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## **STATECRAFT REPERTOIRES OF CHINA AND THE U.S. BEFORE AND DURING THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE\*\***

### **Resume**

In pursuing strategic rivalry, the United States and China have used a wide array of instruments from their statecraft repertoire. Washington has worked on expanding alliances and strengthening bases in the Indo-Pacific, sanctioning Chinese economy and officials, as well as promoting a critical narrative on Beijing's rise. China has launched regional and global initiatives aimed at countering U.S. containment, promoting its economic interests and defending territorial integrity. Following Russia's military operation in Ukraine, the U.S. and China intensified their rivalry for influence in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. Washington considerably reinforced its Beijing-containment military, economic and political alliances in the Pacific, while promoting the narrative of China's "authoritarian threat." Beijing refined its statecraft repertoire by enhancing instruments in reaction to threats around Taiwan. In expansion of its "interest and strategic frontiers" throughout the Global South, thus boosting the narrative of the rise of multipolarity at the expense of U.S. liberal hegemonism.

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## INTRODUCTION

Fully aware that the train of its unipolar global dominance had left the station towards multipolarity, the United States has understandably devoted remarkable attention and assets to confront key geopolitical challengers. Following a humiliating albeit logical retreat from Afghanistan in late August 2021, Washington demonstrated it was keeping both its Trans-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific eyes wide open. In a matter of two weeks, U.S President Joseph Biden sent two clear messages. First to Moscow, by hosting on September 1st Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky with the aim of concluding talks on the “U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership” (U.S. Department of State 2021). Second to Beijing, by signing on September 15th an agreement with the United Kingdom and Australia on the formation of the AUKUS strategic partnership aimed at containing the expansion of Chinese power in the Pacific. Biden reiterated his messaging at the December 2021 “Summit for Democracy”, during which he designated Moscow and Beijing as key “autocratic” challengers.

Following the start of Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, the U.S. decidedly focused on forging and maintaining a firm Trans-Atlantic alliance against Moscow. Nonetheless, Washington did not forget about its key competition in the Indo-Pacific. Neither did Beijing. Both countries were seemingly aware of each other’s repertoires of statecraft and had predicted their relentless pursuit, despite the expected focus on Ukraine and the continuing consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in China.

This paper seeks to discern the repertoires of statecraft used by the U.S. and China before and after the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine, with the aim of detecting their continuity and potential enhancement.

## A PANOPLY OF STATECRAFT REPERTOIRES

In international politics, states practice “statecraft” – “organized actions governments take to change the external environment in general or the policies and actions of other states in particular to achieve the objectives set by policymakers” (Holsti 1976, 293). Combining military,

diplomatic, economic and cultural instruments of power with the strategic logics of their employment forms the tools of statecraft which “state leaders can employ to influence others in the international system – to make their friends and enemies behave in ways that they would have otherwise not” (Goddard, MacDonald & Nexon 2019, 306). Four types of instruments can be distinguished: (1) Military force: threat or direct use of weapons and violence, as well as arms sales, defense pacts and other tools of military power; (2) Economic instruments: translating economic capital into social power over others through incentives like financial assistance, regional trade agreements, currency unions or debt forgiveness, as well as punishments, such as trade sanctions or restrictions of capital flow; (3) Diplomatic instruments: use of social and political capital in cross-boundary interactions, including competitive or collaborative modes or the use of covert or secret diplomacy; (4) Cultural instruments: symbolic instruments affecting the distribution of status, like public diplomacy, propaganda and ideological persuasion (Goddard, MacDonald & Nexon 2019, 306).

While states have the option of using and mixing a broad range of tools in existence (use of force, alliances, sanctions, etc), statecraft can be seen as “a set of repertoires”, with “repertoires” consisting of “more limited toolkits in use, whether by particular states, in relations among specific states, or in specific settings” (Goddard, MacDonald & Nexon 2019, 310). Repertoires “involve not only what people do when they are engaged in conflict with others but what they know how to do and what others expect them to do” (Tarrow 2011, 39). Yet, they can also change depending on “major fluctuations of interests, opportunities and organizations” (Tarrow 2011, 39). They are also more strategic, as they are a “tool kit of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action’” (Swidler 1986, 273). Since statecraft implies interaction between at least two actor-states, being strategic implies the adaptability of repertoires.

Raymond Cohen argues the international system is like a great stage on which states are, at one and the same time, both actors and the audience (Cohen 1987, 21). He uses “theatre as a metaphor for the repertoires of visual and symbolic tools used by diplomats and statesmen”: diplomatic communication seeks cross-cultural comprehensibility; it is a product of careful deliberation; and it “cannot escape from an insatiably inquisitive audience” (Jönsson 2022, 22).

Given that states use a myriad of statecraft repertoires, they need to employ strategic communication to legitimize their international status and leverage through political, military, economic or cultural might. Strategic communication, a concept of organized persuasion, represents a „system of coordinated communication activities implemented by organizations to advance their missions” (Author 2016, 9). In the process, organizations/states shape strategic narratives: „a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international relations to shape the opinions and behaviour of actors at home and overseas” (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 248).

## **A BUILD-UP TO U.S.-CHINA STRATEGIC RIVALRY**

A few months before the 2020 elections, the office of U.S. President Donald Trump released the “United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China” (PRC) (White House 2020). In the document, the White House voiced both its disappointment with the effects of U.S. policy towards China since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1979 and grave concern about the negative effects Beijing’s regional and global ambitions could have for U.S. interests. The U.S. hoped that “deepening engagement would spur fundamental economic and political opening in the PRC and lead to its emergence as a constructive and responsible global stakeholder”, but more than 40 years later, it had become evident the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) “has chosen instead to exploit the free and open rules-based order and attempt to reshape the international system in its favour” (White House 2020). Furthermore, the White House argued, “the CCP’s expanding use of economic, political, and military power to compel acquiescence from nation states harms vital American interests and undermines the sovereignty and dignity of countries and individuals around the world” (White House 2020).

While some analysts argued that the arrival of a new president in the White House would spur change in Washington’s perception of China, these expectations did not fulfil. This was most clearly expressed when U.S. President Joseph Biden named Brookings Institute foreign policy expert Rush Doshi as National Security Council’s Director for China.

Doshi’s 2021 book “The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order” offered a blueprint of Biden administration’s perceptive account of China’s rise and threat to U.S. interests, which did not diverge much from the one expressed by Trump, and thus (re)

confirmed a bipartisan view in Washington of the growing need to confront Beijing more decisively (Doshi 2021). In the book, Doshi argued that China aims to displace the U.S. position of hegemon short of war. In the regional and global order, a hegemon owes his position to three “forms of control used to regulate the behavior of other states: coercive capability (to force compliance), consensual inducements (to incentivize it), and legitimacy (to rightfully command it)” (Doshi 2021, 3). Indeed, the forms of control to which the U.S. statecraft repertoire had successfully contributed for decades. Yet, rising states, like China, apply strategies to displace the hegemon, and they pursue them in sequence. The first strategy is to “blunt the hegemon’s exercise of those forms of control, particularly those extended over the rising state”; the second is to “build forms of control over others”, particularly in the home region; and finally, when the first two are completed, the third strategy is “global expansion, which pursues both blunting and building at the global level to displace the hegemon from international leadership” (Doshi 2021, 4). Doshi argues that this template can be seen in China’s “strategies of displacement” of the U.S. which have evolved over time and in sequence. Its first strategy of displacement (1989-2008) aimed to blunt American power over China following Tienanmen Square, the Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The second strategy (2008-2016) aimed to build the regional hegemony in Asia following the Global Financial Crisis and the diminishment of U.S. power. Finally, referring to Xi Jinping’s quotes about “great changes unseen in a century” (2018) and “time and momentum on our side” (2021), Doshi argued that — following Brexit, Donald Trump’s elections and the coronavirus pandemic — Beijing has launched a “third strategy of displacement, one that expands its blunting and building efforts worldwide to displace the United States as the global leader (Doshi 2021, 4).

China’s view is, understandably, different. Beijing’s foreign policy has traditionally relied on “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” from 1954, which refer to “mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty” and non-interference in internal affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2014). Throughout the Cold War, China was consistent and largely adhered to these principles (Harris, 2014). In the post-Cold War period, Beijing also viewed these principles as a great barrier to the Western “humanitarian intervention.” Indeed, it is the milestone in Western “humanitarian interventionism” – the 1999 NATO aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – which

proved to be a key event in Beijing's strategic thinking. The bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, which killed three Chinese journalists and wounded 20 employees, led to popular discontent in China, including demonstrations against the US embassy and Consulate, the strengthening of anti-Western sentiment, the awareness of the danger of the unipolar order for Chinese interests, but also to strategic foreign policy and security reflection. Lampton argued the bombing of the Embassy left a "scar of deep mistrust" between the US and China, "whose relationship has not fully recovered" (Lampton 2014, 118). Shortly after the NATO aggression, China adopted the "New Security Concept", which, according to Ghiselli, aimed to "improve the view towards a multipolar world order as a response to the US global dominance, especially after the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 by the US aviation brought fear to the top of the Chinese civilian and military leadership of the onset of a new era of the US unilateralism" (Ghiselli 2021, 23). Gries argued that the Chinese, "alarmed by the Kosovo war and the US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, began to reconsider their benevolent view of the international order" (Gries 2012, 306). According to him, "in post-Belgrade China" a "Manichean, black-and-white view of China-US relations" developed, and the bombing of the Chinese Embassy can be viewed as a "turning point in China-US relations" (Gries 2001, 26). After the NATO aggression, China became concerned about the establishment of "coalitions of the willing" and the consequences this could have for international interference in the issues of Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang (Pang 2005, 88).

China's foreign policy has since progressively adapted to the changing geopolitical and geoeconomic changes, to which it undoubtedly also greatly contributed. Its first and foremost motive has remained the preservation of internal stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty. In this field, China faced constant and systemic pressure regarding Xinjiang, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Tibet. Their separatist aspirations are portrayed and supported by the US and the EU as "struggle for freedom and human rights", while Beijing insists it will remain firm in the defence of its territorial integrity. In an attempt to break from the geostrategic constraints imposed by the impressive presence of U.S. forces in its immediate neighbourhood, China launched a number of initiatives spread towards Central Asia, Europe and Africa, but also Latin America. Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, in just a decade, over 150 countries have

to various degrees joined the effort. Beyond economic development and financing, the BRI has also helped China establish a broad network of political partnerships. Thus, the expansion of Beijing's "interest frontiers" as "a geographical area that is defined (and constantly redefined) by the evolution of the Chinese interests and threats to them", which means the necessity of the transformation and expansion of foreign policy and security activities (Ghiselli 2021, 1).

## **U.S. DISPLAY OF CHINA-CONTAINMENT STATECRAFT REPERTOIRE**

The expansion of Chinese statecraft in the regions outside of Asia-Pacific region, combined, among other processes, with the relative decline of US power, has contributed to an evolution from the "unipolar moment" towards multipolarity. It is thus not surprising that Washington has come to view Beijing as a strategic competitor whose power of expansion should be limited, thus opening an era of potential global rivalry. Washington had to implement a wide array of instruments from its statecraft repertoire aimed at containing China's rise.

### (1) Military statecraft

#### (a) Strengthening military bases

Throughout the Cold War and the post-Cold War period, the United States have developed hundreds of military installations in the Asia Pacific. Positioned in key geographical locations, they allow the U.S. military to "encircle China with a chain of air bases and military ports" (Reed 2013). In Japan, the United States Forces count 54,000 troops in 85 facilities located on Honshu, Kyushu, and Okinawa (U.S. Forces Japan 2023). Okinawa alone accounts for 70 percent of all U.S. military bases in Japan (Siripala 2022). The U.S. increased its military presence in Guam, with up to 10,000 U.S. troops stationed on the Pacific Island (Youssef 2023). In South Korea, the U.S. deployed 28,000 troops in 73 military installations, including Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, south of Seoul, which is the largest U.S. overseas military base (Shin and Lee 2021). In the Philippines, despite the fact that in the early 1990s Manila ended permanent U.S. military presence in the country, including two major bases, the U.S. maintained 500 military personnel with access to five bases (Mansoor and Shah 2023).



(b) Expanding military alliances and strategic dialogues  
in the Asia-Pacific

In Asia-Pacific, the U.S. developed five regional treaty alliances: with Japan, Australia, South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines (White House 2022). It has also military relationships with a number of regional partners, including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore and New Zealand. The aim of the U.S. is to use these countries to blunt Chinese influence. Washington has also moved beyond bilateral relations and worked to build multilateral alliances and strategic dialogues. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), known as the “QUAD”, was created as a strategic security dialogue between Australia, India, Japan and the United States in 2007. It went into hiatus for eight years before reemerging in 2017 in the context of the China-containment policy. In September 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom and the U.S. announced the creation of AUKUS, an enhanced trilateral security partnership aimed at assisting Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines, but essentially, again, at containing China’s rise.

(c) Increasing defense cooperation and arms  
procurement with allies

Since the U.S. recognition of the People’s Republic of China in 1979, Washington has maintained *de facto* diplomatic relations with Taipei. According to the U.S. Taiwan Relations Act, “the United States shall make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capacity” (U.S. Congress 1979). From 1979 to 2020, 77 percent of major conventional arms imported by Taiwan were of U.S. origin, with a particularly high level of arms sales throughout the 2010s: the Obama administration notified Congress of more than 14 billion dollars in sales, while the Trump administration notified about sales worth 18 billion dollars (Forum on the Arms Trade 2023). Apart from M1A2 Abrams tanks and Stinger missiles, a particular high point has been the sale of 66 F-16V fighter jets for 8 billion dollars (Browne 2019).

(2) Economic statecraft

China’s economic rise from its opening up in the late 1970s, through the entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, led to its place as the world’s second economy and the most important trading



partner to the world's first economy – the United States. Yet, a rising U.S. bilateral trade deficit with China, together with complaints about China's unfair monetary and intellectual property practices, brought numerous economic measures aimed against Beijing.

(a) Imposition of tariffs for Chinese goods

Although the George W. Bush's and Barack Obama's administrations had already imposed quotas and tariffs on the Chinese textile, aluminium and steel production, by the time Donald Trump became U.S. President, it became clear the U.S. would pursue more radical economic measures against China. Several measures imposed by the Trump administration culminated in the "tariff war" following China's retaliatory measures. In early 2018, the U.S. imposed a 25-percent tariff on steel and 10 percent tariff on aluminium imports, before pursuing a few months later with a 25 percent tariff on 818 categories of goods imported from China worth 50 billion dollars (Fetzer and Schwarz 2020). Counting subsequent waves, the U.S. imposed tariffs on more than 360 billion dollars of Chinese goods – from washing machines to musical instruments.

(c) Bans and restrictions for Chinese high-tech equipment

Worried about Chinese rapid technological advances, the U.S. administration, particularly Trump's, adopted a number of bans and restrictions. In August 2018, the U.S. used security concerns to ban Huawei and ZTE equipment from being used by the government (U.S. Congress 2018). The following year, Huawei was put on a list of sanctions due to cooperation with Iran, which led to the freezing of its cooperation with numerous U.S. companies. The U.S. also persuaded several of its European allies – like Poland, the Baltic states and Romania – to follow the US 5G security initiative "Clean Network", with the objective of securing the networks from what it called "untrusted vendors" (Karaskova et al 2021).

(b) Multilateral economic partnerships

The U.S. initiated a number of activities aimed against China's rise and partnerships. One of them was Obama administration's Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with the aim to bring Chinese neighbours closer to the U.S., but from which Trump withdrew in 2017. The U.S. firmly opposed the 2020 EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), lobbying hard against its acceptance in EU institutions. Furthermore, it

worked to counter the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly in Europe, by urging Central and Eastern European countries to distance from cooperation with China under the cooperation format formerly known as “17+1”. In 2021, Washington proposed its own version of the BRI, the “Build Back Better World” (Widakuswara 2021).

### (3) Political statecraft

#### (a) U.S. sanctions against Beijing officials

The United States has applied sanctions against China, its leadership, members of the CPC and the People’s Liberation Army. Most of these sanctions are linked with the accusations of human rights abuse. These have included visa restrictions and other means of publicly decrying actions considered by the U.S. as non-democratic. Particularly, in 2020, the U.S. sanctioned a number of Chinese officials for “gross violations of human rights” in Xinjiang, under its Uyghur Human Rights Policy. Also, in 2020, the U.S. imposed sanctions, first against Hong Kong officials, then also members of the National People’s Congress of China, for “undermining Hong Kong’s autonomy and restricting the freedom of expression or assembly of the citizens of Hong Kong” (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2020).

#### (b) China-insulating initiatives in the Asia-Pacific

The U.S. has attempted influencing the works of the The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional grouping that aims to promote economic and security cooperation among its ten members. Washington wants to prevent China’s control over the access to the South China Sea. Particularly, it has tried exploiting the position of five ASEAN states (Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei and Vietnam) which have maritime disputes with China. Furthermore, the U.S. has launched subregional initiatives, like the Mekong-U.S. partnership with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam on a number of policy issues. Created in 2020, its objective is to expand the work of the Lower Mekong Initiative, created in 2009 “to counter the spread of China’s influence down the river and into Southeast Asia” (Lintner 2021).

#### (c) Diplomatic support for Taiwan

Although it recognized the PRC and acknowledged the “One China” policy, Washington has a special relationship with Taiwan. In addition to

military and economic cooperation, the U.S. is also urging allies to boost relations and legitimize Taiwan. In November 2021, Lithuania allowed a representative office under the name “Taiwan” to be opened in Vilnius, which represents a fundamental difference from the representative office called “Taipei” that existed in other European cities. Beijing saw this move as a rather recognition of Taiwan, and it has lowered diplomatic relations with Vilnius, while stopping approvals of export permits for Lithuanian exporters (Author 2022a).

### (3) Cultural statecraft

#### (a) Promoting the “China threat” strategic narrative

The U.S. government and its affiliated institutions have financed numerous critical think-tank, media and policymaking reports constructing a negative strategic narrative on China. This narrative is based on frames exploiting the crafted imagery of China’s “systemic ills” and “geopolitical ambitions”, with the objective of depicting China’s cooperation with international partners as toxic, undesirable and dangerous, thus encouraging repulsion of cooperation, fostering disappointment and facilitating crippling criticism (Author 2022b).

#### (b) Creating China-bashing international networks

The U.S. has funded a number of initiatives aimed at creating “China watchdog” networks of researchers, journalists and influencers with the objective of collaboration on analysis and exposure of implications of Chinese policies and activities in various fields – from private business, through academia and (dis)information, up to civil society and technology (Author 2022b). These efforts were particularly strong during the Covid-19 pandemic, when Chinese activities such as “mask and vaccine diplomacy” were portrayed as spreading “both the virus and its propaganda”, as well as during the 2021 “Summit for Democracy” which reflected “a prominent view within the Biden administration that assembling a global coalition of democracies can counter China’s rise” (Pepinsky 2021).

## CHINA'S STATECRAFT REPERTOIRE OF RISE AND BREAKTHROUGH

Attempts by the U.S. to contain China's rise have been met with a wide array of statecraft instruments. Some of them, particularly belonging to military statecraft, were indeed a novelty.

### (1) Military statecraft

#### (a) Activities in the South China Sea and the Taiwan straits

After U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton claimed in a 2010 speech that the South China Sea was a matter of U.S. national interest, Beijing considered it an "attack on China" (Jones 2013, 57). This didn't surprise given the importance of the South China Sea for China's economy and security: nearly 40 percent of China's total trade in 2016 transited through the South China Sea (China Power Team 2017). The Spratly Islands could furthermore have important military significance in case of a war over Taiwan. The China-U.S. spat over the South China Sea escalated throughout the 2010s. China began its island building in the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands in 2013, and the speed of construction was met with strong criticism from Washington. Nevertheless, Beijing continued its construction, while the U.S. continued its freedom of navigation operations "that seek to challenge specific Chinese claims in the area" (Freund 2017). By 2022, China fully militarized at least three islands it built in the South China Sea, arming them with anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile systems, laser and jamming equipment and fighter jets (Associated Press 2022). China also drastically increased its presence around Taiwan, particularly in Taiwan's "Air's Defence zone" – with a peak of 56 incursions in a single day in October 2021 (Brown 2023). Furthermore, Beijing has also expanded its navy. In 2015, it surpassed the U.S. Navy in total size, and has continued its rapid growth since. Estimates in 2021 put the number of Chinese ships and submarines at 348, ahead of the U.S. Navy with 296 vessels (Center for Strategic and International Studies 2023).

#### (b) Expanding security frontiers

Following the establishment of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, and the expansion of China's "interest frontiers", Beijing adopted measures aimed at increasing their security. Following the 2008 Gulf of

Aden anti-piracy mission, it opened a military base in Djibouti in 2017 to protect Chinese economic interests and citizens (Heath et al 2021). Zhou Ping, advisor at the State Council of China, argued Beijing “must extend its ‘strategic frontiers’ to make them overlap with its interest frontiers by establishing a military presence there” (Ghiselli 2021, 2). Indeed, following the expansion of BRI-related China’s national interests, the People’s Liberation Army has pushed “farther away from China’s shores, broadening its strategic horizons, and enhancing its power-projection capabilities” (Rolland 2019, 2). This has led to U.S. analyses suggesting that China is “developing a network of strategic strongholds that can greatly increase the costs of any US military intervention and reduce the willingness of the Belt and Road members to provide the access or assistance to the US” (Russel and Berger 2020, 42)

### (c) Increasing military partnerships

Throughout the 2010s, China has increased military drills with its key strategic partner, the Russian Federation, in pursuit of operational experience. This was a new feature of the China-Russian military cooperation, which for decades had thrived on Russian arms sales to Beijing. Russia’s “Vostok 2018” military exercises, in which the PLA took part for the first time, were considered a “milestone in the increasingly close defense relationship between the two countries” (Carlson 2018). The two countries participated in 78 joint military exercises between 2003 and 2022, more than half of these since 2016, and they have expanded them geographically up to the Baltic and Mediterranean seas (China Power Team 2022).

## (2) Economic statecraft

### (a) Launch of the BRI

Ever since Xi Jinping revealed in 2013 its global development strategy — the Belt and Road Initiative — China has worked to operationalize it and support it through various bilateral and multilateral partnerships. The engagement of the BRI until 2022 has been 962 billion dollars in 147 participating countries (Nedopil 2023). Such rapid development has raised substantial concern in Washington, which has come to regard the BRI “as an integral part of China’s grand strategy and is increasingly worried China will challenge and undermine US interests worldwide”, with the Initiative becoming “an important driving force for

the ‘threat inflation’ phenomenon when it comes to the US perception of China” (Minghao 2021).

(b) Launch of the AIIB

In parallel with the BRI, Xi proposed the creation of the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which since 2016 has become the world’s second largest multilateral development institution, with 106 members, thus turning into a strategic competitor to the US-dominated International Monetary Fund and World Bank (Nguyen 2019). It received the AAA ratings from the top credit rating agencies – Standard & Poor’s, Moody’s and Fitch – and was granted Permanent Observer status in the deliberations of both the United Nations General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank 2023). Ever since its creation, the AIIB was perceived as “another step towards the ‘de-dollarization’ that many expect to be the endgame of Chinese economic policy”, and a “direct threat to America’s ability effectively to set world interest rates and to create seemingly limitless fiat dollars without the need to finance them in free markets” (Browne 2015).

(1) Diplomatic statecraft

(a) De-recognition of Taiwan: China has intensified its work on the de-recognition of

Taiwan, and by the closure of 2021, the number of recognizing countries was reduced to 14. From 2017 to 2021, seven countries derecognized Taiwan – Burkina Faso, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Kiribati, Nicaragua, Panama and the Solomon Islands (Author 2022a).

(b) Signing strategic partnerships at global level

Beijing has drastically increased the number of its bilateral and multilateral partnerships at global level, often aiming to boost regional connectivity. They include countries and regions which have traditionally been dominated by U.S. influence. In Europe, Serbia signed the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China in 2016, Hungary a year later. In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia in 2019 signed 30 economic agreements, boosting trade volume by 23 percent in a year (Chen 2020), while the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Iran worth 400 billion euros was signed in 2021 (Author 2022c). Also, in 2021, China boosted 30 years of relations with ASEAN by elevating ties to the level of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (Yu and Peng 2021).

### (c) Boosting multilateral cooperation

China considerably boosted cooperation within BRICS and the Shanghai Security Cooperation (SCO). Beijing sought to increase the prominence of BRICS through summits and connectivity with other regional groupings, like the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the India-led Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Cooperation with South Africa boosted China-Africa relations through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Cooperation with Brazil further strengthened Beijing's appeal in South America, where China has become the leading trading partner. The SCO expanded in 2017 with the accession of India – a member of BRICS – and Pakistan – a key country for BRI connectivity. In 2021, China pushed for a green light to Iran's membership, while the SCO simultaneously offered the status of "dialogue partner" to Saudi Arabia – a process which ran almost in parallel with the signing of Beijing's strategic agreements with Teheran and Riyad. China has also expanded its influence through BRI-related summits, such as the "Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation" held in 2017 and 2019, or the summits of the China and Central and Eastern European Countries.

#### (1) Cultural statecraft

##### (a) Promoting soft power initiatives

China has used the BRI for the promotion of its narrative, critical of the Western liberal order. It has framed the Initiative as "win-win", "mutually-beneficial cooperation", "sharing the fruits of development", with the objective of building a "community of the shared future for mankind" (Xi Jinping, 2014 and 2016). The strategic narrative of the BRI rules against "Cold-War mentality", "zero-sum-games", "winner-takes-all", "unilateralism" and "law of the jungle" (Author 2022b). The BRI was logically promoted through "Silk Road" imagery (Stošić 2018). In this context, China deployed a number of channels to deploy its soft power, most notably the promotion of Chinese language and culture through the opening of over 500 Confucius centres in more than 160 countries.

##### (b) Mask and Vaccine diplomacy

The COVID-19 pandemic offered both an extreme challenge and opportunity for China. The Chinese government provided humanitarian assistance throughout the world, including in the United States, through



masks, protective gowns, testing, diagnostic and treatment equipment. The assistance, dubbed “mask diplomacy” – “hit two birds – restored its international reputation after being a hotbed for the virus and demonstrated its mature and strong stance in the international system” (Muratbekova 2020). Pursuing on this path, by early 2022 China provided more than two billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine to over 120 countries and international organizations (Xinhua 2022). China’s “vaccine diplomacy was (...) part of a broader strategy of reputational damage repair or an image makeover — both at home and in the world (Lee, Seow Ting 2021).

### **U.S.-CHINA RIVALRY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE**

The beginning of Russian military operation in Ukraine in February 2022 brought unprecedented changes not only to the European and world security, but also to the economic and political map. The United States stood firmly as leading proponent of Trans-Atlantic unity in support of Ukraine, directing the pace of military aid and economic sanctioning of Russia. On the other side, weeks before the hostilities, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin met the opening of the Beijing Winter Olympic games and signed a joint declaration stating that “friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation” (Reuters 2022). China, while continuing to support the territorial integrity of Ukraine, put the blame for the outbreak of conflict on NATO expansion eastwards, refused to join any sanctions against Moscow, and opted instead for increasing cooperation with the Russian Federation in the trading and energy sectors.

Throughout the first year of conflict in Ukraine, Washington and Beijing pursued their strategic competition using a wide display of instruments from their statecraft repertoires.

- (1) U.S. statecraft repertoires during the conflict in Ukraine
  - (a) Military statecraft

The main instrument of the U.S. military statecraft repertoire has been the boosting of alliances and partnerships aimed at containing China, inspired by John Foster Dulles’ Korean war-era “island chain strategy.” Early 2023 witnessed a push of unprecedented intensity. Following Japan’s December 2022 historical commitment to a 60 percent spending increase

over the next five years, in January 2023 Washington and Tokyo signed an agreement boosting mobility for the 12th U.S. Marine Littoral Regiment on the island of Okinawa and improving anti-ship capabilities in case of Chinese attack in Taiwan. The agreement was signed despite criticism by Okinawa Governor Denny Tamaki, who argued that currently “the possibility of China’s aggression into Taiwan is almost zero”, and that the risk of war comes mainly from a potential declaration of independence by Taipei (Oswald 2023). Simultaneously, Japan began the construction of an airfield on the island of Mageshima, which will house U.S. fighter jets relocated from Iwoto/Iwo Jima. Also in January 2023, the U.S. Marine Corps opened Camp Blaz, its base in 70 years in the U.S. Pacific Island of Guam, which is considered as a possible place of the outbreak of conflict with China (Lendon 2023). Simultaneously, the U.S. agreed with South Korea to increase the deployment of fighter jets and aircraft carriers, as well as to expand combined military exercises in the Korean Peninsula.

In February, Washington and Manila signed an extension for the U.S. access to four extra bases in the Philippines, under the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) which had already allowed for access to five of them with the aim of monitoring China’s activities in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. Access was given to an air base on Balabac Island, near the South China Sea, as well as to the naval base and airport in the Cagayan province, some 250 km from Taiwan, despite public opposition by Cagayan Governor Manuel Mamba, who fears “jeopardising Chinese investment and becoming a target in a conflict over Taiwan” (Agence France-Presse 2023). In response, China’s Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning accused the U.S. of “an act that escalates tensions in the region and endangers regional peace and stability” (Westerman 2023).

In March, Australia, the UK and the U.S. unveiled the details of the AUKUS submarine deal designed to equip Canberra with nuclear-powered attack submarines. The deal also provides for U.S. and UK submarines to make rotational deployments to the Western Australia Stirling naval base, seen by analysts as key “from the standpoint of deterring Chinese aggression within the next ten years” (Townshend 2023).

The U.S. also continued its support to Taiwan. U.S. President Biden signed the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), authorizing up to 10 billion dollars in military-purpose grants for Taiwan over five years, including one billion dollars worth of weapons and munitions annually. The bill was put by analysts in the context of the course of

the Ukrainian conflict, particularly regarding the “progress towards Taiwan embracing the asymmetric defence strategy Washington had been urging” (DeLisle 2023). Such decision didn’t surprise given that Biden repeatedly stated in the context of the conflict in Ukraine that the U.S. would defend Taiwan in case of China’s attack, a position which received praise from Taipei and harsh criticism from Beijing (Ni 2022).

#### (b) Economic statecraft

The U.S. also increased its economic and trade initiatives. In May 2002, the U.S. launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), a major trade initiative aiming to expand Washington’s economic leadership in the Indo-Pacific region. Seen as a U.S. attempt to go back to the objectives of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), from which the Trump administration withdrew in 2017, it was joined by 13 countries, including Australia, India, Indonesia, New Zealand, South Korea and Japan, and accounts for 40 percent of the global economy (Manak 2022). While U.S. officials dubbed it an “alternative to China’s approach”, Beijing media sharply criticized it, calling the initiative – “economic NATO” (Banerjee 2022). In the fall of 2022, the United States imposed new sanctions on Beijing by preventing the sales and service by American businesses to Chinese chip manufacturers. This was followed in February 2023 by the creation of the U.S.-led framework “Chip 4”, uniting Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, with the aim to ensure a stable supply of semiconductors and reduce Chinese involvement (Kyodo News 2023). At a meeting of the QUAD in New Delhi in March 2023, the foreign ministers of the U.S., India, Japan and South Korea took a “direct shot at China”, by underlying that they view with concern “challenges to the maritime rules-based order, including in the South and East China Sea.” (Lee, Matthew 2023).

#### (c) Diplomatic statecraft

The August 2022 visit to Taipei by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi prompted a tense diplomatic standoff between Washington and Beijing. China’s diplomatic reaction was harsh and accompanied by the dispatching of warships and aircraft, as well as firing ballistic missiles into the waters of the Taiwan Strait. Although it proved to be a headache for the White House as well, Pelosi’s visit embarrassed Beijing, which had to restrain itself, despite popular discontent and urge to disrupt

the visit. A few months later, at the G20 Summit in Bali, Xi and Biden had their first meeting since Biden took office in early 2021, and it was dubbed “constructively”, with calls for more “cooperation.” Yet, the diplomatic “détente” has been short-lived. In early 2023, the US House of Representatives voted in favor of forming a new Select Committee on the Strategic Competition between the U.S. and the Chinese Communist Party. Tensions further exacerbate the following the February 2023 “balloon incident”, implicating the spotting and shooting down of a Chinese-operated high-altitude balloon, which prompted Secretary of State Antony Blinken to postpone his diplomatic visit to Beijing.

U.S. diplomatic efforts in the region nevertheless gained an additional boost after the first bilateral summit of the leaders of its two key allies in the region, South Korea and Japan, which had worked on the resolution of disputes stemming from Japan’s colonial occupation of Korea. Although Washington was officially absent from the talks, analysts argued that “bringing Japan and South Korea closer together has long been a priority for the Biden Administration and that the “U.S. shuttle diplomacy between the two countries has been credited with helping to bring about the summit” (Aum and Galic 2023). Washington also reopened, after 30 years of closure, its embassy in the Solomon Islands — a country with which Beijing signed a security pact in 2022 — as an effort “to counter China’s growing influence in the region” (Baldor 2023).

#### (d) Culture repertoire

In parallel with other statecraft repertoire, the U.S. also launched several strategic communication initiatives, promoting the narrative of “China threat” and “China’s authoritarianism”, including at the second Summit for Democracy in March 2023. A particularly strong connection has been established with the narrative regarding Russian military operation in Ukraine. In fact, China was labelled as “Russian biggest backer” and its ally in the undermining of the “rules-based world order”, a euphemism for the U.S.-led liberal international order. Such discourse and narratives were promoted in international media, but also in Western multilateral fora, such as the G7. The U.S. also continued with a number of soft power initiatives aimed at competing with Chinese influence, such as in Central Asia, where Washington launched in the fall of 2022 the “Economic Resilience Initiative” aimed at “a long-term strategy to cement the English-speaking world as an avenue for future economic, social, political and cultural development” (Putz 2022).

## (2) Chinese statecraft repertoires during the conflict in Ukraine

Following the outbreak of Russian military operation in Ukraine, China at first adopted a restrained position. Yet, as the conflict intensified, with global security, economic and diplomatic implications, Beijing recalibrated its statecraft instruments.

### (a) Military statecraft

The visit of the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi in August 2022 set off unprecedented China's military drills in the Taiwan Strait, including first-ever test launches of ballistic missiles over Taipei. With the focus on testing land-strike and sea-assault capabilities, the drills showed Beijing's readiness to react militarily in case of Taipei's unilateral independence moves. Similar exercises, though smaller in scale, were carried in April 2023 and simulated sealing off Taiwan in response to the Taiwanese president's Tsai Ing-wen's trip to the U.S. In addition, Beijing has also broadened its aerial incursions into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone.

Under pressure in the Taiwan Strait, China's navy pushed farther globally. In April 2022, China signed a bilateral security agreement with the Solomon Islands, a move perceived by the U.S. as a threat as it allows Beijing to replenish vessels to and potentially open a naval base extending military reach in the South Pacific (Zongyuan 2022). In February 2023, China's navy held joint drills with Russia and South Africa in the Indian Ocean, and in March 2023 with Russia and Iran in the Gulf of Oman.

### (b) Economic statecraft

On the economic front, while fighting to end COVID-19 quarantines and its domestic repercussions, a housing crisis and problems with global supply chains, Beijing did not let aside its regional and global role. China worked hard for BRICS expansion, with Algeria, Iran and Argentina applying to join the organization, with a dozen more – including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – expressing their interest. China also worked on the start of de-dollarization, as it concluded agreements with Brazil, Pakistan, Kazakhstan and other countries to replace the U.S. dollar by the yuan for cross-border transactions. The renminbi replaced the dollar as the most foreign currency in Russia following Western sanctions against Moscow, while Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula

da Silva, on a visit to Beijing in April 2023, called on BRICS nations to “come up with an alternative to replace the dollar in foreign trade” (Iglesias 2023). Boosting energy exchange and trade have also been the hallmarks of China-Russian relations since the beginning of Moscow’s military operation in 2022. Despite harsh criticism from the West and threats of sanctions, Xi Jinping reinstated China’s commitment to strategic partnership with Russia following his trip to Moscow in March 2023.

### (c) Diplomatic statecraft

Following a self-imposed diplomatic retreat due to the COVID-19 restrictions, Beijing pushed hard on the diplomatic front starting in the fall of 2022. After Xi Jinping’s September 2022 first visit abroad since the beginning of the pandemic, the Chinese president went on a furious diplomatic offensive meeting dozens of world leaders in the matter of months – from U.S. President Joseph Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin to German Chancellors Olaf Scholtz and French President Emmanuel Macron. China’s new foreign minister Qin Gang declared in April 2023 that “China’s diplomacy had pressed the ‘accelerator button’”, while the government expanded the diplomatic budget by 12.2 percent (Gan 2023).

In its campaign for the de-recognition of Taiwan, Beijing scored an additional success after the decision by Honduras in March 2023 to break off relations with Taipei.

Beijing started the operationalization of its “Global Security Initiative” (GSI), the promotion of its vision of a global security architecture urging “indivisible security”, against confrontation among alliances. The Initiative, first announced in April 2022 by Xi Jinping, was operationalized in February 2023, in the context of the conflict of Ukraine, as its primary objective is geared against the expansion of alliances such as NATO in Europe – against the national security of Russia, but also in Asia Pacific – against the national security of China. On the anniversary of the Russian military intervention in Ukraine, Beijing unveiled its 12-point plan for the political resolution of the conflict, based on the principles of the GSI – including the respect for territorial integrity, but also against the expansion of alliances and unilateral sanctions, which was rejected by the U.S. (Kine 2023).

Two weeks later, Beijing reinforced its diplomatic credibility with the surprising deal brokering between regional opponents Iran and Saudi Arabia on the restoration of their diplomatic relations. The move was seen by analysts such as former Middle East policy advisor to the State

Department Aaron David Miller as demonstration that “U.S.’s influence and credibility in that region has diminished and that there is a new slightly international regional alignment taking place, which has empowered and given both Russia and China newfound influence and status” (Turak 2023). The move occurred in the context of wide geopolitical changes in the Middle East. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman refused to bow to Biden’s pressure and sided with Vladimir Putin on cutting oil production by OPEC+. Beijing and Moscow also strengthened the SCO in the region, by officially granting dialogue partner status to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Qatar, while giving a green light for the same status to Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait.

#### (d) Cultural statecraft

At the outset of the conflict in Ukraine, Beijing reacted by incriminating Washington and regularly reminding about its military interventions, particularly during the U.S.-led unipolar momentum – from the NATO aggression against Yugoslavia, to the invasion of Iraq and the bombings of Libya. It also launched its new Global Civilization Initiative in March 2023, calling for key soft power instruments, such as respect for diversity, inheritance and robust people-to-people exchange.

## CONCLUSION

Despite global focus on the conflict in Ukraine and its ramifications, the strategic rivalry between the U.S. and China has intensified since 2022. Analysis of statehood repertoires of the two global rivals before and after the beginning of the conflict points to several conclusions.

First, the U.S. has maintained its entire China-containing statecraft repertoire and has considerably boosted several instruments. Particularly unprecedented is the intensity of enhancement of its “island chain strategy” in early 2023, including robust military installments in Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, but also installations in Guam and the military assistance to Taiwan. Given the level and time framework for promised assistance to Taipei, as well as to AUKUS, it is clear that the U.S. will continue to elevate its military presence in the Indo-Pacific in the years to come. Same can be said of its economic statecraft, with initiatives being reinvigorated (QUAD), reformulated (IPEF) or newly introduced (Chan4). Its diplomatic initiatives, such as support for agreement between Tokyo and Seoul, shows that it aims to strengthen unity with and among



allies, which is in line with the NATO 2022 Summit, where Indo-Pacific partners participated for the first time, as well as with the NATO 2030 Agenda. The activities of the U.S. Congress – Pelosi’s visit to Taipei, the creation of a new committee on “strategic competition” with China, promised assistance under the NDAA and reactions to the “Chinese balloon incident” – show a strong bipartisan approach in Washington aimed at resolute challenging of Beijing.

Second, while at first seemingly on the defensive at the international level following February 2022, Beijing refined its statecraft repertoire. Most instruments were enhanced – some in reaction to threats to territorial integrity (Taiwan), others in proactive operationalization of expansion of “strategic frontiers” (Solomon Islands). The strategic partnership with Russia passed an extremely difficult test. Organizations in which Beijing has a decisive voice – like BRICS and the SCO – expanded and their attractiveness grew throughout the Global South. This was particularly remarkable in the Middle East. The Riyadh-Teheran agreement masterminded by Beijing was a gem for China’s rising global diplomatic clout, particularly in the light of the operationalization of the GSI and the peace proposal for the conflict in Ukraine. China also avoided diplomatic decoupling from the European Union, one of its main trading partners, with key EU leaders heading to Beijing. On the other side, the trend of dedollarization intensified with important new bilateral agreements and support from BRICS partners. The outward-looking strategy was further accentuated with the launch of the Global Civilization Initiative.

Third, the analysis depicts both an existing and future epic rivalry of strategic narratives. For the U.S. this means the pursuit of the negative “China threat” narrative, which was further enhanced in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, with Beijing portrayed as part of an “aggressive” and “authoritarian” alliance aimed at dismantling the “rules-based world order.” China, on the other side, boasts the narrative of acceleration of multipolarity at the expense of U.S. liberal hegemonism. Strategic narratives are constructed through strategic communication, which attempts to align words with deeds arising from statecraft repertoires. Indeed, while strategic narratives can be seen as tools of statecraft, they can also glue together various sets of statecraft repertoires – military, economic, diplomatic and cultural. For the U.S. this means the pursuit of the negative “China threat” narrative, which was further enhanced in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, with Beijing portrayed as part of an “aggressive” and “authoritarian” alliance aimed at dismantling the “rules-based world order.”

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## **ПОЛИТИЧКИ ОДНОСИ ДРЖАВНОГ ВРХА КИНЕ И САД ПРЕ И ТОКОМ СУКОБА У УКРАЈИНИ**

### **Сажетак**

У оквиру стратешког ривалства Сједињене Америчке Државе и Народна Република Кина користиле су широк опсег инструмената из свог политичког „репертоара”. Вашингтон је ширио алијансе и јачао базе у Индо-Пацифику, санкционисао кинеску економију и званичнике, те промовисао критички наратив о успону Кине. Пекинг је покренуо низ глобалних иницијатива усмерених ка супростављању америчкој политици зауздавања, ка промовисању економских интереса и одбрани територијалног интегритета. По отпочињању руске војне операције у Украјини, САД и Кина су интензивирале своје ривалство зарад утицаја у Индо-Пацифику и шире. Вашингтон је значајно ојачао своје војне, економске и политичке алијансе усмерене ка зауздавању Пекинга, промовишући истовремено наратив о Кини као „ауторитарној опасности”. Пекинг је јачао инструменте који одговарају на опасности у погледу Тајвана, као и у погледу експанзије својих „интересних и стратешких граница” широм Глобалног југа, оснажујући тиме наратив о расту мултиполарности на уштрб америчког либералног хегемонизма.

**Кључне речи:** Кина, САД, Индо-Пацифик, Украјина, државништво, мултиполарност

