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## ARE THE HAWKS WATCHING CLOSELY? REPORTS ON CHINA'S MILITARY POWER FOR THE US CONGRESS, 2001–2021

Nenad STEKIĆ<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract:* This article presents the findings of a study that examined the Pentagon's perception of China's security and military affairs. Its goals are to explain the major trends and projections of how the United States views China's security policy as part of the launch of its new Grand Strategy, as well as the patterns of US foreign policy response. The main unit of analysis is the report titled "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China", which has been issued annually since 2001 by the Pentagon. In total, twenty-one reports submitted until 2021 are involved in the sample. The analytical process is split into several levels, aiming to get insights and highlight elements of Chinese growth as a major security threat to US global hegemony. The author uses the congruency comparison method to see whether the Pentagon's perception of China's security policy has evolved over time. The reports' features were then qualitatively studied through a series of global security crises, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the US military retreat from Afghanistan, military alignment in the Indo-Pacific, and regional security dynamics in the Arctic. The findings reveal that the Pentagon's perspective on how China formulates its security policy agenda has shifted from a strategic to a more specific military dimension, along with China's domestic potential concerns with Taiwan.

*Keywords:* US; China; security policy; Grand Strategy; content analysis; nVivo.

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<sup>1</sup>Research Fellow, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, Serbia. E-mail: [nenad.stekic@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs](mailto:nenad.stekic@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs); <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9066-0480>

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## Introduction

The international system is made up of many variables that are subject to change, although some of them evolve at a slower pace than others. The pursuit of global supremacy is defined by what is known in the field of international relations as a *hawkish* desire to attain such a position. The hawks are wary of the rest of the system's actors in order to maintain their own systemic hegemony. Such vigilance is extremely vital when another subject threatens to usurp the throne, and these patterns can be traced back to the United States' hegemony over the last two decades. During its short history, it has created arguably the most complex system of aggressive global monitoring of other countries' foreign and security policies. Some of the versions changed depending on what the hawks believed was the most dangerous security threat.

The rapid expansion of China over the last decade has slowed a half-century-long strategic confrontation between the United States and the Russian Federation and ushered in a new era of Sino-American rivalry. Despite popular belief that the United States began to treat China as an enemy of its interests during Barack Obama's presidency (Ooi and D'arcangelis 2017; Beeson and Watson 2019),<sup>2</sup> such a qualification could be justified only in its later strategic activity. For instance, Trump's 2017 US National Security Strategy identified China as a "revisionist power", further claiming that it constituted the greatest threat and challenge to the US economy and interests around the world (The White House 2017). However, the United States' strategic monitoring of other countries' hard power capabilities began far earlier and has evolved into a one-of-a-kind approach to tracking China's military and security advancements. This is reflected in the recurring Pentagon's systematic reports on this topic. The purpose of this article is to identify important directions in the Pentagon's institutional understanding of China's military defence dynamics and to examine how China's Grand Strategy (GS) segments have been perceived by the US during the first two decades of this century. It provides qualitative insights into the Pentagon's perspective of how China's security policy evolved on a yearly basis, as reported to the US Congress during a two-decade period. Thus, it compounds the analysis of twenty-one annual reports titled "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China" that are pursuant to the United States S.1059 – National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000 (US Congress 2000, Sec. XII).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, the National Security Strategy adopted in 2015 envisaged that the US "welcomed the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China" and "...was seeking to develop a constructive relationship with China that delivers benefits for two peoples and promotes security and prosperity in Asia and around the world" (The White House 2015, 24).

<sup>3</sup> The Act required from the Pentagon to submit an annual report "on the current and future military strategy of China" (US Congress 2000, Sec. 1202). It is worth noting that the National Defense

Kerry Dumbaugh (2008) integrates the concept of the Grand Strategy (hereinafter GS) into the analysis of the two sides' policies by situating it in Nixon's early 1970s *détente* strategy, which she believes signalled the end of China's first GS period as well as the first significant change in Chinese foreign policy. Kai He (2016) splits Sino-American relations into two categories: trends (competition or cooperation) and issues of concern (military or economic). Based on these interactions, this author argues that Sino-American relations experienced four major periods: military competition from 1949-1969; military collaboration from 1970-1989; economic cooperation from 1989-2009; and the final economic competition, which lasted from 2010 onwards (He 2016). This author claims that these four decades of military superiority in their bilateral interactions served as the "entrance time" to the unipolar era (2016, 136). The peak of unipolarity brought calm and promising relations between the two countries, which culminated in the early 2000s with George Bush's famous speech delivered at Tsinghua University, in which he stated that "America offered its respect and friendship" to China in the hopes that "it will become a '大國'—big/leading nation at peace with the world" (The White House 2002). This was a time of steady and positive bilateral ties, which, according to some theorists, resulted in China's tardy identification as a "credible" strategic opponent and threat to its throne (Clark 2011; Drezner 2019). As China's military spending increased in 2007, the rhetoric became more heated, prompting the US government to prioritise its foreign policy goals toward China. The substantial growth in military spending began in 2007, with a 17.8% increase that was regarded by then-US Vice President Dick Cheney as "not consistent with Beijing's avowed desire for a peaceful ascent" (Buckley 2007), and then nearly doubled between 2010 and 2015 (The World Bank 2022). The first significant surge occurred in 2008 when Beijing hosted the Olympic Games, which prompted a barrage of foreign criticism of official China over the Tibet situation, protests, human rights, and a slew of other issues.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the fact that Sino-American relations have received a lot of academic attention throughout modern history, there are still some gaps in our understanding of one of the elements of the US foreign policy stance toward China – institutional perceptions of its military and security policy development. There are many classic postulates on which academics have based their papers in the literature,<sup>5</sup> but only a

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Authorization Act, which is still in effect (2022), restricts direct military-to-military interaction with China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) "where such engagement would pose a national security risk" (US Congress 2000).

<sup>4</sup> In separate studies, Kent Ono and Joy Jang Jiao (2008) and Susan Brownell (2012) provided a comprehensive sociological analysis of how human rights and related phenomena were (mis)used against China in the context of the 2008 Summer Olympics.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, relaxation of relations with China during the seventies (Goh 2005; Komine 2016) and certain issues connected to China's internal assumptions about its foreign policy behaviour,

few of them devote the stream of analysis to the study of the *perception of others* (Solomon 1981; Chen and Chen 1992; Broomfield 2003; Ono and Jiao 2008), and this study falls into such a category.

The analysis proceeds as follows: the results of the analysis will be presented after the theoretical premises and methodological apparatus that will be used as a research model in this study. This research design is aligned with the most similar studies in this field, with both manual and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis formats used to convey the findings. The discussion includes comparisons with the existing research work on Sino-American rivalry in terms of growth and global hegemony. Following the author's findings on the identification of China's Grand Strategy segments across time, he concentrates on likely neuralgic points that will serve as the cornerstone of future ties between the two superpowers. In this part, the author discusses the occurrences in Ukraine, Cold War-like attempts to contain the QUAD/AUKUS, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and China's Arctic policy. The goal of the study is to figure out how US institutions feel about China's level of assertiveness in the international system when it comes to security and military policy.

### **Refining the Sino-American Competition Analytical Toolkit**

Analysing how one superpower observes the progress of another power's defensive capabilities as it challenges its predominance in the international system is a difficult task. Because finding a single acceptable theoretical foundation is doubtful, this article borrows postulates from a variety of international relations theories. The hegemonic stability theory (HST) will be applied at the broadest level feasible because the purpose of the study is to find characteristics of the US institutional evaluation of China's military capability. A pledged hegemon must ensure its commitment to the system in order to keep its own position, according to the initial Charles P. Kindleberger's HST inquiry (Kindleberger 1973).<sup>6</sup> One way to do so is to keep track of how other system units behave on a systemic level, particularly those with the capacity to challenge the incumbent hegemon.

In 1989, Michael Webb and Stephen Krasner were the first to apply the HST to the field of international studies. They put the main premise of global dominance rivalry to the test. They identified the diversification of states' interests in relation to international economic liberalisation and stability (Webb and Krasner 1989).

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such as the potential for democratisation (Oksenberg 1998) or China's Communist Party activities (Bian et al. 2001; Brown 2017; Pieke 2017).

<sup>6</sup> The hegemonic status, according to the original HST position, is derived from three important features: primacy in military and technological affairs, economic expansion, and the system's perception of the hegemon (Kindleberger 1973).

Although such an organised system increases the absolute level of well-being of all participants, not all countries will feel the benefits. As these authors noted, if the pattern of so-called “relative gains” threatens the security of powerful states, international economic liberalisation becomes limited (Webb and Krasner 1989).

Another crucial segment for a superpower’s foreign/security policy analysis is the well-known idea of the Grand Strategy. This concept appears to have resurfaced in academic discourse in tandem with China’s massive growth, which has lasted more than a decade. Even though many academics focus their articles on the US GS, there is a large body of work devoted to “deconstructing” the components of China’s GS (Goldstein 2005; Kane 2016; Friedberg 2018; Doshi 2021). Rush Doshi (2021) contextualises his viewpoint on China’s GS throughout three distinct phases, which he calls a “displacement strategy”. According to his stance, China’s GS evolved from 1989 to 2008 (the first displacement strategy), with the financial crisis in 2009 causing the second displacement strategy to emerge, which lasted until 2016 (Doshi 2021, 276). The third displacement strategy is in effect in the current temporal domain, which spans 2017 and beyond. Its major components are targeted at a hegemonic throne change and exposing China’s global ambitions through an asymmetric Sino–American competition strategy. Doshi (2021, 277) says that China’s worldwide expansion can take numerous forms. According to others, the source of this can be seen in the contradiction between the terms “security policy” and “Grand Strategy” in academic discourse.<sup>7</sup>

The Grand Strategy of the challenger to the US hegemony will be segmented at the second, more detailed level of analysis. According to David Singer (1961), the degree of analysis, in this case, should be “lowered” to the national level. He argued that nations move toward outcomes about which they have less knowledge and less control, but that they nonetheless prefer, and thus pick, specific outcomes and strive to accomplish them through deliberate strategy development (1961, 85). His concept of “objective factors” in international politics as central analytical values on which the level of analysis should be based – the state – raised two dilemmas: whether it was necessary to analyse perceptions of these objective factors (in this case, China’s military growth as a threat to its own national security) or whether such an analysis should be carried out independently of both objects in relation to the researchers’ position (Singer 1961, 86)? Without providing a definitive answer to this conundrum, Singer pointed out that while it was correct to conclude that

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<sup>7</sup> Stekić (2021) notes that the distinction between these two concepts is based on two main regularities. First, “Grand Strategy” refers to a systematic set of norms and perceptions of *self* by the superpower, whereas a security policy is a tool that can aid in its implementation. While the Grand Strategy is primarily concerned with securing a superpower’s position within the international system, security policy is always directed to *the other*. Thus, unlike the Grand Strategy, a security policy is usually codified by strategies, doctrines, and other legislative acts (Stekić 2021).

there was no extremely clear causality between actors' actions and "objective factors", perceptions have had a significant impact on the formulation of policies and actions toward one another, and that it could have been a useful alternative to the phenomenological view of causation (1961, 87).<sup>8</sup>

Nicolas Kitchen (2010) offered a new analytic inquiry that provides a model of the Grand Strategy's creation based on systemic influences and domestic notions. He bases his conclusions on neoclassical realism postulates, which incorporate both systemic realist aspects and domestic-level factors that, as per his claim, "neoclassical realists have resurrected from classical insights" (Kitchen 2010, 130). These remarks are completely consistent with the concept of defining "national interests" and conducting foreign policy based on their judgment of relative power and other countries' intentions, but always subject to domestic limits (Lobell et al. 2009).

Advancing the neorealist account, Kai He explains Sino-American relations through the neoclassical realist nexus of threat-interest perceptions. She believes that leaders' perceptions of security challenges and economic interests between the two countries determine either cooperation or competition (He 2016). According to defensive realism, the rise of others could effectively capture these interests. If the US feels China is motivated by security concerns, it may be inclined to embrace cooperative actions that express its own benign intentions. However, if the US considers China to be a selfish country that values changing the status quo for non-security reasons, the US should adopt more competitive policies, putting a strain on US-China relations (He 2016, 53).

Discussions over what constitutes a GS and how it might be altered are relevant to today's Sino-US battle for global hegemony. Furthermore, there is an inconsistent assessment of its components and activities in relation to China's security and defence manoeuvres and actions as well as the hegemonic stability foundation. Some academics focus on the emerging power's centric aspect as well as the means and policies at its disposal (Doshi 2021). In this process, they overlook the current hegemon's position and posture in the system, whose perceptions and actions are more than deserving of systematic examination. The defence realism postulates are used in conjunction with the HST inquiry as the theoretical underpinning for an analysis of the objectives of this study.

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<sup>8</sup> However, the choice of these two levels of analysis and the theoretical investigations that go with them does not rule out the use of other analytical methods in similar analyses. Some scholars deploy an interdisciplinary approach to examine how Sino-American ties are perceived. Emanuele Castano and associates (2003) provided an intriguing analytical possibility for the perception of the *other* in international relations from the standpoint of political psychology. It helps us better understand how international actors are viewed by examining how the perceiver interprets the content of these actors' images. They used the notion of *entitativity* to highlight potential polarisation in international relations based on how the *other* is perceived (Castano et al. 2003).

### **Method Remarks**

This article mainly employs qualitative document analysis (QDA) as a method used to produce the most accurate findings, which are illustrated in documents that circulate and are issued by the same authority on a regular basis. Such a type of analysis allows for clear comparisons between the years and the topics covered in each report. To be fair, the QDA is not the most common method of integrating data in the international relations discipline, yet the considerations presented above show that annual reports with similar structures are a valuable source of data. Recognising that the QDA is not often used in political science research, Jared Wesley (2010) claimed that this cognitive method consists of three ontological orientations.

According to the first, because “quantitative positivists” (as this author refers to them) believe in the principles of “inherency and verifiability”, the QDA distinguishes between the qualitative and quantitative cognitive domains of this method (Wesley 2010, 2). In terms of social reality cognition, the second cognitive ontological dimension sees quantitative and qualitative research projects, and hence the QDA, as equal. As a result, the differences between these two research traditions are represented in the “style”, even though they are methodologically and substantively unimportant (Wesley 2010, 2). The third perspective promotes the notion of methodological dualism in using both methodologies in the examination of political phenomena. Dualists, thus, argue that the ramifications of research methodology should be considered as explicitly as possible (Wesley 2010, 2). This research goes beyond “quantitative positivism” and aligns with ontological viewpoints that are compatible with qualitative research design. Besides, some scholarly debates about the QDA’s methodological consistency have arisen. Overall, the four primary issues of qualitative research that are raised against the scientific accuracy of the analytical process are impartiality, the precision of analysis, portability of the findings, and authenticity (Mackieson et al. 2019). This is particularly evident when it comes to the QDA, which is, of course, interpretivism-based. According to Penny Mackieson and associates, there should be three stages of QDA analysis. The first stage should include the development of the full dataset, while the second level should include the refinement of the themes (Mackieson et al. 2019, 971). They do, however, point out that the final stage is the most essential, as it entails an analytical process based on a set of specified norms and processes (2019, 971). Given that the congruent elements of all reports indicated the existence of three dominant fields of analysis, content analysis will be performed to track the organisation of these acts.<sup>9</sup> The qualitative analysis of the documents in this

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<sup>9</sup> In political science, the congruency comparison approach is a particular application of the standard comparison methodology. It is founded on the presumption that repeating this procedure with

study starts with an examination of the strategic, security, and political dimensions, followed by an examination of the attitude toward Taiwan and, finally, other issues, which were all identified by the software. To reach this conclusion, a two-step analysis will be carried out – in addition to the computer-assisted qualitative data program, the analysis will combine personally observed qualitative insights derived from the author’s own QDA. First, a computer-assisted analysis will be performed to identify the “themes” or significant areas of interest described in the reports. It will be used as the foundation for both automated and manual QDA processes, resulting in a matrix of US institutional perceptions on how China’s GS changes over time.<sup>10</sup>

The author utilized the *nVivo* software, which employs a variety of text analysis techniques, but three were used in this study: theme identification, sentiment measurement, and cluster analysis.<sup>11</sup> The software uses the complete linkage (farthest neighbour) hierarchical clustering technique to arrange the items into a number of clusters based on the determined similarity index between each pair of items (nVivo 2022). It, for instance, labels each sentence as “neutral”, “positive”, or “negative”. To verify the software accuracy, a random test was performed manually throughout the sampling documentation:

*“To advance its broader strategic objectives and self-proclaimed “core interests”, China pursues a robust and systematic military modernisation program”* (Pentagon 2012) / coded as: **positive**

*“China seeks to enhance its profile in existing regional and global institutions while selectively pursuing the establishment of new multilateral mechanisms and institutions to further its interests”*  
(Pentagon 2019)/coded as: **neutral**

*“China’s leadership sees U.S. policy towards the PRC as a critical factor affecting the PRC’s national objectives and increasingly views the United States as more willing to confront Beijing where U.S. and PRC interests are inimical”* (Pentagon 2021) / coded as: **negative**

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categorization, creating relationships between the variables, and providing interpretations will produce the best analytical results. According to some academics, this comparison is most practical when done using “texts provided to each category intended to validate such categorization” (Bhattacharjee 2012, 115). Contrary to generic comparison, congruency comparison only compares related sections or chapters of the cited or examined texts, making it a more sophisticated approach.

<sup>10</sup> The researchers themselves deploy coding activity using the established grid while using the manual QDA. The manual QDA used in this investigation is based on looking at the phenomena that the software QDA has defined. In the following section of this study, this matrix and further data will be provided.

<sup>11</sup> See Abualigah et al. (2020) for more information on how clustering approaches work in the social sciences and in the QDA.

The sample includes twenty-one reports published between 2000 and 2021. Their congruent sections are studied for similarities and differences, as well as to recognise the patterns that lead to China's GS segmental stress in terms of implementing US foreign aims. A broad content analysis and a sentiment measure make up the analysis, along with their frequencies. To give as much accurate analysis as feasible, all extraneous elements of each report were deleted prior to analysis, including the introduction, technical details, contents, and preface paragraphs.

### **Us Perception of China's Security Policy**

Depending on the analysed material for US foreign policy commitments, various scholars convey the findings in different ways (Solomon 1981; Ono and Jiao 2008; Glaser 2015; Komine 2016; Ooi and D'arcangelis, 2017). Starting with the results produced using computer-assisted qualitative software, this section of the paper covers findings ranging from individual research questions to general ones. To identify significant themes, categories, and subcategories, all sampled reports were run through software.<sup>12</sup> The software identified and clustered 16 themes with a total of 5 key dimensions – strategy change, political leadership, military and security issues, Taiwan, and other matters.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the most essential subtopics that are included in the analytical plan are identified within each of the themes.<sup>14</sup> After the text was coded and all the references were classified, the sentiment of the text was measured, which is the first finding of this study, as shown in the figure below.

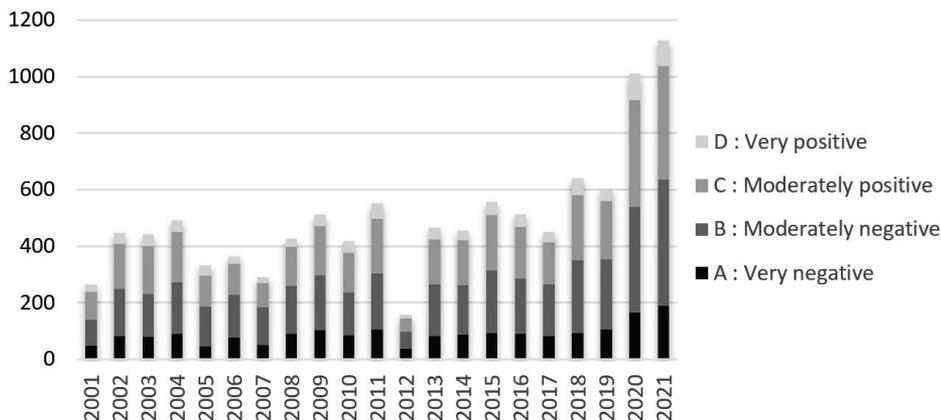
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<sup>12</sup> All essential references (with their sub-categories) for text clustering analysis are included in Appendix A of this article, whilst the findings for all dimensions are listed in Table 1.

<sup>13</sup> Even though the simple word frequency data may already speak volumes without further study, it is worth noting that military development, defence, the PLA modernisation, operation, capabilities, security, and missile technology consistently rank first in all selected reports. Synonyms are used to sample these words.

<sup>14</sup> The software, for example, clustered aircraft, military forces, information, modernisation, technology, and other topics as the principal themes of all reports. It identified considerable usage of phrases like aircraft carrier, commercial aircraft industry, stealth aircraft, or, in the case of technology, dual-use technology, advanced information technology, and communications technology, within these themes. Appendix A of this paper contains a full summary of themes and subtopics, whose frequencies are shown in Figure 4.

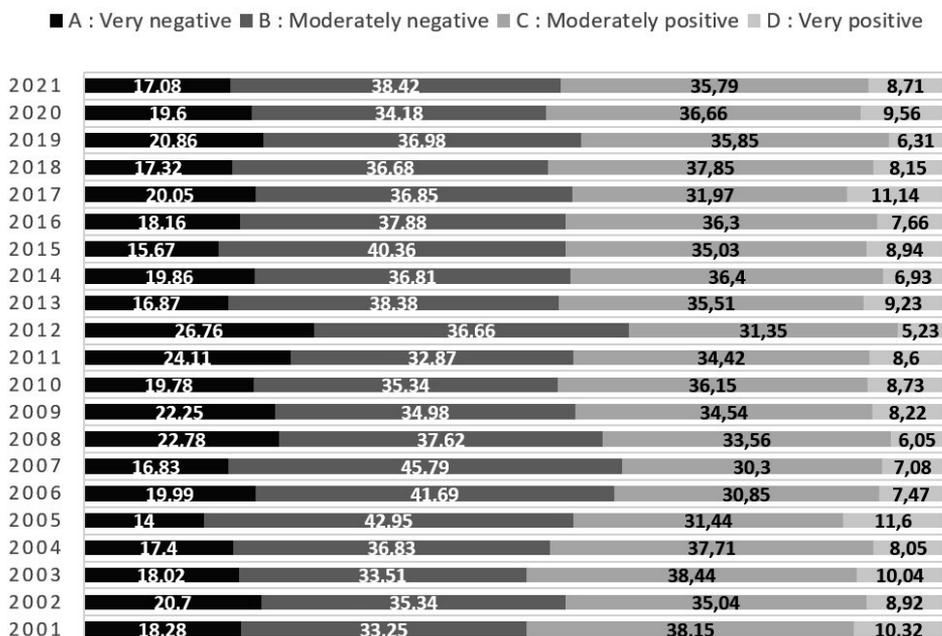
Figure 1: Pentagon’s perception of China’s security policy  
– sentiment frequencies (all reports)



Source: Author.

The software categorised a vast number of references into four categories: very negative, moderately negative, moderately positive, and very positive. The total quantity of indexed and categorised references increased year after year, with some periodic oscillations. The years 2001, 2007, and 2012 had the fewest references, while 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 had the most (Figure 1). As of 2018, negative tone frequencies were prevalent, peaking in 2020 and 2021. Some notable examples can be found in the 2018 Pentagon Report, which stated that “while China advocates for peaceful reunification with Taiwan, it has never refuted the use of military force, and continues to develop and deploy increasingly advanced capabilities needed for a potential aggression” (Pentagon 2018), or that potential military activities in the case of China’s policy towards Taiwan could “range from an air and maritime blockade to a full-scale amphibious invasion” (Pentagon 2018). For instance, a report from 2019 claims that the PLA deploys one of the warfare that “uses propaganda, deception, threats, and coercion to affect the adversary’s decision-making capability” (Pentagon 2019, 112) or the reported “harnesses” of official Beijing to “academia and educational institutions, think tanks, and state-run media to advance its soft power campaign in support of China’s security interests, was in stage (2019, 112). The report from 2014 envisages that “Communist Party leaders and military officials continue to exploit nationalism to bolster the legitimacy of the Party, deflect domestic criticism, and justify their own inflexibility in dialogues with foreign interlocutors” (Pentagon 2014, 17). However, across the twenty-one-year period studied, there were no significant differences in the percentage share of indexed references, as Figure 2 presents below.

Figure 2: Percentage of sentiments expressed in all reports, 2001–2021.



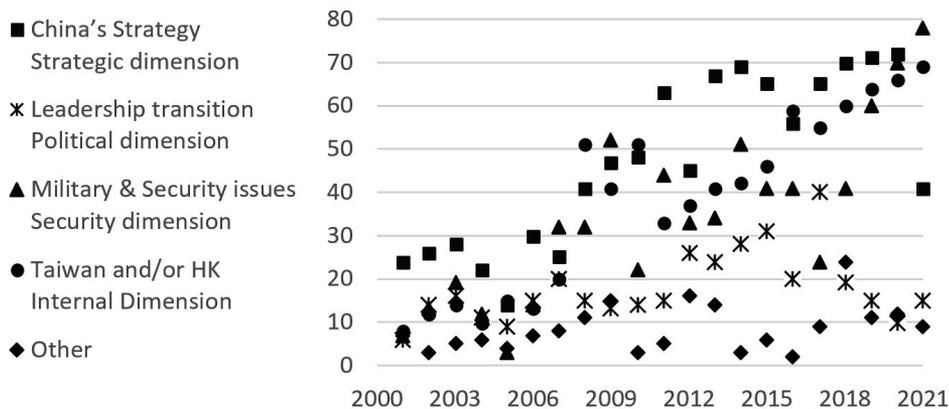
Source: Author.

The most negative sentiments were expressed in the reports from 2006, 2007, and 2012 (all over 60%). The 2001 report was the only one that saw an equal percentage of “very positive” and “moderately positive”, while negative sentiment prevailed in all other reports. The greatest “very negative” sentiment was seen in the reports from 2011, 2012, 2019, and 2020, while the least was found in the reports from 2004, 2005, and 2013. In 2005, 2007, 2015, 2021, and, at the very least, 2008, 2011, and 2012, the most “moderately negative” sentiment was observed. The years 2001, 2003, 2004, 2012, and 2018 received the greatest “moderately positive” scores, while 2006, 2007, and 2012 received the lowest (Figure 2).<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, computer analysis identified five primary dimensions on which the contents of the reports have been focusing: China’s Grand Strategy, Political Leadership, Military and Security Issues, Taiwan and HK, and Other Issues (Figure 3).

<sup>15</sup> The breadth of the reports was expanded throughout time, not just in length but also in scope. Reports of up to fifty pages in length were registered for the first few years of reporting. The reports have gotten a little lengthier since 2008, but they were still up to 100 pages long, but the 2016 report had a far broader scope and length – around 200 pages. This pattern persisted, with reports totaling 200 pages in 2020 and 2021.

Figure 3: Share of total references within identified dimensions across the reporting period



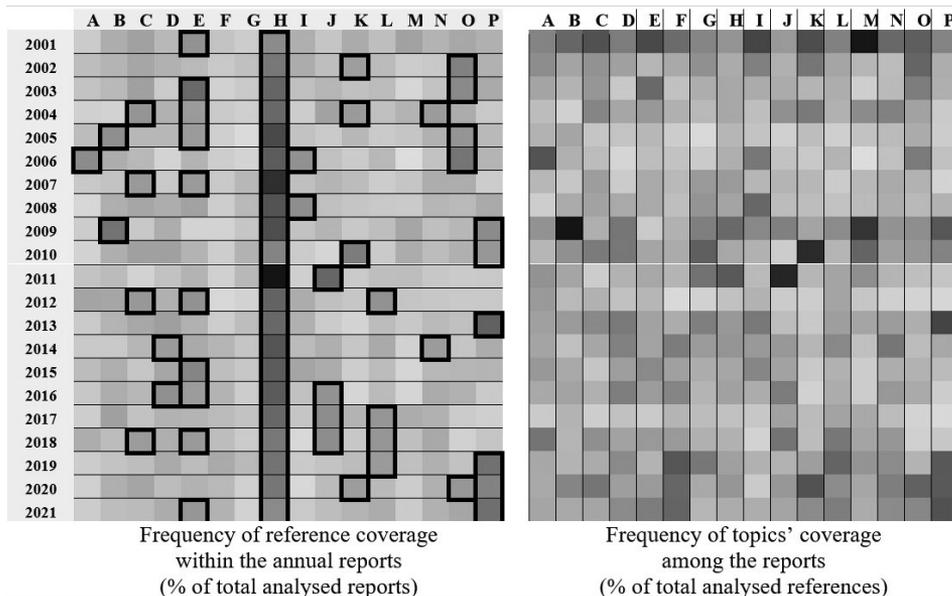
Source: Author.

Figure 3 demonstrates that the Chinese Grand Strategy dimension takes up the majority of the space in all reports, which was especially visible in the early reporting periods. This first dimension accounts for about half of the total representation between 2001 and 2005, but it also accounts for a considerable portion of the reports in 2011 and 2013–2015. It is worth noting that since 2017, this dimension has taken up less space in reports, with only 19% of references in 2021 (Figure 3). Except for 2002 and 2017, when such percentages are lower, political elements and leadership turnover occupy a stable 10% in all reports with notable consistency across a large number of reporting years. It claimed China and Russia “maintain a robust defence and security relationship, including bilateral policy consultations and professional military exchanges” (Pentagon 2002).<sup>16</sup> According to the report, “Beijing has created a spectrum of non-lethal coercive alternatives, including political/diplomatic, economic, and military measures”, while its “coercive techniques would aim to sway Taiwanese authorities whose decisions are influenced by public opinion, at least in part” (Pentagon 2002, 47). The political dimension of China’s “aggressive efforts to advance its sovereignty and territorial claims, its loud rhetoric, and lack of transparency regarding its rising military capabilities and strategic decision-making” is given a lot of attention in the 2017 Report (Pentagon 2017, 42). These moves “have pushed some countries in the region to strengthen their connections with the United States”, according to the report (Pentagon 2017, 42).

<sup>16</sup> This stance is also accepted by some scholars. See Ladevac (2021) for a comprehensive overview of present Sino-Russian relations.

Military and security issues as the third dimension have taken around 15-20% of each report, with the exception of the last three years culminating with the 2021 Report. It is largely focused on military topics, particularly the mission and tasks that China’s PLA has in the “new age”, as well as the strength estimates of Taiwanese troops (Pentagon 2021). It also provides information on the PLA’s near-periphery forces, capabilities, and actions, as well as the PLA’s global footprint. The treatment of resources and technologies for force modernisation, as well as the list of interactions that US Army leaders have had with China’s PLA, adds to its comprehensiveness. According to Pentagon estimates, China would likely keep expanding the PLA’s worldwide military presence through “humanitarian assistance, naval escorts and port calls, UN peacekeeping operations (PKO), arms sales, influence operations, and bilateral and multilateral military exercises” (Pentagon 2021, 125). The Taiwan issues have intensified the greatest across all aspects. Between 2001 and 2009, it accounted for roughly 10% of all reports, but these figures have been steadily climbing until 2017 when it accounted for more than 20% of all reports, and in the 2021 Report, it accounted for nearly 30% of all examined references (Figure 3).

Figure 4: Frequencies of reference and topics coverage, 2001–2021.



Legend: A: aircraft B: capabilities C: defence D: development E: force F: foreign G: information H: military I: missile J: modernisation K: national L: operations M: power N: security O: systems P: technology.

Source: Author.

Figure 4 shows the frequency of references and topics covered in all reports. The results for each year are presented in the left segment, based on the current topic. Military capabilities, modernisation, military power, military modernisation program, and military budget are all heavily weighted in all of these cases. Extreme clusters of references, such as those in the 2018 and 2021 reports, refer to force deployment, particularly naval forces, in relation to Taiwan. Furthermore, technology deserves special attention, particularly in recent reports that include clusters of dual-use technology and technology that China imports from other countries. Figure 4 on the right shows that the most common themes in reports were national modernisation and technology clusters. However, the last three reports included the capabilities and advanced technology of the PLA's operating technique. Furthermore, the cluster involving international and overseas foes was well-represented in reports from 2018 onwards, while the Pentagon believes that the national and system clusters were also essential in China's tactical advance during the same period (Figure 4).

Another qualitative output of this study is a manually completed content analysis, which is in line with some academic discussions (Wesley 2010) on the QDA research traditions. It will cover the essential points of how the United States views China's military strength during the last two decades. The structure of the first three reports in the reporting period (2001–2003) was very similar. China's Grand Strategy is monitored by the Pentagon through an examination of its goals and sources, as well as its military and security strategies. As seen by the Pentagon in the early 2000s, the components of China's GS were positioned inside its comprehensive national power – CNP measure, as well as how the PRC's conventional armed forces were updated and trained.

The Strategic Force Modernisation Program, as well as its intercontinental and medium-range ballistic missiles, as well as submarine-launched ballistic missiles, received a lot of emphasis in the 2003 Report (Pentagon 2003). For the first time in the 2005 Report, the security situation in Taiwan was linked to the PLA upgrading. According to the Pentagon Report, China's strategy for Taiwan “combined the credible threat of using military force with economic and cultural tools” (2005, 39), and China could “threaten or deploy a naval blockade either as a ‘non-war’ pressure tactic in the pre-hostility phase or as a transition to active conflict” (Pentagon 2005, 41). Since 2008, the Pentagon has identified “special topics” in each annual report. To be fair, these efforts were fairly modest in 2008 and 2009, with only one such issue in each report – *Human Capital in the PLA Force Modernisation* in 2008 and *China's Global Military Engagement* in 2009.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The special topics of the 2008 Report are conscription modes, educational standards, officer admission and career growth, and civilian personnel (Pentagon 2008, 47).

Based on all subsequent reports, no clear pattern can be discerned when it comes to special topic coverage; nonetheless, in most cases, they tend to follow the previous year’s most tumultuous events and official Beijing’s policy moves (i.e., adoption of Arctic policy in 2018 treated in the Report of 2019).

Table 1. Pentagon’s appraisal of China’s military and defence capabilities in the spotlight<sup>18</sup>

Period	Dimension									
	Strategic/Grand Strategy		Political& Leadership		Security & Defence		Taiwan / HK		Other	
	CAA*	MPA**	CAA	MPA	CAA	MPA	CAA	MPA	CAA	MPA
2001-2008	↔	↓	↑	↔	↔	↔	↔	↔	↔	↔
2009-2013	↔	↔	↑	↔	↓	↓	↔	↓	↔	↔
2014-2018	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓
2019-2021	↓	↓	↔	↔	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↔

\* Computer Assisted Analysis / *nVivo*

\*\* Manually Performed Analysis

Source: Author.

Table 1 clearly shows how the focus of dimensions has shifted over time, demonstrating that US policy has been passivated and can now be researched and examined as such through case studies. China’s strategic dimension of its desire for supremacy is no longer considered by the Pentagon. Rather, it focuses on a number of high-profile defence concerns, as well as internal Chinese political upheaval around Taiwan and Hong Kong. When comparing computer-automated and manually completed analyses, the analysis demonstrates that institutional views have shifted from strategic and political to security and military realms, as well as to internal political issues. It is not surprising, then, that the United States’ foreign policy agenda toward China has recently centred on thwarting China’s global military dominance<sup>19</sup> as well as its domestic weakening through the securitization of the

<sup>18</sup> Where ↔ indicates stagnation of the issue in US perception, ↓ stands for some changes, while ↑ and ↓ indicate rise or downgrade focus to a topic within the specific dimension.

<sup>19</sup> A fundamental assumption of the Hegemonic Stability Theory is that the hegemon in the system possesses military strength. It is no surprise that the US is stepping up its efforts to confront China’s PLA growth, military budget increase, and prospective force deployment outside of China throughout the world.

Taiwan issue, which will be discussed in the next part, through several neuralgic challenges that are occurring in the international system.

### **Are the Hawks Monitoring Closely: Dovish *Status Quo* or Hawkish Assertiveness?**

This study offers an analysis that is in line with the contemporary academic community's attempts to deconstruct US foreign policy goals (Drezner 2019; Löfflmann 2019; Biden 2020; Kaufman 2021; Lawniczak 2022). While the purpose is to explain the Pentagon's briefings to the US Congress and their potential impact on US foreign policy formulation, it appears that such a task would be difficult to perform academically within the limits of an academic essay. As a result, the findings' statements should be viewed as one of several possible explanations for the United States' change in foreign policy objectives toward China. Besides, the paper does not include specifics of China's foreign policy instruments such as the Belt and Road Initiative,<sup>20</sup> relations with many countries within this initiative, or Chinese investments due to the specifics of the topics covered by the reports, even though they have explained how the US policy toward China was perceived. Second, this essay focuses primarily on the People's Republic of China's security and military expansion, which, besides many other domains, has only a partial impact on US foreign policy formulation. Given that China's global strategy is built primarily on military and economic influence rather than deploying political power, the findings could be useful in assessing components of the US agenda.

The Pentagon's evolving view of Chinese military and policy development points to a broader trend of shifting perceptions of the US's place in the modern international system. For a long time after World War II, US officials labelled China an "international outlaw", citing the Taiwan Strait problem and the Sino-Indian border war as examples (Solomon 1981). The normalisation dialogue between the two sides in 1971, however, was little more than a Washington's response to probable Sino-Soviet allyship, as Richard Solomon (1981) asserted in his classic article on US perceptions of China. Fears of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan prompted the Congress to pass a bill on provisional measures.

Unlike decades ago, when the main points of uncertainty were more acute than ever before, the focus of US foreign policy toward China appears to be turning

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<sup>20</sup> Even though the BRI does not yet have a military component, it may serve as a tool for Chinese policymakers to encourage greater aggressiveness in security-related matters. According to Abdur Shah (2021), the securitization of the BRI has altered how the US's priorities for foreign policy have evolved. He contends that a securitized approach exaggerates the threat that the BRI poses to the American international order while disregarding its ability to help meet Asia's urgent infrastructure needs (Shah 2021, 14).

passive, possibly for the first time in recent history. Kenneth Schultz (2005) proposes an explanation in which a state's hawkish behaviour is significantly reliant on the average voter in a consolidated democracy. When governments consider whether to cooperate, they must consider not only how the foreign opponent will react but also how voters will react to their decisions, as is the case with the US political system (Schultz 2005). Washington is now obligated to respond to the problems that are arising in Eurasia in order to build a coherent strategy to fight China's growing security and defence capabilities both at home and abroad. The number of bills introduced in the US Congress against China is enormous. Between 2001 and 2021, the US Congress passed a total of 27 resolutions and acts targeting China's domestic political difficulties and CPC operations (US Congress 2022).

Some of the resolutions, such as the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020, the Hong Kong Autonomy Act, the Prohibition of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Trade to the US Market, the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019, the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018, and the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019, were aimed at internationalising internal political problems within China. It should be noted that these initiatives run concurrently with US foreign policy actions against China and serve as a supplement to them. It is also worth noting that the total number of proposed anti-China laws that were never passed for a variety of reasons dwarfs the number of measures passed by both houses of Congress. The US Congress passed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018 as a direct step to govern the US military and diplomatic strategy in the Indo-Pacific area as a result of the US view of the current Chinese military growth power in the region. This Act states that the Indo-Pacific region plays a theatre of a "geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order" (US Congress 2018, Sec. 2-7) and calls for the increased importance of US allyships with Japan, both Korea, Australia, and Thailand, its strategic partnership with India, commitment to Taiwan, all to deter and contain China (US Congress 2018). The Act also directs the president of the United States to make efforts to change Taiwan's *status quo* and to transfer defence articles to Taiwan that are "tailored to meet the existing and likely future threats from China, including supporting Taiwan's efforts to develop and integrate asymmetric capabilities, as appropriate, including mobile, survivable, and cost-effective capabilities, into its military forces" (US Congress 2018, Sec 209-3b).

Due to the peculiarities and intensity of influencing the reformulation of US foreign policy towards China, further brief discussion moves to four neuralgic points – the crisis in Ukraine, the security vacuum created by the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the dilemma of "containment" of China through QUAD, and then AUKUS, as well as the rising security and economic dynamics of the Arctic region. Such analysis is consistent with neoclassical realism's theoretical

notion that “intervening variables – ideas within states” impact foreign policy preferences (Kitchen 2010).

#### *Four focal points of US-China policy reformulation*

New global complexity has prompted the US to become more active in its efforts to contain China militarily. Since its founding in 2007, when then-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe described it as an “Asian arc of democracy”, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) has evolved into a distinct but insufficiently formal alliance. It was revived by Trump’s presidency, and while most people had forgotten about it, it was restored in September 2021 under Biden’s administration, bringing Australia and the United Kingdom under the US security umbrella. However, with an 18-month time constraint and a lack of real defence cooperation (it only envisions collaboration in technology and submarine development, as well as information sharing), the AUKUS is unlikely to meet its goal of being a serious tool of “China’s containment”.

It is for these reasons that this pact is way too far from the rationalist foreign policy approach. Rather, if the QUAD was considered a project to legitimise an attempt to “defeat the communist menace” (The White House 2017) in the eyes of the public and political leaders of Western countries, then the AUKUS is nothing more than the pure legitimization of such efforts and the result of a post-truth period. The academic community (Chen and Chen 1992; Broomfield 2003; Clark 2011; Drezner 2019) generally agrees that, in modern circumstances, great powers’ (and superpowers’) foreign policy cannot be conducted on rational grounds but rather on deceptions, creating false threats, securitizing issues that do not deserve it, and permanently creating a “security theatre” atmosphere in (south) Eastern Asia, labelling it as “the US’ Indo-Pacific policy”.<sup>21</sup> This attempt to restrict China in the manner of the Cold War will almost certainly fail, as the ways in which the international system functions have substantially altered since the Cold War. Without success in degrading the PLA capabilities, as Pentagon perceptions (see Table 1) show, the US willingness to station military personnel near its direct adversary’s home would be a disastrous policy. Supplying weapons to Taiwan by the Western coalition would also be a mistake, as Beijing would use this to justify military action against the island. However, AUKUS still exists (April 2022) but

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<sup>21</sup> As a part of the US effort to pay more attention to this area, the Indo-Pacific theatre has been heavily securitized recently. Its Pacific Military Command renamed itself the “Indo-Pacific Military Command” and expanded its geographical sphere of operations. This militarized response to the BRI is emblematic of the broader “China Threat” attitude that is currently dominating policy debate in Washington. See Abdur Rehman Shah (2021) for a more extensive discussion on the means and outputs of the Indo-Pacific region’s securitization.

with limited scope as it remains in the shadow of the armed conflict that erupted in February 2022 in Ukraine.

The beauty of the Winter Olympic Games opening sharply contrasted with the Russian Federation's leadership decision to attack Ukraine only two days after the Games ended. Even though the Russian invasion is far from over (April 2022), the several-week-long crisis has generated a major question about the future of Sino-American strategic competition – whether the island is endangered? A few official Beijing measures might currently (April 2022) provide an accurate assessment of China's role in Ukraine's conflict. Official Washington accuses China of exploiting the fate of Ukraine to justify potential aggression against Taiwan daily, while it sent its top defence officials to the island just a few days after Ukraine's conflict emerged (Martina and Brunnstorm 2022). This was especially intensified by top Chinese officials' statements that China remains “on the right side of history” when it comes to this conflict (*Reuters* 2022). Taiwan is an important hub of US foreign policy, especially given the findings of this article, which show that the Pentagon has shifted its focus from China to military capabilities and placed its relationship with Taiwan in an international context. The hawks' focus appears to be dispersed across a wide variety of concerns that must be resolved simultaneously (Doshi 2021; Shah 2021).

Unlike the Ukrainian crisis, the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan put China's official security policy to the test to a large extent. This long-planned but widely perceived as “sudden” and “chaotic” retreat generated a real scholarly concern: how closely do the hawks monitor China's future prospective involvement in Afghanistan? Until President Obama's 2011 announcement of a complete military withdrawal from this Central Asian country, China paid little attention to the Afghan situation. This precisely aligns with the Belt and Road Initiative, a ten-year-old effort aimed at bringing Central Asian and European countries under a single roof of multilaterally enhanced economic and political cooperation. Wang (2016) argues that unlike the pure energy trade cooperation that China maintained with Afghanistan during the first decade of the XXI century, with the introduction of the BRI, this course has changed. China keeps great bilateral ties with the official Afghan and Pakistani governments, whilst was willing to participate in the “intra-Afghan” dialogue between the Taliban and the official government in 2015 (Wang 2016, 76). He also established a number of arguments that a power vacuum that would emerge as a result of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan for China's involvement would be nothing but “a significant flaw” (Wang 2016). In terms of military presence, China has yet to fill this power vacuum (April 2022), but in terms of soft power, such as humanitarian and financial aid, China has made significant progress in Afghanistan (Soherwordi and Sulaiman 2021). Under the Taliban, no substantial Chinese investment announcements have been made to date, although this Central Asian country is critical for China's terrestrial New Silk Road, both for transit and supply security. As a result, the Afghan issue is projected to remain one

of the cornerstones of both sides' efforts to maintain regional control as part of their larger strategic rivalry. The Arctic is one such place that deserves a lot of attention in this battle.

Not only is the Arctic a novel variable, but it also symbolises all similar cases that might emerge as “non-competed” areas of this rivalry. In 2018, China announced its Arctic Policy with a tendency to establish itself as a “Near Arctic” state.<sup>22</sup> However, in the international arena, this campaign has not garnered the support of its key “rivals”. In January 2021, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo slammed China’s “Near Arctic” claims, alleging that its borders are up to 1450 kilometres from the Arctic Circle and calling it “communist fiction” (Langley 2021). China’s tendency to develop a safe passage for its trade ships to avoid repeating the Malacca dilemma may result in the establishment of a new sovereign over the Arctic. How closely the hawks will monitor China’s ambitions for the Northern maritime route will be determined by the regional security dynamics in the High North. Should China be willing to send military forces to defend the northern route, this might draw the attention of the US and create a classic security dilemma, promoting the Arctic as a new chessboard for global domination.

All four cases show that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and China’s security and defence policies are deeply anchored in what the US hawks are supposed to monitor, which is why attempts to create a coherent “theory of perception of China” (Broomfield 2003) are not entirely futile. Based on the neuralgic areas, it is feasible to infer the existence of numerous possibilities that will be reflected in US foreign policy. The first scenario might entail a new international power balance marked by prolonged tripolarity. It would include the United States as the system’s major superpower and hegemon, but with two clear poles – the Russian Federation and China – in political, economic, and military matters. The balance between the US and China, a kind of soft bipolarity that aligns with Spykman’s geopolitical stance in practice – China would eventually control Eurasian space, while the US/West would control the so-called “rim” of Rimland – is the second scenario that will influence US foreign policy goals in the near future. Russia would rule the Rimland in this situation. However, the issue here is that it is unclear whether the parties “agreed” in a gentlemanly manner, whether the balance of power was achieved by all parties’ conscious effort or by pure chance.

The third possibility would be a new US strategy to solidify and sustain its traditional unipolarity. It will be motivated by a desire to assert hegemony and a desire to “come closer” to China’s geographical reach and the South China Sea. If

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<sup>22</sup> In terms of Kindlberger’s precondition for “hegemonic commitment” to the *whole* system, this completely corresponds to the basic theoretical postulates of hegemonic stability (Kindlberger 1973).

this occurs, China's growing military assertiveness and readiness to forcefully defend its declared objectives in Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as other sites such as the Malacca Strait, will become more realistic. What happened in Afghanistan may have been a precursor to the last scenario, but the situation in Ukraine in April 2022 still speaks against China's military involvement outside of its borders.

### **The Endangered Hawk's Nest: Toward a More Pragmatic Approach of US Foreign Policy**

This study examined how the United States saw China's security agenda during the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and applied the findings to the current neuralgic areas where strategic competition may continue to emerge in the future. At the end of 2021, Henry Kissinger remarked that in today's environment "there could be no national victors in national contests" for both China and the United States (*XinhuaNet* 2021). This was not far from his first plea for strategic rivals to achieve mutual coexistence in the system. Charles P. Kindleberger (1973) exposed that a hegemon's commitment to the system is of vital importance for its "nest". Whether such a hawk's nest is going to be shaken or not depends on the perception of China's overall growth. According to Ian Clark (2011), due to relative material imbalances within the system, China's succession to hegemony over the US could occur by 2025. He argued that hegemony should be connected "not only with the exercise of dominant power, but with the construction of a distinctive, and acceptable, pattern of order" (2011, 22), which China is unlikely to achieve anytime soon. Whatever occurs, China and the US will almost certainly opt for coexistence over direct armed conflict, which is why US foreign policy aims are likely to become pragmatic. It will fight to maintain its control wherever it can at the moment, with a particular focus on the regions of the world where China is consolidating its power.

In summary, this study found that US foreign policy has evolved away from focusing on *others'* Grand Strategies and toward more pragmatic and specific reasons that promote China's global ambition. The absence of structured and systematic monitoring of China's security policies does not imply that the US has given up on the battle. The findings showed that over the past few years, the US began to concentrate on practical areas of China's security policy, which may be a component of a new, well-coordinated "Western" strategy for containing China. Such perceptions, as shown in Table 1, are in conformity with the thesis that this may be the enhanced US objective to partially handle each component of China's security strategy, both inside and outside of its borders, rather than challenging China's integral policy.

Even though content analysis of strategic acts can be a useful analytical tool, as explained earlier in the text, this study has one epistemic fault. The Pentagon's annual reports to the US Congress are an example of this article's release. Although the

scientific validity of the conclusions has been enhanced by the inclusion of as many as 21 reports, this does not imply that the US President or the Congressional Foreign Affairs Committee would take action against China in practice. Depending on the performance of other superpowers in the system, the US foreign policy approach could be (come) dovish or hawkish. Hence, the scope of this piece is confined only to an institutional comprehension of *others'* foreign policy strategies in international relations. Further research efforts should focus on improving the analytical toolset for Sino-American strategic competition, as this is a topic that will dominate the attention of IR academics in the near future. As a result, a nuanced strategy is required that fits both conceptually and contextually with what the two superpowers want to accomplish and how a genuine scientific analysis could investigate and explain this interplay.

It remains to be seen how Sino-American strategic competition develops in the future, particularly in light of emerging international complexities. The armed conflict in Ukraine that erupted in February 2022 further “promoted” Russia as a conventional hard power pole in international relations, which will impact US foreign policy and its focus on both China and Russia. This could, subsequently, lead to a modern “imperial overstretch” in the United States’ foreign policy practise in the third decade of this century.

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## ДА ЛИ ЈАСТРЕБОВИ ПОСМАТРАЈУ ПОМНО? ИЗВЕШТАЈИ О ВОЈНОЈ МОЋИ КИНЕ ЗА АМЕРИЧКИ КОНГРЕС, 2001–2021

*Апстракт:* Овај чланак представља налазе студије којом је испитана институционална перцепција Пентагона о безбедносној и војној политици Кине. Научни циљ чланка је да објасни главне трендове и пројекције о томе како Сједињене Државе виде кинеску безбедносну политику у светлу покретања њене нове Велике стратегије, као и обрасце спољнополитичког одговора САД. Главна јединица анализе су извештаји под називом *Војни и безбедносни догађаји који укључују Народну Републику Кину* које Пентагон издаје на годишњем нивоу од 2001. Узорак је укључен укупно двадесет и један извештај поднет закључно са 2021. годином. Аналитички процес је подељен на неколико нивоа са циљем да се стекну увиди у истакнуте елементе кинеског раста као главне безбедносне претње глобалној хегемонији САД. Аутор користи методу конгруентних подударности да утврди како се перцепција кинеске безбедносне политике временом мењала. Карактеристике извештаја су затим квалитативно проучене кроз призму глобалних безбедносних криза, укључујући руску инвазију на Украјину, војно повлачење САД из Авганистана, војно усклађивање у Индо-Пацифику и регионалну безбедносну динамику на Арктику. Налази откривају да се перспектива Пентагона о томе како Кина формулише своју безбедносну политику померила са стратешке на конкретнију – војну димензију, која укључује и унутрашње проблеме Кине са Тајваном.

*Кључне речи:* САД; Кина; безбедносна политика; Велика стратегија; анализа садржаја; nVivo.

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## Appendix A

aircraft	capabilities	defence	development	force	foreign	information	military
aircraft carrier	military capabilities	active defence	military-technological development	military forces	foreign technology	information blockade	military capabilities
military aircraft	joint operations capability	defence spending	probable development	nuclear forces	foreign militaries	information warfare	military forces
commercial aircraft industry	operational capability	defence industries	national development	special operations forces	foreign affairs	information operations	military modernisation
indigenous aircraft carrier program	key capabilities	ballistic missile defences	security development	naval forces	foreign firms	achieving information dominance	military power
aircraft bombs	limited capability	air defence brigade	force development	secessionist forces	foreign policy goals	advanced information technology	military modernisation program
fixed-wing aircraft	targeting capability	national defence	national development strategy	force structure	foreign governments	information superiority	military budget
stealth aircraft	joint capabilities	annual defence spending increase	national development program	force development	foreign industries	information technology	military organisations

missile	modernisation	national	operations	power	security	systems	technology
ballistic missile submarines	military modernisation	national power	joint operations	national power	security developments	control system	advanced technology
anti-ship cruise missiles	modern warfare	national interests	special operations forces	military power	security strategy	advanced weapons systems	foreign technology
ballistic missile defences	modernisation effort	national sovereignty	joint operations capability	state power	security environment	international system	military technologies
missile frigates	force modernisation	national development	information operations	great power	securing access	global governance system	dual-use technologies
missile closure areas	modern information technology	national goals	long-distance mobility operations	economic power	security matters	weapon system research	enabling technologies
missile destroyers	modernisation goals	national strategy	air operations	power projection	Chinese security strategy	vertical launch system	communications technology
conventional missile forces	ground force modernisation	national defence	amphibious operations	preeminent power	security issues	air defence systems	advanced information technology