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Thucydides's Trap, Clash of Civilizations, or Divided Peace? U.S.-China Competition from TPP to BRI to FOIP

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Abstract: China's rise from a middle power to a superpower challenger to the United States has happened in recent decades. Strategic writers have published prolifically on the dynamics of power transition and prospects of war and peace in the new century. Among them, three frameworks are particularly salient: the Thucydides's Trap (TT), Clash of Civilizations (CC), and Divided Peace (DP). TT focuses on the structural and competitive logic between the rising power and the ruling power. CC underscores tensions rooted in ideational and institutional differences between the superpowers. The DP emphasizes the emergent bipolar order with U.S.-China coexistence. This article applies the three frameworks to the U.S.-China competition in the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Belt and Road Initiative, and Free and Open the Indo-Pacific Strategy. It argues that policy specialists and agencies play complex and constructive roles in such multilateral competition that goes beyond the three frameworks. The COVID-19 pandemic has paused exchange and travels by such actors; hence, it exacerbated strategic and cultural clashes between Beijing and Washington. Lately, the two countries reaffirmed the continuity of BRI and FOIP as multilateral competition.

Keywords: Belt and Road; TPP; FOIP; Thucydides's Trap; clash of civilization; U.S.-China competition; divided peace

Introduction

The United States and China are at a critical moment of great power politics, a path fraught with conflicts, competition, and rivalry. In the meantime, they are engaged in bilateral and multilateral exchange in trade, investment, production, environment, and science and technology. While many American strategists advocate “decoupling,” or “partial disengagement,”¹ it is profoundly difficult and painful to untangle the world's two largest economies after decades of deep globalization. How can we evaluate the current state and future trajectories in the U.S.-China relations? How can we get a better sense of the process of competition and disentanglement? Is there still hope for a stable future,² or should we be prepared for the “clash of titans?”³

Among the scholarly and policy communities in the U.S. and China, there are three salient frameworks to think about and predict U.S.-China competition trajectories. Firstly, it is the influential Thucydides's Trap (TT), popularized by Harvard Professor Graham Allison, and related to power transition arguments. The framework diagnoses the pathology of power transition structure. It posits a real probability of war between a rising power (China) and the established dominant power (U.S.).

The second framework is called “clash of civilizations” (CC), initially proposed by Samuel Huntington, and is currently driving many discourses on U.S.-China competition.⁴ The framework underscores 1) the civilizational competition between China's Confucian

culture and the United States-led Western culture, 2) differences in social norms and institutions that shape behaviors of the two peoples, and 3) ideological contest between liberal democracies and communist authoritarianism in China.

Finally, within policy circles in Beijing and many foreign policy writings, the prevalent view can be summarized as “divided peace” (DP). DP has three layers of arguments: one, the core interests in China and the U.S. are separate but more or less compatible; two, the Chinese strategic culture is not confrontational, or expansionist, and hence it does not follow the logic of a challenging rising power; and three, both the U.S. and China are great powers, with a power balance that compels them to coexist and respect each other’s fundamental security.

Focusing on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP), this article examines to what extent the three analytical frameworks account for the U.S.-China competition in the last decade. What aspects of the interactive and multilateral confrontation are not captured by the frameworks? How can the pattern of competitive multilateralism help us understand the nature and trajectory of great power politics in the current era?

According to TT, Chinese leaders launch the BRI to expand its power at the U.S. expense, which leads the U.S. to rally strong opposition to the BRI. The U.S. opposition is then followed by China’s more aggressive promotion of the BRI, leading the U.S. to escalate China’s suppression. Such bilateral and competitive logic is likely to spiral into a militarized conflict between the two superpowers. According to the CC framework, China’s BRI seeks to promote Chinese culture and political values as a distinct form from the U.S. The U.S. opposition focuses on attacking the Confucian culture and China’s authoritarian system. Finally, should the DP prevail, China’s BRI and U.S. competition would have separate “spheres of influence,” in which countries and actors involved in the BRI are the followers of Chinese interests, and U.S. allies and friends consist of a non-BRI sphere.

Analysis of the U.S.-China competition through the entire cycle of the BRI—origin, implementation, and adaptation, suggests that while all the three frameworks are partly verified, none of them capture the evolving policy process and dynamic interactions between the two countries and beyond. First, on TT, the analysis shows that when the two countries faced threats of escalating conflicts, they *retreated* from the conflict-prone zones and responded with multilateral efforts, as seen in the cycle from the TPP to BRI to FOIP. Second, concerning the CC, the process shows that Beijing promoted the idea of “inclusive” and government-led development via the BRI while Washington highlighted the BRI’s lack of transparency. There has been little concerted effort in discrediting the opponent’s culture and values. Finally, the U.S.-China competition in the BRI and FOIP seemingly supports the DP theory. Yet, in reality there are considerable mutual penetration and engagement between the BRI and FOIP “blocs.” Moreover, the “third” powers have actively embraced their roles *across* the blocs.

The article ends with a discussion of COVID-19's impacts on the U.S.-China relations and how the three frameworks fare with this sudden and sweeping eruption of diseases and economic recession. To start, the logic of "DP" is shown to be infeasible. The COVID-cycle reveals, once the two countries are separated—forced division by the virus, peace becomes increasingly unattainable. Disregarding the shared vulnerability and challenges to human life and livelihood, Washington and Beijing have both pursued a confrontational approach toward each other. Geostrategic competition and tension have likewise accelerated elsewhere. In other words, with "divided" power politics, Thucydides's Trap is becoming more likely.

Furthermore, with the social-economic exchange at a halt, public sentiments, susceptible to divisive media and political manipulation, have reached unprecedented negative and hostile. In both countries, popular groups denigrated and stigmatized the other's norms, culture, and behavior. The U.S.-China confrontation has taken more cultural connotations, naming COVID-19, the "Chinese virus" and charging China for spreading "digital authoritarianism." In short, with divided geopolitics, the CC thesis is making a dangerous turn in the COVID-world.

In the near future, the U.S.-China rivalry is likely to be aggravated by COVID politics in China and the U.S. The long-term trend, however, is not set in stone. Going beyond political rhetoric, China's policy discourses and actions are primarily pragmatic and moderate; the government policies also show the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s continual commitment to globalization and multilateralism.⁵ In the U.S. and other countries, rational and moderate voices are still available. The newest strategy from Washington indicates apparent confrontation but also accommodation of different interests in China. The balancing and counterbalancing through the BRI vs. FOIP venues are still preferred options for the two rival powers.⁶

The Frameworks

The rise of China has caught full attention from foreign policy specialists. In 2005, Aaron Friedberg evaluated a wide range of literature on U.S.-China competition. Breaking the vast literature into three schools of thought—realism, liberalism, and constructivism, Friedberg lays out contradictory factors in each school that predicts either a conflictual or cooperative future.⁷ That time, he left the question—"is conflict inevitable"—open, as the contradictory factors could shape the outcome in different ways.

In the recent decade, along with China's rapidly rising power, foreign policy communities on U.S.-China competition have grown exponentially; and they continued to diverge in their assessments of ongoing and future scenarios. With increasing security studies in China and younger specialists in the U.S., empirical works on U.S.-China relations have taken many shades,⁸ and theoretical discussions have been quite nuanced.⁹ The growing body of scholarship has a parallel to the TT, CC, and DP frameworks, emphasizing structural, cultural, and political factors shaping the two great powers. As such, the following discussion

incorporates some of the scholarly publications in the field of U.S.-China competition.

The Thucydides's Trap

Realist academics have argued when a rising power emerges and threatens to replace an established power, there is a high probability that the bilateral rivalry ends in war. John Mearsheimer made such a proposition forcefully in an essay in 2005 titled "Clash of The Titans." He observes that the world system's structure is self-reliant anarchy, in which rational states seek maximum security to minimize their threats.¹⁰ Other realists surmise, in a rising power, the state has evolving interest and expanding aims. Driven by the power transition structure, a rising power will start by securing dominance in its region and preventing hegemonic powers in other regions.¹¹ By contrast, according to Mearsheimer, the established power is defined by possessing dominance in its strategic region while avoiding the emergence of hegemons in other parts of the world. Hence, a rising power and an established power are highly likely to "clash" in war.

Following the power transition structure, TT has been famous among policy and scholarly communities in recent years. The name came after the ancient Greek historian who observed a dangerous dynamic between a rising Athens and ruling Sparta. As quoted in Graham Allison's famous book, *Destined in War*, Thucydides remarked, "It was the rise of Athens, and the fear that this instilled in Sparta, that made war inevitable."¹² Inherent in the "pathology" of power transition, rising powers understandably feel a growing sense of entitlement and demand more significant influence and respect.¹³ Established powers, faced with challengers, tend to become fearful, insecure, and defensive. In such a structural environment, Allison observed, "misunderstandings are magnified, empathy remains elusive, and events and third-party actions that would otherwise be inconsequential or manageable can trigger wars that the primary players never wanted to fight."¹⁴

Aaron Friedberg is also a vocal voice on China's ambition to expand the power and exclude the U.S. influence in Asia and beyond. He noted that after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, China has "adopted a more assertive posture in its dealing with Washington, as well as with many of America's allies in Asia." Such assertiveness included, Friedberg continued, threats to "impose sanctions on U.S. companies involved in arms sales to Taiwan," claims to "virtually all the resource-rich South China Sea," and conduct of "its largest-ever naval exercises in the Western Pacific."¹⁵ Furthermore, China's efforts in Shanghai Cooperation Organization in central Asia, ASEAN Plus Three institutions in East Asia, and aims to promote "Asian," not Pacific, grouping, are all deemed as means to "extrude" the U.S. in East Asia.¹⁶

To be sure, long-term China specialists have cautioned against the application of past power transition theories to today's U.S.-China relations. They argue that China's choices of means to challenge the U.S. and responses to America's suppression are contingent on how the U.S. employs different policies to handle the China challenge.¹⁷ Unfortunately, their views have declined in recent years due to Washington's much-intensified concern about

the China challenge and the Trump administration's general aversion to policy specialists.¹⁸

In short, the TT draws on the realist logic of power transition in an anarchic world, in which a “rational” rising power seeks to expand its interests at the expense of the established power and a “rational” ruling power aims to contain and undermine the rising power. There have been many incidents in China's behavior and policies in East Asia and elsewhere that lent support to such strategic expectations. The problem with such strategic arguments is that they only choose supporting incidents and do not provide counterfactuals. A serious investigation into the process of interactions between the rivals can shed light on questions to *what extent* and *how* the TT has functioned.

Clash of Civilizations

In the realist world of diplomacy, security, and foreign policy, culture, values, and norms—issues related to civilization—usually do not feature centrally. Paradoxically, in today's great power politics, the CC has become a central framework in public discourses and policy narratives of the U.S.-China relations. That is because, in recent decades, domestic popular movements and identity politics have become influential forces that shape a country's foreign policy and behavior.¹⁹ In particular, in engagement with China, America has been a “missionary” state and a crusading democracy that sought to transform the PRC in social-political values and practices.²⁰ Contrary to the U.S. cultural goals, the PRC has steadfastly upheld its Chinese tradition and communist values, while embracing economic globalization. Today, and in the foreseeable future, China is unlikely to acquiescence to Western democracies' civilizational/value superiority. The CC perspective submits that cooperation among countries with different cultures and management of their structural conflicts would be exceedingly difficult and challenging.

The CC discourse began with Samuel Huntington's 1993 essay “The Clash of Civilizations?” as a rival argument against the dominant liberal discourses following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, represented by political scientist Francis Fukuyama and economic globalist Thomas Friedman.²¹ Huntington argued, far from dissolving in the global liberal world order, cultural fault lines would become a defining feature of the post-Cold War world. He presciently spotlighted the divide between “Western and Islamic civilizations,” as revealed by the September 11th attacks and their aftermath. Huntington saw the gulf between the U.S.-led Western and Chinese civilizations as just as deep, enduring, and consequential.

Then what is Chinese culture? Many China specialists such as Alastair Iain Johnston and Chinese scholars such as Qin Yaqing and Yan Xuetong have studied Chinese strategic culture and historical roots of Chinese foreign policy behavior. Above all, Henry Kissinger's description nicely captures the distinct and essential aspects of Chinese culture. In *On China*, Kissinger offers the concept of “singularity of China.” He wrote, “the Chinese civilization originates in antiquity so remote that we vainly endeavor to discover its commencement.”

Furthermore, he continued, “The Chinese approach to world order was vastly different from the system that took hold in the West. In official Chinese records, foreign envoys did

not come to the imperial court to engage in negotiations or affairs of state; they came to be transformed by the Emperor's civilizing influence. [And finally,] the organization of the Chinese government reflected the hierarchical approach to world order."²²

In *On China*, Kissinger also unpacks different layers of policy propensities in China and how it deals with its neighbors and peer great powers. Unfortunately, the clash of civilization thesis typically does not highlight the more nuanced cultural-behavioral observations. In 2019, as Graham Allison updates, "tensions between American and Chinese values, traditions, and philosophies will aggravate the fundamental structural stresses that occur whenever a rising power, such as China, threatens to displace an established power, such as the U.S."²³ In other words, civilizational *incompatibility* compounds the Thucydidean risks and makes it harder to manage the strategic tensions between China and the U.S. in the great-power rivalry.

In Allison's CC argument, cultural/normative differences manifest in many dimensions: conceptions of the state, economics, the role of individuals, relations among nations, and the nature of time. Specifically, Allison observes, Americans see government as a necessary evil and believe that the state's tendency toward tyranny and abuse of power must be feared and constrained. For Chinese, the government is a necessary good, the fundamental pillar ensuring order and preventing chaos. In the economy, the U.S. embodies free-market capitalism in which the government plays minimal roles. By contrast, China embodies state-led capitalism, with the government setting targets for growth, picking and subsidizing industries, promoting national champions, and undertaking significant, long-term economic projects to advance the interests of the nation.²⁴ Due to such a divergence in cultures, what are standard practices and acceptable behaviors in China would be seen as outrageous and conflictual from Americans' point of view. Similarly, what America advocates in line with their values are likely to be viewed as hostility targeting China, intensifying the rivalry.

The CC perspective also has racial underpinning and exacerbates competition and conflicts from the power shift. Power transition involves ordering and reordering national states that represent different cultures and races, and hence power shift generates reordering culture and psychological impacts caused by such a reordering. In an interview with Nathan Gardels in 1999, Lee Kuan Yew spoke, "for America to be displaced, not in the world, but only in the western Pacific, by an Asian people long despised and dismissed with contempt as decadent, feeble, corrupt, and inept is emotionally very difficult to accept. The sense of cultural supremacy of the Americans will make this adjustment most difficult."²⁵ On the other hand, China took great pride in its civilizational achievements. "Our nation is a great nation," President Xi Jinping declared in a 2012 speech. "During the civilization and development process of more than 5,000 years, the Chinese nation has made an indelible contribution to the civilization and advancement of mankind." Indeed, Xi claimed in his 2014 book, *The Governance of China*, that "China's continuous civilization is not equal to anything on earth, but a unique achievement in world history."²⁶

The cultural differences between China and the U.S. have permeated discourses in the

economy, politics, and global competition. Wu Chengqiu, a professor at Fudan University in Shanghai, employs a variant of CC perspective to capture the change in U.S. policies toward each other in the last three decades. He recognizes that strategic compatibility or incompatibility has broadly defined the Sino-U.S. relations. However, the bilateral rivalry has also stemmed from “fundamentally different ideas, namely, Chinese statist nationalism and American liberal hegemony.” Put simply, Wu argues, “their ‘different dreams’ have led to the ‘same nightmare.’”²⁷

However, while the U.S. and China have differed in many issue areas, it is debatable how much such cultural differences are the main drivers of their strategic competition. Furthermore, Chinese society, economy, and culture are complicated too. As China’s IMF director Jin Zhongxia has remarked, America’s missionary tradition is similar to China’s Confucian idea of heaven-human harmony [*tianren heyi*], and liberal market in Adams Smith has a long tradition in China’s localities too. For liberal groups inside China, Jin’s views strike a cord. In a way, the difference between Chinese liberals and nationalists is as vast as the difference between globalist and isolationist norms and culture in America.²⁸

Furthermore, despite cultural differences between China and America, it is undeniable that there has been a profound intermingling in society, education, economy, and science between the two countries. In the U.S., there are millions of Chinese students and immigrants. In China, there likewise have been a large number of Americans who live and work. In the last decades, American investors have deeply participated in Chinese companies’ globalization. In the BRI process, China has drawn on interaction and input from Western professionals, Western rules and laws, and the West’s globalization experiences. Hence, up to the COVID-19 outbreak, the CC framework was a conventional perspective but did not rise as a leading determinant of foreign policy. COVID-19 and the racist turn in the West against China show that the clash of Chinese and Western civilizations is possible; societal animus can lead to a dangerous strategic shift in the great power politics, and vice versa.

Divided Peace

With origins in realism, constructivism, and liberalism, the TT and CC frameworks capture main discourses and scholarships in the U.S. The DP framework, by contrast, captures counter-thinking arising from China. There are different streams of thoughts in this framework. Firstly, Chinese scholars like Qin Yaqing and Yan Xuetong go back to China’s traditional culture and strategic history and argue that the *Chinese* international relations cannot be explained and predicted with Western IR theory. The Chinese employ “relational” world politics, in Qin’s conception,²⁹ or “humane authority” [*wangdao*], in Yan’s thinking.³⁰ According to the strategic culturalists, such philosophical roots make China less likely to expand with military arms, defying the expectation of a rising power’s aggressive behavior. As such, the argument goes, it is possible to have peace between rising China and established America, as the riser does not challenge the sphere of influence held by the ruling power.

However, according to Amitav Acharya, Qin’s “cultural idealism” and Yan’s “moral realism” insert the Chinese voices into prevailing IR theories. Still, they have not offered

robust evidence for or convincing explanation of the concepts. As such, they have difficulty traveling beyond a small circle of IR scholars in Beijing.³¹ Strategic historian Victoria Hui also challenges the historical evidence employed by the culturalist IR and questions its explanatory and predictive values in discussing U.S.-China rivalry or China's behavior in the region.³²

At the second level, the DP arguments came in response to America's growing "decoupling" posture with China,³³ and contend that core interests in the U.S. and China are more compatible than conflict. Relating to Thomas Friedman's view of "the world of order" and "the world of disorder," Wang Jisi suggests that China and the U.S. both belong to the "world of order" and still possess common interests and ability to adapt. He hence argues that both countries should "pursue their domestic imperatives, cooperating where possible, and adjust their relations to minimize conflict."³⁴ Yan Xuetong also wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in 2019 and projected the "uneasy peace" with Chinese and American powers in a divided world. He argues, "Contrary to what more alarmist voices have suggested, a bipolar U.S.-Chinese world will not be a world on the brink of an apocalyptic war," because China's ambitions for the coming years are much narrower than many in the Western foreign policy establishment tend to assume. He predicts, "Both sides will build up their militaries but remain careful to manage tensions before they boil over into outright conflict."³⁵

In proposing the DP framework, scholars are sensitive to nationalist turns in China and the U.S. in recent years and differences in politics and foreign policy norms between the two countries. For example, on nationalism, Wang Jisi urges that Washington and Beijing focus on internal affairs and social stability and hence preserve the space of DP. Yan Xuetong also suggests, as nationalism leaves little space for political integration and norm-setting in liberal internationalism, the strategic goal is to maintain stability in the bipolar system. Moreover, to achieve that, in Yan and Wang's divided peace, China should uphold its restraint and reassure America's concerns.

At the third level, DP captures the newly emerged scholarship on the "developmental peace," as supposed to the West's democratic peace theory. In an issue written by younger IR scholars on China, Ling Wei draws the connection between development and security. Wei argues that stability based on economic connectivity and development priority has prevailed in East Asia in the recent past and now in China's foreign policy. The primary hypothesis of developmental peace is that the more states prioritize economic development, the more likely they are to reduce or even resolve their conflicts in terms of security interests. Arguably, such a strategic framework has shaped Beijing's justification for the BRI and other involvement in regional economic groupings.³⁶

In addition to "developmental peace," President Xi's new-type great power relations [*xinxing daguo guanxi*] are also in the DP framework realm. The new-type great power relations rejects the Thucydides's trap. It suggests that China is pursuing primarily economic interests and primarily uses economic means, rather than arms race or exclusive alliance

formations in conventional great-power competition.³⁷ However, the new-type great power formula does not directly address what defines “the new-type great power relations,” nor does it suggest policies and mechanisms that can stabilize the competition between the two powers that pursue different global agendas with divergent values.

In summary, China’s scholars and political leaders present the idea of divided peace to describe U.S.-China competition that differs from the Thucydides’s trap and the clash of civilizations; the latter two are likely to compel the U.S. to conduct coercive strategy against China. Challenging the TT, the DP arguments observe 1) China’s strategic culture is not expansionist and militarist, 2) China is a peer competitor to the U.S. in power, and 3) China’s core interests are domestic, not international. Rejecting the CC framework, the DP scholars find global issues involving U.S. and China is shaped by “fluid, issue-specific” alliances rather than rigid opposing blocs divided among clear ideological lines. The U.S. and China compete over consumer markets and technological advantages, playing out in disputes about the norms and rules governing trade, investment, employment, exchange rates, and intellectual property. *These are not the whole-scale clash of civilizations* (italic added).³⁸

Finally, the DP is correct to point out that competitive or cultural logics are not the only scenarios shaping the U.S.-China competition. Still, it does not convincingly explain how “divided” great powers can maintain peace. The opposite would be valid unless the risers do not rise, or the rulers do not rule. The structural conflicts will persist, and the civilizational difference will make peaceful power transition harder. The following section analyzes the process from the TPP to BRI to FOIP. It shows that moderate specialists, professional bureaucracies, and third countries, all embedded in complex interdependence involving China, the U.S., and regional economies, have helped manage the great power conflict.

The Analysis: TPP to BRI to FOIP

Thucydides’s trap, clash of civilizations, and divided peace represent prevalent logics in international relations that shape the dynamics and outcome of power transition. They have provided a set of variables that scholars can employ to evaluate the current state of U.S.-China relations. However, none of the logics pay close attention to the domestic process of policy adjustment and the role of policy agencies. In this section, the analysis examines the whole cycle of the BRI, from its origin to implementation, and adjustment. Unpacking the cycle, it focuses on the BRI’s interactions with two recent and prominent strategies from the U.S.—the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), abandoned in 2016, and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) gaining traction since 2017.

First, the U.S. promoted the TPP negotiations expeditiously in 2012 and 2013, with the strategic agenda to “contain” China’s regional influence or “convert” China’s economic behavior to the West’s model. Responding to such geostrategic coercion, the Chinese *did not opt for* complete resistance to the TPP, hence without escalating the great power competition.³⁹ Instead, in China, policy specialists studied ways to engage the TPP and manage its potential threats.⁴⁰ The BRI, as a response to the TPP, embodies a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, it “goes

West” (Eurasia continent) to avoid direct conflict with the TPP process in maritime Asia. On the other hand, it provides infrastructure and investment enticements to China’s Asian neighbors to counter the encirclement of the TPP.⁴¹

Second, while President Xi launched the BRI, most projects, programs, and financing were conducted by central agencies and think tanks, in addition to state companies and local governments whose primary motivation was commercial. Hence, the BRI sounded “strategic” but acted pragmatically. This pattern has arguably shaped the U.S. responses to the BRI. On the one hand, there was genuine and thorough research to scrutinize shortcomings of the BRI projects, such as risks to the environment, social inclusion, and financial stability. On the other hand, it is forming a multilateral grouping that counterbalances China’s influence in the region. In this two-pronged process, we do not see concerted escalation and hardening in the U.S.-China rivalry in the regional and global stage.

Finally, facing America’s critiques of the BRI implementation, Chinese agencies in Beijing, the banks, and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and local governments, are generally accommodating and seek to incorporate prevailing western regulations and practices in the BRI process. While facing the FOIP counterbalancing, China toned down its foreign policy tones in the region and adopted new proactive measures to boost relations with members in the FOIP. China’s response to the dominant power (America)’s suppression does not support expectations based on Thucydides’s trap, the clash of civilizations, or divided peace.⁴²

This process demonstrates the observations unaccounted by the three frameworks. Firstly, there are vibrant and active policy communities in China and the U.S., which conduct a timely and extensive analysis of policy moves in the rival country. Secondly, the bureaucracies, more abundant in Beijing than in Washington, are pragmatic and connected to different ideas and interests prevalent in the two countries, making focused efforts to manage tensions in the rivalry. Thirdly, beyond the rival dyads, there are influential regional and global actors that align with the U.S. in values but have vital interests in working with China. This structure offers a mix of restraint and reassurance to the dominant power and the rising power and eases the “pathology” of power transition identified by former scholars.

From TPP to BRI (2012-2013)

TPP originated from Singapore’s P4 grouping in 2005, but its real influence came in 2008 when the U.S. decided to join. In 2011, Japan announced its interest in joining. By 2012, Malaysia and the Philippines also joined, at which point Washington promoted the TPP as the economic pillar of the “Pivot to Asia” strategy. Thanks to China’s competition, the TPP emerged as a massive free trade agreement, including 12 nations in the Pacific, yet without China.⁴³ Washington insiders argued that the TPP would lead to one of two responses from China, both advantageous to U.S. interests. First, the TPP’s stringent labor and environmental standards would repel China, freezing itself out of a massive and advantageous trading bloc in its own backyard. Second, China would clamor to join, and in the process—like in the years leading up to its 2001 ascension into the WTO—become a more economically open nation.⁴⁴

Neither expectations became true. Among policy communities in Beijing at the time, people were convinced that the TPP was to contain and compete with China's growing influence in the region. They considered the challenge from the TPP to be exceptionally grave, with the potential to weaken China's economic clout in the region.⁴⁵ However, the policy communities differed regarding how to respond to the pressure or challenge from the TPP.⁴⁶ While some vocally resisted the TPP as "containment" against China, others argued that "the benefits of joining the TPP outweigh the costs."⁴⁷

Between the TPP and the launch of BRI, there were three policy proposals in Beijing to address challenges in security, diplomacy, and the economy facing China. The first was led by strategists in Beijing who proposed "China goes west" to deescalate or prevent escalation of competition with the U.S. in Maritime Asia.⁴⁸ This proposal reoriented China's foreign policy toward the Eurasian continent. It coincided with Chinese diplomats' proposition to use "mutual connectivity" infrastructure projects to stabilize China's relations with its Asian neighbors. In the meantime, China's domestic industry faced widespread overcapacity, and the economic technocrats were arguing for the "Chinese Marshall Plan" to expand investment and infrastructure abroad.⁴⁹

These proposals and policy priorities in Beijing were not to join the TPP, nor to turn inward-looking, as expected by American observers. Instead, they indicate a regional process that was separate from the TPP process. Furthermore, the BRI process also targeted the TPP's core members (Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines), the U.S. allies (UK and Australia), and international organizations based in the U.S. Such complex linkages between China-led BRI and the U.S.-led TPP are quite different from what defines the Cold War structure between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. They demonstrate that in today's great-power competition, the existence of secondary powers and networks of policy professionals has shaped the superpower rivalry's calculations and processes.⁵⁰

Between the BRI and the TPP (2014-2016)

The BRI and TPP competition is concerned with not only diplomacy and strategy but also economic ideologies. In the TPP, the U.S. emphasizes "high standards" in market liberalization and openness. In the BRI, China imposed no explicit "standards," except for vague concepts of mutual interest and mutual respect. The TPP advocated the reduction of governments' roles in market operations and the importance of SOEs in the economies of its members. In the BRI, China relied on top-level government coordination and enhanced large SOEs and governments' power. The TPP focused on services, intellectual property rights, and domestic regulations, while the BRI aimed to facilitate large-scale infrastructure construction, energy sale and transport, and relocation of manufacturing industries.⁵¹

During BRI's domestic mobilization, scholars compared the strategy with the TPP. Supporting the BRI, they portrayed the TPP as America's enterprise to weaken China economically and politically. They also characterized the U.S. as "a selfish hegemon," because the TPP negotiations set up the conditions to challenge China's political and social system.

By contrast, they observed the BRI was more open, inclusive, and development-oriented.⁵²

However, it is worth noting that, even after China launched the BRI, it did not shut the door to the TPP. Chinese scholars still observed that China would “assiduously study the pros and cons of TPP.”⁵³ In March 2014, China’s Minister of Commerce Gao Hucheng spoke to domestic and international reporters, “We think the TPP is an important negotiation, and also a high-quality trade regime.” Gao said, “China is always open and accommodating to regional cooperation.” Former Vice Minister of Commerce Long Yongtu even announced in November 2014, one year after the launch of BRI, that “TPP has to include China sooner or later.” Long and other reformists saw the TPP’s standards as potentially creating an external lever to “help China’s badly needed reform in the state sector, labor, and environmental areas.” In November 2014, China announced a landmark climate accord with the U.S. Moreover, the Xi administration has designated “deepening market reform” a priority in the coming years—an excellent fit for the TPP’s requirements.⁵⁴

In late 2014 and 2015, accommodating voices toward TPP were still available in China. They supported a set of serious investigations into how critical terms in the TPP were likely to affect China and how China could effectively respond to the TPP. Researchers at Chinese universities and government think tanks concluded that China could manage short-term costs that TPP would incur in their country, whether it joined or not. The findings suggested that China could manage the costs via tax rates reforms, expanding outbound investment, and reform in relevant legal and environmental regulations.⁵⁵

However, in the U.S., a domestic setback for proponents of TPP pushed them on the path of using China to rally support of the TPP domestically. In May 2015, as U.S. congressional leaders were to pass legislature for an eventual up-or-down (“fast-track”) vote on the TPP, the Obama administration attempted to sell the pact internationally and domestically as a deal to counter Chinese influence. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* on April 27, 2015, President Obama asserted, “If we do not write the rules, China will write the rules in that region,” meaning the Asia-Pacific. “We will be shut out.”

Just as the U.S. intensified confrontation with China in the TPP process, China’s BRI received an early success. In Kazakhstan in 2014, China signed economic projects in trade, industry, energy, technology, and finance that totaled US\$23.6 billion. In Belarus the same year, following the construction of Sino-Belarus Industrial Park, eight Chinese provinces and seven localities in Belarus signed joint development projects. In Russia, China finalized thirty economic projects, with a total worth of around US\$20 billion. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) proposal also achieved strident success, from 21 country members in 2014 to 57 in 2015. Moreover, U.S. efforts to stop close allies like the United Kingdom from joining failed.

With the early success in the BRI and intensified hostility from the U.S. in the TPP process, Chinese officials and policy specialists cared much less about the TPP. Li Xiangyang, dean of Global Strategy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), who was deeply

concerned about TPP two years ago, now strongly promoted the BRI. The initiative is “diverse and open,” he said; in contrast, “TPP uses high standards to exclude nations,” and is “not real openness.” Scholars also argue that TPP imposed U.S.-drafted terms on others. “It has too much politics,” they noted, “while market principles drove AIIB.”⁵⁶

To summarize the rise of BRI and its contest with the TPP, first, competition from the TPP was one of the drivers of the BRI, but it was not the only one. Domestic industrial overcapacity and preexisting infrastructure diplomacy were two other motivations. Second, even when China launched the BRI, the moderate voices continued to engage and open to accept the TPP once it became a real grouping.

The real damage to the TPP was the abandonment by the Trump administration in early 2017. Trump’s first years in office focused on the “America First” movement in the economy and security. As he was busy pulling back the U.S. obligations in multilateral efforts and reducing government professionals, China’s Xi Jinping took the global spotlight. Xi’s BRI emerged as an important regional and global strategy. Beijing was emboldened to expand the BRI into regions and sectors that later result in financial and political backlashes against China.⁵⁷ In short, when the U.S. abandoned its leadership on the world stage, it amplified Beijing’s strategic ambition, which ultimately undermines China’s moderate moves and support of multilateralism.

Between the BRI and FOIP (2017-2019)

In 2014-2015, while China was mobilizing domestic support for the BRI, Washington’s priority was to push the TPP process through domestic ratification. Therefore, it largely dismissed the significance of the BRI. Then, in 2017, while the U.S. abandoned the TPP, China held its first BRI Summit in Beijing and attracted the global spotlight on China’s global ambition. At the Summit, Chinese leader Xi Jinping announced that the BRI was “the project of the century,” which would guide China’s globalization in the decades to come.⁵⁸ Beijing identified sixty-six countries as the BRI partners in 2017, and the number would increase to more than a hundred in the next year and a half. Large infrastructure projects rolled out and began with full force. In Pakistan alone, there were dozens of power plants, railways, and port cities. China’s commitment to Pakistan increased from US\$46 billion in 2015 to US\$66 billion in 2018.

The rapid surge of the BRI in the global arena raised intense attention and scrutiny from policy communities in the U.S. think tanks in Washington and various universities produced voluminous reports, organized numerous forums, and conducted field and data studies of the BRI projects and implications for the U.S. and global interests. They found that China’s financing carried debt servicing risks, China’s infrastructure downplayed environmental costs and social inclusion, and China’s telecommunication technology had the potential to undermine America’s supremacy in the IT fields. As a whole, they called Beijing to improve transparency and accountability; they also called Washington and its allies to offer “a higher road,” creating standards and high-quality programs to compete with the BRI.⁵⁹

In the meantime, strategists focused on the BRI as China's most ambitious, potentially significant, economic statecraft—using economic means to pursue political and security agendas abroad.⁶⁰ They raised the issue that China's finance and infrastructure have the potential to shift the geopolitical balance in Eurasia and the world. The proposed "digital Silk Road," in particular, gave China control over target countries' security and critical resources.⁶¹ The U.S. government incorporated these concerns and propagated the narrative that China's BRI was "debt traps" to the recipients. In 2019, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence made a scathing critique of China's opaque lending and "debt traps" in the BRI. In visiting Latin America, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urged developing countries to resist China's "debt diplomacy."⁶²

In short, the BRI's launch and rapid expansion galvanized America's concerns with and research interest in China's outbound investment and infrastructure. They raised the specter of "great power competition" that was intensifying rapidly on a global scale. Zero-sum observations were common: where China gained access meant the loss of access by the U.S. The U.S. and other Western societies also became concerned about Chinese companies and citizens working in their countries for intelligence and technology losses. These concerns demonstrate the logic of "Thucydides's trap." The rising power's move to globalize its economic and political influence amounts to a threat and challenge to the established power.

On the other hand, the critiques on China's specific projects were also due to different behavioral norms, legal systems, and political institutions. The Chinese prefer to operate in a networked system consisting of fellow Chinese and government actors. They have limited trust and comfort in dealing with local societies and western media. For example, Chinese companies are very reluctant to speak to local media and public, for fear of making mistakes on sensitive issues. Beijing's regulators are reluctant to publicize "transparent" procedures regarding its BRI programs because the BRI wants to be flexible for Chinese actors to participate and improvise with projects.⁶³ To Chinese, Western-style transparency, or the so-called high standards would exclude less-trained professionals and indigenous Chinese companies from participating in the BRI strategy. In brief, vindicating the clash of civilizations framework, there are real issues in the BRI implementation that divide Chinese capital behavior from the recipients' expectations and norms in the West.

More importantly, the competitive and cultural logics propelled Washington to support a multilateral counterbalancing against China's BRI. The FOIP, consisting of U.S., Japan, Australia, and India, emerged as the most critical grouping to counter the expansion of the BRI in the region and beyond. On the one hand, FOIP showcases a coordinated balancing by the "established" power to suppress the threat and challenge from the rising power. On the other hand, with all democratic members, FOIP emphasizes openness and freedom, presenting value differences from China's way of globalization.

The TT and CC logics predict China to escalate its opposition to the FOIP grouping and values. The Chinese response, however, is more nuanced. On the surface, China's

official rhetoric dismissed the FOIP grouping, in Chinese Foreign Minister's words, "like a seafoam" that may "get some attention, but soon will dissipate."⁶⁴ Some Chinese scholars also point out that the FOIP, in its early stage, are paper tigers, "without substantive content," and "the U.S. does not have resources to invest in it."⁶⁵

However, in actual policy discussion, FOIP formation resulted in recalibration in China's regional and bilateral relations to counter the pressure. On the one hand, instead of directly challenging the U.S.-led Quad grouping, China adopted moderation of its BRI implementation and foreign policy rhetoric, striving to show that China is not "the bad guy" here. On the other hand, China recalculated its policies to members in the FOIP, such as Japan and India, and made consistent efforts to repair and enhance bilateral relations.

To elaborate, on the first, America's critiques against China's BRI and the formation of FOIP resulted in strategic "rethinking" in China. Renmin University Professor Shi Yinong warned that China had "overstretched" by undertaking too many concurrent initiatives and projects in Asia and beyond.⁶⁶ Yan Xuetong pointed to a rising China's potential predicament as a "strategic rash advance."⁶⁷ Whether it is "overstretch" or "rash advance," the discourse shows that Chinese strategists are worried about the speed of China's expansion of global influence, limited domestic resources, and growing external counterbalancing.

Furthermore, pressures from the FOIP led to moderation in China's foreign policy assertiveness. Since late 2017, Beijing has been sending a clear signal that it was toning down the domestic rhetoric of exaggerating China's capability and achievements. The slogan "Made in China 2025" was rarely mentioned in official statements anymore. When U.S. imposed sanctions on Chinese tech companies ZTE and Huawei, Beijing did not follow the traditional route of retaliating U.S. enterprises operating in China. Nor did it mobilize nationalist tools to rouse anti-American sentiment among the general public, as in previous similar cases.⁶⁸

Directly on the BRI, Chinese policy actors also observed that China's projects in heavily indebted countries, such as Sri Lanka, Djibouti, and Myanmar, had led to external criticism and perception of the BRI as Beijing's debt traps. Hence, in 2018, there were shifts in how China promotes the BRI, with Chinese leaders repeatedly stressing the need for refinements in BRI construction projects over the next five years. In particular, there was a greater emphasis on developing high quality and high-standard infrastructure projects to enhance the actual effects, and a greater focus on risk management and control of cooperative projects, strengthening the sustainability of financing and improving the openness and transparency of international cooperation.⁶⁹

In addition to rethinking its overall foreign policy engagements, China recalculated its interactions with members of FOIP and decided that it could neutralize its balancing against China, driving a wedge between the U.S. and its allies and rebuilding bilateral ties in the region.⁷⁰ In particular, with India, Beijing tried its best to maintain a relatively benign relationship with New Delhi. In summer 2017, the Chinese and Indian armies faced off

at the Doklam plateau. Moreover, after the standoff ended in August 2017, the two sides agreed to disengage. Due to India's roles in the FOIP, China has taken measures to appease India, including condemning terrorist attacks in Pakistan at the 2017 Xiamen BRICS summit, resuming the provision of hydrological information in the upstream section of the Yuluzangbu river to India, and agreeing to reopen the Nathu La route for the annual Indian pilgrimage to Tibet.

Similarly, China began to mend its relations with Japan after years of strained bilateral ties. In May 2018, Chinese premier Li Keqiang visited Tokyo and declared the resumption of Japanese and Chinese leaders' mutual visits. In the security realm, the two sides agreed to launch an "air-sea liaison mechanism" to prevent clashes between the Japanese Self-Defense Forces and the Chinese military and ease tension in the East China Sea. In October 2018, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo traveled to Beijing, making the first official visit to China by a Japanese leader in seven years. While there, Abe expressed his hope of "ushering in a new era of China-Japan relations where competition evolves into coordination."⁷¹ Following the visit, China and Japan signed several cooperation agreements in the areas of third-party market cooperation, maritime crisis management, bilateral currency swap arrangements, and the safeguarding of the multilateral free trade system, thereby marking the revival of bilateral relations.⁷²

Regarding Southeast Asia, which is an essential player in the Indo-Pacific region but not in the Quad grouping, China adopted reassurance. For years, ASEAN's strategic priority in dealing with China has been to reach a more binding Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea. To alleviate ASEAN countries' concerns, Beijing began to seriously explore the possibility of agreeing on a South China Sea COC. In August 2017, China and ASEAN adopted a negotiating framework for the COC and formally initiated consultations in November the same year. At the China-ASEAN leaders' meeting on November 14, the leaders of China and eleven ASEAN countries agreed to complete the Single Draft Negotiating Text of the COC in South China Sea by the end of 2019. The two sides finished the Single Draft's first reading ahead of schedule in July 2019, a positive move towards the goal of concluding the consultations by the end of 2021, as promised by China.

At present, there are still significant points of divergence between China and ASEAN on the COC. Furthermore, there are fresh tensions in the border and economic realm between China and India. Japan is also seeking decoupling with China in the aftermath of COVID-19. However, China's reassurance and restraint in 2018-2019 were evident as it faced diplomatic pressure from America's FOIP grouping. In October 2018, the joint ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise 2018 was held in Zhanjiang, Guangdong province, China. Marking as the first maritime exercise conducted by the navies of China and the ten ASEAN members, the event demonstrates both sides' willingness to establish strategic trust.⁷³ China-Indian border skirmish, involving dozens of casualties, has been resolved without significant backlash inside China. Moreover, Japan's decoupling action has not caused retaliation from China.

In short, China's adjustment and recalculation due to the FOIP are unlikely to alleviate China's strategic tensions with the neighbors, or change the U.S. power and coercion, or thwart the competitive FOIP process. Instead, China's self-adjustment has enhanced the U.S. influence and appeal of the FOIP grouping in the region. However, Beijing's moderation has helped China manage its contentious relations with regional adversaries and make Beijing and Washington be engaged in multilateral settings to deal with differences in the Pacific-Indian Ocean regions. This BRI-FOIP process shows a pattern of "competed peace." The dominant powers, out of great-power rivalry, competed to offer economic and political incentives to smaller powers and competed to show which one is the provider and stabilizer of the public goods in a region.

This BRI-FOIP process also reveals who are relevant policy actors in the China-U.S. rivalry, their ideas regarding the rival power, and how they help prevent the great power competition from escalating into significant warfare. First, in both China and the U.S., policy think tanks are very vibrant. They are quick to study policy programs in the rival country and report the scope and potential implications. Second, they play policy watchdog roles regarding the rival country, paradoxically helping the rival policy improve its implementation. In the BRI, American critiques forced the Chinese government to consider rules and social impact more systematically. In the FOIP, Chinese assessment of it as "lacking substance" forced Washington and its allies to insert economic components into the strategic grouping. Finally, bureaucracies have considerable agency in managing and adjusting China's foreign policy. They frequently incorporate discourses prevalent among think tanks in China and the U.S. While the Trump administration seems *ad hoc*, professional bureaucracies in America's allies filled the gap. In particular, the FOIP process was expedited by momentum and push from Tokyo and Canberra, as well as sustained track II efforts—involving diplomats, think tanks, and academics—coordinated by Japan.

Conclusion

We are at a critical historical moment, with the U.S.-China power transition exceeding the gravity in former challengers like Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union and with consequences impacting more population and more issue domains than prior great power politics. The literature on this great power transition has grown exponentially in recent decades in the U.S., China, and elsewhere. It belongs to three frameworks: the "Thucydides's trap" that emphasizes the competitive and structural logic; the "clash of civilizations" that stress the ideational differences between Chinese and American values; the "divided peace" proposition that recognizes disengagement between the two nations and advocates peaceful coexistence.

The article focuses on the U.S. TPP, China's BRI, FOIP strategies, and their interaction from 2012 to 2020. Tracing the process of external pressure → domestic debates → policy counteraction happening in Washington and Beijing, the TT, CC, and DP frameworks have accounted for much of the competition between the two superpowers. However, the frameworks fail to capture essential roles by policy agencies, such as identifying the threats

from the rival power, improvising policy mechanisms to shape behaviors at home and in the rival countries, and helping stabilize the competition and deflect escalation in regional and global competition. Such policy agencies are not limited to Chinese and Americans; they are also from countries allied with the U.S. and countries closely working with China. Their efforts and roles are essential.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, however, challenged such processes and moderation suddenly. It directly tests the DP framework, which emphasizes 1) different but compatible culture, 2) changing but compatible power balance, and 3) different but compatible core interests. The U.S.-China interactions and spheres of influence were indeed being “divided,” artificially by the pandemic-imposed economic and travel bans. What ensued, however, was not peace but more animosity. From March to May 2020, Washington blamed China and rallying societal and strategic coercion against the PRC; Beijing reciprocated with charges against the U.S. and with aggressive “mask diplomacy” around the world. In short, once the bilateral and multilateral exchange stopped, the TT and CC dangers ascended rapidly.

As China and the U.S. gradually reopened the economy, and economic-policy exchange gradually revived, Beijing and Washington’s post-COVID policy trends came into focus. Fortunately, continuities seem to prevail. The PRC’s Two Sessions [*lianghui*] reiterated in late May that Beijing’s commitment to multilateral governance and BRI’s continuity as China’s globalizing platform. In the U.S., the “2020 Strategic Approach to the PRC” underscores “a return to principled realism.” It states firmly to remains “open to constructive, results-oriented engagement and cooperation from China where our interests align.” In strategic balancing, Washington underscores implementing a “whole-of-government strategy for *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision*.”⁷⁴

In summary, there will be continual and dominating uncertainties in post-COVID China, the U.S., and the world, which mandate necessary adjustment and likely hardening in the confrontation. One thing is for sure, the BRI and FOIP will continue to serve as important venues of balancing and counterbalancing. If anything, the pandemic teaches us that integration is a lot more fragile than people think, and without it, the world is a lot less stable. As countries move beyond COVID politics, it is vital to rebuild and renew the multi-layered linkages between the big powers and many others.

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