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Title US-Japan-China in a Liberal World Order: A Constructivist Approach to Analyze the US Trade War against the Two

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US-Japan-China in a Liberal World Order: A Constructivist Approach to Analyze the US Trade War Against the Two

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Abstract

The ideological compatibility facilitates the conflict resolution mechanism. This motif is dominant in the United States' relations with Japan. After WWII, Japan's aggressive tendencies were assuaged by its integration into the international arena. The integration transformed Japan's domestic political and economic systems to conform to the norms and values of the international liberal order. In return, it was given certain concessions, especially when it came to its trade war with America in the 1980s. On the other side, China, which has been declared a threat to America's national security, faces hostility and aggression from America. China's threat to US national security is guided by the ideological incompatibility between China and the United States. The constructivist approach is used in this paper to understand how the ideological paradigm differently informs US perceptions and foreign policy contours towards China and Japan in similar geopolitical settings.

Keywords: *Ideology, Trade War, Incompatibility, Constructivist, Perception, Foreign Policy*

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Introduction

The post-World War II settlement gave rise to the bipolar system, in which the United States, as one of the two superpowers, established a comprehensive network of multilateral organizations and regulatory regimes to modify and guide national behavioral patterns in the western half of the world. In late 60s, the ideological compatibility between the British and Americans facilitated the smooth power transition between the two; however, the USSR emerged as an ideological challenger to the liberal elements of the American-designed liberal order. China and many other decolonized states soon joined the Soviet bloc. While many other earlier imperialist regimes, such as those in Japan and Western Germany, defected to the United States, they adopted the values and ideals of liberalism. The competition was divided into two tiers: inter-bloc and intra-bloc. At the global level, ideological competition between superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—was sparked, while substructure competition within both blocs also crawled in. The Sino-Russian split and subsequent defection of China was a major setback for the communist bloc in intra-bloc politics, whereas healthy economic competition between Japan and the United States did not replicate the same fate. However, the new power structure brings the US and China face to face where the latter holds revisionist designs to embed Chinese characteristics in the international world order.

The rise of China as a peer competitor of the US clearly provoked a wedge between the two, and the US perceives the "China dream" as a primary threat to the "American dream". America considers it necessary to counter this threat by intimidating, even if necessary through open hostility, which was officially embedded first in Trump's and then Biden's national security documents. The paper discusses, firstly, the theoretical underpinnings and the rationale for prioritizing social constructivism over other traditional theories. Additionally, it highlights the root causes of the US-Japan trade entanglement, how historically it shuttled back-and-forth between accommodation and confrontation, and why Japan preferred to stay in the US-led international order. Furthermore, it stresses why the US decided on an antagonistic and hostile pathway to the Chinese political, economic, and military dreams. Finally, how will the US-China rivalry affect the future of global politics?

Theoretical Framework

The return of China as the center of global politics turned out to be the primary subject of discussion for political pundits, policymakers, and the global intelligentsia. China has not only surpassed America in terms of disproportionate production but has also excelled in the field of modern technology and innovation. Traditionally, analysts prefer to elaborate on America's foreign policy either through 'realism' or 'liberalism'. The former is more pessimistic in its approach to achieving 'national interest' at the expense of other states and will not hesitate to opt for destructive wars (Waltz, 1979;

Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008). While the latter is more optimistic and discards the realist's 'self-centrism' and believes in 'cooperation' and 'mitigation' in an anarchical world (Savigny & Marsden, 2011). Both theories are well established but contradictory, as realists believe in 'containment' while liberals believe in utopian integration.

Both believe in materialism and objectivity in world politics. The contours of various strands of liberalism, where human rights, democracy, and freedom of speech stay at the top, have very little room for a China determined to defend Chinese characteristics and socialism at any cost. Whereas the zero-sum aspect of realism holds negative tolerance for power sharing in global politics, that obviously pits the two giants—the US and China—on the collision path. However, they fail to analyze world politics through the prism of ideational perspectives, which are entrenched in the agency's identity, [mis]perceptions, cognition, ideology, values, norms, religious belief, and most importantly, socio-cultural, historical, and political orientation. Likewise, the traditional theories are reductionist and don't offer a comprehensive explanation.

Social constructivism is in denial with pure material-oriented theories (realism and liberalism) and offers ideational factors that play a role in the orientation and objective sense of the social and political world. For social constructivists, the material world is the result of the social and discursive construction of human agency. Additionally, identity, norms, ideas, beliefs, religion, perceptions, and historical makeup explain the political world more comprehensively than conventional thinking. They believe that it is the "*ideational and normative*" structure that shapes the political actors' identities and interests through the mechanisms of "*imagination, communication, and constraint*" (Reus-Smit, 2013a). Furthermore, they say that human actions get meaning through shared knowledge and that the material world in itself is meaningless (Wendt, 1995). Therefore, the presence of the material world is nothing; rather, it's the 'intersubjective' understanding and interpretation that constitute reality. Likewise, it is the state's leadership that, through discourse(s), constructs the state's identity and interests, and as a result, the action taken seems appropriate and legitimate. Interestingly, states identities and interests get influenced by the prevailing domestic and international norms, which in turn shape an actor's identity (Reus-Smit, 2013b). To comprehend the best, they follow methodologies like 'comparative historical case studies', 'ethnographic research', 'discourse analysis', and 'qualitative and quantitative content analysis' (Phillips, 2007). Social and political norms and values are central to the constructivist debate and define it as "*a standard of appropriate*

behavior laid out for an actor with a given identity" (Katzenstein, 1996). Compliance with social 'norms' and 'values' for an actor is necessary as it defines its identity and, as a result, legitimizes the action taken. In other words, following the 'logic of appropriateness', actors behave in a particular way that they believe is most appropriate to the situation and in line with their identity, subject to the adaptation and internalization of their practices (March & Olsen, 1998). In other words, norms and values gain legitimacy and acceptability after going through a whole life cycle.

Another, important ideational aspect is understanding and interpreting identity. Identity is how we differentiate ourselves from others, which might be positive, negative, or non-identity. To constructivists, identity is the mutual and discursive constitution of 'self' and 'other', 'we' versus 'they' 'in-group' and 'out-group' or 'domestic' vs. 'foreigner' that depends on whether the identity is 'oppositional' or 'complementary', for instance, 'enemy' or 'friend' (Kauppi & Viotti, 2020). However, identity is not fixed and is a very fluid and contestable concept. It is the product of human cognition and imagination in a given social and political environment where different actors are interacting with each other across various contexts. It is this 'otherness' that necessitates social norms, rules, practices, intersubjective meanings, and social relationships. Social constructivism seems more appropriate to analyze US-Japan and US-China trade relations, and more holistic and accommodative approaches were adopted to own Japan and declare China as a true competitor and hostile to the US-led world order. Japan framed itself following the world order led by US-led norms and values, while China, on the other hand, divorced itself from the US-led hegemonic identity and institutionalized 'norms' and 'values' validation in its foreign policy to define and shape the world order according to its own perceived social and political construction. The Chinese strategic desire to revise the liberal world order in accordance with China's dream proved to be a great shortcoming of modernization theory.

According to Professor Robert Art, a former CIA consultant, "*Of course we cannot know with certainty what course China will follow once it has reached the power it clearly desires, but we would do well to expect much the same for China as has happened with every other emergent great power of the modern era: its ambitions will grow as its capabilities increase*" (Art, 2010). One can deduce that a discourse of otherness is evolving in the policy circles of the US. It is rooted in the language of identity and security. Once such discourse is translated into the language of identity, then taking actions, even to wage war, becomes legitimately acceptable in a given context. It further demonstrates America's anxiety, grounded in their cognition through the 'culture of anarchy'¹ and competition

due to China's unprecedented advancement in the military, economy, and technology in relatively a short time.

The American dream is challenged by the Chinese dream, while Chinese exceptionalism is bent on eclipsing the narrative of American exceptionalism. By default, this struggle for the shift of normative power from Washington to Beijing poses a great challenge to the health of the American-led order. As the US-led order is institutionalized and propagated in the language of identity, any alternative is perceived as a security threat to the American dream. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) are manifestations of the Chinese dream to dislodge the liberal institutions of the world order, an extension of the American dream. To conclude, whether it was US-Japan trade relations or the ongoing US-China relations, the hegemon always looks through the prism of politics of identity and the institutionalization of international norms and values through the discursive construction of reality. It further indicates the study is also theory-driven, not following reductionism.

US-Japan relations post-WW-II: From Hostility to Friendship to

Rivalry

Even before the American Revolution, the various colonies were in contact with Pacific Rim states such as Japan and China for trade purposes. As time passed, this interest expanded to other spheres as well. However, Japan was a reserved state, and Americans were expanding outward. In 1853, Japan signed a trade agreement with America as a result of American gunboat diplomacy, but it was not well received in the country. Consequently, the anti-foreign movement took down Shogon's government in 1867 and led to Meiji restoration (Clements, 2017). The series of unequal treaties between Japan and America was an American move to control navigation and trade through the Pacific Ocean. The Meiji period embarked Japan on the path of modernization, and its lawyers and military experts were trained on European lines. After its victory in the 1905 Russo-Japan War, it emerged as a powerful stakeholder in regional power politics. However, the defeat at the Medway battle dashed its stature as a Pacific power on par with America, which ultimately entailed its unconditional surrender in August 1945. The Meiji constitution was suspended, and America introduced new constitutional, legal, structural, and institutional reforms (Dower, 2000). In other words, the democratization of Japan was initiated to bring it into the fold of the American-led liberal order.

US-Japan relations were exemplary until the late 1970s. However, at the start of the 1980s, when Japan excelled with America in trade under its trade policy to "*revitalize exports and free imports*", their relations resulted in friction. At this critical juncture, America started to perceive Japan as a rival and true competitor. As Walter Mondale, 42nd Vice-President of the United States argued "*We have to stop following that white flag and start running up the American flag and turn and fight and make America number one again in international commerce so that American jobs are filled in this country*". Similarly, Tip O'Neill (Speaker of the House) threatened to "*fix the Japanese like they've never been fixed before*," and Jack Brooks (Democratic Congressman) indicated that the "*US should have dropped four nuclear bombs on Japan, not just two*" (Tasker, 2018). The stronger Japanese trade clout was taken as an emerging challenge for the US economic position. Though Japan relaxed access to American products in its market, its trade deficit did not decrease significantly. Once again, the US forced Japan to import more and gave more concessions, especially in the high-tech industry. However, it did not work, and the US accused Japan of an anti-dumping policy, followed by 100-percent tariffs on Japanese products like computers, TVs, high-tech semiconductors, textiles, iron and steel, home appliances, and telecommunication (Bose, 2005).

In addition, the US blamed Japan for its excessive intervention in a market known as "state capitalism" and declared it was not a 'fully mature market economy' (Tsurumi, 1987). The US put maximum pressure on Japan to restructure its political and economic system. Despite all these initiatives, the US was still on the receiving end. In 1989, the United States and Japan signed the "Structural Impediments Initiative (SII)," which resulted in reforms in the fields of the 'Japanese circulation system', the removal of more 'tariff barriers', and the 'encouragement of US exports to Japan's market' (Mastanduno, 1992). It was this agreement that ensured American agricultural products had access to the Japanese market. Consequently, Japanese structural reform benefited its performance in the face of the trade war as compared to its negative consequences.

For example, in the 1980s, Japan surpassed America in the semiconductor industry and became the largest 'chip' supplier in the world. On the one hand, this triggered concerns in America about the loss of core technology and feelings of national security threat. On the other hand, President Reagan perceived Japan as the biggest economic threat and not only criticized Japan's 'national industrial policy' but also indicted them for stealing

US 'intellectual property' and dumping its products in the US market. Further, he accused Japan of selling sensitive American military technology to the former Soviet Union, an arch-rival of the former. According to Auerbach (1986):

“President Reagan ordered stiff penalties on \$300 million worth of Japanese products in retaliation for Tokyo's failure to keep an eight-month-old semiconductor trade agreement. The goods include some computers, disc drives, color, and black-and-white televisions, tape player combinations with radios or phonographs, electric motors, floppy discs, power hand tools, and X-ray film. The action, the first U.S. retaliation against Japan on trade, drew praise from high-technology industries and from Republicans and Democrats on Capitol Hill who are considering trade legislation”.

These and other measures forced Japan not only to share semiconductor technologies but also to import more American-made semiconductor products. America was more concerned about its military-industrial surveillance. In retaliation, the American FBI arrested six executives of Hitachi and accused them of stealing IBM technology. Likewise, Fujitsu was discouraged from purchasing Fairchild Semiconductor, a pioneer of America's high-technology industries and the mother company of Silicon Valley (Rempel & Walters, 1987). Interestingly, at that time, Fujitsu was owned by the French, not the Japanese. In the end, Japan showed more flexibility to accommodate by giving more access to its market to the US. Japan also joined the US sanctions regime against the Soviet Union in the wake of Soviet aggression in Afghanistan. It evinces that the US-Japan trade dispute was negotiated by professional, cool-headed specialists, but it still took more than a decade to settle the differences that were having less effect on the global financial market. Japan took advantage of its 'special relations' with the US and played to extract maximum strategic concessions. Japanese military dependence on the US made it pliable to US economic demands. The reason was simple: Japan had preferred to follow the institutionalized norms and values of the US-led liberal international order in its spirit.

On one side, it was the Japanese perception that it was in the best interest to follow and not confront the US, while on the other hand, the latter, put the former into the bracket of 'Kantian Culture'² since WW-II. Notwithstanding all these relaxation efforts and concessions, the US has never recovered from the trade deficit with Japan, even today. Japan never challenged the US hegemonic position in the region and beyond and preferred to stay and

benefit from the US-led order as a 'status quo' and 'satisfied power'.³ Although America and Japan had embittered economic relations, they were not severe because of in-group identical construction. After some policy measures, ideologically coherent countries can resolve their conflict. And as the confusion was resolved by the policy measures, America relinquished the idea of recognizing Japan as an economic threat. In other words, the mitigation of the trade war entrenched how the US and Japan socially and politically constructed, perceived, and accommodated each other through the identity discourse of 'we group'.

US-China Relations: A Historical Mix-up

Before discussing in detail the US misperceptions regarding China, it is necessary to first set the historical stage in order to understand US-China relations and China's earlier obeisance to the US world order that catapulted it to the rank of the second-biggest economy in the world. US-China relations go back to the 18th century, during Guangzhou's Empress.⁴ However, formal bilateral diplomatic relations started in 1868 when both states exchanged diplomatic missions (Dolin, 2013). During this era, America perceived China as an opportunity to conduct and expand trade beyond the shores of the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, despite the Chinese resistance to foreign trade. To minimize Chinese anxieties, the US remained benevolent during the 'Opium Wars' (Lazich, 2006).

Almost throughout the 19th century, US-China relations were a mix of accommodation and intransigence due to divergence in ideological affinities. After the 19th century, the US initiated the 'Open Door Notes' of 1899 (Esthus, 1959). The policy was crafted to win Chinese trust to continue trade and diplomatic relations with the US and also to ensure that major European powers respect its territorial sovereignty and administrative integrity. This policy also ensured that American travelers and traders capitalized on the voyaging opportunity to China, which resulted in idealizing the latter as an imaginative society rich in culture and romance. However, in 1912, the Qing dynasty was toppled, and China was declared a republic under the nationalist leadership of Dr. Sun Yat-sen. Internal instability and external threats to China were at their highest during this period. Another civil war between Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang-led government and the Chinese Communist Party kicked off in China. The Japanese occupation temporarily ceased their fight twice but resumed immediately after the termination of WWII. In the civil war, the Mao Zedong-led Communist Party emerged victorious. American support for the

nationalists was grounded in Western liberal political (promotion and protection of democracy) and economic (capitalism) identities.

However, when WWII broke out and the US was forced to be part of the Allied Powers against Imperial Japan and Hitler's Germany, the US extended its all-out support to fight against the 'Axis Powers' to both communists and nationalists China. The democratic US buttressed communists both in China and Russia to defeat greater evils—Imperial Japan and Hitler's Germany—for a free world. After the triumph of 'Communist Mao' and the retreat of 'Nationalist Chiang' to Taiwan (Formosa), US foreign policy was based on no diplomatic relations and brought sanctions against mainland China, even declaring it 'Red China'. The Chinese "Cultural Revolution" further enhanced the gulf between the two ideologically different states (Kaufman, 1998). It was in the late 1960s and later in the 1970s that America reconfigured its foreign policy towards China due to multiple reasons, i.e., to benefit from the Sino-Russo split, to recover from economic stagnation, and to shift its economic base towards the huge Chinese market. Backdoor diplomacy worked, and China was awarded a permanent seat at the UNSC and then recognition in January 1979. Till the 1970s, America's foreign policy constructed and perceived China as a threat, which was replaced with a new discursive construction in its foreign policy circle.

Scholars believe that China was more eager to establish relations with the West. The opening of China to the world materialized during the Deng Xiaoping era in 1979. His foreign policy can be summed up in his famous saying, "It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice. "However, both were having divergent identities, as Morris mentioned, "*China and the United States have always been engaged to produce and depict primarily definite identities for themselves, which when confluence stand at opposing poles to each other*" (Morris, 2012). In the West, Deng's initiative to open China was taken as an opportunity to constructively engage China. It had at least twofold benefits: this engagement would ultimately democratize China and allow America to access China's cheap labor. American foreign policy circles discursively constructed a new discourse about Chinese identity as "modern," "civilized," "progressive," and most importantly, 'capitalist' that not only justified formal diplomatic engagements but would ultimately lead to influencing China's political system. In its true essence, China was undemocratic, authoritarian, and communist. In US policy documents, Chinese identity was transmuted from 'Red China' or 'Communist China' to 'The People's Republic of China' or impartial 'China' (Turner, 2014).

President Reagan said in 1982 that the US would not interfere in Chinese domestic affairs and had no intention to violate its territorial sovereignty (Downen, 1982). Further, it would stick to the 'One China Policy' and respect China's official position towards Taiwan. During this period, US policymakers downplayed Chinese human rights violations due to economic interests and in the hope that China would accept the US-liberal political order sooner or later. During this time, America benefited from its trade relations with China as compared to 1980s US-Japan trade relations. China's companies had not competed head-to-head with American companies. Their multinational companies like 'chipmakers', 'casinos', 'Apple', 'Walmart,' etc. benefited more. China was the third-largest trading partner after Canada and Mexico and exported more than Japan and Germany collectively. That was one of the main reasons that in America, 'anti-China' sentiments were below the threshold. Michael Crichton, in 'Rising Sun', a novel and movie, depicted Japan as notorious for controlling the American high-tech industry while China became a stakeholder in Hollywood films like "Darkest Hour'.

China Economic Rise: Material and Ideational Roots

The Chinese economic rise was the result of opening its market to the external world in general, to the West, and especially to the US. Inspired by US economic, technological, and industrial development, it welcomed foreign investors to benefit from their experience and install industries inside China. Initially, the US 'romance' with China continued till the mid-1990s, when the balance of payments and surplus trade were in favor of the former. However, since the late-1970s, benefiting from trade and economic liberalization, Chinese GDP has doubled annually, and its economy has on average doubled every eight years (Morrison, 2019). In the coming years, the Chinese will come into open competition in the fields of technology, economic growth, artificial intelligence, and the establishment of parallel and competitive international institutions. It was this unprecedented and unexpected rise that changed American perceptions of China.

In 2017, the Chinese economy overtook the US in purchasing power parity (PPP) (Tang, 2020). It is now considered the world's largest manufacturer and consumer and holds the largest foreign currency reserves (People's Daily, 2019). Now Chinese companies like 'Alibaba', 'Tencent', 'Huawei', 'ZTE' etc. have increased their foothold worldwide and are considered prime competitors of the leading US companies. As cited by 'Fortune' that the number of Chinese companies globally has surpassed that of

American companies (Murray & Meyer, 2020). Another indication was the global financial crisis in 2008, when China not only survived but also unprecedentedly turned into the driver of the global economy. While the West at large and America, in particular, had to overcome the crisis, China fitted itself as the world's largest exporter of goods and leading trading nation, expanding to 124 countries (Monaghan, 2014).

Likewise, China has prioritized innovation and technology to modernize and increase its industrial capabilities. In 2015, the CCP officially announced the 'Made in China 2025' plan for high-tech manufacturing, which included robotics and 'smart manufacturing'. To promote the industry, Chinese authorities provided subsidies, minimum-interest loans, strong support for domestic industries, and the pursuit of intellectual property rights (McBride & Chatzky, 2019). Two years later, in 2017, China released a state-level strategy to develop artificial intelligence (AI) entitled 'New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan' to earn \$150 billion and also to become the world leader in AI by 2030 (Roberts et al., 2020). Under the modernization process, China has also geared up the automotive sector, which mainly consists of manufacturing processes, high-speed railways, QR-code payments, facial recognition, 5G communication, and cybersecurity (Xinhua, 2017). Currently, China is the largest automaker and auto market. Shenzhen city is known as the 'Chinese Silicon Valley' and is now one of the leading cities in advanced technology.

Traditionally, China has allocated around 2 percent of its GDP to the military. However, due to rapid economic and technological modernization, it has increased its military expenditure to around 10 percent of GDP, from \$108 billion in 2008 to \$239 billion in 2018 (Maizland, 2020). In 2022, China increased its military budget to \$229.5 billion; a nominal increase of 7.1 percent. China currently ranks among the world's most advanced militaries. The military is a focus area due to internal and external challenges. According to the Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China (2019), for the protection of socialism, internal stability, deterring external threats, safeguarding China's overseas interests, and the survival of the CPC, a strong military has become an indispensable component of China's strategic thinking. It has also established permanent military base in Djibouti and heavily invested in and leased several strategically important overseas ports. The term 'overseas interests' became frequent in China's policy documents.

China is an integral part of the core multinational organizations guided by the liberal norms of the world order. Apart from that, it is also struggling for a parallel structure to balance the US influence. As China rises, new neologies make their way into global politics, such as "Beijing Consensus", "Harmonious World", "Shared Future," etc., to counter Western dominance through language. China's alternatives have great appeal in semi-democratic and authoritarian states, especially in Africa and Asia. China is now playing a leading role in fighting alarming non-traditional security issues like terrorism, pandemic diseases (Covid-19), deforestation, etc. The US distrust of China goes beyond the trade deficit and is grounded right into ideological incompatibility. China is known both as a 'nation state' and a "Lenin-inspired party state," with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at the helm of affairs. In the case of China's parliament, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China officials control state affairs, where the General Secretary stays at the top and serves as president of the country. Now the party has been personalized after 2018, during which President Xi will remain as the party head until his departure.

From 'Red China' to 'Cooperative to 'Hostile China': A Perceived Threat to US Hegemony

During the 'Republican' and 'Democratic' administrations, American policymakers have socially and discursively mapped China differently. Soon after the formation of the CCP, America declared it "Red China" and distanced itself due to its ideological 'otherness'. Since the 1970s, it has been constructed as 'Cooperative China', which would result in serving American economic interests on one side and, on the other side, expecting that it [China] would embrace the US-led international political and economic order. It was through these expectations that Clinton characterized China as a "strategic partner", Bush Junior as a "responsible stakeholder", and Obama called it a partnership based on "mutual respect and win-win cooperation" (Kwan, 2019). However, the US official position went through a drastic transformation from partnership to competitor during the Trump administration, and the Biden administration inherited it with full vigor.

However, the Chinese's unfair economic practices, technological advancement, and military modernization changed the perception of President

Trump and his successor, which resulted in declaring the former a "revisionist power" and "strategic competitor". America constructed, interpreted, manipulated, and legitimized a discourse of 'otherness' against China. American policymakers, particularly since President Trump securitized China through the language of identity and security, have, for example, emphasized in the 2017 National Security Strategy Report that the foundation of national security lies in 'economic security'. The 2018 US National Security Strategy clearly deviated from the previous narrative when it came to China: "China and Russia are now undermining the international order from within the system by exploiting its benefits while simultaneously undercutting its principles and "rules of the road ""(DoD, 2018). The Biden administration's National Security Strategy repeatedly raised concerns over China's revisionist approach to the liberal world: "The PRC is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The doctrine clearly drew a line in the sand between the autocratic world and the democratic world, championed by China and the US, respectively.

Previously, US policymakers' accommodation of China as a member of the international community was based on the perception that it would wholeheartedly accept western political, economic, and liberal values grounded in human rights institutionalization. However, the Chinese "selective acceptance" disappointed the Americans, resulting in a shift in its policy from 'engagement' to 'decoupling," aiming to constrain China's growing influence in international politics. It was these perceived and constructed threats in American leaders' cognition that led them to take such aggressive measures against their Chinese counterpart.

For example, the top tier of Americans, including presidents and vice presidents, has been vocal about China's human rights violations in Tibet and Xinjian and its aggressive policies in the South China Sea. Even amidst the Ukraine war, the US declared the Indo-Pacific theatre a priority (Al Jazeera , 2022). Based on the construction of policymakers, the former and incumbent President of the US declared Chinese trade practices "unfair' and imposed more tariffs on Chinese goods and services, restricted its investments in high-tech sectors, and registered a case against China at the WTO forum. American policymakers declared China the primary threat to its national security through the discursive dominant discourse of identity. The rise of China as an economic

power supported by its increasing defense budget led to anxieties about a possible takeover of the supply and demand chain in the American policy circle. As Mike Pompeo, Secretary of State, stated, "*Our goal was to make clear that the threats to Americans that President Trump's China policy aims to address are clear and our strategy for securing those freedoms established*" (U.S. Department Of State, 2020).

To social constructivists, interpreting these statements echoes the US apprehension about the perceived Chinese threat and its readiness to inflame the conflict in the future. By making repetitive appeals to discourses, the US has not only institutionalized the Chinese threat but also differentiated 'itself' from the Chinese 'other'. This also supports our arguments that threats are not real but imaginary and perceived, and it is the perception that we are responding to. Once a state is put in the 'other' category, then consensus develops through intersubjective agreements by declaring someone, in our case, China, as a real threat, and a response to it seems legitimate and necessary.

For example, Huawei and ZTE have been declared a security threat due to their goals for espionage and have been banned from their sales in the US (Morell & Kris, 2018). Even the allies have been asked to follow suit. Likewise, American universities are now discouraging Chinese students in the high-tech industrial research area, and Chinese workers of ethnic origin in different technological and industrial sectors have been fired due to accusations of stealing sensitive secrets and then passing them to China. The "cooperative Chinese discourse" has been replaced with a new 'Red Scare' discourse (Trivedi, 2019).

Our stance has been supported by Steven Bannon, who stated, "*One of us (the USA or China) is going to be a hegemon in 25 or 30 years, and it's going to be them if we go down this path.*" He went on to predict: "*If we continue to lose it, we're five years away, I think, ten years at the most, from hitting an inflection point from which we'll never be able to recover*" (Kuttner, 2017). This is a typical example of how the US symbolizes someone as a 'friend', 'competitor,' or 'rival,' the very essence of social constructivism. Now, fighting a war on all fronts seems necessary and legitimate, and all possible engagements must be taken to contain the rising China. Historically, the West constructed China as the "Yellow Peril", which means cunning and immoral and has been replaced now in the American policy circle with the "Red Peril" (Ooi & D'Arcangelis, 2017). Now that US policymakers have constructed China as a 'revisionist' and an

‘existential’ threat to the American-led order and norms and values through dominant discourse, they must be contained, even if necessary through the use of force.

On the other side, Chinese officials responding to these allegations believe that the "*real motive of the USA in waging a trade war is to contain China as a challenger to US hegemony and assert that the view of China as an unfair trader is groundless and nothing more than an excuse*" (Kwan, 2019b). Further, they believe that the US follows a "*60% rule*", and whoever reaches that level, the US starts declaring it a rival like Japan in the 1980s and now China. To the US policy circle, China is a threat to the ‘America First Principle’, which is a far more bitter rival than both the Soviet Union and Japan previously. The purpose is not merely reducing its trade deficit with China but also addressing the perceived threat of dominance in the future.

Conclusion

To conclude, the US stands to defend liberal ideals inculcated in the international world order. The US draws its power from its designed liberal world order, and any threats to the health of the world order will have serious consequences for America's global status. In this regard, whether it was Japan in the 1980s or currently China, the US will not tolerate any alternative to its moral values grounded in American ‘exceptionalism’ and ‘moralism’ or those who descend in line within the prism of ‘we group’. In the case of the US-Japan trade war, Japan surrendered to the US-led international political, economic, and military system. In other words, Japan wholeheartedly welcomed the US-propagated liberal values and norms on one side and accommodated the US’s anxieties to avoid further conflict on the other. However, China follows different directions in terms of its economic policies, ideology (Confucianism), and political system, which are in disparity with the US identity and ideology. All ideological inconsistencies are evoking an alternative structure at the cost of American global standing.

The US has embraced a confrontational path to counter China's vocal criticism of human rights violations in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong. The US is knitting regional alliances with like-minded states to counter China in the Indo-Pacific. The US vision of maintaining and cementing its Wilsonian-style, rules-based world order has been consistently challenged by the rise of various undemocratic regimes. In China, the overarching authoritarian structure has

delivered on its promise of economic empowerment to the masses. US-China relations, therefore, are at a crossroads. The Cold War policy approach touted by State Department hawks reflects merely a policy approach and not an inevitability. US-China economic and trade ties combined with China's rising role in matters of global importance give it an increasing role as a partner that cannot be shunned or treated as an adversary.

While the future remains contested with the US willingly asserting its policy of containment and aggressive policies undermining core Chinese ideals such as pro-Taiwan policy, Chinese strategic culture will consider the impacts of a long-standing conflict that can be detrimental to achieving the regime's goals. Therefore, while the future remains one of predominant tension and contestation both in terms of spheres of influence and greater role in global affairs, US-China relations will remain a complicated mix of conflict, cooperation, ideological contestation, and battling for regional power brokering. Last but not least, the US-China trade war will get worse with each passing day. However, the tension will remain short of war, and in any war scenario, the US will ultimately reverse China's four decades of economic achievement. That is why China must avoid war and keep on pursuing debate, dialogue, and discussion. It must engage the international community through international institutions, lobbies, and soft power influence. Last but not least, the US must respect China's red lines, crossing which can lead to unwanted disaster for not just the region but for the whole world.

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¹ Kantian culture of anarchy, the posture is that of friends, not hostile, and rooted in the perception of social construction of relations

² Kantian culture of anarchy, the posture is that of friends, not hostile, and rooted in the perception of social construction of relations

³ The concepts of ‘status quo’ and ‘satisfied power’ have been borrowed from Organski’s ‘Power Transition Theory’ (1958).

⁴ Empress of China was the name of the first vessel to reach China’s city of Guangzhou (Canton) in 1784. It didn’t carry any diplomatic mission but was for the purpose of trade.