

## NEW BALANCE OF POWER IN THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND THE ROLE OF CHINA

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**Abstract:** Amidst the myriad debates surrounding the structure of the international system of relations, a novel issue emerges: whether China's profound growth warrants recognition as a transformative variable influencing the organization of the system. Through an examination of states' economic, political, and military capacities, it becomes evident that a multipolar order is emerging. Over the past three decades, China's remarkable economic growth has contributed significantly to rebalancing global economic power dynamics. In safeguarding its economic interests, China strategically augmented its military capabilities and spearheaded a plethora of political initiatives to foster diverse multilateral frameworks. Consequently, as the world's second-largest economy and third most potent military force, China has solidified its stature as an indispensable actor on the international stage. However, the persistent augmentation of China's economic, military, and political influence has stirred apprehensions within the United States, which, in its 2022 Defense Strategy, categorizes China as a "primary competitor" while declining to acknowledge its equal status. Consequently, China's contemporary role in international relations can be construed as catalyzing the establishment of a balanced power framework. Present and forthcoming Chinese endeavors aim to foster a multipolar order wherein China assumes the mantle of a major power and a pivotal participant in global affairs.

**Keywords:** multipolarity, international system, economic power, political power, military power, USA, China, balance of power.

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## Introduction

In 1974, Robert A. Scalapino observed that following two decades of marginalization as an outlaw among nations, “the People’s Republic of China has experienced a sudden and dramatic ascent to the status of a great power within the United Nations. It has garnered near-universal diplomatic recognition and established client states in a manner akin to other significant powers” (Scalapino, 1974, p. 349). The rise of the PR China to the status of a great power, therefore, has been going on for half a century, since the moment it was elevated to the permanent membership of the UN Security Council. Of course, at that moment American diplomacy was guided by other strategic goals when they were “changing course” towards China.

However, as Scalapino prophetically announced – the consequences of that “change of course” will become far-reaching since they enabled the legitimisation of China as a great power in international relations. Certainly, it cannot be claimed that everything in this approach was planned, or even that everything took place according to Chinese strategies that have been defined over the decades. Numerous decisions were influenced by changing circumstances caused by various interactions in international relations. Nevertheless, the new balance of power became a reality already in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. China has succeeded in legitimizing its status as a great power, if not a superpower. It has become impossible to think about world politics without taking into account China’s goals and ambitions. How did this happen?

The aims of this paper are to investigate the process by which the PR China ascended to the status of a great power within the international arena, particularly focusing on its legitimization as a global player. It aims to analyze the structural changes in the international system following the Cold War and the role of self-help strategies in shaping power dynamics. Furthermore, the paper seeks to examine the impact of China’s economic growth on its rise as a global power, including its implications for the global economic system and its efforts to safeguard its interests through military and political means. Ultimately, the paper aims to uncover the interconnectedness between economic expansion and power dynamics, with a specific emphasis on China’s transformation into a significant global actor.

This paper is structured as follows. First, the authors examine the structure of the international system and the principle of self-help in the aftermath of the Cold War, shedding light on the evolving perceptions of power dynamics and the notion of hegemonic stability. This section goes

deeper into the hierarchical conception of the global political order and elucidates the guiding principles of state behavior grounded in self-help strategies. Following this, the paper scrutinizes the role of China's economic growth as a catalyst for augmenting power potential on the international stage. Through an in-depth analysis, it evaluates the transformative impact of China's economic ascendance, elucidating its implications for the global economic system and its concomitant endeavors to safeguard its interests through military and political means. By traversing these thematic domains, this paper endeavors to unravel the nexus between economic expansion and power dynamics, particularly spotlighting China's emergence as a significant global actor.

### **The structure of the international system and the principle of self-help**

The US victory in the Cold War also led to a change in the outlook on international relations during the 1990s and in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The self-confidence of the Western Bloc was at its peak. Francis Fukuyama's thesis on the "end of history" emerged as a seminal perspective in the discourse of international relations, garnering widespread attention and discussion. As one of the most cited theorists of his time, Fukuyama posited the notion that the culmination of the Cold War marked the endpoint of ideological evolution and the triumph of liberal democracy as the ultimate form of governance. This influential thesis captured the optimism prevalent in the Western bloc during the 1990s, reflecting a belief in the inevitability of liberal democratic principles spreading globally. However, as subsequent events unfolded, it became evident that the reality diverged significantly from Fukuyama's prognostications, prompting reevaluations of his thesis and its applicability in an ever-changing geopolitical landscape (Fukuyama, 1993). However, the anticipated "end of history" did not materialize, prompting inquiry into its failure to manifest. Despite the fact that some of Fukuyama's conclusions were well-reasoned, and some of his predictions were correct, the problem arose in the perception of the "end of history" by non-Western actors. As described in the concept of the security dilemma, much of international relations is about perception (Jervis, 1978, pp. 167-214). Such security dilemma underscores the precarious nature of international relations, where misperceptions and misinterpretations can significantly impact the dynamics between states, often necessitating diplomatic efforts to mitigate tensions and build trust.

The perception of non-Western actors was significantly different from what was meant by the “end of history” in the West.

According to these perceptions, the structure of the international system was to remain clearly hierarchically established. At the top of this structure would be the United States with its allies in the Western bloc. All other countries, including Russia, China, and India, would have only a second-rate role. They would remain to be regional powers, actors of regional security, but with limited influence on a global level (Proroković, 2018, pp. 295–310).

It was naive to expect that non-Western actors would agree to this kind of subordinate role. While the future of international relations in the West was viewed through Fukuyama’s prism, non-Western actors viewed the processes through the neorealist framework of Kenneth Waltz (Waltz, 1979; Waltz, 2008). Guided by the principle of self-help countries and nations are striving to achieve their interests, they are constantly questioning and redefining them, depending on how the international environment is changing and, therefore, constantly trying to increase military, economic and political power.

From the point of view of distribution of power, the world political system has its own structure, which can, according to some theorists be unipolar, bipolar, or multi-polar (Proroković, 2018, pp. 383–454). In theoretical discourse, models incorporating the existence of multiple superpowers within the international system have been developed, ranging from tripolarity and quadripolarity (Jackson, 1978), to even quintipolarity (Jackson, 1978). Additionally, literature presents several hybrid models representing variations or compilations of previous models, such as uni-multipolarity, post-unipolarity, and bi-multipolarity (Rosecrance, 1966). Furthermore, perspectives exist suggesting the possibility of an apolar (non-polar) world, although such a scenario remains absent in the practical realm of modern international relations. Despite various prognostications, states persist as the primary actors in international relations. These actors encompass a spectrum of classifications, including superpowers, great powers, regional powers, small states, and microstates.

Accepting the concept of the “end of history” also meant agreeing to the concept of hegemonic stability. The only superpower in the structure of the international system remains the USA, which will determine key processes and thus shape or at least influence all other interactions.

Superpower is a country that determines regional security dynamics in all regions of the world. Superpower is the only, or one of few major regional security actors in each region (Krejčí, 2010, pp. 674–675). A number of papers

have been published on how a unipolar structure was created after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the United States as the only superpower (Waltz, 1993; Mearsheimer, 1994; Kupchan and Kupchan, 1991; Brooks and Wohlforth, 2002; Ikenberry, 1995). The characteristic of a superpower is the dominance of the world order, the possibility to influence the shaping of political solutions in all parts of the world and to impose its will.

Great powers are states that are able to independently secure their own national security. These are the countries that have an adequate combination of military, political and economic power, so that they can independently protect their interests (Kennedy, 1987). Of course, in order to legitimize one actor as the most important in world politics, he must have a “critical mass”, that is, a sufficient number of inhabitants, the size of a territory with a resource potential, internal stability and an adequate socio-economic environment. Regional powers are significant actors of regional relations and therefore they are seen as important allies of superpowers as well as of great powers (Godehardt and Nabers, pp. 193–208).

Back in the 1990s, it seemed that, in case of agreeing to the concept of hegemonic stability, like Russia and India, China could most likely only count on the role of a regional power. Although possessing a sufficient “critical mass”, China’s role in global politics was destined to remain politically subordinate to the interests of the USA. The costs of unipolarity for China, as well as for Russia and India, were deemed prohibitively high.

At the same time, viewed from a global perspective, in the first post-Cold War years, China’s power potentials, primarily economic, but to a certain extent also military, were modest. And in the political sense, nothing indicated that China could quickly become a “disruptive factor” to the projected American hegemony. From 1971 to 1997, official Beijing vetoed only twice. Both times in 1972. In August, they did it independently to block Bangladesh’s admission to the UN (because of its relations with Pakistan), and then in September, together with the Soviet Union, on a proposal for a resolution on the Middle East crisis and the violation of the ceasefire. Avoiding the use of the veto during the transformation of the structure of the international system from bipolar to unipolar, and then also in the first years of unipolarity, indicates the prudence of Chinese policy. Foreign policy goals were subordinated to internal development. Internal development depended on Western (primarily American) investments and technologies. China did not want a confrontation with the US, to a large extent there was no reason for it. And when, in 1997 and 1999, after a quarter of a century, China twice put a veto, it was because of the attitude of Guatemala and FYR

Macedonia towards Taiwan. Thus, it was warned that the actions of other states concerning China's internal issues will not be tolerated.

As a permanent member of the Security Council, China had the opportunity to legitimize its position as a great power, but it was far from that status during the 1990s in every respect. How did the situation arise wherein the US, as outlined in the 2022 Defense Strategy, designated China as a "principal competitor", purportedly seeking to exert influence over the prevailing order through economic, military, technological, and diplomatic means? Furthermore, the EU's declaration that China, due to its backing of Russia, is evolving into a "direct adversary" of the Western bloc warrants examination.

One of the solutions to the posed questions lies within the Chinese strategy, characterized by a gradual and patient approach to constructing a balance of power in international relations. Prioritizing internal development has led to the elevation of economic prowess, thereby establishing an economic equilibrium. Concurrently, the expansion of economic strength has facilitated increased investment in bolstering military capabilities, enabling more effective protection of economic interests. This augmented military power has, in turn, supported successful endeavors to shape a favorable and desirable international landscape through various decisions, initiatives, and strategic partnerships.

### **Economic growth of China as an accelerator of power potential**

The word *pokankuni* in a Tulu language in India means the process of learning by looking at others (De Boano, 2007, p. 171). In certain circumstances, it is the best way to gain new knowledge and acquire the necessary skills from the immediate environment. By using other people's practice, we improve ourselves. The remarkable ascent of China during the 1980s and 1990s can be encapsulated in a single term. Preceding China's economic transformation, the East Asian region observed the economic successes of Japan, followed by Taiwan and shortly thereafter, Korea. These neighboring examples provided valuable insights into fostering growth and sustaining long-term economic development, particularly through investments in education, technological capacity, and the promotion of innovation (Lin, 2017, pp. 24–31). The difference, however, was in scale. China's population is 11 times that of Japan, 28 times that of South Korea and 61 times that of Taiwan. The rise of China has left global consequences, it directly influenced the transformation of the world political system.

Because of China's size, including its "critical mass" parameters, internal development also has dramatic implications for the environment. First to the immediate environment and neighboring countries, then to the wider region, and finally on a global scale. As it rose to become the second largest economy in the world, China could no longer learn from its neighbors, but began to compare itself to the US. The higher and faster the Chinese economy grew, the deeper and more comprehensive were the implications.

Table 1 presents the share in global GDP share based on the PPP for the G20 members. Instead of aggregate results for the EU, which is a member of the G20, the table also shows indicators for Spain as the most important member and the largest economy of the EU after Germany, France, Great Britain, and Italy. This was also done in order to avoid doubts and unnecessary polemics, because in 1989 there was no EU with 28, but EC with 12 members, so an open question would be raised as to what is being compared with what.

*Table 1: Share in world GDP of PPP of G-20 members from 1989 to 2014 (Proroković, 2018, p. 549)*

State	2014/1989 (A)/(P)	2014 (%)	2009 (%)	2004 (%)	1989 (%)
<b>USA</b>	- 6,14 (-27,56)	16,14	16,98	19,64	22,28
<b>China</b>	+12,25 (+300,98)	16,32	13,71	9,68	4,07
<b>Japan</b>	-4,39 (-49,94)	4,40	4,90	5,79	8,79
<b>Germany</b>	-2,65 (-43,44)	3,45	3,72	4,20	6,10
<b>France</b>	-1,75 (-42,27)	2,39	2,65	3,07	4,14
<b>Brazil</b>	-0,72 (-19,25)	3,02	3,18	3,08	3,74
<b>Great Britain</b>	-1,29 (-35,34)	2,36	2,53	2,96	3,65
<b>Italy</b>	-2,26 (-53,42)	1,97	2,36	2,88	4,23
<b>Russia<sup>2</sup></b>	-0,17 (-4,89)	3,30	3,44	3,47	n/a
<b>India</b>	+3,11 (+83,60)	6,83	6,09	4,91	3,72

<sup>2</sup> In 1989, Russia was a constituent republic within the Soviet Union. Consequently, the absence of data for that year in the table mitigates potential discrepancies in comparisons. Therefore, the initial column delineates alterations in Russia's indicators relative to the year 2004.

State	2014/1989 (A)/(P)	2014 (%)	2009 (%)	2004 (%)	1989 (%)
Canada	-0,60 (-28,84)	1,48	1,54	1,73	2,08
Australia	-0,19 (-15,83)	1,01	1,04	1,09	1,20
Spain	-0,78 (-34,98)	1,45	1,70	1,94	2,23
Mexico	-0,65 (-24,71)	1,98	2,03	2,21	2,63
South Korea	+0,45 (+37,50)	1,65	1,67	1,64	1,20
Indonesia	+0,56 (+28,57)	2,48	2,27	2,03	1,96
Turkey	+0,01 (+0,72)	1,40	1,34	1,38	1,39
Saudi Arabia	+0,10 (+7,19)	1,49	1,38	1,28	1,39
Argentina	+0,01 (+1,15)	0,88	0,89	0,81	0,87
SAR	-0,23 (-26,14)	0,65	0,68	0,70	0,88

When comparing the indicators of economic power among the USA and other major powers, notably China and India, distinct trends emerge. The USA's share in the global economy exhibits a consistent decline, whereas China and India are experiencing growth (Table 1). Over a twenty-year span, the US has witnessed a decrease in its global economic share by a quarter in relative terms. Additionally, there is a noticeable decline in the economic power of other Western nations, including European countries.

However, despite the fact that China's share in the global economy grew exponentially, Beijing still could not influence many processes. Lee Jijun asserts that in 2003, China held the position of the leading consumer of steel and the second-largest consumer of oil globally, despite having only a negligible 0.1 percent influence on the international oil pricing mechanism. Consequently, Jijun argues that China ought to proactively engage in regulating, controlling, and reforming the international economic system, as well as contributing to the establishment of a fair and equitable global economic order (Bhattacharya, 2005, p. 63).

China's growth, although it suited American investors and even certain sectors of the American economy, is also becoming a challenge for American interests. Because the growth of China's share in the world economy is taking place at the expense of America's decline. As much as this has become clear to American strategists, it has also become clear to Chinese strategists. In order not to depend on processes determined by others, such as for



example the international oil pricing mechanism, Chinese had to show the readiness to defend their own interests both by military and by political means. In order to apply the principle of self-help, and in order to ensure one's own security, in parallel with the growth of economic power potentials in China, the growth of military power potentials is also detected.

*Table 2: Military expenditure by country 1990–2020 (SIPRI, 2021, pp. 3-21)*

Country	1990	2000	2010	2020
<b>USA</b>	636.176	475.217	865.268	766.583
<b>China</b>	21.282	41.167	129.359	244.934
<b>India</b>	20.604	30.296	54.032	73.001
<b>Russia</b>	220.503 (USSR)	23.584	49.834	66.838
<b>Great Britain</b>	60.892	48.701	63.177	58.485
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	27.756	30.822	53.569	55.535
<b>France</b>	51.395	45.010	48.415	51.572
<b>Germany</b>	61.408	42.403	41.046	51.570
<b>Japan</b>	42.690	46.223	46.420	48.160
<b>Brazil</b>	12.980	16.768	25.389	25.101

In 2020, China's allocations for military purposes were one-seventh higher than the combined allocations of Great Britain, France, Germany and Japan, while thirty years earlier, China allocated almost three times less than Great Britain and twice less than Japan. Technological development also caused the modernization of combat systems of the armed forces, as well as the improvement of nuclear potential. Stekić (2020) examines China's involvement in various initiatives focusing on the technological development to demonstrate the applicability of the so-called "technological sovereignty" as an analytical tool. He claims that the potential for its technological dominance through initiatives like the "Digital Silk Road" raises questions about the future dynamics of international hegemony. Stekić (2022) contends that China has reached the pinnacle of technological supremacy, surpassing European, American, and Asian competitors, notably Japan. This position enhances China's geopolitical standing, as the dominance it achieves in technology directly translates into increased

military, economic, and consequently political influence globally. To maintain its status as a “technohegemon”, China will encounter several key challenges in the future of which the most crucial challenge is closely linked to the so-called “digital” aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative.

The facts related to China’s nuclear arsenal are somewhat less well known, but it can be assumed with great probability what the nuclear capacities of this great power are (Busch, 2001, pp. 149–196). China today possesses about 260 nuclear warheads, which can be used on ballistic missiles launched from the ground, from bomber planes or from submarines (strategic triad) (Shulong and Yu, 2009, p. 169).

The peculiarity of China’s position is reflected in the fact that this country, from the moment of “entering the status” of a nuclear power, proclaimed the policy of *No First Us*<sup>3</sup>. It is a classic example of relying on the principle of self-help by using a deterrence strategy. As Thucydides says: “Instead of attacking them yourself, you prefer to defend yourself against their attack” (Tukidid, 1957, p. 47). The development of official Beijing’s military nuclear program was aimed at deterring the enemy and possibly using it in a “second strike”, a retaliatory attack on enemy territory from which the initial “first strike” was launched.

However, Richard Woolgar-James questions the validity of such a Chinese policy in the second decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A key factor in changing the status of a nuclear power is submarines that can fire missiles with nuclear warheads. Nuclear powers with submarines carrying nuclear missiles have a strategic advantage and are capable of delivering a “first strike” (Woolgar-James, 2015). By increasing the potential of military power, thanks to which China has become the third most powerful military power in the world, the balance of power has been established in this area as well. This is how the ability to independently ensure its own security was developed, which is a condition for China to be classified as a great power. However, in order to achieve the status of a great power, political recognition from other actors is also necessary. First of all, from the more powerful ones. That is, in this particular case – from the USA. Despite the fact that China has become the second largest economy and the third

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<sup>3</sup> China became the fifth nuclear power in the world after a successful test on October 16, 1964. The entire project was codenamed “596”, and the first nuclear weapons test was carried out at the Lop Nur location, in the salt desert in the north of the country, in the Xinjiang region, in the Bayangol-Mongolian Autonomous Region.

military power in the world, the US has not shown readiness to recognize China as an “equal partner”. At the political level, the USA remains more dominant by using all the privileges secured during the time of unipolarity, while it sovereignly dominated the world political system. In order to complete the process of legitimizing the status of a great power, China had to act politically, through various decisions, initiatives and strategic partnerships in order to influence the formation of a favorable and desirable international environment.

### **China’s political power and the creation of a balance of power**

Although China is today a “main competitor” for the USA and a “direct rival” for the EU, it is a big question how interested Beijing itself was in such a development. As already stated, during the 1980s and 1990s, China’s foreign policy goals were subordinated to internal development, and therefore confrontations with the USA were avoided. The same thing continued in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

China’s foreign policy positioning at the time was complex, elaborated on several levels and in sectoral policies, with the aim of further increasing economic power in order to stabilize internal conditions and with the leadership’s perception that political power is still insufficient for open confrontations with the USA. Sharper and more decisive Chinese reactions occur only in cases where its interests are directly threatened, which can be especially seen in the policy towards the open issue of demarcation in the South China Sea (Wang, 2011, p. 68). In that period, it was often emphasized that China needs peaceful development in order to achieve its long-term domestic goals. “President Xi Jinping has declared two century goals as priorities to be achieved in his second five-year term. First, by 2021 (that year marks one century since the founding of the Communist Party) GDP per capita from 2010 should be doubled. The idea is to create *Xiaokang shehui* – a society of moderate prosperity, which - interpreted by our dictionary – is the middle and consumer class, which will buy more on the domestic market, so increasing domestic consumption rather than exports will enable further economic growth and development. Another century goal is to achieve the Chinese Dream (*Zhongguo Meng*) of the Great Renaissance of the Chinese People (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*)” (Góralczyk, 2015).

Guoguang Wu states that in relation to the immediate environment and neighboring countries, China projects the concept of “make friends - pacify - enrich” (*youlin-mulin-fulin*) (Wu, 2008, p. 269). In order to illustrate this

approach, the expression “if our neighbors are friends – the periphery is stable”<sup>4</sup> is used (*mulin youhao, wending zhoubian*) (Pekkanen, Ravenhill and Foot, 2014, p. 408). Michael Yahuda notes that this kind of setup actually benefits China itself the most. It is its way to build a framework in which it can promote its interests in the best possible way.

In relation to the wider environment, Chinese multilateralism is actualized through “new regionalism”. New structures, institutions and regional organizations are being built. This approach is best seen in China’s deployment within the SCO. In this organization, China agreed to participate on a completely equal basis, although the disproportions with individual member states are easily visible (Yahuda, 2008, pp. 76–85). Jianwei Wang notes that China prefers to use a multilateral rather than a bilateral format to “delegitimise fears about the Chinese threat” held by almost all neighboring countries. This especially applies to Russia, with which China wants to maintain stable relations and have fruitful cooperation (Wang, 2008, pp. 104–126). Wang also emphasizes that, unlike other regional organizations, the SCO stands out because it deals with issues of security and military cooperation. These are more sensitive issues, and rules and principles that apply to economic integration units cannot be used in military regional organizations, so China has promoted a special principle: “top-down functionalism”. In the wider region, China, together with Russia and India, is establishing the RIC forum, which should ensure stability in relations between the key countries of East Asia and South Asia.

The same is happening during the expansion of Chinese investments to other regions within the framework of the proclaimed Belt and Road strategy. Wu Guoguan concludes that “international multilateralism is not a principle that China is fully committed to and which it is trying to achieve with a linear approach and a coherent performance” (Zheng and Tok, 2008, p. 180). Instead, China is concentrating on strengthening its own presence in different regions, by different means. Lađevac and Stekić (2021) contextualize the political risks linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) within the framework of China’s Fifth Grand Strategy. They assert that

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<sup>4</sup> Some authors also state that it is about two separate messages “*mulin zhengce*” (good policy towards neighbors) and “*wending zhoubian*” (stable periphery), but this does not fundamentally change anything, nor does it in any way affect the conclusions drawn in the paper amounts. Look, for example: Patrick Nopens, “The Impact of the Withdrawal from Afghanistan on Russia’s”, Security Policy Brief, 54, March 2014, p. 6.

within the Eurasian space, the BRI presents various political risks, including the potential for sudden changes in political regime types, fluctuations in foreign direct investment (FDI) flows, and challenges to the stability and peace of certain microregions (2021, p. 58).

Therefore, it can be stated that there is a special, Chinese approach to multilateralism, which implies a non-linear and asymmetric approach, which even in some cases is not long-term oriented. China's multilateralism has several levels and several dimensions. When talking about Chinese multilateralism, it should be kept in mind that there are about four different levels: 1) multilateralism in relation to neighbors (includes the region in which China is most interested); 2) pan-regional multilateralism (within the wider region, which also includes ASEAN, the North Pacific, and South Asia, in which the USA and Japan are traditionally interested); 3) global multilateralism (which is mainly based on symbolism and political messages sent by China); 4) multilateralism seen from the point of view of internal and foreign policy (China is trying to attract Taiwan in addition to Hong Kong with an active approach and policy of "one country - two systems", which can also be seen as using a multilateral approach to solve an internal political problem) (Wu, 2008, pp. 268–280).

However, the question of relations with the USA remains open all the time. "The notion of the creation of a new type of relationship between China and the US as great powers is constantly repeated in China's most important central concept on the future Sino-US relations." President Xi personally insisted on it. He often tried to get US President Barack Obama's approval for this characterization of Sino-American relations. Obama did not accept this idea" (Yinhong, 2015). In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this becomes one of the key issues for China's foreign policy. In June 2013, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, speaking at the World Peace Forum, said that "China has become a great power and it guides relations between great powers, but it must not work according to the mold of the former great powers. This means that China will not tolerate the interference of others in its diplomatic decisions, will not seek alliances or hegemony. Instead, Beijing will continue the path of peaceful development" (Kejin, 2013).

Therefore, it is important for China that the USA recognizes it as an equal status partner, which would mean that it has confirmed itself as a great power. The problem with this is that the US would then independently and voluntarily renounce its own superpower status. Because if China is recognized as a great power, it automatically implies that the US is not the only great power. The period of hegemonic stability is over. Despite all the problems they face,

especially noticeable after the escalation of the financial crisis in 2008, the US is still the largest economy and the most important military power in the world. Geopolitically, American influence is evident both in Europe (thanks to relations with the EU and the functioning of NATO), as well as in the Pacific region (Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand) and in the Middle East. The US dollar continues to enjoy the status of unofficial “world currency”. Why would the US agree to China’s offer? This is where we come back to perception. The picture of the world from the point of view of the USA was one, but from the point of view of China it was completely different. The US assessments of global processes were one, the Chinese quite different.

Different perceptions and assessments caused different interpretations of certain events. Because of this, the positions of the US and China are becoming more and more distant. This is first manifested by voting in the UN Security Council during the war in Syria. If China and Russia’s double veto investments in 2007 and 2008 regarding the proposed resolutions concerning Myanmar and Zimbabwe could still be characterized as an ongoing alignment of interests, then their joint action regarding Syria could not be qualified as such. China and Russia used a double veto three times (February and July 2012 and May 2014), thus demonstrating a new strategic partnership.

Simon Norton’s observation highlights that China views the United States and its allied systems as its greatest threat to achieving its goals and safeguarding its interests. Over time, China’s grand strategy has transitioned from Deng Xiaoping’s era, characterized by a policy of maintaining a low profile, concealing capabilities, and patiently waiting. Presently, China demonstrates a greater readiness to assert its power to influence and shape the external environment. This is evident through its active modernization of the military, particularly emphasizing the development of information systems and naval capacities, aimed at protecting its security interests. There is noticeable action in the direction of strengthening naval power and territorial pretensions. At the same time, it seeks to maintain a stable peripheral environment necessary for its development, and does not take aggressive steps that could lead to military conflict. Through diplomacy, it is trying to alleviate fears that a more powerful China will be aggressive” (Norton, 2015, pp. 9–10). In its performance, China identifies itself in the international community with an anti-hegemonic attitude, which can also be interpreted as standing against the (hegemony) of the USA (Béja, 2008, pp. 253–259). Since 2012, if not earlier (since 2009 when the first BRIC summit was held), it has been doing so together with Russia. Instead of an agreement with the USA on the creation of a *new type of relationship between the great powers*, it

is moving towards the aspiration to limit the actions of the USA. With this approach, the US would eventually be forced to recognize equal status with China. Stekić (2023) characterizes China as a “hesitant hegemon” and suggests that despite its global influence, China displays reluctance to fully embrace the role of a traditional unipolar superpower in its security and foreign policy. To gain insight into China’s potential access to global leadership, Stekić (2023) delineates the layers of its foreign policy, allowing for a deeper understanding of its engagement across different segments of the international arena.

However, what makes the whole thing more complex is that the other actors gathered in the BRICS configuration were equally involved in this process. That is, in the growing BRICS+ configuration, which will expand and include an increasing number of actors interested in establishing the balance of power in international relations. Essentially, by creating a strategic alliance with Russia and acting through numerous multilateral formats, China has both shaped and accelerated the establishment of a balance of power (Proroković, 2023, pp. 46-48).

In an anarchic international environment, states are guided by the principle of self-help in order to protect and realize their interests. But, if that is not enough for them to realize their interests, they are ready to cooperate with other actors or negotiate through international organizations. Of course, up to a certain limit. Because, as Kenneth Waltz notes, the actors are not only forced to ask themselves, ‘Will they win?’, but also: ‘Who will win more?’ (Waltz, 1979, pp. 107-113). By establishing a balance of power and limiting US action, non-Western actors expect to gain more. The option that was offered to them thirty years ago was to project their interests in a clearly hierarchical system, where they would be able to reach the status of regional powers with greater or lesser influence on global processes. According to the changes that have taken place, some of them (China, Russia and India in the first place) now perceive themselves as great powers and by joint action they are establishing a balance of power towards the USA in order to legitimize this new status. In this way they are also working towards the end of transformation of the structure of the world political system from unipolar to multipolar.

### **The role of China and new paradigms of its global vision**

China’s political power, embodied in various decisions, initiatives and strategic partnerships aimed at shaping a favorable and desirable international environment, has now been put to the function of the goal of

establishing a balance of power and forming a multipolar order. Two decades ago, it may not have been an explicit objective, and it's conceivable that the Chinese political leadership harbored different expectations. However, the current scenario is the culmination of a multi-decade process initiated with China's attainment of permanent membership in the UN Security Council. Subsequently, accelerated economic growth and dynamic development ensued, accompanied by concerted efforts to bolster military capabilities and engage in proactive foreign policy initiatives.

It is evident from the Chinese approach that changes in the international environment were induced gradually, by insisting on benefits for all interested parties and promoting win-win solutions, along with the creation of new regionalism and numerous multilateral formats. China accepted others as equals. In spite of the fact that it saw itself more and more as a great power, and in the end, in the statements of Chinese officials, they declared their status as such, they negotiated with others with full respect and on an equal basis. Even in a bilateral format, when, for example, negotiations were held with the Solomon Islands delegation in the spring of 2022. At the same time, there was an expectation that others would accept China as an equal partner. And everyone accepted it, except the USA. And without that, it was impossible to talk about the legitimization of China's status as a great power in international relations. Instead of a scenario where the transformation of the structure of the world political system from unipolar to asymmetric multipolar (or even bipolar – hypothetically, although it is difficult to imagine, it was still possible to create an asymmetric bipolar order in the agreement of the USA and China) was to take place through cooperation, it started to take place through confrontation. These confrontations were first detected on the political level and they intensified during the war in Syria. Over time, they also transferred to the economic level, with the introduction of restrictive measures in mutual trade, limiting investment opportunities and technological exchange. China's response to these American steps has been an ever-closer association with Russia, both bilaterally and in the multilateral BRICS and SCO formats. Hence the reluctance of the Chinese leadership to side with the West in their conflict with Russia from February 2022. To a large extent and thanks to the position of China, in the non-Western part of the world, despite the pressures and fierce propaganda – few responded to the demands for the introduction of sanctions against Russia (Proroković, 2022, pp. 749-750). Without a partnership with China, it is a big question how Russia would fare in this "international game". Since it is in partnership with China, it is easier for it to perform in the international arena. The strategic linking of the two



countries, with the support of numerous other actors, has withstood the test of time and trials, and has shown that a new balance of power in international relations is being built around that axis and is inducing multipolarity. China is not only the generator of growth of the global economy, but also the generator of transformation of the structure of the world political system.

In this context, the three strategic initiatives launched in 2021 and 2022 should also be considered. First is “The Global Development Initiative proposed by President Xi Jinping at the 76<sup>th</sup> annual session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021”. It is “a major step towards fulfilling that promise, as it will strengthen the global development cause and help realize the UN Sustainable Development Goals”. In fact, more than 100 countries as well as the UN have supported the Global Development Initiative (Wang Lei, 2022). Through increased investment in global development and innovative financing mechanisms, the GDI seeks to bolster assistance to developing countries and foster collaborative efforts among development partners (CIKD, 2023). The Global Development Initiative (GDI) spearheaded by China emphasizes three core strategies to tackle global challenges (CIKD, 2023). Firstly, it prioritizes building international consensus on promoting development, fostering collaboration among nations to address shared developmental goals. Secondly, the GDI focuses on promoting increased resources for global development, aiming to mobilize greater financial support and investment towards sustainable development efforts worldwide. Finally, it emphasizes building cooperation platforms centered on eight priority areas, including poverty reduction, food security, pandemic response and vaccines, financing for development, climate change, industrialization, digital economy, and connectivity. Through these concerted efforts, the GDI endeavors to create a more inclusive and prosperous global community by addressing critical developmental needs and fostering international cooperation and solidarity. So far (February 2024) the GDI achieved more than 130 projects in 58 countries worldwide with focus to Asia and Africa (CIKD, 2023). The Fund South-South and GDI Fund are also established with capital of more than 4 billion USD for 2024 (CIKD, 2023). Besides, the Global Security Initiative – GSI, introduced by Chinese Communist Party general secretary Xi Jinping during the Boao Forum on April 21, 2022, aims to establish a balanced and sustainable security architecture. Its core principles include upholding indivisible security, respecting sovereignty, and resolving disputes through dialogue. With endorsements from over 80 countries and regional organizations, the GSI has garnered widespread international support. On the one hand, establishing a balance of power promises a more even development and reduction of the

current disparities that exist between the developed, mostly Western countries and the rest of the world, which consists of developing or underdeveloped countries. On the other hand, with the aim of more even development, it is proposing to establish new principles for ensuring global security.

The Global Civilizational Initiative – GCI promotes cultural and civilizational exchanges to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation among nations. Rooted in principles of sovereignty, respect, and dialogue, it seeks to cultivate a more peaceful and harmonious world. By facilitating cultural exchanges and mutual appreciation, the GDI aims to strengthen bonds between China and other countries, contributing to global harmony and prosperity. Some analysts claim that China points with pride to the large number of countries that praise its three global initiatives – development, security, civilization. Moreover, the three global initiatives now form the core of China’s foreign policy, which in part challenges American values and thus American primacy (CGTN, 2023). All of China’s initiatives, including the Global Security Initiative, Global Development Initiative, and China Civilizational Initiative, are firmly rooted within the framework of the United Nations (UN) and align with the principles outlined in the UN Agenda 2030 of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By integrating these initiatives into the broader UN umbrella, China demonstrates its commitment to collective global efforts and contributes to the realization of sustainable development objectives on an international scale.

China’s role in contemporary international relations is to establish a balance of power towards the Western bloc led by the USA. The continuity of this process, which practically proves the thesis of Kenneth Waltz, influenced the development of different perceptions that became more and more opposed over time. China wants to be recognized as an equal partner by the US, and if the Western countries still do not want it, Beijing will force them to do so by using the built multilateral configurations and new initiatives (like the two proposed in 2021 and 2022). And that’s how the transformation of the structure of the world political system into a multipolar one will end. Or will another large-scale war be necessary for that to happen? It is difficult to predict at the moment, but it cannot be ruled out. The persistent refusal of the USA to accept the change in reality and agree to a new balance of power in the world caused a dramatic deterioration of relations with Russia. Hence the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis, as well as the destabilization of the global character. There is a possibility that something similar can be repeated in Sino-American relations.

However, judging by the current course of the process of establishing the balance of power, this does not mean that it can be stopped. It just means that it will play out through total confrontation and threaten regional security in different parts of the world. The transformation will take longer and cost more. The US has labeled China as “major competitor”. At the same time, judging by the development of China’s approach and the political initiatives that followed each other, the USA also became the main competitor for official Beijing.

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