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Great Powers' Struggle: Is the World Heading Toward Bipolarity Again?

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ABSTRACT

After the 2020 pandemic, there has been an increasing academic discourse describing the emergence of a new bipolar international system centered around the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). This article aims to test the hypothesis that "the struggle between these superpowers, as seen in the reshaped global order following the 2020 pandemic, will once again bring about a 'bipolar world order' similar to that of the Cold War." In this context, the conceptual framework of the bipolar world order will be outlined, followed by an analysis of the national power elements of the two countries within the framework of realist theory. The international implications of their competition will then be analyzed in the conclusion. A quantitative research method will be employed to collect the necessary data, which will be analyzed using content analysis techniques. Finally, the accuracy of the tested hypothesis will be discussed and evaluated.

Keywords: United States of America, People's Republic of China, Great Power, Rivalry, Bipolar World Order.

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Büyük Güçler Mücadelesi: Dünya Yeniden İkili Kutuplaşmaya mı Gidiyor?

ÖZ

2020 yılındaki pandemiden sonra "Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (ABD) ve Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti (ÇHC) etrafında oluşan iki kutuplu bir uluslararası sistem yeniden ortaya çıkmaya başladı" tanımlamaları son zamanlarda akademik alanda artış göstermiştir. Bu makale ile "zamanımızın süper güçleri olan bu devletlerin mücadelesi, 2020 pandemisiyle yeniden şekillenen küresel düzende ortaya konulduğu gibi, Soğuk Savaş'ta olduğu üzere, yeniden 'iki kutuplu bir dünya düzeni' getirecektir" hipotezi test edilecektir. Bu bağlamda iki kutuplu dünya düzeninin kavramsal çerçevesi çizilecek, devamında iki ülkenin ulusal güç unsurları realist teori çerçevesinde araştırılacak ve sonuç bölümünde rekabetlerinin uluslararası sonuçları analiz edilecektir. Çalışmada nicel araştırma yöntemi kullanılarak gerekli veriler toplanmış ve bu veriler içerik analizi tekniği ile analiz edilmiştir. Sonuçta test edilen hipotezin doğruluğu tartışılarak bir değerlendirme yapılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti, Büyük Güç, Rekabet, İki Kutuplu Dünya Düzeni.

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INTRODUCTION

This study explores the potential shift toward a bipolar world order in the 21st century, driven by the deepening rivalry between the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China

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(PRC). This intensifying competition between the world's two l argest economies and military powers has profound implications for the structure of global politics, international alliances, economic policies, and security frameworks. The article analyzes the conceptual framework of the "bipolar world order," which traditionally refers to a global structure dominated by two primary powers or "poles," each influencing political, economic, and security landscapes to support its interests and ideology. Historically, the Cold War era exemplified a bipolar world order, with the US and the Soviet Union each leading vast blocs of aligned states and rivaling one another across multiple domains. The possibility of a new bipolarity suggests a return to a more clearly divided world, contrasting with the multipolar system that emerged following the Soviet Union's dissolution.

Building on previous research, this article makes a unique contribution by integrating both theoretical and empirical approaches to assess the emerging the US-PRC rivalry. It offers a rigorous, comparative analysis of national power elements, combining realist theory with quantitative research methods and content analysis. This approach provides an original perspective on the shifting dynamics between these two superpowers. Additionally, the article contributes to the discourse by examining the often-overlooked role of third-party nations that strategically navigate this rivalry, aiming to maintain diplomatic and economic flexibility. Through this multidimensional approach, the article seeks to deepen understanding of the new bipolar framework, emphasizing the distinct paths of influence that the US and China exert on global institutions and regional alliances.

To research this possibility, the article first outlines a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of bipolarity within international relations, drawing from realist theory. The article then explores the 'national power elements' of both nations, analyzing their strengths and weaknesses in areas such as economic scale, military capacity, technological advancement, and soft power. These elements underpin each country's global influence, and are discussed to assess how the two nations compare in terms of strategic advantages and vulnerabilities. By examining trends in foreign policy, economic engagement, and military investments, the study highlights areas where the US-China competition is most acute, including the Indo-Pacific region, global technology standards, energy security, and military reach. It also explores how other nations—particularly those in Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East—navigate this emerging rivalry, often balancing relations with both superpowers.

In the conclusion, the article discusses the validity of its tested hypothesis: that the ongoing competition between the US and China is not just a short-term geopolitical contest but

a structural shift with the potential to reshape global order. The study considers whether we are witnessing the foundations of a new bipolar era that could result in renewed global tension and divided international alliances. Additionally, it contemplates how this shift might impact global institutions, such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), which were established in the post-World War II era to support multilateralism. In this context, the article ultimately aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how a re-emerging bipolar structure might shape the global future.

Hypotehesis, Research Design, Methodology and Limititation

This article hypothesizes that "the struggle between the US and the PRC will lead to the emergence of a new 'bipolar world order', similar to the geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War. This emerging rivalry, characterized by the strategic competition for global influence, could lead to a new division of the world into spheres of influence, with countries aligning with either the US or China to pursue shared economic, military, and geopolitical interests. As such, countries clustered around these two superpowers may act together to create a new bipolar world order, further intensifying global rivalries and reshaping international alignments.

To explore this possibility, the national power elements of both the US and China will be examined within the framework of realist theory, which posits that states act primarily to maximize their power and ensure their security. The analysis will focus on selected parameters that include military strength, economic influence, technological advancements, and soft power, which collectively define a nation's ability to shape global dynamics. Quantitative research methods will be employed to collect relevant data, which will then be analyzed using content analysis techniques. This data-driven approach will allow for a comprehensive examination of the current power balance between The US and China and their potential trajectories.

The study's limitation lies in its focus on a specific combination of four national power elements: military strength, economic influence, technological capacity, and soft power. While these factors are crucial in understanding global power structures, the study does not encompass other potential elements, such as political ideologies, environmental sustainability, or soft power tactics like diplomatic influence. Nevertheless, by focusing on these key areas, the research will provide valuable insights into how the ongoing the US-China rivalry might reshape the international order and the implications for third-party countries navigating this increasingly polarized global landscape.

The Conceptual Framework of Bipolar World Order

A bipolar world order is often defined as a global system in which power is concentrated between two dominant superpowers, with their influence extending over military, economic, technological, and cultural spheres. This order tends to create an environment where both superpowers and their weaker allies continuously monitor, compete, and strive for superiority. Wayman (1984) characterizes this structure as a "system in which the majority of global military, economic, technological, and cultural influence is concentrated between two superpowers," each with a network of allied states. Bipolarity, as Morgenthau (1985) notes, can present both opportunities and dangers, as the system holds the potential for both cooperation and destructive rivalry.

The Cold War era provides a historical example of bipolarity, where The US and the Soviet Union represented the two hegemonic superpowers. From the end of World War II until the mid-1960s, the global order was defined by political, military, economic, and nuclear competition between these two nations. Waltz (1964) identifies four critical features of this period: 1) the lack of significant peripheries or third superpowers; 2) intense competition, particularly in military and technological domains; 3) constant pressures and crises that maintained global instability; and 4) the importance of even minor shifts in the balance of power between the two superpowers, which could have significant global ramifications.

Bipolarity is not solely a structure of competition, but also one of cooperation. Maher (2018: 496-498.) argues that the dynamic between the two dominant powers involves both rivalry and collaboration, such as during arms control negotiations between The US and the Soviet Union. This tension between cooperation and competition suggests that while bipolarity can maintain international stability by providing clear global power structures, it can also generate significant security risks. The focus on military and nuclear armament, in particular, often results in an arms race that can destabilize global peace.

While a bipolar world order may contribute to maintaining global stability, it often results in increased military readiness and economic rivalry. In such a system, national security strategies are frequently driven by the imperative to counterbalance the opposing power, leading to a focus on both conventional and nuclear armaments. This intense rivalry can escalate the likelihood of conflict, either through direct military engagements or proxy wars" (Waltz, 2000: 36-37). Thus, while bipolarity has the potential to foster global stability through clear power delineation, it also creates an environment where competition, armament, and the risk of

catastrophic conflict are central features. The Cold War serves as a clear historical example of the complexities and dangers inherent in such an international system, where the balance of **power** was essential in preventing global war but also pushed the superpowers toward nuclear escalation (Gaddis 2005: 45-46).

The Power Competition of the US and PRC

It is important to emphasize that assessing national power is a complex and multifaceted work, with different methodologies and perspectives on how to measure and compare it. In this study, the national power of the US and the PRC is assessed solely on a combination of military power, economic influence, technological advances, and soft power.

Overview of the US' Global Power

The US is widely recognized as one of the world's most powerful nations. It possesses the most powerful military, with significant capabilities for power projection and global reach, supported by a large defense budget, robust force structure, and advanced military technology. The US military maintains a strong global presence with numerous bases and deployments.

In terms of human resources, the US military is the third-largest in the world, with 1.39 million active personnel. The US Navy, particularly, includes aircraft carriers and advanced warships, providing maritime dominance. With approximately 332,000 active-duty personnel, the Navy operates 11 nuclear-powered aircraft carriers—more than any other country—which provide the US with unparalleled global reach and versatility. These carriers serve as mobile airbases, enabling The US to conduct a range of operations, from high-intensity combat missions to humanitarian relief efforts. The US Air Force has 319,000 personnel with the largest fleet in the world, with over 5,500 advanced aircraft, including 354 F-35A Lightning II fighter jets (Air Force Magazine, 2023). Additionally, the US military expenditure is in the 3th rank in the world with 3.5% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Statista 2023).

Strategists assume that three dynamics would size and shape the US military power in the future: 1) guidance to focus on PRC, 2) demands from day-to-day operations and, 3) potantiel recruiting challenges. And also the US Army's force development plans six major initiatives: 1) long range precision fires, 2) next generation combat vehicles (including robotics), 3) future vertical lift (including attack unmanned systems), 4) air and missile defense systems, 5) soldier lethality (next generation squad weapons), 6) Army network (including cyber electronic warfare units). On the other hand, it is evaluated that maritime and air forces

should strengthen their power than army, because of the Pacific theater's geostrategic and topographic situation (Cancian 2021: 6-16).

The US's defense budget is 715 billion USD with a 1.6 % increase again in 2022 after a decrease in 2021. It is understood that the President Biden's Administration wanted to focus on ensuring the armed forces equipped to deter adversaries, modernized, defend their people, interests, allies and defeat threats effectively (US Department of the Treasury 2024: 1-4). With 3.6 million personnel stationed in over 4,800 sites in 160 countries, the US military operates under nine Combatant Commands, which include: 1) Africa Command, 2) Central Command, 3) Cyber Command, 4) European Command, 5) Indo-Pacific Command, 6) Northern Command, 7) Southern Command, 8) Space Command, 9) Special Operations Command, Strategic Command, and Transportation Command (The US Department of Defense 2024a).

The US maintains the world's largest economy, valued at 25.46 trillion USD in 2022, representing a significant share of global GDP (The World Bank 2024a). This robust economic foundation is supported by a diverse industrial base, a leading position in high-tech industries, technological innovation, and a strong entrepreneurial culture, which collectively enhance its influence in the global economy. The US dollar's role as the dominant global reserve currency further consolidates the nation's financial power, as does the global reach of its multinational corporations, such as Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon. Per capita, the country's GDP reached 70,248 USD in 2022, with a population of approximately 331.9 million. However, recent economic challenges, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, have impacted The US economy significantly, leading to inflation rates as high as 8% in 2022, marking the highest levels in decades (The World Bank 2024a).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching consequences on the US economy, similar to its impact on other countries worldwide. The pandemic disrupted supply chains, reduced consumer spending, and led to unprecedented government intervention in the form of stimulus packages. The inflationary pressures that followed have posed ongoing challenges, as rising prices affected consumer purchasing power and led to shifts in monetary policy. These effects have highlighted the interdependent nature of the global economy and emphasized the importance of resilient economic planning in the US.

Since the Industrial Revolution, the US has been at the forefront of technological and scientific innovation, which has driven economic growth and maintained its competitive edge. In recent years, countries that focus on technological innovation have advanced further in the

global economy, with the US Department of State underscoring the importance of science, technology, and innovation as key pillars of national leadership. Four dedicated offices within the Department of State support this agenda: The Office of Science and Technology Cooperation, The Office of the Science and Technology Adviser to the Secretary of State, The Office of Space Affairs, and The Office of Artificial Intelligence (The US Department of State 2023).

The US is a global leader in high-tech sectors such as information technology, biotechnology, aerospace, defense, and advanced manufacturing. American companies like Google, Amazon, and Apple are at the forefront of developing transformative technologies in Artificial Intelligence (AI), data science, and cloud computing. Apple, for example, stands as the world's most valuable technology company, with a market capitalization reaching approximately 2.7 trillion USD by 2022 (WIPO 2023). The company has expanded from computer manufacturing to creating mobile devices and even exploring virtual and augmented reality through its "Metaverse" development, a venture expected to redefine digital engagement and commerce. AI represents one of the most significant technological advances shaping the 21st century, and the US is a key player in this field. AI has broad applications across industries, from healthcare to finance, and American companies like Google's Deep Mind and Microsoft's Open AI division are pushing the boundaries of machine learning and neural networks. In quantum computing, which promises to revolutionize data processing and encryption, IBM and Google are leading the way with significant breakthroughs. Quantum technology is expected to have major implications for national security, financial modeling, and drug discovery, further cementing the US's leadership in high-tech innovation (US Department of State 2023).

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, cybersecurity has emerged as a critical area for technological development. The US has invested heavily in cybersecurity infrastructure to protect its digital economy and secure its networks from threats. Agencies like the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) play a crucial role in maintaining the integrity of US digital systems, while private-sector firms such as Cisco and Palo Alto Networks are global leaders in cybersecurity solutions. The strategic importance of cybersecurity is amplified by the US's dependency on its digital economy, where e-commerce and digital payments play a substantial role.

The US is also advancing in clean energy technology, which aligns with global efforts to combat climate change. American companies like Tesla lead in electric vehicle production and battery technology, while other firms, such as NextEra Energy, are expanding renewable

energy sources. Investment in green technology has become a focal point of the US innovation policy, driven by initiatives such as the Inflation Reduction Act, which allocated billions for clean energy development. Innovations in renewable energy storage, electric grids, and emissions reduction place the US at the forefront of environmental technology, an area critical for future economic sustainability. The Global Innovation Index 2021, published by the World Intellectual Property Organization, ranked the US third among 132 economies, with Switzerland taking the top spot. This ranking reflects the country's sustained investment in research and development and its commitment to fostering an environment conducive to innovation (WIPO 2023).

Joseph Nye (2004: 5-6) describes "soft power" as the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment. For the US, soft power arises largely from the global appeal of its culture, political ideals, and policies. American popular culture—movies, TV shows, music, and fashion—has a significant global impact, bolstering the country's image abroad. Hollywood, as a leading film industry, has played an essential role in this cultural influence. From 1985 to 1990, the US film revenues from foreign markets grew significantly, reaching 1.65 billion USD from 740 million USD, with substantial growth in countries such as South Korea, Brazil, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Japan (Wagheilether 2001).

American music has also become a powerful cultural export, with genres like jazz, rock, hip-hop, and R&B originating from the nation's multicultural history. Since the 20th century, American musicians such as Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson, and Beyoncé have achieved global fame, shaping fashion, hairstyles, and lifestyles internationally (Prada 2006). The English language, spoken by 1.27 billion people globally as of 2020, serves as a lingua franca in business, diplomacy, and academia, amplifying the US's cultural reach. Additionally, American universities attract substantial numbers of international students, enhancing cultural and academic exchange (The World Bank 2024b). The US also holds substantial influence in international organizations and alliances, with particular strength in NATO, where it plays a leading role in defense and security decision-making. Since World War II, it has used its political, economic, and military power to shape a global order characterized by democratic governance, open markets, and multilateral cooperation. This influence has contributed to a world order in which the US is seen as a stabilizing force in international relations.

The US' role as a global superpower is supported by a combination of economic strength, technological innovation, high-tech industry leadership, cultural influence, and

strategic leadership. As challenges emerge—from inflation to international competition—the US continues to adapt, striving to maintain its position in a rapidly evolving world order. The resilience of its institutions, combined with an ability to innovate and a commitment to global engagement, enables the US to project influence across multiple spheres, reinforcing its status as a preeminent power on the global stage.

Examination of PRC's Rise as a Global Power

Since the 2000s, the international political economy has evolved from a bipolar system into a more multipolar one, where the PRC has risen as a global power. Close cooperation with Russia, which shares a similar international policy goal and serves as another pole of opposition to The US and the West, has accelerated China's rise (Trenin 2015: 9). The Bush Administration's post-9/11 security strategies have also contributed to the PRC being increasingly perceived as a global threat. This section examines the recent rise of China in terms of its military, economic, technological, scientific, and socio-cultural advancements.

Since the PRC was founded in 1949, China has transitioned after a wide range models from socialist to Maoist economy to a more open, mixed economy. From this point onward, China began implementing a strategy focused on integrating its economy into the global system and advancing reform efforts, while simultaneously working to strengthen all elements of its national power. The first phase of the grand strategy introduced in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping's leadership aimed to transform China into an economic power through a planned economy model. The economic development resulting from this strategy allowed China to effectively capitalize on the vacuum left in the international system after the Cold War. As a result, China's rapidly growing economy began to bear fruit by the mid-1990s, drawing global attention to the nation. The critical question here is whether China's rapid economic growth will ultimately challenge the existing international system. The second phase of China's grand strategy focuses on channeling regional resources into China and reintegrating Taiwan with the mainland. The final stage envisions leveraging this advanced economic development to build military power and establish China as a "superpower." In a notable departure from previous leaders, Xi Jinping has openly expressed China's ambition to become a superpower, announcing at the most recent Party Congress that they aim to create a superpower that will make the Chinese people proud by the nation's 100th anniversary (Karaca 2019: 5).

Since 2020, the United States has regarded China as an increasingly formidable military threat, driven by the PRC's rapid military modernization and assertive actions in the Indo-

Pacific region. Under President Xi Jinping, China has embraced a "strategic deterrence" approach, expanding and modernizing the People's Liberation Army (PLA), especially its nuclear and space capabilities. China aims to achieve the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation by 2049" (US Department of Defense 2023a: 1-2).

The PLA, established in 1927 and restructured in 1949 with the founding of the PRC, has modernized significantly since 1978. Today, it is among the world's largest military forces, with approximately 2 million active personnel. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) boasts the world's largest navy, comprising approximately 355 ships and submarines as of 2022, with projections estimating growth to 460 vessels by 2030 (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS] 2022).

PRC's defense budget reached 293.35 billion USD in 2021 (up from 22.24 billion USD in 2000) as it expanded strategic operations to include "open seas protection" and peacekeeping, humanitarian, and space missions abroad. The Chinese navy operates in international waters across the Middle East, Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. As the fifth-largest arms supplier globally, China exports various military equipment—such as unmanned aerial systems, submarines, naval vessels, fighter jets, and surface-to-air missile systems—to nations including Kazakhstan, Iraq, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia (US Department of Defense 2024b).

China's economic transformation since 1978 has been both rapid and unprecedented, with its GDP skyrocketing from 149.54 billion USD in 1978 to 17.96 trillion USD in 2022, positioning it as the world's second-largest economy. Between 1980 and 2020, China maintained an average annual GDP growth rate of approximately 9.5%, a remarkable achievement that remains unmatched by other major economies. Although growth has slowed to around 6% in recent years, China continues to exert significant global economic influence. As China looks to sustain its growth, it faces increasing pressure to adopt more sustainable policies. This growth has largely been driven by industrialization and manufacturing, but it has come at a substantial environmental cost. The country remains the world's largest consumer of coal, which constitutes over 56% of its energy mix. In 2022, China accounted for roughly 27% of global CO_2 emissions and produced about a third of the world's greenhouse gases. On the other hand, China is heavily investing in renewable energy to combat environmental challenges. In 2021, China led the world by installing 52 GW of wind energy and 54.9 GW of solar capacity, making it the largest global installer of both. Despite these efforts, the shift to greener growth will require substantial reforms in energy production, environmental policy, and addressing social inequalities tied to environmental impacts (World Bank 2024b).

China's economic rise has been paralleled by a strong focus on scientific and technological advancement. In 2010, PRC produced 2.4 million engineers, compared to 1.4 million in the US, underscoring its growing human capital advantage. Today, China leads the world in patent applications, filing 1.5 million in 2021—nearly half of the global total. In terms of research and development (R&D), China's spending surged to approximately 441 billion USD in 2022, accounting for 2.4% of its GDP, with plans to increase this to 2.8% by 2025 (WIPO, 2023). The country has made significant strides in artificial intelligence (AI) and quantum computing, with ambitions to become a global technology leader. By 2021, China contributed around 23% of the world's AI-related scientific papers, and its goal is to lead AI technology by 2030. The 2022 Fortune Global 500 list highlighted China's growing corporate power, with 142 companies ranking, surpassing the United States (136) and Japan (41) (Fortune, 2022). China is also rapidly expanding its presence in the electric vehicle (EV) sector; BYD, a prominent Chinese EV manufacturer, saw its sales double in 2022, securing a substantial share of the global market. These achievements reflect China's growing technological capabilities, reinforcing its global economic and technological influence.

China's space program has made significant strides, positioning it as a major competitor in space exploration. The China National Space Administration (CNSA) achieved notable milestones, including the completion of the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System and successful missions to Mars and the Moon. In 2021, China launched 55 space missions, surpassing the US to become the world's most active space-faring nation. The country's space budget, estimated at 9 billion USD in 2022, is the second-largest globally after the US, reflecting its commitment to expanding its space capabilities. China has also significantly increased its satellite presence, with over 500 satellites in orbit as of 2022, supporting both civilian and military needs through systems like the High-Resolution Earth Observation System. As part of its broader space ambitions, China aims to complete its space station by 2025, further establishing itself as a rival to NASA and other leading space agencies in advanced space exploration (China National Space Administration 2023).

In recent years, China has worked to enhance its global influence through soft power, focusing on cultural diplomacy and media outreach. State-run media networks, such as China Global Television Network (CGTN) and Xinhua News Agency, broadcast in multiple languages, reaching a global audience and providing an alternative to Western media. Confucius Institutes, present in over 150 countries, play a key role in promoting Chinese language and culture, contributing to China's soft power as part of the "Belt and Road Cultural

Exchange" program. China has dedicated an annual budget exceeding $10 billion to public diplomacy, with initiatives that include scholarships for international students and partnerships with foreign universities (Akdağ 2022: 211).

Moreover, China's tourism sector plays a significant role in its cultural diplomacy. In 2019, the country welcomed over 145 million international visitors, making it one of the most visited nations globally (United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 2020). This influx of tourists not only stimulates the economy but also facilitates cultural exchange and enhances China's global image. Additionally, China's international sports achievements, particularly in the Olympics, have further bolstered its reputation. In the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, held in 2021, China ranked second in the medal tally with 88 medals, showcasing its athletic prowess (Olympic.org 2021). The Chinese government continues to invest heavily in sports infrastructure and development, with a budget exceeding 15 billion USD allocated for the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing (Xinhua 2021). This investment is part of a broader strategy to enhance China's global presence and influence through soft power initiatives, which include promoting sports as a vehicle for cultural exchange and national pride.

Analysis of the US- PRC Rivalry

The Global Firepower Index (GFP) assesses the military power and defense capabilities of countries worldwide based on factors like population, military personnel, equipment, budgets, and logistical capabilities. According to this index, the US ranks first in military capacity, while China is ranked third among 145 countries. This site evaluates the US military capacity more superior than China in basic issues such as air forces, natural sources, logistics and geography, while China is more predominant in manpower, land and naval power, financials, personnel and logistics (Global Firepower 2023). The US military maintains a formidable and extensive global presence, underscored by cutting-edge technological capabilities that span air, sea, space, and cyber domains. As of 2023, the Department of Defense (DoD) manages an impressive array of assets, including approximately 13,000 aircraft, 4,000 tanks, and 490 naval vessels. The US Navy remains the most versatile maritime force globally, comprising 11 aircraft carriers, 68 submarines, and numerous support vessels (Defense Manpower Data Center 2023). In the air domain, the US Air Force operates over 350 F-35 fighter jets, renowned for their advanced stealth, sensors, and networked capabilities, ensuring the US air superiority well into the future (Air Force Magazine 2023).

The US Army's force modernization efforts include the creation of several new units to enhance its capabilities. Key initiatives include the establishment of Multi-Domain Task Forces (MDTFs), which are designed to operate across land, air, sea, space, and cyber domains to support joint operations. The Army is also expanding its missile defense capabilities with additional Indirect Fire Protection Capability (IFPC) battalions to counter airborne threats, including unmanned aerial systems (UAS). Additionally, new Counter-Small UAS (C-sUAS) batteries will be incorporated into defense units to address the growing UAS threat. The Army is also introducing Maneuver Short-Range Air Defense (M-SHORAD) battalions to protect against low-altitude aerial threats, such as rotary and fixed-wing aircraft. These efforts are part of a broader strategy to modernize and adapt the Army's structure to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving global security environment (Congressional Research Service, 2024). The U.S. Space Force (USSF), officially established in December 2019, is a dedicated military branch focusing on space operations, tasked with protecting the US space assets and ensuring national security. As of 2024, the Space Force manages and operates a fleet of over 400 military satellites, including those used for global positioning, missile warning, secure communications, and reconnaissance. These satellites play a critical role in both military and civilian applications, enhancing navigation, intelligence, and secure communication systems (Union of Concerned Scientists 2023).

The integration of AI and autonomous systems across various military branches, such as drones like the MQ-9 Reaper and MQ-4C Triton, further enhances intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, allowing for more efficient and safer operations (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, 2023). The establishment of the US Cyber Command (CYBERCOM) also reflects the growing importance of cybersecurity and offensive cyber capabilities. It is tasked with protecting critical infrastructure and executing cyber operations to deter threats from state and non-state actors, highlighting the US military's evolving approach to modern warfare in the digital age (US Cyber Command 2024).

On the other hand, China has considerably strengthened its naval capabilities, emerging as a formidable maritime force. As of 2022, the PLAN possesses approximately 355 ships and submarines, with estimates suggesting an increase to around 460 vessels by 2030 (CSIS 2022). This expansive fleet includes three aircraft carriers, and the newly developed and equipped with an advanced electromagnetic catapult launch system, enhancing its ability to deploy heavier and more advanced aircraft at a rapid pace. The PLAN also operates around 60 submarines, including 12 nuclear-powered vessels split between ballistic missile submarines and attack

submarines, further elevating its strategic reach and underwater warfare capabilities. Supporting its blue-water ambitions, the PLAN's surface fleet includes over 80 destroyers and frigates, as well as multiple amphibious assault ships and auxiliary vessels, providing robust combat, logistics, and expeditionary capabilities (US Department of Defense 2024).

Beyond its navy, China has made notable advances in robotics, artificial intelligence, and high-tech weaponry, signaling a comprehensive commitment to cutting-edge military technologies. For instance, the PLA has integrated AI-enhanced autonomous systems into its arsenal, including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), unmanned surface vessels (USVs), and undersea drones, which serve critical roles in both reconnaissance and combat scenarios. The Wing Loong and CH-series UAVs have gained international prominence and are among the most widely exported military drones globally, used by several countries across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Alongside these unmanned systems, the PLA is developing hypersonic missile technology, notably the DF-17 hypersonic glide vehicle capable of achieving speeds above Mach 5, posing a significant threat to existing missile defense systems and enhancing China's strategic deterrence (Janes, 2023; US Department of Defense 2024).

China has also made significant strides in space exploration, further establishing itself as a leading player in this field. The BeiDou Navigation Satellite System, which became fully operational in 2020, includes more than 30 satellites and provides global positioning and timing services that rival the US' GPS system (China National Space Administration 2023). This autonomous satellite network plays a critical role in both civilian and military applications, extending China's influence beyond its borders. PRC's lunar exploration program has been particularly impressive, with the successful deployment of a rover on the far side of the Moon in 2019—an unprecedented achievement in space exploration. Building on this success, the Tianwen-1 mission in 2021 made China only the third country to land a rover on Mars (National Aeronautics and Space Administration 2022). Furthermore, PRC has embarked on the construction of a modular space station, with the launch of its core module in 2021, and expects to complete the full assembly by 2024. The station will support a rotating crew of astronauts and host a variety of scientific experiments in low Earth orbit, reinforcing China's long-term presence in space and opening opportunities for international collaboration (China National Space Administration 2023).

These technological advances across naval, aerospace, and robotic domains reflect China's strategic objectives to secure its interests and expand its global influence. By investing heavily in both high-tech military and space capabilities, China is solidifying its position as a

leader in advanced defense systems and scientific innovation. This multi-faceted approach is not only reinforcing China's regional dominance but also positioning it as a significant competitor in the global arena, challenging the traditional technological hegemony of established superpowers. The US-China military comparison derivered from the references above is in the Table-1.

Table: 1. The US-China Military Comparison

Category	The United States	China
Total Military Personnel	1.3 Million active, 811,000 reserve	2.04 Million active
Number of Aircraft	13,000	3,285
Tanks	4,000	6,000
Naval Vessels	490	355 (projected 460 by 2030)
Aircraft Carriers	11	3 (Liaoning, Shandong, Fujian)
Submarines	68	60 (Including 12 nuclear-powered)
Fifth-Generation Fighter Jets	350+ F-35 & F-22 jets	Limited, developing J-20 fleet
Hypersonic Weapons	ARRW and others in development	DF-17 Hypersonic glide vehicle
Autonomous UAV Systems	MQ-9 Reaper, MQ-4C Triton	Wing Loong, CH-series drones
Military Satellites	400+	Over 30 in BeiDou system
Space Capabilities	GPS, Reconnaissance, Intelligence	BeiDou, Lunar & Mars missions
AI and Robotic Systems	AI for decision-making, UAV swarms	Advanced UAVs, increasing AI
Missile Defense Systems	GMD and Aegis BMD systems	Developing missile defense systems

Source: Defense Manpower Data Center 2023; Congressional Research Service 2024: US Department of Defense 2024; China National Space Administration 2023.

Although PRC has increased its defense expenditures more than 10 times since 2000, reaching 300 billion USD in 2021, with also the reorganization and modernization activities of its military units, which it has accelerated since 2015, it does not seem possible for it to reach a military force with a global impact in the near and medium term. Despite China's significant advancements, the US military, deployed in more than 160 countries and over 4,800 regions, has a far greater global reach than the PLA, whose operations are primarily limited to China and the Pacific region. While China's defense budget has increased more than tenfold since

2000—reaching 300 billion USD in 2021— and with the recent reorganization and modernization activities of its military units, it is unlikely that the PRC will achieve a globally impactful military force in the near or medium term.

The economic powers of the two countries are closely matched by comparing the selected indicators; the GDP, GDP per Capita and foreign trade. The US is the largest economy, with a GDP of 27.36 trillion USD in 2023, while China's GDP has risen to 17.79 trillion USD. The US GDP per capita was 81,695 USD in 2022, compared to China's 12,614 USD. Additionally, while the US is the largest services importer in the world, with 680.3 billion USD in imports in 2022, China is its largest trading partner, accounting for 16.2% of total exports (International Monetary Fund, 2023; World Economic Outlook Database, 2023; World Bank, 2023; Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2023; World Trade Organization, 2023; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023). The US-China Economic Indicators derivered from the refernces above is in the Table-2.

Table: 2. The US-China Economic Indicators

Indicator	**The United States**	**China**
GDP (2023)	27.36 trillion USD	18.49 trillion USD
GDP per Capita (2022)	81,695 USD	12,614 USD
GDP Growth Rate (2023)	2.1%	4.5%
Services Imports (2022)	680.3 billion USD	332.8 billion USD
Top 5 Export Partners (2022)	1. Canada: 356.5 billion USD 2. Mexico: 324.3 billion USD 3. China: 150.4 billion USD 4. Japan: 80.2 billion USD 5. UK: 76.2 billion USD	1. United States: 576.8 USD billion 2. Japan: 139.7 billion USD 3. South Korea: 108.8 billion USD 4. Vietnam: 78.5 billion USD 5. Australia: 58.6 billion USD
Total EU Exports	350.8 billion USD	Not applicable
Top 5 Import Partners (2022)	1. China: 536.3 billion USD 2. Mexico: 454.8 billion USD 3. Canada: 436.6 billion USD 4. Japan: 148.1 billion USD 5. Germany: 146.6 billion USd	1. United States: 576.8 billion USD 2. Japan: 139.7 billion USD 3. South Korea: 108.8 billion USD 4. Australia: 55.8 billion USD 5. Vietnam: 45.1 billion USD
Total EU Imports	553.3 billion USD	Not applicable
Services Exports (2022)	926 billion USD	329.6 billion USD
Top 5 Services Import Partners (2022)	1. UK: 70.8 billion USD 2. Germany: 42.0 billion USD	1. United States: 76.5 billion USD 2. Japan: 24.8 billion USD

	3. Canada: 40.6 billion USD 4. Japan: 38.5 billion USD 5. Mexico: 37.3 billion USd	3. UK: 20.2 billion USD 4. Germany: 19.9 billion USD 5. Singapore: 16.4 billion USD
Total EU Services Imports	166.7 billion USD	Not applicable

Source: International Monetary Fund 2023; World Economic Outlook Database 2023; World Bank 2023; Office of the United States Trade Representative 2023; World Trade Organization 2023; National Bureau of Statistics of China 2023.

In the light of all these economic data, it can be seen that in the economic competition between the US and China, the two countries are neck and neck, with the US having a very slight advantage according to foreign trade figures. Moreover, it is very important that the US is the largest commercial partner of PRC with a 16.2 % share total of exports today. In future predictions, especially Asian countries' place in the world population and their effectiveness in the economy will increase, in this context, if current conditions continue, China will surpass the US and reach the highest GDP in 2040, accounting for 22.8 % of the total GDP on a global scale. It is estimated that it will rank 2nd after India in terms of population.

The US-China trade war, primarily driven by a significant trade imbalance and differing economic structures, has caused substantial shifts in global markets and national policies. In 2022, the US trade deficit with China reached approximately 382 billion USD, a gap largely attributable to China's focus on manufacturing, while the US economy remains more service-oriented (US Census Bureau 2023). Beginning in 2018, the US imposed tariffs on approximately 370 billion USD worth of Chinese imports, targeting sectors such as technology and manufacturing. In retaliation, China imposed tariffs on around 110 billion USD of the US goods, impacting industries like agriculture and automobiles (Office of the US Trade Representative 2019; Brown 2020). This escalation has had a significant impact on global supply chains, with US importers absorbing roughly 90% of the additional costs, prompting many companies to relocate production to countries like Vietnam (Amiti, Redding & Weinstein 2019; International Trade Centre 2022).

Additionally, the technological competition between the two nations has intensified relations, as the US imposed export controls on semiconductors and AI technologies to limit China's access to advanced technology, prompting China to ramp up investments in its domestic semiconductor industry (SIA 2023). The trade war has had far-reaching effects on the global economy, influencing trade balances and supply chains in regions such as Southeast Asia, the European Union, and beyond. In 2023, the US, Japan, and the Netherlands implemented export

controls on semiconductor equipment, restricting China's access to crucial technology inputs—a significant move, as these countries account for 90% of global chip production. In response, China has enacted stringent regulations on the export of critical materials such as gallium and germanium, aiming to reduce reliance on foreign technology and bolster its own technological independence (Allen 2023).

CIA Director Bill Burns recently emphasized that the US-China rivalry has intensified in science and technology, marking these fields as crucial battlegrounds for global influence. Since 2010, China has aggressively expanded its technical and scientific workforce, surpassing the US in numbers of trained engineers and scientists. With strategic investments in fields such as artificial intelligence (AI), 5G, quantum information science, biotechnology, and green energy, China has positioned itself as a leader in technology production, outpacing the US by 2020 in the manufacture of items like computers, automobiles, and smartphones (Allison et al. 2023). This technological growth has been further bolstered by China's efforts to restrict mergers of foreign semiconductor firms operating domestically and impose cybersecurity-based limitations on companies like Intel and Micron, whose exports to China have been significantly impacted. In the US-China rivalry, the struggle for supremacy continues in another dimension by highlighting issues such as culture, social and intellectual life, values, film and music and folklore, which are seen as 'soft power'. While the US is trying to achieve global hegemony with the 'American dream', democracy, human rights and freedoms, liberalism and welfare, rock, country, folk music genres and Hollywood movies, PRC tries to adopt policies emphasizing Chinese traditional culture, Buddhism, Confucian, Taoist thought and the themes of 'socialism and statism'. However, the values of the US and the West such as 'liberalism, rule of law, human rights and freedom' have recently been questioned by the international public with their policies in the Russia-Ukraine and Israeli-Palestinian wars.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the "One Belt, One Road" project, is a key strategic initiative launched by China to extend its global influence. By establishing a vast network of trade routes and infrastructure projects connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa, the BRI aims to enhance economic connectivity and foster international partnerships. The initiative is primarily composed of two components: The Silk Road Economic Belt, which links China to Central Asia, Russia, and Europe, and the Maritime Silk Road, which connects China to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean (Durdular, 2016: 81). While BRI strengthens China's global influence through expanded economic ties, it also presents notable geopolitical, economic, and environmental risks. The Middle Corridor, passing through Central

Asia, exemplifies some of these challenges, including the complexities of regional politics and the dependency on Chinese financial investments. This dependence has raised concerns about the potential for unsustainable debt accumulation among the participating countries (Zhang, 2016). Additionally, BRI poses significant environmental challenges across multiple Earth systems due to its extensive infrastructure projects. The impacts span from atmospheric changes, such as disruptions to the East and South Asian monsoons, to alterations in river systems, exacerbating water stress in sensitive areas like Central Asia. BRI infrastructure also traverses geodynamically active zones, heightening risks of landslides and environmental degradation. These projects threaten biodiversity through habitat fragmentation and increased human encroachment, exemplified by the Amur Bridge corridor affecting nature reserves. The cumulative impacts, driven by intensified human activities along BRI routes, may result in unforeseen regional and global environmental changes, including climatic effects and destabilization of ecosystems. Despite these concerns, effective interdisciplinary impact modeling remains limited, underscoring the need for comprehensive, multi-scale environmental assessments to mitigate risks associated with BRI developments (Teo et al: 5-6)

Moreover, BRI and the Middle Corridor Initiative (MCI) present both opportunities and risks for Türkiye. These initiatives enhance Türkiye's strategic importance as a key transit hub linking Asia and Europe, facilitating trade and infrastructure development through projects like railways, tunnels, and ports. Türkiye benefits from investments in critical infrastructure, improving connectivity and access to global markets, especially in North Africa. However, the deepening economic ties with China could create dependency, limiting Türkiye's geopolitical flexibility. While these projects offer economic growth, they also raise concerns about the balance of influence between Türkiye and China (Hussain 2021: 242-243). In conclusion, while the BRI offers promising growth and connectivity, careful management of its economic, geopolitical, and environmental consequences is essential to ensure long-term stability and sustainability in the regions it impacts. Third-party states are increasingly central to the evolving the US-China rivalry, as they leverage their historical, economic, and strategic ties to balance relations between the superpowers.

Unlike the Cold War era, in which most states aligned strictly with one superpower, the current landscape is more fluid, with states like India, Russia, Japan, and ASEAN countries asserting their own agency by diversifying diplomatic and security partnerships (Walt, 2022: 120-121). These states play a crucial role in maintaining regional stability and often reshape global governance frameworks to support a multipolar order. For example, India's engagement

with both the US through the Quad and with China and Russia via BRICS demonstrates how third-party states strategically balance interests. This dual participation allows India to enhance its regional influence while promoting multilateralism rather than aligning strictly with one bloc (Pant& Joshi 2021: 45-46).

Russia, meanwhile, shares with China a strategic alignment driven by mutual interests in countering the US influence, particularly through cooperation in BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). However, Russia's partnership with China is pragmatic and lacks the ideological rigidity of Cold War-era alliances, as Russia remains cautious of China's growing influence in Central Asia. Through these alignments, Russia not only asserts influence over former Soviet states but also challenges the Western-dominated international order. ASEAN countries, including Singapore and Indonesia, adopt a pragmatic and neutral stance to avoid choosing sides, favoring a multilateral approach to regional integration. Their participation in ASEAN and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) enables these states to create dialogue and dispute-resolution mechanisms, fostering stability even as the US-China competition intensifies (Cooley 2020: 112-113).

This emerging bipolar order is defined by a flexible, multipolar dynamic that resists a strict divide. Third-party states play autonomous roles, participating in both the US and China-led institutions and initiating spaces for multilateral cooperation, as seen with Japan's collaboration with ASEAN and the EU's advocacy for strategic autonomy. These countries often support rules-based frameworks and avoid full alignment with either bloc, contributing to a less polarized global landscape. By promoting regional stability through diversified partnerships and multilateral frameworks, third-party states mitigate the risks of a divisive, confrontational bipolar order, supporting a fluid world order that emphasizes pragmatic interests over strict bloc politics (Smith & Jones 2019: 56-57; Walt 2022: 132-133)

CONCLUSION

After the Cold War, the world transitioned from a bipolar order to a multipolar system characterized by periodic alliances and partnerships. The 2020 pandemic further unsettled this balance, creating significant economic, political, and security shifts. Recently, the intensifying power struggle between the US and the PRC, along with their respective allies, has raised questions about the potential emergence of a "new Cold War."

The US, with an economy valued at around 27.36 trillion USD in 2023, remains the largest in the world, while the PRC follows at 17.79 trillion USD. In defense spending, The US

leads with 876.94 billion USD, dwarfing China's 291.96 billion USD in 2022 (World Bank, 2024). Although China's military budget has surged, particularly since 2000, and modernization efforts have restructured the PLA since 2015, China's military influence remains primarily regional, focused on its borders and the Pacific. The US, by contrast, maintains a global military presence, with forces in over 160 countries and 4,800 installations worldwide. This global reach and established logistics give the US a significant advantage in power projection.

In technology, the US also has a clear lead, particularly in innovation, IT, biotechnology, aerospace, and defense. Six of the world's top ten technology companies are American, including industry giants Alphabet (Google), Microsoft, and Apple, while only one is Chinese. Soft power further strengthens the US position, with widespread cultural exports such as Hollywood films, popular music genres, and the English language.

The US benefits from a robust global network established after World War II, including institutions like the UN, NATO, and international financial organizations, all of which extend its influence across the world. The US media, technology, and cultural exports further bolster this influence, reinforcing its longstanding hegemonic status. However, since the 1970s, China's steady rise has increasingly challenged the US dominance. A core component of China's strategy is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, which aims to expand PRC's economic and cultural presence throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe. Through large-scale investments in infrastructure and strategic partnerships, the BRI has strengthened China's economic power and has bolstered its cultural influence, enhancing its soft power by fostering cultural exchange and goodwill in partner countries. If this trajectory continues, China could potentially surpass the US economically by the 2040s. While the US works to maintain its leadership through institutions like the IMF and WTO and by preserving the dollar's role as the global reserve currency, China promotes a multipolar world order. Its BRI, coupled with involvement in organizations like BRICS and ASEAN, facilitates connections with emerging markets and encourages trade in local currencies—subtly undermining the US influence and challenging the US-led order.

Third-party regions and countries, such as the European Union, Japan, India, and Russia, also play crucial roles in the US-China rivalry. The EU advocates for multilateralism and economic ties with China, while Japan strengthens security cooperation with the US due to regional tensions with China. India balances its role between the two powers, aligning with The US through initiatives like the Quad, yet preserving its non-aligned stance. Russia, particularly

due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, has aligned more closely with China to counterbalance Western influence.

In conclusion, we cannot confirm the struggle of the US and PRC, the superpowers of our time, will again bring 'a bipolar world order' as in the Cold War, as put forward in the global order. While the US may see its influence wane in some regions, the economic interdependence between the two powers likely serves as a moderating force, fostering a more nuanced multipolar world. This interdependence, along with the strategic roles of influential third parties, suggests a global order that is neither fully bipolar nor unipolar but a complex, multipolar landscape shaped by various alliances and economic partnerships.

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Etik Beyan:	Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan edilir.	***Ethical Statement:***	It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.
Çıkar Çatışması:	Çalışmada kişiler veya kurumlar arası çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.	***Conflict of Interest:***	The authors declare that declare no conflict of interest.
Yazar Katkı Beyanı:	Çalışmanın tamamı yazar tarafından oluşturulmuştur.	***Author Contribution Declaration:***	The entire study was created by the author.
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