as the theory of hegemonic war. According to this theory, the international system is dominated by a hegemonic power, which must generate sufficient resources and reduce its costs of control to maintain the status quo. However, as the costs of control rise, the hegemon's influence declines and the challenger is ready to become the new hegemon. A hegemonic conflict is initiated between the dominant power or powers and the challenger or challengers in order to facilitate a power transition. This conflict is global, and all system countries are involved. In addition, the hegemonic war is a conflict on all levels of influence – economic, ideological, and political. This struggle involves unlimited means, because there are many

¹ A.F. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Random House, 1968), 364-367, 371-372.

participants and the stakes are high. If the challenger prevails, the system will be governed by a new distribution of power, territory, and resources, as well as new norms. After each hegemonic conflict, a new cycle of growth, expansion and decline will emerge².

George Modelski developed the third theory, known as the cycle of power, in which the dominant power in the international system attempts to define a cycle of expansion and decline for that country. Compared to the previous two theories, the cycle of power attempts to define the mechanism of growth and decline more precisely. In the case of Organski and Gilpin, neither defines the stages through which a simple power becomes a dominant power. Similarly, a dominant power declines so that it can be challenged by other powers within the system. Furthermore, the first two theories attribute a decline of a power to the economy, whereas Modelski attempts to define a more complex model that includes economic variables, technological development and political innovation created by the dominant power. In Modelski's case, decline is due more to the deterioration of the world power's ability to control the system than to economic stagnation or rising costs of government. On the other hand, in all three cases, the transition from one hegemon to another is achieved through a global conflict involving all the powers in the international system. Moreover, the challenger is a power that seeks to reshape and establish a new international order based on its international ambitions. In conclusion, George Modelski's cycle of power theory is more complex and involves more variables in the development of a world power. The economic variables can explain China's rise in recent years, but the cycle of power is more appropriate for determining whether China can transform itself from a challenger to a superpower. Because of its complex analysis of the rise and fall of a dominant power, George Modelski's theory of cycles of power is more appropriate for determining whether a Chinese cycle of power, is feasible in the near future.

According to George Modelski, world powers are always maritime or oceanic powers, such as Portugal, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. A sea power is an island or semi-island nation with a highly developed economy and the ability to control the sea to impose its global order. All world power challengers, on the other hand, are landlocked countries that share land

² Robert Gilpin, *War & Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 197-200, 210.

borders with other states or powers in the international system³. The United States is considered a sea power because of its quick access to the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, while China is a land power because of its limited access to the Pacific Ocean and its land borders with other Asian nations.

Because of its geographical location, China will devote its resources first to regional land or water disputes and then to international issues. In the future, the transition from one cycle of power to the next will be challenging because a conflict between the world power and the challenger could be both conventional and nuclear. In view of these circumstances, the process of transition should be carried out without the use of force. In addition, China's ability to create the next cycle of power will be determined by its ability to overcome its regional and domestic problems. China may become the leading economic power in the international system in the coming decades; but the process of creating a new cycle of power is still in its infancy. This status will not give China the ability to create a new cycle of power; it will only give it the ability to become the most important economic centre in the entire market. As a result, China will seek to seize future opportunities to become the next global leader, but this will be extremely difficult given the lack of a global network of alliances and its limited power projection outside East Asia⁴. In a world where the United States has already solved these two geopolitical problems since 1945, it will be difficult for China to solve them in its case. However, if China is able to overcome these challenges, it will be the first land power to create a cycle of power.

II. Methodology

In order to determine whether or not China can establish a cycle of power in the future, it will be necessary to test George Modelski's theory using the US-China geopolitical and geoeconomic competition as a case study. Case studies can be used for the following purposes: description, hypothesis generation or theory development, hypothesis and theory evaluation, and normative theory development. In order to test a theory, it is essential to carry out the following

³ George Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Seapower in Global Politics, 1494-1993* (London: MacMillan Press, 1988), 5, 11-12, 16-18; George Modelski, *Long Cycles in the World Politics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1987), 10, 33.

⁴ Thomas Christensen, *China ca provocare. Cum pot fi modelate alegerile unei puteri în ascensiune*. (București: Comunicare.ro, 2016), 265.

four steps: develop a hypothesis or theory; gather evidence from history, interviews, etc.; identify alternative explanations for effects; and gather evidence that the alternatives did not occur or did not cause the effects. However, it is crucial to identify the necessary and sufficient cases to validate the theory. Therefore, the case study can be used to test the hypothesis for events that are in the process of occurring or are influenced by the present history⁵.

This case study covers the period from 2008, when the most recent economic crisis began, to the present day, with East Asia and the international system serving as the geographical boundaries. To construct this comparison, each of the conditions proposed by George Modelski in his theory are evaluated in relation to China. In addition, we describe the other cycles of power in history and then offer offensive realism as an alternative explanation for China's rise. Finally, we use offensive realism to explain China's inability to become a world power. To do so, we analyse the geopolitical characteristics of East Asia and the major regional issues that have a direct impact on China. On this basis, we can determine how many of George Modelski's cycle of power characteristics China fulfils and what advantages the United States has over China in terms of creating a Chinese cycle of power.

III. The Cycles of Power: An Overview

According to George Modelski, there are three distinct categories of powers in the international system: the global power, the challengers to the global power and the other powers in the system. The global power is the only power within the system that has a military advantage over the other powers. However, this advantage does not imply that the global power has the ability to project its influence globally⁶. At the same time, the challenger is the power that aspires to become the next global power in order to restructure the system in accordance with its objectives. The transition from challenger to global power occurs during global conflicts, but competition can begin in peacetime⁷. The final category

⁵ Thomas A. Schwandt and Emily F. Gates, "Case Study Methodology", in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research (Fifth Edition)*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2017), 604, 612-614.

⁶ Modelski, *Long Cycles in the World Politics*, 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

consists of powers with insufficient resources to become challengers or global powers, erstwhile global powers, and former challengers⁸.

A global power can only be a maritime power because only maritime powers can become status quo powers and have the ability to control the world's oceans. The sea power had a distinct advantage over the land powers because its geography made it less vulnerable to attacks from the continent, and the restraining power of water prevented it from waging war against any land power⁹. On the other hand, a land power is always considered a challenger power because of its ability to project power in multiple directions, on land and at sea, but there is a high probability that it will be balanced by a coalition led by the global power¹⁰. However, if the challenger is defeated during a war, the balancing coalition tends to disintegrate and the former allies may eventually become the new global power challengers¹¹. During the Cold War, China was an ally of the United States against the Soviet Union after the Sino-Soviet split, but it has since become the main challenger to the US international order.

Based on the distinction between a land power and a sea power, Modelski found that only nine nations had the potential to become global powers: Spain, Portugal, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Japan, the United States, and the Soviet Union. Only four of these became global powers (Portugal, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States), while the others became their rivals¹².

Therefore, for a nation to become a global power, it must have the following four characteristics¹³:

1. *A favourable geography* – this means that countries that are insular, peninsular, or oceanic island nations have a distinct advantage over continental countries because they have rapid access to the global ocean and the ability to protect their borders more effectively than continental nations¹⁴;

⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁹ Modelski, *Long Cycles in the World Politics*, 10; Tunsjø, Øystein. *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 14-15; John, Mearsheimer. *Tragedia Politicii de Forță*. (București: Antet, 2007), 85-88.

¹⁰ Modelski, *Long Cycles in the World Politics*, 33.

¹¹ Ibid., 34.

¹² Ibid., 10.

¹³ Ibid., 220.

¹⁴ Ibid., 221.

2. *A cohesive and open society* – indicates that the society is stable and free from unrest or internal conflict, that civil liberties are protected, and that the society is welcoming to immigrants¹⁵;
3. *A leading economy* – indicates that the global power should become the preeminent economic power in the international system. As a leading economy, the global power has sufficient resources to invest in innovation and in solving global problems. However, as innovation declines, the global power loses resources and its influence begins to decline¹⁶;
4. *A global political strategy* – indicates that a global power has a plan for organising the international order. In the past, the United Kingdom (UK) aimed to have the world’s most powerful navy. This gave the UK the ability to control trade routes and project influence in different regions of the world¹⁷. Similarly, the United States uses its naval superiority to ensure the freedom of navigation and its military innovation to maintain peace in certain regions of the globe.

Once a nation has acquired all the characteristics of a global power, its period of domination and regulation of the global system lasts at least one hundred years. Each 100-year period is known as a cycle of power, which consists of four phases lasting between 25 and 30 years: Global War, World Power, Delegitimization, and Deconcentration¹⁸.

The Global War is the phase during which a new global power begins to establish a new international order within the system. A cycle of power is the interval between two global conflicts, characterised by a period of stability during which the global power creates a new political order¹⁹. Global wars differ from regional, national, and local conflicts in the following ways²⁰:

- Each global war lasts between 25 and 30 years;
- The global war has a global purpose and a global participation, so that all the powers of the system are involved;
- All global wars can be explained by a structural crisis caused by the delegitimation of the global power and the erosion of its power base;
- Every global war will lead to a new structure of the global system.

¹⁵ Ibid., 222-223.

¹⁶ Ibid., 223-224.

¹⁷ Ibid., 224-225.

¹⁸ Ibid., 44, 93, 103, 119-120.

¹⁹ Ibid., 36-37.

²⁰ Ibid., 37.

The World Power is the phase in the cycle of power in which the global power dominates the system by imposing a new political and economic order. This is the only phase in which the influence of the global power increases and the ability of the other powers to challenge it is limited²¹.

Delegitimisation is the phase in which the authority of the global power begins to erode and its ability to regulate the system begins to decline. During this phase, the other powers become increasingly nationalistic, and a new power emerges within the system²². *Deconcentration* is the final stage, in which the global authority loses influence and the system becomes multipolar. During this stage, the system is bipolarised between two global alliances, and a new global conflict begins²³.

Using his theory, George Modelski identified four cycles of power in history: the Portuguese Cycle with Spain as the main challenger; the Dutch cycle with France as the main challenger; the First British Cycle with France as the main challenger, Second British Cycle with Germany as the main challenger; the American Cycle with the USSR as challenger after the Second World War until the end of the Cold War, and the current American Cycle with China as the main challenger²⁴. To create a cycle of power, a global power must be one of the most technologically advanced nations, as Portugal was when it revolutionised the maritime industry, or it must become the most important economic power in the system, as the United Kingdom did during the second cycle of power by spearheading the Industrial Revolution and supporting international trade²⁵. In addition, a global entity must be able to find solutions to global problems that arise after a new political order. To solve these problems, however, the global power must strike a balance between its national resources and its ability to model the system. The existence of these cycles of power can be used to gather historical evidence to test George Modelski's theory²⁶.

In analysing the last cycle of power, the Global War phase is considered to be the Second World War and the period from 1945 to the present represents the World Power phase. During these phases, the United States became the preeminent power in the international system and established a number of international institutions to govern the system. During the same period, the

²¹ Ibid., 119-120.

²² Ibid., 119-120.

²³ Ibid., 120.

²⁴ Ibid., 40.

²⁵ Ibid., 15, 86.

²⁶ Ibid., 65.

United States initiated the formation of a series of regional alliances that continue to be used to preserve the US liberal order. Identifying the Delegitimization phase of the US cycle is extremely difficult because, despite the fact that the US' economic power declined during the 2008 economic crisis and China became the second economic power in 2010, US political and military power remains intact.

The launch of BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or the American withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, did not diminish US political and military power because Washington was able to establish two regional alliances during the same time period: Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS). At the same time, the presidency of Xi Jinping, which began in 2013, can be seen as a form of the Delegitimization phase, as the Chinese leader seeks to challenge the liberal order by adopting a multilateral approach and win-win cooperation. In addition, the Chinese President introduced the concept of the “Chinese Dream” in order to transform China into a superpower by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC)²⁷.

The concept behind the Chinese Dream is that China can reassert itself as a superpower within the international system, similar to how imperial China did in the past, when it was considered a regional power centre. Before becoming a superpower, however, China aims to become one of the first major players in the next technological revolution by launching the Made in China 2025 programme in 2015. China is keen to develop its industry and research in a number of priority sectors, including information technology, automation, the aerospace industry, the maritime industry, the transport system, renewable energy, the power industry, agriculture and medicine, according to this programme²⁸. If China is able to overtake the United States and become the first technological power in the international system, this programme has the potential to create a cycle of power and make China the most formidable technological rival to the United States.

²⁷ Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China, Vol. I* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2014), 56-58.

²⁸ Scott Kennedy, “Made in China 2025”, *Center for Strategies & International Studies*, June 1, 2015, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/made-china-2025>, accessed on July 29, 2023.

IV. Creating a New Cycle of Power

The US-China competition can be seen as a form of power transition, with the US as the global power and China as the challenger, but the beginning of this competition is difficult to pinpoint historically. In our opinion, the economic crisis of 2008 can be seen as a turning point, when the soft power of the United States was affected by the crisis, while the soft power of China increased due to its stable economy and high economic growth rate. The second turning point occurred between 2009 and 2010, when China initiated the formation of BRICS with other emerging economies from the international system. The third turning point occurred when the United States redefined its relationship with China, coining the term *Pivot to Asia* in order to shift its foreign policy priorities from the Middle East to East Asia²⁹. The fourth event occurred in 2013, when Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the creation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the first international investment initiative developed by China³⁰. The fifth moment was when the United States criticised China for its artificial islands in the South China Sea and its use of civil-military operations to expand its economic zone in the region³¹.

In 2022, the People’s Republic of China launched military exercises around Taiwan in response to the visit of former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi³². This is reminiscent of one of the Taiwan Strait crises that began in 1950, when the Nationalist forces took control of the island at the end of the Chinese Civil War. During the same period, the competition between the United States and China moved from a regional to a global level. The first phase of the global competition between the United States and China began in 2018, when former US President Donald Trump initiated a trade conflict with the PRC. The cause of the trade war was Donald Trump’s protectionist policies, which were implemented by US industries in order to strengthen US economic power.

²⁹ Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century”, *Foreign Policy*, no. 189 (November 2011): 58-60.

³⁰ Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, 312-316, 317-320.

³¹ Michael McDevitt, “The South China Sea: Assessing U.S. Policy and Options for the Future”, CNA Occasional Paper, November 2014, 9-16, 32-35, https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/iop-2014-u-009109.pdf, accessed on July 29, 2023.

³² Wayne Chang et al., “China military rehearses ‘encircling’ Taiwan after US Speaker visit”, CNN, April 8, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/07/china/china-taiwan-military-exercises-hnk-intl-ml/index.html>, accessed on July 29, 2023.

The trade war consisted of a series of customs tariffs imposed on certain Chinese-made goods. In order to reduce some economic barriers, the two nations signed the first phase of a trade agreement in 2020, but despite a change of Administration in Washington that same year, the trade war continues to this day. The second phase of the competition was banning of Chinese 5G technology used to develop 5G communication networks worldwide. To achieve this, the Trump Administration sued a number of European and Asian allies to enact national legislation banning Chinese companies from participating in the development of 5G networks. This is because the United States wanted to stop the accelerated development of Chinese 5G technology around its allies, largely because the Chinese technology is perceived as a threat to the country's cybersecurity³³. However, the shift from a regional to a global competition does not mean it will become a power transition competition. To determine whether the global competition will lead to a power transition, we need to apply George Modelski's theory to determine whether China will become the next global power.

Geography is the first characteristic to be analysed: China's geographical area is 9,326,410 square kilometres, and its coastline on the Pacific Ocean is 14,500 kilometres long³⁴. It is protected in the north by the Gobi Desert, which, historically, made an invasion from Russia somewhat difficult, and in the south by the Himalayas and the jungle³⁵. The Himalayas can prevent India from conquering Chinese territory, and the rainforest prevents China from expanding its influence in Southeast Asia³⁶. China's most vulnerable border is in the province of Manchuria, because its geography makes a land invasion possible and China has been threatened in this region twice in history. The second was during the Cold War, when China had a border conflict with the Soviet Union along the Amur River. The Korean Peninsula is also a geographical vulnerability for China, as the Japanese invasion of China began after Japan conquered the peninsula in 1910, and again during the Korean War, when United Nations (UN) forces advanced close to the Yalu River, the natural border between China and North Korea. Because of this vulnerability, China will continue to support

³³ Robin Emmott, "U.S. warns European allies not to use Chinese gear for 5G networks", *Reuters*, February 5, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-huawei-tech-eu-idUSKCN1PU1TG>, accessed on July 29, 2023.

³⁴ CIA, "Explore All Countries: China", *The World Factbook*, August 30, 2022, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/china/>, accessed on May 07, 2023.

³⁵ Øystein, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics*, 108.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 186-187.

the communist regime in North Korea in order to use it as a buffer against the US troops stationed in South Korea.

Moreover, any attempt to unify the two states could be seen as a threat to China's interests in the region, since a unified Korea would no longer serve as a buffer state and its foreign policy would be more anti-Chinese than pro-Chinese. The same is true of Vietnam, which, despite being a communist regime, has an anti-Chinese foreign policy and sees China's growing military dominance as a threat to its independence. China, on the other hand, is trying to use geography to its advantage in terms of maritime territory. In the case of the East China Sea, China is using the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute with Japan to extend its exclusive economic zone, while in the case of the South China Sea, it is creating artificial islands to claim territorial waters in a maritime area contested by Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, Indonesia and Taiwan.

The second characteristic is a cohesive and open society, which is highly questionable in the case of China, given that it is a communist state ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Also, China is no longer a totalitarian state, but rather an authoritarian one, with nationalism, communism and Confucianism as its primary political ideologies, although Confucianism is seen more as a religion³⁷. After Deng Xiaoping's Four Modernizations, China changed from a communist state with a command economy to a communist state with a free market economy, a model known as *socialism with Chinese characteristics*. This allowed the CCP to survive the end of the Cold War by transforming the country's economy from a planned to a free market. Unlike former European communist states, the CCP was able to offer economic growth and social stability in exchange for freedom and democracy, so China did not become a democracy as a result of its economic transformation³⁸.

China is seen as a unique paradigm because neither the middle class nor rapid economic development have been able to produce the democratic wave that Samuel Huntington predicted would accompany the third wave of democratisation³⁹. One possible explanation for this paradox is the notion that,

³⁷ Paul F. Scotchmer, "Is China headed for a clash of cultures as Xi Jinping fuses Confucius and Marx?", *South China Morning Post*, July 27, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3017929/china-headed-clash-cultures-xi-jinping-fuses-confucius-and-marx>, accessed on May 18, 2023.

³⁸ Helen Gao, "The Chinese Public Doesn't Know What the Rules Are Anymore", *Foreign Policy*, September 05, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/05/china-communist-party-ccp-economy-zero-covid-protests-mortgage-strike/>, accessed on May 7, 2023.

³⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave. Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1991), 66-69.

because the size of the country, only a centralised power system can govern it without sparking civil conflict, as happened during the time of the Republic of China⁴⁰. Without political, cultural and religious freedom, stabilisation could become a major obstacle to China’s future development. The Uighur minority from Xinjiang and the Hong Kong population are both treated strictly for their political and cultural beliefs. Because of these actions, the former Trump administration accused China of committing genocide against the Uighur minority and ended Hong Kong’s preferential treatment⁴¹.

Immigration is an additional concern for China, mainly because the nation cannot become a cultural and technological melting pot like the United States. Important characteristics of an open society are an open immigration policy and a good integration policy, but in the case of China, the nationalism of the Han ethnic group and the low integration of the other ethnic groups indicate that the country is still far from being open to immigrants. As Lee Kuan Wee, the late Prime Minister of Singapore, said in an interview with Graham Allison, this is seen as another major disadvantage for China vis-à-vis the United States, and it will affect China’s future development⁴².

The third characteristic is that China was expected to become the dominant economic power in the near future, but the Covid-19 pandemic, high debts, and low population growth have slowed China’s economic development⁴³. In contrast, China will remain the world’s second largest economy, as evidenced by the country’s GDP growth from \$ 191.15 billion in 1980 to \$ 17.73 trillion in 2021⁴⁴. Similarly, the United States’ GDP rose from \$ 11.33 trillion in 1980 to \$

⁴⁰ Graham Allison and Robert D. Backwell, *Lee Kuan Yew. The Grand Master’s Insight on China, the United States, and the World* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2013), 35-36.

⁴¹ Eduard Wong and Chris Buckley, “U.S. Says China’s Repression of Uighurs Is ‘Genocide’”, *The New York Times*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/19/us/politics/trump-china-xinjiang.html>, accessed on May 18, 2023; Sabrina, Rodriguez,, “Trump signs Hong Kong sanctions bill in blow for China”, *Politico*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/14/trump-hong-kong-china-sanctions-361636>, accessed on May 18, 2023.

⁴² Allison, *Lee Kuan Yew. The Grand Master’s Insight*, 31, 40.

⁴³ The Economist, “When will China’s GDP overtake America’s?”, June 7, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2023/06/07/when-will-chinas-gdp-overtake-americas>, accessed on July 29, 2023; Stella Yifan Xie, “China’s Economy Won’t Overtake the U.S., Some Now Predict”, *The Wall Street Journal*, September 2, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/will-chinas-economy-surpass-the-u-s-s-some-now-doubt-it-11662123945>, accessed on July 29, 2023.

⁴⁴ The World Bank, “GDP (current US\$) – China”, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN>, accessed on May 09, 2023.

23.32 trillion in 2021⁴⁵. China's annual growth increased from 7.8% in 1980 to 14.2% in 2007; but the country's growth slowed to 2.2% in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and then returned to 8.1% in 2021⁴⁶. On the other hand, US economic growth was 1.9% in 1980, -1.3% in 2008, the first year of the most recent economic crisis, and -3.3% in 2020, with a spectacular increase to 5.8% in 2021⁴⁷. With the exception of 2020, the annual growth rate in US was between 2% and 4%, while China's annual growth rate was more than 6%. The Chinese economy will expand, despite a growth rate of less than 6%, because Chinese companies can relocate from the East Coast to the interior of China as the coastal market develops. Similarly, the US economy may stagnate for an extended period of time between a 2-4% annual growth rate or a negative growth rate, because US companies have lost the huge advantage they once had in the global market, mainly due to the free transfer of technology to China, but also because other markets have developed local competitors for US products⁴⁸. The US' GDP per capita increased from \$ 12,574 in 1980 to \$ 70,248 in 2021, while China's GDP per capita increased from \$ 194 in 1980 to \$ 12,556 in 2021⁴⁹. China's GDP based on purchasing power parity (PPP) rose from \$ 1.62 trillion in 1990 to \$ 24.86 trillion in 2021, while the US GDP (PPP) per capita rose from \$ 10.1 trillion in 1990 to \$ 21.13 trillion in 2021⁵⁰.

Graham Allison, who believes that China has already overtaken the United States in terms of GDP at PPP per capita, argues that China will be the economic powerhouse of the 21st century⁵¹. Thomas Christensen, on the other hand, sees China's rise not as an alternative to the US liberal order, but as a power that is highly dependent on the global market and still invests in US

⁴⁵ The World Bank, "GDP (current US\$) - United States", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=US>, accessed on May 09, 2023.

⁴⁶ The World Bank, "GDP growth (annual %) – China", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=CN>, accessed on May 09, 2023.

⁴⁷ The World Bank, "GDP growth (annual %) – United States", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=US>, accessed on May 09, 2023.

⁴⁸ John Mearsheimer, "The Inevitable Rivalry", *Foreign Affairs*, no. 11-12 (November/December 2021): 51-52.

⁴⁹ The World Bank, "GDP per capita (current US\$) – United States, China", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?end=2021&locations=US-CN&start=1980>, accessed on May, 19, 2023.

⁵⁰ The World Bank, "GDP, PPP (constant 2017 international \$) – United States, China", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.PP.KD?locations=US-CN>, accessed on May 19, 2023.

⁵¹ Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?", *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>, accessed on May 20, 2023.

dollars. Furthermore, Christensen believes that using PPP as an index to compare the US and Chinese economies is not very accurate because PPP only measures a country's ability to purchase some products, but not of the same quality⁵². On the other hand, the index does not indicate how much money the Chinese are willing to donate to support the international ambitions of the political leader. Christensen suggests using GDP per capita as a measure to determine of how much money the Chinese population has⁵³. In this case, however, the GDP/capita index is also inaccurate, because China and the United States do not have the same population, and the United States has a significant advantage. In addition, the distribution of GDP in both countries can vary from region to region and within social classes. It is therefore somewhat difficult to use an economic index to determine which nation leads the economic system. As a result, from an economic perspective, it will be extremely difficult to determine which nation will be the leading economic power in the next decade, but China still has more advantages than the United States.

The final feature relates to China's global strategy, in which it is able to launch international initiatives to challenge the US international order. The BRICS initiative was launched in 2009, followed by the BRI in 2013, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2016. The most significant of these three projects is the Belt and Road Initiative, a multi-country global infrastructure investment initiative. Launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in two speeches in Kazakhstan and Indonesia, the BRI has, overtime, become China's most important international initiative⁵⁴. From the outset, the BRI was seen as a means to connect China with Africa, the Middle East and Europe in order to cooperate in various fields and improve the global market distribution chain, but the initiative has many drawbacks. On the other hand, BRICS and AIIB were perceived as a form of competition to the international financial institutions established by the United States after Bretton Woods⁵⁵.

The BRI infrastructure initiatives are seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage for the development of these countries. Many of the countries in

⁵² Christensen, *China ca provocare*, 181-184.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵⁴ Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, 312-316, 317-320.

⁵⁵ Adrian Pop and Andreea Brînză, "Power Transition and Balance of Power: Comprehending the Power Dynamics of the 21st Century", *Public Administration & Regional Studies*, 10th Year, No. 1 (19), (2017): 67; Adrian Pop, "Rising Through the Crisis: The Impact of Emerging Countries on the Future Distribution of Power", *Knowledge Horizons – Economics* 6, no. 2, (2014): 27.

which China is investing are not particularly wealthy in terms of their GDP, and after the Chinese companies have completed their projects, many of them have fallen into a debt trap. In some African countries, this has led to popular uprising against political leaders, first because of the debt trap, and then because Chinese companies brought in their own labour instead of using local workers to build the projects⁵⁶. Despite these drawbacks, the BRI managed to convince the Group of Seven (G7) nations that it posed a threat to their soft power influence in Africa and Asia. As a result, they began to develop projects with similar goals, such as the Blue Dot Network in 2019, Build Back Better World in 2021 and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment in 2022, but none of these projects have the same international impact as the BRI.

V. A Chinese Cycle of Power?

To become a global power, China fulfils three out of four conditions, although its geographical position is still seen as a disadvantage. This position will allow China to develop a new cycle of power, which, if successful, will be the first cycle of power created by a continental power. However, in order to become the next global power, China must find the most effective means of achieving a peaceful transition, as in the case of the UK and the US, where their democratic and cultural traditions made it possible⁵⁷. This view is supported by Zhiqun Zu, who argues that a peaceful transition of power between China and the United States is only possible if both countries are satisfied with the status quo. For this to happen, there must be a favourable political and social relationship between the world power and the challenger in both countries. In addition, the establishment of economic, political, and cultural ties between the two powers can facilitate a peaceful transfer of power⁵⁸.

Similarly, Pop and Brînză believe that China can make a peaceful transition to the position of global power because it is already integrated into the global system and the danger of conflict between the challenger and the global power is reduced. Comparing China to the Soviet Union in the past, the economic interdependence between the two powers and China's policy of peaceful rise

⁵⁶ Batty Fodbei, "No Question Asked? Development and the Paradox of China's Africa Policy", *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 1, (Winter 2019): 155-163.

⁵⁷ Graham Allison, *Destined For War* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2018), 271-273.

⁵⁸ Zhiqun Zu, "Power Transition and U.S.-China Relations: Is War Inevitable?", *Journal of International and Area Studies* 12, no. 1 (2005): 3-6.

may indicate a preference for accommodation from Beijing. However, the development of the Chinese military in recent years poses a threat of regional conflict⁵⁹.

On the other hand, Robert Gilpin argues that a power transition through a hegemonic conflict is possible even in a nuclear era, but that the risk of devastating the world in the pursuit of the global power status will be extremely high compared to a peaceful transition⁶⁰. Therefore, it will be difficult for China to provoke a hegemonic conflict, and it will have to tolerate becoming the world's leading economic power, but not the world's leading military power. Unlike the United States, China lacks a global network of alliances, and its geography will make it extremely difficult for it to project influence into other regions⁶¹. To successfully construct a cycle of power, China must be able to become a regional hegemon and obstruct any regional counterbalancing alliances formed in East Asia, with or without the support of another regional hegemon. Once a country becomes a regional hegemon, it can project its authority outside the region to prevent the formation or existence of other regional hegemons⁶².

This condition for a world power was not considered in George Modelski's theory, mainly because only the United States has succeeded to become both a regional hegemon and a global power. Due to their ability to fulfil all of the proposed conditions, the other world powers included in his theory did not achieve regional hegemony, but instead became world powers directly. Thus, the theory of long cycles has a weakness with respect to the modern distribution of power in the international system and the ability of a country to become first a regional hegemon and then a world power. On the other hand, the distribution of power within East Asia will limit China's ability to become a regional hegemon. According to Mearsheimer, the distribution of power in East Asia is an unbalanced multipolar system with three or more powers and a potential regional hegemon, in this case China⁶³.

To counterbalance China's growing influence, other regional powers are interested in forming coalitions and alliances with the United States, as is the

⁵⁹ Pop and Brînză, "Power Transition and Balance of Power, 69.

⁶⁰ Robert Gilpin, "The Theory of Hegemonic Wars", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* XVIII, no. 4 (Spring 1988): 612.

⁶¹ Christensen, *China ca provocare*, 265.

⁶² Mearsheimer, *Tragedia Politicii de Forță*, 34-35, 102-103.

⁶³ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 337-338, 356-359.

case with QUAD and AUKUS. China is interested in pushing US military forces out of the East Asian region, at least beyond the First Chain of Islands, which includes the Sunda Islands, Japan, the Philippines and Taiwan⁶⁴. But even if this scenario is plausible, China remains surrounded by regional powers interested in forming alliances to counter its hegemony. The void left by the United States in East Asia will not be immediately filled by China, and the quest for regional hegemony will be prolonged, with the possibility of the rise of another regional power. Moreover, if China succeeds in becoming a regional hegemon, it will be able to form counterbalancing alliances in the Western Hemisphere to challenge the United States. This allows China to pursue becoming a global hegemon, but this will continue to be difficult due to the resistance of water, especially the Pacific Ocean⁶⁵. Thus, offensive realism can be seen as an alternative explanation for China's rise as a potential world power in the international system.

It will be crucial for Beijing to become a regional hegemon, as this will allow it to project power into other regions. Without this ability, a global power will not be able to create a cycle of power, and any challenger will be able to reform the system in order to become the next global power. China has opened a military base in Djibouti, but it lacks the ability to project military power outside of East Asia. China's ability to project power will therefore depend on the future bipolarisation between democracies and authoritarian regimes. This will be to China's advantage, as it will be able to extend its international initiatives to other authoritarian regimes and force them to use the renminbi or another international currency rather than the US dollar⁶⁶.

From this perspective, China's soft power relative to the United States is increasing, especially through the global initiatives of the BRI. Many African and Southeast Asian nations view China as a superior source of foreign investment and economic aid compared to the United States. This is largely due to China's option not to link foreign aid and investment projects to democracy and civil rights reforms, which is a significant advantage for countries ruled by military or authoritarian regimes. However, this advantage can be turned against China if these nations fail to pay their debts, nationalise Chinese investments, or adopt a foreign policy hostile to China.

⁶⁴ John Mearsheimer, "Can China Rise Peacefully?", *The National Interest*, October 25, 2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204>, accessed on July 31, 2023.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Pop, "Rising Through the Crisis", 27.

China's continued use of the U.S. dollar as its international currency, poses another threat to its power projection. This will limit Beijing's economic freedom, as the United States will be able to change the interest rate or print money to finance its national debt. The result could be a decline in China's gross domestic product, which could affect annual growth and population income. In addition, the United States and the European Union (EU) could impose trade barriers on Chinese products or make future investment conditional on improvements of democracy and human rights. This may affect China's domestic policies by facilitating the emergence of numerous human rights movements, as has happened in Eastern Europe after the 1975 Helsinki Conference. Some of these movements, such as those in Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Hong Kong and Manchuria, may easily turn into nationalist movements, and the danger of China's disintegration may increase.

Unlike the United States, China will remain an authoritarian regime and a closed society, and it is extremely difficult to predict how a democratic system will be implemented in the country. First, because there is a significant possibility that China will revert to civil war between different factions or regional armies, as it did after the fall of the Chinese Empire, and second, because it is extremely difficult to establish a democratic tradition in a country that has been ruled for centuries by an emperor or in recent decades, by the PCC, with a centralised power structure. Obviously, it is possible to transfer the democratic governance of Taiwan or the democratic paradigm to the mainland. In this case, it is fascinating to observe how a democratic elite established on an island devises democratic remedies for issues that will dominate mainland politics. It is also possible to convert China from an authoritarian regime to a democracy by transforming the country from a unitary republic to a federation in which political parties and minorities are represented at both regional and national levels. On this basis, the new democratic government can delegate some administrative and political matters to the regional level, where there may be an elected regional executive and regional legislature.

Furthermore, if China is able to beat the United States in the 5G and AI competitions, it will have the technological edge it needs to become the next global power. Similar to Portugal, which revolutionised maritime transport, and England, which launched the Industrial Revolution, the 5G revolution will lead to a technological revolution in human history. If China is able to become the first technological power in the next decade, it will be able to influence future international legislation on the development of artificial intelligence and 5G

technology. Gaining this advantage will also give China a military advantage in terms of its ability to use AI in the next military confrontation. In such a scenario, the United States could lose its technological advantage over China, thereby reducing its global influence. Because of this risk, the United States is attempting to erect technological and political barriers in front of China to prevent it from adopting 5G technology, as was the case in Europe.

VI. Conclusion

Although China fulfils three of George Modelski's four conditions for the establishment of a power cycle, the Chinese leadership still considers a power cycle an unattainable goal. On the other hand, George Modelski's theory has some shortcomings in its ability to predict long cycles. First, it is extremely difficult for the theory to predict the end of the US cycle based on the historical patterns that have emerged during other cycles of power, because the country is still in the World Power phase, although this phase should last no longer than 25 to 30 years. In addition, it is extremely difficult to predict when the Delegitimization phase begins or will begin in order to determine when the Deconcentration should occur. Moreover, the importance of sea power will diminish in the near future due to the new technologies that will be used in warfare, such as drones, artificial intelligence, robotics and cyberwarfare. However, if China is to continue to challenge the post-Cold War order established by the United States, the development of sea power will remain crucial for China in the foreseeable future.

Finally, without a network of alliances and with an authoritarian regime, its ability to project power beyond of East Asia will remain severely constrained. Despite China's potential to become the world's leading economic power, the likelihood that it will remain a secondary power in the global system is quite high. This circumstance could lead the Chinese leadership to use border issues as a way to gain more power in East Asia and to expand the country's influence. However, an unfavourable outcome of these events is likely to lead to protests, social unrest and an economic crisis, as well as a call for a change in the CCP leadership or support for democracy as an alternative to an authoritarian regime. In order to establish a Chinese cycle of power, the Chinese rulers will need to manage these situations very well in the coming decades if they are to maintain their influence.

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