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Trabajo Fin de Grado

New Contests, Old Shadows: The Cold War's Influence on Modern US-China Dynamics

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Abstract: The relationship between China and the United States presents a pivotal question for the 21st century: is this a new Cold War, echoing the ideological clashes of the past, or a unique paradigm in international relations? This research attempts to respond to this question by examining two hypotheses: the Bipolar World Hypothesis and the Cold Peace Hypothesis. By critically analyzing these hypotheses through the lens of historical context and the current US-China dynamics, this thesis aims to determine which framework offers a more complete understanding of this complex rivalry. The study will also explore economic, political, and social interdependencies to further analyze the relation between cooperation and competition within China and the US. By critically examining these frameworks through historical and contemporary lenses, the research seeks to explore whether this complex relationship represents a continuation of historical power struggles, or a new model of interaction characterized by both competition and cooperation – a potential "Cold Peace" in the 21st century.

Key words: Cold War, Cold Peace, systemic rival, Conflict Theory, narratives, Critical Constructivist Theory, interdependence, OBOR, B3W, power dynamics.

Resumen: *La relación entre China y Estados Unidos plantea una pregunta clave para el siglo XXI: ¿estamos en una nueva Guerra Fría con los choques ideológicos del pasado, o un paradigma único en las relaciones internacionales? Este trabajo trata de responder a esta pregunta examinando dos hipótesis: la Hipótesis del Mundo Bipolar y la Hipótesis de la Paz Fría. Mediante el análisis crítico de estas hipótesis a través del foco del contexto histórico y las dinámicas actuales entre EE.UU. y China, esta tesis busca determinar qué marco ofrece una comprensión más completa de esta rivalidad. El estudio también explorará las interdependencias económicas, políticas y sociales para analizar más a fondo la relación entre cooperación y competencia entre China y EE.UU. Por tanto, la investigación busca explorar si esta relación representa una continuación de las luchas de poder históricas, o un nuevo modelo de interacción caracterizado por la competencia y la cooperación – una posible "Paz Fría" en el siglo XXI.*

Palabras clave: *Guerra Fría, Paz Fría, rival sistémico, Teoría del Conflicto, narrativas, Teoría Constructivista Crítica, interdependencias, OBOR, B3W, dinámicas de poder.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I: INTRODUCTION	3
1. JUSTIFICATION OF THE TOPIC	3
2. RELEVANCE OF THE TOPIC	4
3. OBJECTIVES	5
4. HYPOTHESES.....	7
5. METHODOLOGY	8
6. STRUCTURE	10
PART II: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	11
I. RELEVANCE OF THE FRAMEWORK.....	11
II. STRUCTURE OF THE FRAMEWORK.....	12
III. CONTENT	13
1. <i>Cold War and Cold Peace</i>	13
1.1. Comparison between Cold War and Cold Peace	16
2. <i>Conflict Mitigation and Cooperation in a Cold Peace</i>	17
2.1. Sino-American Relations.....	19
3. <i>Conflict: Inevitability in International Relations</i>	21
3.1. Application of Conflict Theory in Sino-American Relations.....	22
4. <i>Victimhood and Victory Narratives through the Critical Constructivist Theory</i> 23	
4.1. Former Soviet Union-US Relationship.....	25
4.2. China-US Relationship	27
4.3. Comparison using the Critical Constructivist Theory	28
IV. CONCLUSION OF THE FRAMEWORK.....	30
PART III: ANALYSIS	32
1. US-CHINA CURRENT RIVALRY	32
2. THE INTERDEPENDENCE THEORY	33
2.1. <i>Interdependence as a Double-Edged Sword</i>	34
2.2. <i>Types of Interdependencies</i>	35
2.2.1. Economic Interdependencies	36
2.2.2. Political Interdependencies	39
2.2.3. Social Interdependencies	43
3. INTERNATIONAL PRESENCE: OBOR VS B3W	45
PART IV: CRITICAL ANALYSIS THROUGH THE FRAMEWORK	51
PART V: CONCLUSIONS	54
PART VI: BIBLIOGRAPHY	56

PART I: INTRODUCTION

1. Justification of the Topic

I have always admired the complex relationship between China and the United States, and it has been a driving force behind my academic interests, particularly in the area of international relations. This intrigue comes from the unique nature of their interaction, as I find very interesting how they can make competition and collaboration coexist, competing fiercely in some respects while simultaneously collaborating on others.

Last semester, during the International Security course, my engagement with this subject deepened significantly. I had the opportunity to delve into a debate surrounding the China-US rivalry through a presentation based on the article by Li Xing and Raúl Bernal-Meza, titled "*The China-US rivalry: a new Cold War or capitalism's intra-core competition?*" (2021). This academic paper provided a platform to explore the nature of the China-US relationship, challenging the binary Cold War paradigm and introducing the concept of "systemic rival" as a framework for understanding their interactions in today's global context.

Furthermore, the presentation made me reflect on the applicability of the Cold War analogy to the current China-US dynamics. Unlike the clear ideological divide that characterized the former Soviet Union-US standoff, the China-US rivalry is embedded within the complexities of globalization, with intertwined economies and shared global challenges that demand cooperation. This realization led me to question the simplicity of drawing direct parallels with the Cold War, recognizing instead the distinct characteristics of the contemporary rivalry.

Motivated by this experience and the discussions it sparked among my classmates, I decided to further explore this topic. My aim with this thesis is to explore the relationship between China and the United States, moving beyond simplistic historical analogies to find out the dimensions of their rivalry and cooperation. By examining the roots of their interactions, I hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics shaping the international order today.

2. Relevance of the Topic

This thesis's relevance extends far beyond an academic purpose; it serves as a crucial analytical tool for understanding the characteristics of modern international politics, which, at its core, reflects a continuity of historical patterns of power dynamics, strategic engagements, and conflict resolutions. The examination of the Cold War era, with its geopolitical strategies and ideological confrontations, offers the opportunity to understand the difficulties of today's global stage, particularly the relationship between the United States and China.

At the heart of this analysis is the recognition of the Cold War, not only as a period of direct confrontation between the United States and the former Soviet Union, but also as a pivotal era that shaped the contemporary global order. The bipolar world order of the Cold War, defined by a delicate balance of alliances, has morphed into a new form of rivalry in the age of globalization, where the United States and China stand as the primary actors on the international stage. This shift from military and ideological conflicts to economic and technological competitions marks a significant evolution in global conflicts and cooperation, needing a reevaluation of Cold War-era strategies within the modern context.

Furthermore, the introduction of the Cold Peace concept within this thesis is also relevant, as it shows the paradoxical relationship between competition and cooperation that characterizes the current international system. The US-China relationship, with its blend of economic symbiosis and strategic rivalry, reflects this new reality. This duality proves how there is a need for a broader understanding of how nations can simultaneously compete on certain fronts while cooperating on others.

Moreover, the exploration of narratives surrounding victimhood and victory are fundamental to comprehend how states behave. These narratives are very connected to national identity and to historical memory, which are key aspects that define a country's foreign policy. Many scholars tend to overlook these narratives and focus more on interstate relationships, without analyzing the actual narratives that countries build about themselves and portray to others. This neglect also proves the relevance of this thesis' topic, as it explores relatively uncharted territory. Therefore, by examining how states use

these narratives to position themselves on the world stage, this study aims to uncover the motivations that dictate their foreign policy, highlighting a dimension of international relations that is pivotal yet underexplored. Furthermore, it seeks to identify the patterns of behavior among states, as well as the evolving mechanisms of conflict and cooperation. By doing so, it offers results into the motivations driving current global conflicts, providing a clear roadmap in order to comprehend the modern international landscape.

As a whole, the relevance of this topic lies in its approach to understanding the dynamics of global power and its implications for the United States and China's relationship. It stands as a testament to the importance of historical context in analyzing contemporary geopolitical challenges, offering a new perspective in an increasingly interconnected world.

3. Objectives

The primary objective of this thesis is to explore and analyze the evolving nature of the global rivalry and partnership dynamics between the United States and China, focusing on how this relationship compares to historical Cold War tensions between the US and the former Soviet Union, and assessing whether the current interactions might lead to a new paradigm of "Cold Peace" in international relations. This exploration aims to understand whether the China-US relationship represents a continuation of historical patterns of power rivalry or if it reflects a unique model of interaction within the global order, characterized by both competitive and cooperative elements.

Alongside this primary aim, the thesis identifies several specific objectives that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the topic. These objectives are strategically formulated to grasp the main focus of the thesis from various perspectives, where each facet of the topic is meticulously examined. The specific objectives are:

- To analyze the concept and implication of "Cold Peace", exploring it as a theoretical framework for understanding current global divisions, with a special focus on how it applies to the China-US rivalry.

- To use Conflict Theory as a framework to analyze Sino-American relations, exploring how this theory explains the seemingly contradictory dynamics of "neither-friend-nor-enemy" and "superficial friendship" that characterize the US-China relationship.
- To examine the historical evolution of China-US relations using victimhood and victory narratives through the Critical Constructivist Theory, providing a detailed overview of historical contexts and turning points.
- To compare the similarities and differences of the identity narratives between China, the former Soviet Union, and the US, and how they have affected their foreign policies.
- To explore the current China-US interaction through the Interdependence Theory and how it can be seen as a double-edged sword, cooperating and competing in different aspects.
- To analyze the political narratives and strategies employed by both China and the US, examining how leadership communications influence bilateral relations and international perceptions.
- To study the role of social and cultural interactions between the two countries, as they shape public opinion and bilateral ties.
- To assess key international strategies, specifically the Belt and Road Initiative (OBOR) by China and the Build Back Better World (B3W) by the US, evaluating their implications for global infrastructure development and geopolitical influence.
- To explore potential future scenarios for China-US relations, considering the impact of current trends on international order, diplomacy, and global governance.

4. Hypotheses

The thesis presents two hypotheses aimed at explaining the Sino-American relations within the context of the contemporary global order. These hypotheses will be used to investigate the interplay of cooperation and rivalry between China and the United States, exploring whether their interactions present a phase in international relations that reminds the reader of past geopolitical tensions or if they present a new paradigm characterized by strategic interdependencies and a complex balance of power.

- a) **Bipolar World Hypothesis:** The first hypothesis suggests that the current geopolitical landscape, primarily established by the interactions between the United States and China, echoes the bipolar structure of the Cold War era, where the global world was dominated by two superpowers engaged in a state of competition across various areas. This hypothesis argues that much like the former Soviet Union-US rivalry that defined the Cold War, the China-US relationship today manifests in a similarly binary configuration, with these two nations emerging as the principal actors around which global economic, political, and military alliances are formed. The thesis will examine whether this analogy holds true in the context of the modern world and whether this comparison to the Cold War accurately captures the essence of the current US-China dynamics.

- b) **Cold Peace Hypothesis:** The second hypothesis introduces the concept of "Cold Peace," proposing that the Sino-American relationship is characterized by superficial cooperation and strategic competitions. This hypothesis presents the fact that despite the apparent engagements in trade, diplomatic dialogues, and cultural exchanges, the US and China remain neither enemies nor genuine allies. Instead, their relationship is marked by a complex series of interdependencies that make their interactions very challenging, creating a scenario where both nations are compelled to compete and cooperate. The thesis will explore the accuracy of framing their relationship within this "Cold Peace" model, assessing how these dynamics influence their bilateral actions and impact the broader international system.

Understanding the nuances of the US-China relationship requires analyzing where these two hypotheses connect. The Bipolar World Hypothesis lays the foundation, suggesting a return to a Cold War-like structure with the US and China as dominant powers fighting for global influence. However, the Cold Peace Hypothesis adds a crucial layer of complexity. It moves beyond a simple binary of competition, acknowledging the existence of a "Cold Peace" – a state marked by a paradoxical mix of cooperation and rivalry. Despite the absence of a formal alliance or open hostility, both nations find themselves intertwined in a web of economic interdependence, forcing them to cooperate on certain issues and compete in others.

These hypotheses, though distinct, are complementary. Cold Peace can exist within a Bipolar World structure. Competition and power dynamics can coexist with the need for some level of cooperation due to interdependence. The Bipolar World Hypothesis suggests a world potentially divided by the influence of these two major powers. However, on its own, this framework might paint an overly simplistic picture. The Cold Peace Hypothesis acts as a refining lens, acknowledging the complexities within this structure. It recognizes the presence of cooperation alongside competition, creating a richer understanding. Utilizing the analogy of a coin to explore the relationship between the Bipolar World Hypothesis and the Cold Peace Hypothesis provides a better comprehension of Sino-American relations. The Bipolar World Hypothesis looks at the two sides (US and China) of the coin, while the Cold Peace Hypothesis examines the nature of the material (cooperation on one side, rivalry on the other) that makes up the coin. Both are needed to understand the coin fully.

Therefore, throughout the thesis, the aim will be to determine whether the literature and investigations corroborate or challenge these hypotheses in order to understand the evolving nature of US-China relations and their implications for global stability.

5. Methodology

The methodology adopted for this thesis draws its initial inspiration from the key aspects presented in the article "*China-US rivalry: a new Cold War or capitalism's intra-core competition?*" (Xing & Bernal-Meza, 2021). The paper's conclusion is that China-

US competition will shape the trajectory of the world order for decades to come. Therefore, this article is both a source of inspiration and information, throughout the thesis, when analyzing the US-China relationship.

Furthermore, the methodology of this thesis is distinguished by its integration of theoretical exploration with empirical analysis, and a critical evaluation of China and the United States' strategies, offering an exploration of the repercussions on worldwide stability.

Firstly, the conceptual framework was developed through an extensive review of academic literature, scholarly articles, and insights from experts in international relations. This phase involved a look into academic and political sources to understand the historical and theoretical contexts that shape US-China relations. The aim was to establish the thesis in a robust theoretical foundation, enabling a critical examination of the evolving situation between these nations.

For the analysis, a methodical approach was used in order to gather contemporary perspectives in US-China relations. This involved consulting a range of current newspapers, online articles, and recent publications that offer insights into the latest trends, policies, and events shaping the bilateral relationship. The objective was to capture the most current state of affairs, crucial for providing an up-to-date narrative on US-China relations.

Consequently, following the establishment of a conceptual framework and the analysis of contemporary US-China relations, the thesis progresses to a critical evaluation. This section will critically analyze how recent developments, as identified in the analysis, align with or diverge from the theoretical foundations established in the conceptual framework. This evaluation will also encompass the two proposed hypotheses – the Bipolar World Hypothesis and the Cold Peace Hypothesis. By examining the empirical data gathered through the analysis, the critical evaluation will assess whether the evidence supports the hypotheses or if they need to be adjusted.

Finally, the conclusions represent a reflective culmination of the research conducted. It combines a synthesis of the insights gained from the literature review,

analysis of current dynamics, and critical examination. This section presents my own perspectives, informed by the extensive body of evidence and theoretical discussion encountered throughout the thesis.

6. Structure

- **Part I: Introduction** outlines the significance and scope of the chosen topic, detailing the justification and relevance for its selection. It sets forth the primary and secondary objectives, presents the two hypotheses under consideration, describes the methodology employed for research, and previews the thesis structure.
- **Part II: Conceptual Framework** delves into the chosen framework's importance and its organizational structure, emphasizing the main reasons behind its selection. This section proceeds to explain the framework's content, addressing themes such as the Cold War and Cold Peace, the application of Conflict Theory, and the exploration of victimhood and victory narratives through the Critical Constructivist Theory. It culminates with a summary of the framework's key conclusions.
- **Part III: Analysis** examines the present-day rivalry between the US and China, exploring the types of interdependencies to explain their economic, political, and social competition and cooperation. Furthermore, it compares their global infrastructure developments and geopolitical influence through two initiatives.
- **Part IV: Critical Analysis Through the Framework** critically evaluates if recent developments align with existing theories and assesses the validity of the proposed hypotheses on US-China relations.
- **Part V: Conclusions** draws the thesis to an end with a comprehensive conclusion that synthesizes the research findings and insights gained.

PART II: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

i. Relevance of the Framework

The relevance of the Cold War in our analysis emerges as a fundamental framework for understanding the nature of current international divisions and tensions. It offers an opportunity through which we can analyze the nature of global competition, particularly in the context of the US-China rivalry. Furthermore, it provides a valuable comparative framework to analyze whether today's geopolitical landscape is evolving to a similar pattern of rivalry or if it is diverging towards a new paradigm, conceptualized as "Cold Peace".

The Cold War analysis lies in the main exemplification of a bipolar world order, where two superpowers are able to exert influence over international affairs. This context provides an explanation to the alliance formations and strategic movements seen in today's international relations, particularly between the US and China. Their economic and technological competition echoes the characteristics of the US-former Soviet Union rivalry. Therefore, by drawing parallels between these two eras, this analysis aims to discern patterns and strategies that have persisted over time, shedding light to the motivations and potential outcomes of current global conflicts.

Furthermore, this analysis also introduces the Cold Peace concept, which adapts to the complexities of the modern world. It is fundamental to introduce this framework as it reflects the current international landscape, where nations engage in cooperative trade on one front while competing fiercely in other areas. This paradigm focuses on a balance between cooperation and competition, alliance and rivalry, aspects that define the interactions of major world powers in the 21st century.

Ultimately, this thesis aspires to bridge the gap between theoretical exploration and real-world applicability, by contributing significantly to the academic and practical discourse on international relations. This knowledge will be used to inform policymakers and scholars on navigating the current scenario towards sustainable peace and cooperation, particularly in the critical relationship between China and the United States, using the former Soviet Union as a point of reflection.

ii. Structure of the Framework

This framework starts by defining and contrasting the theories of “Cold War” and “Cold Peace”, and it also examines their interconnections, as perceived by various scholars. Consequently, the framework explores the variety of strategies that can be employed to alleviate the tensions that characterize the Sino-American relationship. Specifically, this exploration is rooted in practicality, aiming to provide actionable insights into peacebuilding efforts and conflict resolution strategies.

As the framework progresses, the question of the inevitability of conflict is asked through a detailed examination of realism and liberalism, uncovering the main barriers to cooperation and their respective different views in terms of conflict and cooperation strategies. Furthermore, the thesis applies Conflict Theory specifically to the Sino-American context to illuminate the challenges and opportunities present in their relationship. Moreover, it tackles the broader theme of global divisions and tensions through the innovative lens of Critical Constructivist Theory. This thesis defines the former Soviet Union-US and China-US relationships by analyzing historical narratives of victimhood and victory through this lens. Furthermore, both relationships are compared explaining both their similarities and differences.

Finally, it is also necessary to explore the connection between the concepts explained in the conceptual framework. "Cold War" vs. "Cold Peace" sets the stage for a primary introduction: is this active hostility or tense standoff? Concepts like conflict mitigation and cooperation then become potential solutions within a Cold Peace scenario. Next, Conflict Theory helps identify underlying tensions, while victimhood and victory narratives, via the Critical Constructivist Theory, show how history shapes current views. Finally, comparing the China-US situation with the former Soviet Union-US relationship provides an opportunity to learn from the past. Are there similar dynamics or key differences? By using these interconnected concepts, the conceptual framework builds a strong foundation for analyzing the complexities of China-US relations, ultimately aiming to navigate this situation with a focus on peace and stability.

iii. Content

1. Cold War and Cold Peace

In the ever-evolving landscape of international relations, understanding the terms that describe the state of interactions between nations is crucial. Terms such as "Cold War" and "Cold Peace" are pivotal in understanding the complexities of modern geopolitics. These concepts offer a framework for analyzing the dynamic and often subtle forms of rivalry and cooperation that define the global order.

In the world of international relations, "Cold" refers to a state of tension and rivalry between nations which does not escalate into direct military confrontation (Peters & Thayer, 2012). It does not describe frosty relations, but rather a tense and competitive state between nations that falls short of outright war. Exemplified like two chess grandmasters locked in an intense duel – every move calculated, every strategy analyzed, but without physically attacking each other. High tension simmers beneath the surface, fueled by distrust and animosity (Sakwa, 2013, p. 11). These countries might not clash directly, but they fight indirectly through proxy conflicts, backing opposing sides in regional wars. The competition extends beyond military might, encompassing economic dominance, ideological influence, and even cultural spheres. Both sides recognize that full-blown war could lead to mutually assured destruction (MAD), so they find alternative ways to exert power without resorting to direct military confrontation.

Traditionally, "Peace" simply meant the absence of war, as noted by Peters & Thayer (2012, p. 12). However, in international relations, it's a more complex concept. Peace is not just the lack of fighting, but the creation of a stable world order. This includes a predictable environment for nations to cooperate, functioning international law to settle disputes peacefully, and democratic institutions that prevent internal conflicts. These elements are interconnected – a stable world is less likely with human rights abuses, and democracy can uphold legal principles. This broader definition, sometimes called "Positive Peace", is what organizations like the UN strive for through peacekeeping, human rights advocacy, and promoting democratic development (Martín, 2005).

Therefore, peace in international relations transcends the simple absence of war. While preventing armed conflict remains a central pillar, scholars like Peters & Thayer (2012) emphasize a more comprehensive definition. This broader vision encompasses the construction of a stable and just global order, a world not just free from war, but where nations can collaborate and thrive in a predictable environment.

Furthermore, to fully grasp the concept of "Cold Peace", the nature of "War" must be understood. Traditionally, war was viewed as a large-scale armed conflict waged between nation-states. However, the landscape of warfare has become considerably more complex, with various non-state actors now playing a prominent role.

One key development is the rise of non-state actors as active participants in warfare. As Haas points out (1965, as cited in van der Dennen, n.d.), ethnic factions fighting for autonomy or control of territory are a major factor in contemporary conflicts. Religious groups may engage in armed struggles to establish dominance or fight for perceived injustices. Ideological organizations, like extremist groups, can resort to violence to achieve their goals. Furthermore, terrorist networks and even major drug cartels possess sophisticated weaponry and engage in military-style operations. These non-state actors often blur the lines between civilian and combatant, making these conflicts particularly challenging.

The way these conflicts are fought has also evolved. Traditional images of two state armies clashing head-on are less common. Non-state actors frequently employ asymmetric warfare tactics. Guerilla warfare, hit-and-run attacks, and the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are all strategies designed to exploit the weaknesses of conventional militaries. This makes it difficult for state actors to achieve decisive victories and creates a protracted, low-intensity conflict environment.

The globalized world has further complicated the picture. Advancements in communication and technology have transformed the nature of war (Bekkevold, 2023). Non-state actors can leverage the internet for recruitment, propaganda, and fundraising, and the ease of movement across borders allows them to establish safe havens and operate internationally.

As this thesis delves into the definition of "Cold" conditions in international relations and the evolving nature of "War", it becomes imperative to explore the historical period known as the "Cold War" for a more comprehensive understanding.

"Cold War" refers to a specific historical period following World War II, roughly from 1945 to the early 1990s. This era wasn't defined by a singular, large-scale war, but rather by a constant state of tension and rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. This simmering conflict stemmed from a fundamental divide: Capitalism versus Communism (Doyle, n.d.). The United States championed capitalism, an economic system built on private ownership, free markets, and individual liberties. In contrast, the Soviet Union advocated for communism, characterized by state control of the economy, a single ruling party, and limited individual freedoms. This fundamental difference in ideology permeated every aspect of the Cold War.

The rivalry wasn't confined to a single battlefield. The US and Soviet Union sought to expand their influence and gain allies across the globe. This competition played out economically, as they fought for dominance in trade, resources, and technological advancements. Politically, the world became bipolar, with many nations aligning themselves with either the US or the Soviet Union (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2019). This formed a sort of "us vs. them" mentality across the globe.

Fearing the horrific consequences of direct military confrontation, particularly due to the development of nuclear weapons by both sides, the US and USSR often fought each other "indirectly" through proxy wars. These were regional conflicts where each superpower backed opposing sides, effectively using smaller nations as pawns in their ideological battle. The Vietnam War, the Korean War, and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan are some prime examples of proxy wars.

The global landscape became divided into two major blocs – the Western Bloc led by the US and its allies (including many Western European nations and Japan), and the Eastern Bloc dominated by the Soviet Union and its satellite states in Eastern Europe. Each bloc had its own economic and military alliances, distinct cultural spheres of influence, and a competing vision for the future of the world.

However, the term "Cold Peace" presents a seemingly contradictory concept in international relations. It describes a period where major powers co-exist without direct military confrontation, yet remain locked in a state of intense tension, rivalry, and suspicion.

The most striking feature of a Cold Peace is the absence of direct war between major powers (Doyle, 2023). This can be attributed to various factors, such as the threat of mutually assured destruction (MAD) with nuclear weapons or a delicate balance of power that deters either side from initiating a full-scale conflict (Doyle, 2023). However, this doesn't equate to a peaceful world order. Beneath the surface of non-engagement lies a mix of geopolitical tension and rivalry. Espionage activities, propaganda campaigns, and relentless competition for influence in other countries become the norm.

Interestingly, a Cold Peace does not preclude limited cooperation between major powers. Sometimes, pragmatism trumps ideology (Doyle, 2023). Major powers may find it more practical to cooperate on specific issues rather than let rivalry get in the way. This does not mean they become allies, but they can leave specific areas for cooperation while competition continues in other spheres.

1.1. Comparison between Cold War and Cold Peace

Building on the concepts of Cold War and Cold Peace, it becomes evident that while the Cold War presented a clear dichotomy between two dominant superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, each championing opposing ideologies, Cold Peace presents a far more complex landscape.

The Cold War was a period of clear and binary opposition between the United States and the Soviet Union representing two dominant ideologies: capitalism and communism (Feffer, 1996). This ideological divide shaped a bipolar world order, neatly divided into two blocs – the West and the East, creating a relatively black-and-white scenario of geopolitical alignment and opposition (Ditrych, 2014). The Cold Peace, on the other hand, operates within a spectrum of greys. There may be major powers with competing interests, but the landscape is more complex and less defined. Nations can have a mix of cooperative and competitive relationships with each other, depending on

the specific issue at hand. For example, countries may cooperate on trade or environmental issues while simultaneously competing in military or territorial matters (Hickman, 2023).

Sakwa (2013) uses the term "mimetic Cold War" to describe how Cold Peace can inherit patterns of rivalry from previous eras. Even if the core ideological conflict is gone, the historical animosity and competition can persist. This "mimetic" aspect highlights the enduring nature of suspicion and rivalry between major powers, even when the specific ideological justifications may have changed. The situation is "Cold" because it lacks the direct military confrontation that would make it a "Hot" war; however, it is not a true peace because the underlying conflicts and competitions remain unresolved. This concept is central to both Cold War and Cold Peace. Neither involve direct military confrontation between major powers. However, the Cold War featured a constant threat of potential escalation, particularly due to the nuclear arms race. A Cold Peace, on the other hand, may not have the same level of immediate threat, but the underlying tensions and competition can still have significant global ramifications.

Furthermore, the concept of a zero-sum mentality, where one side's gain is seen as the other's loss, is also a defining characteristic of both the Cold War and Cold Peace. This emphasis on maintaining a balance of power can significantly hinder cooperation and exacerbate existing tensions (Xinhua, 2019). Therefore, the concepts of "Cold War" and "Cold Peace" are fundamental to analyze the current global divisions on China-US rivalry, as it enables the exploration of similar patterns of behavior and the understanding of the current global tensions.

2. Conflict Mitigation and Cooperation in a Cold Peace

In a Cold Peace scenario, while open warfare may be absent, the constant threat of violence hangs heavy, casting a long shadow over any opportunity of true peace. However, this situation is not without hope. By employing an approach that addresses both the economic realities and political tensions, nations can navigate the divide of a Cold Peace and foster cooperation. This section will delve into these strategies, exploring how economic interdependence, structured mediation efforts, and robust legal frameworks can pave the way for a more peaceful future.

According to Braddon's research (2012), economic interdependence is central to understanding a Cold Peace. This concept describes a situation where nations become reliant on each other's economies through trade and shared resources. Braddon argues that this interdependence acts as a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, economic competition, disputes over resources, or unequal trade deals can become breeding grounds for conflict. However, economic interdependence also presents a pathway to peace. When nations become reliant on each other for goods and services, if trade gets disrupted and cooperation is affected, it hurts everyone involved. For example, if Country A relies heavily on Country B for food imports, war would disrupt these supplies and lead to food shortages in both countries. This shared vulnerability creates a strong incentive to find peaceful solutions to their differences. This concept aligns perfectly with the earlier notion of building mutual interests in a Cold Peace environment. By fostering economic interdependence, nations create a shared stake in maintaining peace, providing a powerful incentive to manage underlying tensions and prevent a return to open warfare.

While economic interdependence offers a promising path towards resolving conflict, it is not a standalone solution. The significance of economic ties cannot be denied, but for truly effective outcomes, a more comprehensive approach is necessary. This is where integrating structured mediation and peacekeeping strategies becomes crucial. Clayton & Dorussen's research (2021) sheds light on the valuable synergy between these tools.

Peacekeeping forces excel at maintaining order and preventing existing agreements from collapsing (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.). Imagine a fragile ceasefire between two countries – peacekeeping forces play a vital role in ensuring this ceasefire holds. However, peacekeeping alone does not address the root causes of conflict. It is in this juncture that the process of mediation becomes pivotal. Mediation aims to facilitate dialogue and reach negotiated settlements that tackle the underlying issues that led to the conflict in the first place (Mason & Clayton, 2023). In the previous example, mediators would work with both countries to find a lasting solution, not just maintain the temporary ceasefire achieved by the peacekeeping forces (United Nations Peacemaker, n.d.).

Neutral third-party mediators can create a safe space for dialogue between rival nations, helping them overcome mistrust and find common ground. Furthermore, Clayton & Dorussen's research suggests that mediation is even more effective when accompanied by transformative peacekeeping (2021). This type of peacekeeping goes beyond simply maintaining order and focuses on addressing the root cause of conflict. It might involve initiatives to promote human rights, rebuild infrastructure, or support civil society organizations.

Used together, these tools prove far more effective than relying solely on one (Duursma, 2023). This combined approach is particularly important in a Cold Peace scenario, as simmering tensions can easily erupt into renewed violence. Diplomacy, robust legal frameworks to govern economic interactions, and continuous dialogue through mediation channels are essential for managing these tensions and fostering cooperation.

2.1. Sino-American Relations

The relationship between the United States and China is a defining feature of the 21st century. While not a declared war, the current state of tensions and competition between these two economic and military giants strikes a resemblance to a Cold Peace. Economic interdependence, a cornerstone concept explored by Braddon (2012), plays a significant role in this dynamic. However, as the following sections will explore, achieving true cooperation requires a multi-pronged approach that builds upon the ideas of Clayton & Dorussen (2021). By strategically leveraging economic ties, employing structured mediation efforts, and fostering robust legal frameworks, the United States and China can navigate the complexities of their Cold Peace towards a more stable and cooperative international relationship.

Given the deeply intertwined economic relationship between China and the United States, characterized by significant trade links and mutual investments, there exists a unique opportunity to leverage these connections as a platform for enhancing diplomatic relations and easing tensions. As previously explained, Braddon's analysis on economic interdependence resonates strongly in the context of the China-US relationship. As he states, the economic interdependence can be a double-edged sword, creating both

tensions but also opportunities for cooperation (2012). The mutual economic benefits provide a strong incentive for both nations to maintain a peaceful relationship, but trade disputes could also escalate into major conflicts.

China is currently the largest goods trading partner for the US as its goods exports to China make up to \$151.3 billion, supporting 1.06 million American jobs in 2022. Investment is also substantial with US investors holding \$1.1 trillion in equities issued by Chinese companies and US companies invested \$105 billion in China (US-China Business Council, 2023). The interdependence between these countries is significant and, as Braddon explained, the challenge lies in leveraging these economic ties to foster a stable and cooperative environment, rather than allowing them to become the source of conflict (2012).

Clayton & Dorussen's analysis on mediation and peacekeeping also offers valuable insights for navigating the complex China-US relationship (2021). Flashpoints like Taiwan and the South China Sea necessitate diplomatic strategies that foster dialogue and identify common ground (Lanteigne, 2018). Here, mediation can play a crucial role in facilitating communication and bridging differences between the two superpowers. Peacekeeping measures in this context might not involve traditional military deployments (Yuan, 2022). Instead, they could take the form of mutual agreements designed to prevent escalation and maintain the current status quo. This approach prioritizes stability and crisis prevention over assertive military posturing.

While military power undoubtedly plays a significant role in the foreign policies of both China and the US, it is crucial to adopt a balanced approach that integrates diplomatic and economic considerations (Gowan, 2020). In the context of a "Cold Peace", where open conflict is undesirable, projecting military strength can serve as a deterrent. However, it is essential to manage these maneuvers carefully to avoid miscalculations that could spiral into a full-blown military confrontation.

By employing a combination of mediation, non-military peacekeeping measures, and strategic diplomacy, China and the US work towards a more stable and peaceful coexistence (Rust, 2023).

3. Conflict: Inevitability in International Relations

Following the examination of conflict mitigation strategies, this thesis will explore the theoretical dimensions of conflict and cooperation, concentrating on the inherent inevitability of conflict within China-US relationship. It analyzes the main obstacles to cooperation through the lens of two dominant theories in international relations: realism and liberalism.

Realism, with its foundation laid by thinkers like Thucydides and Hans Morgenthau, paints a picture of a world inherently prone to conflict (Korab-Karpowicz, 2023). Human nature, according to realists, is inherently selfish, with states acting as rational actors driven by self-interest and security concerns. In the absence of a central authority to govern the international system, states exist in a self-help system, leading to a security dilemma (Antunes & Camisão, 2018). This dilemma arises when states, out of fear of each other, build up their militaries and form alliances. These actions, intended to enhance security, can be perceived by other states as threats, prompting them to further bolster their own defenses, creating a vicious cycle of mistrust and potential conflict.

Realism further complicates the China-US relationship through the concept of power politics. Realists believe that states prioritize power as a means of ensuring survival and achieving their national interests (Antunes & Camisão, 2018). In the context of China's growing economic and military might, the US might feel threatened, leading to competition and potential conflict. Offensive realists, a sub-school within realism, might even advocate for a more aggressive approach to contain China's rise. However, defensive realists, like Kenneth Waltz, acknowledge the possibility of cooperation under certain conditions. For instance, they might argue that both China and the US could cooperate to maintain a stable international order if it benefits their long-term security interests (O'Hanlon et al., 2022).

Liberalism, on the other hand, offers a more optimistic perspective. Emerging after the devastation of World War II, liberalism emphasizes the importance of democratic institutions, international law, and cooperation to promote peace and prosperity (Meiser, 2018). Liberals believe that by fostering democratic values and establishing strong international institutions that promote peaceful conflict resolution,

trade, and human rights, states can overcome their differences and cooperate for mutual benefit.

However, applying these principles to the China-US relationship presents challenges. Critics argue that liberalism is overly idealistic and overlooks the differences in power dynamics and differing political systems (Steele, 2007). China's non-democratic system might be seen as an obstacle to cooperation, especially in areas where democratic values clash with China's internal political priorities. Additionally, liberals are criticized for underestimating the difficulty of creating and maintaining strong international institutions.

In the China-US relationship, both theories offer interesting points, but neither provide a complete picture. Realism highlights the inherent challenges of cooperation due to the absence of a central authority and the pursuit of national interests. Liberalism, however, offers hope for cooperation through shared interests and strong institutions. The key for China and the US might lie in finding a pragmatic balance between these perspectives (Kennedy, 2024). Recognizing the realities of power politics while simultaneously working towards building trust and establishing effective international mechanisms for communication and cooperation could be the path forward for a more stable relationship.

3.1. Application of Conflict Theory in Sino-American Relations

Scholar Alfredo Hardy, in his book *"China Versus the US: Who Will Prevail?"* (2020), explores the complex Sino-American relations through the lens of Conflict Theory. In this section, Conflict Theory will be explored so it can shed light on the motives driving tensions between these two superpowers.

Conflict Theory, a sociological perspective, posits that society is inherently unequal and characterized by competition for scarce resources – power, wealth, and prestige being the most prominent (Nickerson, 2023). This competition breeds conflict between groups with differing interests and positions in the social hierarchy. Conflict theorists argue that dominant groups seek to maintain their power by controlling resources and legitimizing their position through ideology.

When applying Conflict Theory to Sino-American relations, Hardy argues that their rivalry exemplifies the theory's principles (2020). Unlike the ideological contest of the Cold War, the US-China tensions revolve around perceptions of global power, as both nations strive for dominance in economic, technological, and military spheres (Ross, 2020).

Conflict Theory emphasizes how internal weaknesses can impact a group's position in a competition for power. Hardy highlights how internal US issues, such as political polarization, could weaken its global standing relative to China (2020). A divided nation may struggle to project a unified foreign policy or invest sufficiently in areas critical for maintaining its competitive edge. This internal vulnerability can heighten the potential for conflict as each nation seeks to exploit the other's weaknesses (Economy et al., 2024). While Hardy's analysis focuses on the potential for conflict, it is important to acknowledge areas where US and Chinese interests might converge (Radeck, 2023). Conflict Theory does not negate the possibility of cooperation when it serves the interests of both parties.

By understanding the competition for power and resources, potential flashpoints can be explored to manage this relationship. However, a complete picture requires acknowledging the possibility for cooperation on issues of mutual concern. The future trajectory of the US-China relationship will likely involve a complex mix of competition and collaboration, shaped by domestic politics, economic realities, and the evolving global landscape.

4. Victimhood and Victory Narratives through the Critical Constructivist Theory

The current tensions between nations can be understood through the application of victimhood and victory narratives using the Critical Constructivist Theory. This theory goes beyond traditional approaches and delves into how these historical narratives shape national identities and, consequently, international relations.

Critical constructivists believe that “producing, reproducing, and patrolling the state identity is vital to its stability and security” (Cho, 2009, p. 90). Identity should be understood as a process which is never complete. Therefore, identities are “actively

constituted” as they are in “constant development”, ending up in a never-ending process (Cho, 2009, p. 90). As cited in the book *“Identity and Difference”* Woodward mentions, “identity is most clearly defined by difference, that is what it is not” (Woodward, 1997, p. 2, as cited in Cho, 2009, p. 90). According to critical constructivists, these constructions are not just results of social interactions, but they are key to the understanding of international dynamics.

Connolly also emphasizes that the concept of identity is intrinsically linked to difference (Connolly, 2002, p. 9, as cited in Cho, 2009, p. 91). This connection often results in a negative form, where “the other” is perceived as inferior or dangerous, needing its exclusion to maintain the purity and security of “the self”. Consequently, when “the other” is dehumanized, it can lead to extreme actions which often involve violence (Cho, 2009, p. 91). Thus, identity is being continually shaped by society, reshaping itself in relation to difference.

Moreover, a critical constructivist approach can be applied to national security. For instance, the authors in the book *“Cultures of Insecurity”* take “discourses of insecurity” as to interrogate how they operate (Weldes et al., 1999, p. 11, as cited in Cho, 2009, p. 92). They reject the idea of the state as a pre-given entity, explaining how state identity is constructed through foreign policy and through what “the other” is manufacturing. They emphasize the fact that dangers are interpretative constructions which both shape and are shaped by state identity. Moreover, the role of discourses is highlighted in constructing threats and identities, which are not neutral and are continuously shaping actions and perceptions (Sadriu, 2021).

As a whole, the role of discourses is to help framing concrete guidelines on people’s thoughts, “discourses make certain things sayable, thinkable and doable” (Hill, Abercrombie, & Turner, 2000, p. 99, as cited in Cho, 2009, p. 93). This is associated with the process of socialization, as it creates formal and informal institutions which set expectations on how the world should work, which identities are possible, and what types of behaviors are legitimate. Therefore, political discourses are able to “essentialize representations of identities” (Neumann, 1999, p. 212, as cited in Cho, 2009, p. 93).

However, there is a specific type of discourse, the discourse of danger, which also provides the state with a variety of apparent truths about who we are by focusing on what we are not, or, on what we have to fear (Di Lân, n.d.). These types of discourses come attached to certain strategies towards the constructed enemies and constructive differences, “the ability to represent things as alien, subversive, dirty, or sick is pivotal to the articulation of danger” (Campbell, 1998, p. 3, as cited in Cho, 2009, p. 94).

The understanding of international relations often gets stuck focusing solely on events and outcomes. But a deeper analysis lies beneath the surface. Critical Constructivism offers a framework to explore how nations tell their stories – stories of past injustices or victimhood and glorious victories. These narratives are not simply echoes of the past; they are actively constructed by governments to shape a national identity (Kuusisto, 2021). This identity then becomes a powerful tool on the world stage. It allows nations to define their place, justify their actions, and ultimately guide the policies they enact.

However, the question remains: is this a universal strategy? To truly understand the power of these narratives, we need to compare across historical and contemporary contexts of the two major international relationships: the former Cold War rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States, and the current dynamic between the US and China. By examining how these nations have employed narratives of victimhood and victory in the past and present, we can identify potential patterns. Do they follow a similar playbook, or are there unique nuances in how each nation uses these stories to inform their policy decisions?

4.1. Former Soviet Union-US Relationship

The relationship between the former Soviet Union (USSR) and the United States (US) dominated the 20th century, shaping the course of global politics and leaving a lasting legacy that continues to influence international relations today. This thesis will explore the historical roots of this relationship, focusing on the period between World War I and the collapse of the USSR, highlighting the narratives of victory and victimhood that fueled tensions and ultimately led to the Cold War.

The foundations of the conflict were established in the aftermath of World War I (1914-1918). Germany, defeated and burdened with crippling reparations, felt humiliated. Meanwhile, the newly formed Soviet Union, established after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, was excluded by the West due to its communist ideology (Maas, 2008). These feelings of resentment and exclusion fostered narratives of victimhood amongst both nations, laying the groundwork for future conflict (Ikenberry, 2001).

In contrast, the United States emerged from the war largely unharmed and played a critical role in the Allied victory. This fueled a narrative of American triumphalism and a desire to shape a new world order based on its democratic and capitalist ideals. President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, outlining principles of self-determination and collective security, embodied this vision (Roos, 2023). However, the idealistic vision remained largely unfulfilled. Unresolved issues from the war, coupled with the perceived victimhood of Germany and the Soviet Union, created fertile ground for renewed conflict.

The ideological differences between the US and the USSR further exacerbated tensions. The US championed democracy, free-market capitalism, and individual liberty. The USSR, on the other hand, advocated for a communist system with state control of the economy and centralized power (Perry, 2022). Both superpowers sought to spread their ideologies globally, creating a sense of competition and distrust. Countries were pressured to choose sides, leading to the formation of two opposing blocs: the capitalist bloc led by the US and the communist bloc led by the USSR. The Cold War (1947-1991) became a manifestation of these underlying tensions. This period was characterized by an arms race, proxy wars fought in various parts of the world, and a constant fear of nuclear annihilation. Each superpower sought to demonstrate the superiority of its system through technological advancements, economic growth, and military might (Magnúsdóttir, 2019).

The legacy of the US-Soviet relationship continues to influence the world today. The rise of new powers like China and the ongoing tensions in Eastern Europe demonstrate the enduring impact of Cold War narratives. Understanding the historical context of victory and victimhood narratives is crucial for understanding the complexities of contemporary international relations (Burns, 2019).

4.2. China-US Relationship

The relationship between the United States and China is one of the most critical and complex dynamics of the 21st century. Understanding this relationship requires a comprehension beyond economic ties and military might. At its core lies a variety of historical narratives – narratives of victory and victimhood that shape national identities, foreign policy strategies, and ultimately, the future trajectory of this critical partnership.

For China, the narrative of the "Century of Humiliation" casts a long shadow (Yingling, n.d.). This period, spanning from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, was marked by foreign intervention and imperialism by Western powers and Japan. Unequal treaties, the Opium Wars, and the Japanese occupation inflicted deep wounds on the country. However, the crucial element lies not just in these events, but in the narrative of overcoming them.

This narrative serves a dual purpose. It fuels China's current assertiveness on the global stage, driving a desire to reclaim its rightful place in the world order (Shankar, 2022) with initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to reassert its leadership role, not just in Asia, but globally. Furthermore, the narrative emphasizes safeguarding against any form of foreign interference. China's assertive actions in the South China Sea, its stance on Taiwan, and its growing military capabilities are all seen as necessary precautions against potential threats and a way to prevent another "Century of Humiliation".

However, China's historical narrative extends beyond the Century of Humiliation. Its long journey – from dynastic past to communist revolution under Mao Zedong, economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping, and the current leadership of Xi Jinping – all contribute to its national identity (Casper, 2018). This narrative emphasizes resilience, highlighting China's ability to overcome challenges and rise from periods of weakness. Sovereignty, absolute control over its territory and internal affairs, is paramount. Any perceived challenge to its sovereignty is met with strong resistance. Finally, the narrative emphasizes a return to global prominence, as China sees itself rightfully reclaiming its historical position as a major power.

On the other hand, the United States holds its own narrative. Defined by its emergence as a colonial rebel who achieved independence to become a global power, the US narrative draws heavily from its role in World Wars, the Cold War, and its position as a defender of free-market capitalism and global democratic ideals. These narrative positions the US as a global leader, a perception evident in its foreign policy decisions and its approach to international relations.

Understanding these contrasting narratives is crucial for analyzing the current dynamics of the US-China relationship. Both nations use these narratives to shape their international relations strategies and dictate their foreign policies (Hoang & Di Lan, 2023). China's narrative of rising from humiliation fuels its ambition and justifies assertive actions. For the US, the narrative of being a global leader motivates its efforts to maintain the existing international order. These contrasting narratives often lead to tensions, as each nation remains deeply rooted in its historical experiences and national identity (NCUSCR, 2023).

However, the relationship is not a simple clash of narratives. There are areas of cooperation, driven by economic interdependence and shared security concerns (Hass, 2024). The question remains: Can these narratives evolve to accommodate a more cooperative future? The internal audience plays a crucial role in China. The narrative of national rejuvenation helps legitimize the Communist Party's rule and fosters a sense of national pride. Competition with the US is another key aspect of the narrative, positioning America as a potential obstacle to China's rise (Hass, 2024). This perception fuels competition across various domains.

Ultimately, the future of US-China relations hinges on how these narratives evolve and whether they can be reconciled. Finding common ground and fostering mutual understanding will be crucial for addressing the complex challenges of the 21st century.

4.3. Comparison using the Critical Constructivist Theory

Having outlined the historical viewpoints of the three countries and the ways in which these perspectives shape their strategies in foreign policy, it becomes crucial to synthesize these narratives. By employing Critical Constructivist Theory, we can more

deeply understand how these historical legacies inform current diplomatic actions and policy decisions, emphasizing the significance of social constructs in international relations (Behraves, 2011).

The US narrative paints a picture of a nation born from rebellion, championing liberal democracy and emerging as a global superpower. This narrative of victory fuels a sense of responsibility for upholding the existing international order and promoting democratic values. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union became its primary antagonist. The Soviet narrative, centered on a revolutionary socialist state, aimed to spread communism and fight Western imperialism. This clash of narratives – the US as the defender of freedom versus the USSR as the leader of a new social order – fueled the Cold War's ideological rivalry and proxy conflicts around the globe.

China's relationship with the US also revolves around narratives. The "Century of Humiliation" narrative, depicting China's exploitation by Western powers, remains a potent force. This narrative of victimhood fuels China's current assertiveness on the world stage. It aspires to reclaim its rightful role as a global leader and prevent a repetition of past injustices. Actions like those in the South China Sea are seen as safeguarding its sovereignty against potential threats. The US narrative, perceiving China's rise with suspicion, often frames it as a challenge to the established order.

Critical Constructivism emphasizes the dynamic nature of these narratives. They are not static pronouncements but evolve in response to changing global realities and domestic needs. The collapse of the Soviet Union forced a reevaluation of its narrative, while the US narrative might adapt as China's influence grows. Additionally, these narratives are not simply reflections of the past. They are actively constructed by governments to shape national identity and justify foreign policy decisions.

The impact of these narratives on international relations is undeniable. The Cold War and the current US-China trade tensions are all deeply intertwined with these competing narratives. They influence how countries perceive their interests and those of their adversaries. However, it is important to go beyond mere comparison. While there are commonalities, the US-China and US-Soviet relationships have unique features.

The US-Soviet rivalry was undeniably defined by a clear ideological divide. Communism, with its emphasis on state control and class struggle, directly challenged the US vision of liberal democracy and free markets. The US-China dynamic, however, is not so neatly categorized. While China's brand of state capitalism certainly differs from the US model, it does not represent a complete rejection of free markets. Both nations are major players in the globalized economic system.

Nevertheless, economic ties are the crucial difference between the US-Soviet and US-China relationships. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and its satellite states were largely isolated from the global economy. In contrast, the US and China are deeply entangled in a mutually beneficial trade relationship. China is a major exporter, the US a significant importer, and both nations hold large amounts of each other's debt. This economic interdependence creates a powerful incentive for maintaining some level of cooperation, despite political and strategic disagreements.

Therefore, Critical Constructivism offers a valuable framework for understanding the complex narratives that shape US foreign policy. By analyzing how the US engages with different nations through historical narratives, a deeper understanding of their foreign policy choices is gained, as well as the potential directions of critical international relationships. As these narratives continue to evolve, so will too the evolution between cooperation and conflict on the global stage.

iv. Conclusion of the Framework

In conclusion, the examination of the Cold War and Cold Peace frameworks, alongside the exploration of conflict mitigation, cooperation strategies, and the victory and victimhood narratives through the Critical Constructivist Theory, offers a series of tools to understand the current international system.

There has been a transition from a bipolar world order after the Cold War, to a nuanced state of global interactions, conceptualized as Cold Peace. The conceptual framework reveals that, while economic interdependence and diplomatic engagement offers ways to alleviate conflict, underlying tensions and strategic competitions still persist, reminiscent of Cold War dynamics, yet distinct in their contemporary context. As

explained, the Critical Constructivist Theory further illustrates this conceptual framework by emphasizing the role of identity, though victory and victimhood narratives. This approach showed how the United States and China, along with the former Soviet Union, used these narratives to justify their foreign policies and their identities towards the global world.

As this thesis transitions to a real-world scenario, it is fundamental to examine the current relationship between these countries, their interdependencies, and the scenarios that could lead to a state of Cold Peace and multipolarity.

PART III: ANALYSIS

Delving into the analysis part of the thesis, the focus broadens to a current global landscape, with a particular emphasis on the rivalry between the United States and China. To explore this landscape, it is imperative to explain the concept of interdependencies, which will be a key aspect to explore the current relationship between these two global powers. Interdependencies, in this analysis, will refer to the economic, political, and social strategies that both restrict and drive the decisions of countries within the global stage. By exploring the nature of Sino-American interdependencies, this analysis will explain which mutual reliance influences their rivalry and cooperation strategies and it will also raise the question whether an increase in interdependencies result in an increase in either cooperation or conflict.

These interdependencies will be reflected and explained through presidential discourses from the current president of China and the last two presidents of the United States, which will serve as strategic guidance of their distinctive leadership perspectives. These discourses will be analyzed with the sole objective of providing a deeper understanding of how leadership narratives influence and, sometimes, exacerbate the difficulties of Sino-American relations. Furthermore, the analysis will explore how present these two countries are in other parts of the world, highlighting key projects and initiatives that aim to expand their political and economic spheres, like the One Belt and One Road project (OBOR) by China and the Build Back Better World (B3W) by the United States.

Through this comprehensive analysis, the thesis aspires to illuminate the intricacies of the US-China rivalry, offering insights into the potential pathways towards managing competition and fostering cooperation in an increasingly interdependent world.

1. US-China Current Rivalry

The current rivalry between the United States and China states a significant deviation from the patterns observed in the conceptual framework. Characterized by their reduced governmental effectiveness, widespread public disengagement and great

economic imbalances, this competition differs from the historical dynamics of power rivalries (Heath, 2023).

This competition is set against a series of global interdependencies, a required concept to understand the complexities of the current relationship between these countries (Zhang, 2024). Past confrontations featured unified and centralized states with robust cohesive internal structures, propelled by the expansion of political participation and economic improvement. However, the current US-China rivalry introduces new elements that challenge the traditional understanding of great power dynamics. The root of their interdependent relationship raises relevant questions about how this connection is established and maintained (Heath, 2023).

Analysts are divided in their interpretations of the rivalry's trajectory, with some foreseeing inevitable conflict, while others advocating for a cautious management of competition or even transforming the rivalry into greater cooperation (Durfee & Slodkowski, 2023). Consequently, the acknowledgment of global interdependencies is essential in navigating the interconnected landscape that defines the contemporary rivalry between the United States and China.

2. The Interdependence Theory

The concept of interdependencies emerges as a key concept for analyzing the rivalry between the United States and China, as it provides a shift from traditional models of international relations towards a more intertwined global context. The interdependence approach acknowledges not only one-sided but also mutual dependence relationships. Even if one country is more dependent than the other, there is still a level of dependency from both sides (Bärtschi, 1978). The "more" or "less" side is covered by the concept of "asymmetry", which refers to the "unequal levels of dependence, particularly evident between the periphery (developing countries or less developed regions) and the metropolises (developed countries or central regions)" (Bärtschi, 1978, p. 248).

Over time, one-sided dependencies have evolved into what is known as asymmetric interdependence, indicating that while one country may be less dependent, it is not entirely independent. This approach has been fleshed out by Bergsten, Keohane, &

Nye considering seven criteria for assessing the effectiveness of international economic systems, including efficiency, growth, full employment, income distribution, price stability, quality of life, and economic security (1975, p. 26).

Therefore, this analysis will establish its foundation on the interdependence approach as it is more aligned with the real political-economic issues and is more relevant in the contemporary context of globalization. By embracing this viewpoint, the thesis will critically analyze the mutual dependencies that shape economic policies and outcomes across the United States and China.

2.1. Interdependence as a Double-Edged Sword

The interdependencies between these nations are not only economic but also technological and strategic, which collectively shape and sometimes strain the bilateral ties (Arkin, 2022). The nature of the economic ties between the US and China offers a rich field to study the dual forces of cooperation and competition, reflecting how deeply intertwined economies can impact and potentially complicate diplomatic and military relations. In line with the observations made by Mansfield & Pollins, this thesis acknowledges that the relationship between economic interdependence and political conflict has gained increasing attention, underscoring the complexity of how intertwined economies impact diplomatic and military interactions (n.d.).

In the context of US-China relations, interdependence is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, their economic cooperation is highlighted by trade agreements, with both nations being pivotal trading partners, which has indeed fostered mutual growth and prosperity. On the other hand, this interdependence contrasts with their political and territorial disputes, notably in areas like the South China Sea, where China's territorial claims have led to tensions, not only with the countries in that area, but also with the United States, which advocates for freedom of navigation. Additionally, this interdependence also affects their competition for technological supremacy, further illustrating the dual nature of their relationship; cooperatively economic yet competitively geopolitical (Brown, 2024).

This nature of economic cooperation and geopolitical competition opens the debate of the role of trade in either fostering or mitigating this conflict. This thesis engages with previous studies where it has been proposed an interactive relationship between interdependence and political regime type. The hypothesis presented by Park explains that trade interdependence has divergent effects on relations involving democracies and autocracies: it leads to conflict in autocratic regimes while being peace-promoting for democratic states (2018, p. 22).

2.2. Types of Interdependencies

In light of this hypothesis, an understanding of US-China relations necessitates a comprehensive examination of the web of economic, political, and social interdependencies that inextricably link the two nations. This deeper exploration will not only illuminate the areas of cooperation and competition that define their complex situation, but also shed light on the potential pressure points and areas of leverage that exist within this critical relationship.

Economically, the interconnection between the US and China is not just limited to trade; it includes investment, joint ventures, and shared economic projects that span technology, manufacturing, and services. These economic engagements create a web of mutual reliance, with each economy benefiting from the other's growth. This economic symbiosis, while bolstering prosperity, also gives rise to competitive tensions, with each nation seeking to protect and advance its own economic interests. The examination of these economic projects and mutual agreements will be also discussed in further sections of the thesis, as it is key to understand the common ground where both countries stand in.

Politically, the discourses of the last two US presidents and the current Chinese president have oscillated, reflecting the fluctuating nature of the bilateral relationship. These presidential narratives have been pivotal in shaping both domestic and international perceptions. The rhetoric and communication from both nations' leaders are more than just words and sentences, they reflect the strategic priorities and ideological thoughts that drive each country's approach to the other. The examination of these discourses, which will be analyzed in subsequent sections of the thesis, reveals the layers of political strategy and motivations that inform the complex Sino-American dynamics.

Socially, the level of global integration is evident through cultural exchange, educational collaborations, and the pervasive spread of technology. The globalization experienced by both countries has led to a shared participation in the global market, challenging traditional notions of nationalism seen in previous rivalries such as the Cold War. Unlike the US-Soviet dynamic, which was marked by distinct ideological blocs and limited economic interaction, the US-China relationship exists within a highly globalized framework where the exchange of goods, ideas, and culture is extensive, even in the middle of rising nationalistic sentiments.

This thesis will explore these economic, political, and social interdependencies in the subsequent sections, understanding how they manifest and interact with one another. In doing so, it will aim to explain the interplay between trade and conflict, democracy and autocracy, cooperation and competition—all within the broader context of an increasingly interconnected world. The examination will draw contrasts with past geopolitical rivalries and offer a comparative perspective on the potential paths for navigating the US-China relationship moving forward.

2.2.1. Economic Interdependencies

In the economic environment, the relationship between the United States and China is a clear example of both cooperation and contention. This thesis will focus on trade and the resulting interdependencies, acknowledging the economic relationship, yet choosing to narrow the focus to aim for preciseness. Given the amount of economic ties that bind these two countries, it is impractical to cover every aspect within the scope of a single academic thesis. Therefore, this study will specifically focus on the trade dynamics that characterize their interlinked economies, recognizing that while the broader economic interactions are very significant, the aim is not to provide an exhaustive analysis, but rather to understand their trade relationship and the dependencies they created.

The journey of US-China economic interdependence commenced notably with China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 (WTO, n.d.). As a requisite for being admitted, Beijing had to commit to a set of economic reforms, including steep tariff cuts for imported goods, protections for intellectual property (IP),

and transparency around its laws and regulations (Siripurapu & Berman, 2023). Although it is true that, trade between both countries was already growing even before China joined the WTO, its admission solidified permanent normal trade relations, offering greater stability for American businesses (Siripurapu & Berman, 2023). This event marked the beginning of an era of growth in bilateral trade, taking their economic interactions to the global arena.

Since that moment, trade between these two countries increased and became a vital aspect for the prosperity of both countries (Siripurapu & Berman, 2023). Specifically, the United States emerged as one of the largest markets for Chinese goods, while China became a significant destination for American exports (Siripurapu & Berman, 2023). This bilateral trade led to considerable benefits, offering American consumers access to a wider range of affordable goods and providing Chinese manufacturers with vast markets for their products.

However, this relationship based in trade was not always straightforward and has, on multiple occasions, led to a series of challenges. Specifically, it has experienced significant turbulence since July 2018. In that moment, there was a pronounced shift towards increased protectionism and economic tension leading to the initiation of the US-China trade war. Over the course of this conflict, the United States imposed tariffs on approximately \$550 billion worth of Chinese goods, while China retaliated with tariffs on \$185 billion worth of US goods, disrupting global supply chains and affecting international trade dynamics (Mullen, 2022).

The conflict saw numerous escalations and retaliations when the US imposed a 25% tariff on \$34 billion worth of Chinese imports (Mullen, 2022). China responded in kind, marking the start of a tariff exchange that would encompass a wide range of products, from agricultural goods to high-tech equipment. Despite a temporary truce called at the G20 summit in December 2018 by both presidents, Xi Jinping and Donald Trump, negotiations broke down, leading to further increases in tariffs on both sides.

In January 2020, a pivotal moment arrived when the United States and China signed the Phase-One Trade deal. This agreement, signed by US President Donald Trump and China's Vice-Premier Liu He, was aimed at de-escalating the trade war (U.S.- China

Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020). It included commitments from China to increase purchases of US goods and services, alongside provisions for financial market access, intellectual property protection, and enforcement (2020). However, the deal fell short of expectations, with China buying less than 60% of the US exports it had committed to, raising questions about the effectiveness and future of trade negotiations between the two countries (Mullen, 2022). Nevertheless, the US also took significant actions, such as imposing restrictions on the import of cotton and apparel products from China's Xinjiang region due to concerns over forced labor.

High-level discussions resumed in 2021, with talks between Chinese Vice-Premier Liu He and US officials, including Trade Representative Katherine Tai and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen (Crossley, 2021). These conversations highlighted a mutual recognition of the importance of Sino-US economic relations but also underscored its challenges.

In the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022, tensions between China and the United States intensified once more. During that period, the administration under President Biden targeted numerous Chinese corporations with sanctions. In retaliation, China implemented a series of counteractions against the US sanctions, notably introducing export restrictions on gallium and germanium, materials critical for the production of semiconductors and various other products (Ma, 2024).

China has also drawn criticism for Western countries for its position on the Ukrainian war, remaining neutral and refusing to criticize its invasion (Agence France-Presse, 2024). Therefore, China and Russia have increased their political and economic ties, surpassing ambitious trade objectives and reflecting a strategic pivot towards the reinforcement of their bilateral relationship. They have reached more than \$240 billion, overshooting a goal of \$200 billion set in bilateral meetings last year. In contrast, trade between the US and China fell drastically, going down by a 11.6% (Agence France-Presse, 2024).

As moving into 2024, the landscape of US-China economic trade relations appears to have shifted towards selective cooperation. Senior officials from both nations seem to be worried about the misunderstandings and miscalculations that can occur and affect the

delicate balance between interdependence and rivalry. In fact, during a press conference, Wang Lingjun, the Deputy Minister of the General Administration of Customs in China, remarked that China is expected to encounter increased challenges this year: "The complexity, severity and uncertainty of the external environment are on the rise, and we need to overcome the difficulties and make more efforts to further promote the growth of foreign trade" (Lingjun, n.d., as cited in AFM Office, 2024, para. 2).

2.2.2. Political Interdependencies

To explore the interdependencies between China and the United States, the focus will be established on examining political discourses as they unfold in scholarly papers, televised events, and official political documents. The aim is to show the dynamics at play in the Sino-US relationship and to highlight the areas of mutual dependence, conflict, and cooperation.

The analysis will segment the interactions between the US and Chinese leaders, examining their engagements and the resulting impact on both nations. This thesis will delve into the period of cooperation and challenges between current President Xi Jinping and his relationship with former US president, Donald Trump, and current US president Joe Biden, explaining their differences and the approach that works best to maintain a stable relationship.

As it has been shown in the previous part of the thesis and as it will be seen in this one too, few appeared to have noticed that the sudden deteriorations in US-China relations are usually followed by rapid recoveries too. This thesis explains the enduring phenomenon using a theory of superficial friendship, which is defined as the simple policy of pretending to be friends. This is exemplified in the turning point of the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis. This military standoff arose from concerns about Taiwan's potential move towards independence, a red line for China. The US position in the Taiwan Strait was described as a balance between several factors. Officially, the US acknowledged the "One China" policy. However, the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979 allowed unofficial relations and military support for Taiwan's self-defense. The US has always maintained a policy of "strategic ambiguity" on whether they would intervene militarily if China attacked Taiwan. In essence, the US tried to maintain peace and

stability in the region through this delicate balancing act, acknowledging China's position while simultaneously deterring Chinese aggression (Xuetong, 2010, p. 263–292).

This event prompted a reevaluation of the complex relationship between the two nations. The concept of "neither-friend-nor-enemy" (fei di fei you) perfectly captures the dynamic between these two nations. While theories like "superficial friendship" suggest a facade of cooperation, the reality in the Taiwan Strait exposes this relationship as a mutually assured non-conflict rather than genuine support. It resembles a toxic friendship, where avoiding open conflict takes precedence over genuine well-being. There is an undeniable interdependence, but it lacks the trust of a true friendship. This concept finds resonance in literature. Author David Lampton, a proponent of the "neither-friend-nor-enemy" view, titled his book *"Same Bed Different Dreams"*, highlighting co-existence without true alignment. (2001).

Therefore, in the evolving discourse on Sino-American relations, the tenure of President Xi Jinping and his interactions with US Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden offer a different perspective through which to examine the complexities of this international relationship. This segment of the thesis seeks to explore the key aspects between these leaders, framing their engagements within the broader context of cooperation, conflict, and the strategic posture of "neither-friend-nor-enemy" that has characterized the relationship between the two countries.

Donald Trump's perspective on Xi Jinping reveals a complex blend of admiration, envy, and strategic rivalry. Trump's remarks, particularly during his presidency and post-presidency period, highlight an interesting paradox in his approach to Xi and China at large. During a speech to donors at Mar-a-Lago in 2018, Trump expressed envy for Xi's ability to extend his presidency indefinitely, remarking, "He's now president for life. I think it's great. Maybe we'll have to give that a shot someday" (Trump, 2018, as cited in Phillips, 2018, para. 1). This statement shows Trump's fascination with authoritarian control and his envy of the power dynamics within China that allow for such a consolidation of authority (Wolf, 2023).

Moreover, Trump's admiration for Xi's leadership style was evident in his several comments praising Xi's intelligence and control over China. At a campaign event, Trump

lauded Xi, stating, “President Xi in China controls 1.4 billion people in China with an iron hand” and went on to describe Xi in almost cinematic terms: “President Xi is like central casting. There’s nobody in Hollywood that can play the role of President Xi. The look, the strength, the voice.” (*CNN– Transcripts*, 2024). Trump's emulation of Xi's voice and his emphasis on Xi's authoritarian control reflect a complex view where rivalry is intertwined with a certain degree of respect for Xi's governance model.

This admiration, however, did not ignore competitive policies. Both during and after Trump's presidency, the US ramped up support for Taiwan, imposed tariffs on Chinese imports, and maintained a tough stance on China, illustrating a policy approach that, despite possible personal affinities, recognized the strategic rivalry between the two nations (Wolf, 2023).

In contrast, President Joe Biden's discourse has focused more explicitly on the ideological and systemic competition between American democracy and Chinese autocracy. In his State of the Union address, Biden directly challenged Xi by questioning the appeal of Xi's leadership model, stating, “Name me a world leader who’d change places with Xi Jinping. Name me one!” (Wolf, 2023, para. 2). This rhetorical question highlights the problems facing Xi’s leadership and the autocratic model, and sets a different tone from Trump's, emphasizing the competitive aspect of the relationship over personal admiration.

From Beijing's point, the transition of power to Xi Jinping in 2013 was a pivotal moment fraught with critical decisions that mirrored this ideological competition highlighted by Biden. Upon Xi’s rise to power, the Chinese government was confronted with a Hobbesian choice (Fingar & Lampton, 2023, p. 53). On one hand, implementing reforms and pursuing a strategy aimed at economic growth could expose the regime to risks from within and outside, potentially undermining its stability. Conversely, avoiding such reforms risked diminishing public support and inciting social unrest, which could be exploited by the United States and others as evidence of China's move towards greater domestic repression and aggressive foreign policies (Silver et al., 2023).

Xi has defined his governance system as collective leadership (Fingar & Lampton, 2023, p. 45), articulating consensus positions, not as “an aberrant lone wolf” (Fewsmith,

2021, as cited in Fingar & Lampton, 2023, p. 45) favoring a more centralized approach with a tight circle of trusted advisors and specialized groups to steer policy direction. These entities, known as "small groups," have historically played a role in China's administration but are now increasingly influential, focusing more on executing policy decisions rather than solely on strategic deliberation (Fingar & Lampton, 2023).

Furthermore, Xi Jinping's personal attributes and his perspective on the United States are crucial to understanding both his domestic and foreign policy strategies (Bader, 2016). Described as self-confident and decisive, these characteristics have been shaped by his rich political lineage and his experiences within the Communist Party (Fingar & Lampton, 2023). As a son of a revolutionary veteran, Xi is deeply entrenched in the party's legacy, viewing himself and his generation of "princelings" as custodians of the Communist Party's future (Baum, 1996). This sense of duty is reflected in his governance style, which, while centralized and authoritative, is also marked by a practical approach to problem-solving. Temperamentally, Xi is known to be cautious yet occasionally impetuous, suggesting a leader who balances strategic patience with a readiness to act decisively when necessary (Bader, 2016, p. 9)

Broadly speaking, Xi Jinping's foreign policy approach has been marked by “a mix of bullying and beneficence”: bullying over territorial disputes and strategic generosity in economic relationships, always with the potential threat of economic pressure as a background force (Blackwill & Campbell, 2016, p. 16). His ability to implement such a policy has been facilitated by his centralization of policymaking.

Regarding the United States, Xi Jinping's outlook is shaped by a blend of respect for the US as a global power and a critical stance towards the American-led international order (Bremner, 2015, as cited in Blackwill & Campbell, 2016). Xi sees the US not only as a key competitor but also as an indispensable partner in certain global issues. However, he is deeply aware of US intentions towards China and the broader Asian region. This perspective is rooted in a broader strategic vision that seeks to reshape the international order to better accommodate China's interests and model of governance, advocating for a multipolar world where China's sovereignty and developmental model is respected.

While Xi might have erred in various aspects, his observation that the world today is undergoing drastic changes unseen in a century remains accurate (Nikkei Asia, 2022).

In response, Beijing is committed to shielding itself from both perceived and real internal disruptions that could arise from this global upheaval.

It would be a mistake to view the evolution of China in the last few years primarily as the product of the vision and imagination of an aggressive leader (Bader, 2016, p. 15). The trends that have raised international concerns have been long-standing. While it's important to scrutinize Xi's leadership and the course he's setting for China, the broader questions regarding China's trajectory extend beyond his period in office, its trajectory is rooted in past practices and will likely to continue into the future.

2.2.3. Social Interdependencies

The relationship between the United States and China is often framed through the lens of economic competition and political rivalry. However, beneath the surface lies a complex web of social interdependencies that bind these two nations together in the age of globalization.

While economic ties like trade and investment are undeniable drivers of interdependence, the social fabric of the US and China is surprisingly interconnected. Joseph S. Nye, a prominent political scientist, argues that the relationship goes beyond a two-dimensional chess game and operates on a three-dimensional level, encompassing not just military and economic ties, but also a social dimension (Nye, 2011, 1:46). This social dimension manifests in several ways.

A significant area where this interdependence manifests is in the shared value placed on education by both societies. Both nations have heavily invested in student exchange programs, as they recognize education as a pathway to social mobility and economic success. These programs not only foster cultural understanding but also build networks that are likely to influence future generations, thereby acting as bridges between the two cultures (Shanghai Government, 2023). The Sister Cities Programs, exemplified by the partnership between Los Angeles and Beijing, facilitate educational exchanges (Sister Cities International, n.d.). Furthermore, cultural exchanges through American movies, music, and Chinese martial arts and cuisine highlight the mutual fascination and appreciation between the people of the two countries (Shanghai Government, 2023).

Furthermore, and despite certain restrictions, TikTok, a short-form video app immensely popular with young audiences globally, and WeChat, a multi-purpose messaging app dominant in China, have also emerged as unexpected facilitators of cultural exchange (Ryan et al., 2020). While both platforms have limitations due to government regulations in their respective countries, they allow young people from the US and China to share aspects of their daily lives, trends, humor, and creative expression. Through these platforms, users gain glimpses into each other's cultures, fostering a sense of connection and challenging stereotypes.

The rise of a globalized workforce further strengthens social interdependences. Multinational corporations operating in both countries necessitate a workforce that can navigate cultural differences and bridge communication gaps. This fosters the development of cross-cultural expertise and creates a new generation of professionals who understand the complexities of doing business between the US and China.

However, analyzing social interdependences does not come without its challenges. Stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings can create friction. Americans hold preconceived notions about Chinese political structures, while Chinese citizens perceive American foreign policy as self-serving (Tang, 2022). These contrasting viewpoints can create a sense of "us vs. them" mentality. Nye emphasizes the importance of looking at China through Chinese eyes, not American eyes (Global Times, 2023) and avoiding unhelpful caricatures of China (Fingar & Lampton, 2023). One of the most prevalent misconceptions in the US is seeing China as the characterization of a pure autocracy solely focused on regime survival and countering US influence (Fingar & Lampton, 2023, p. 45). This characterization presents an incomplete picture. Reducing their motivations to a single-minded pursuit of power undermines the possibility of shared interests and potential cooperation. Furthermore, attributing all of China's actions to the personal ambitions of President Xi Jinping ignores the reality of collective leadership within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Doshi, 2023). Additionally, comparing him to Mao Zedong disregards the vast societal and economic transformations China has undergone, suggesting a simplistic continuity of leadership styles that simply does not reflect reality (Zhang, 2019).

Misinterpreting China's goals can lead to unnecessary suspicion that benefits neither nation. Overestimating Xi's personal power can create a sense of helplessness in the face of perceived Chinese assertiveness (Silver et al., 2023). Ultimately, these misunderstandings contribute to a downward spiral in US-China relations, characterized by deterrence efforts in various spheres instead of collaborative problem-solving strategies.

In order to bridge this gap and to foster mutual understanding, a conscious effort is required, which can be achieved through educational initiatives that promote media portrayals that move beyond stereotypes. Therefore, the media ends up playing a crucial role in shaping perceptions. Accurate portrayals of China's social progress and its people's aspirations can foster empathy and understanding. Similarly, acknowledging China's economic achievements and its citizens' entrepreneurial spirit can create a sense of respect.

Socially analyzing the relationship between both countries presents challenges due to differing political ideologies and cultural perceptions (Mearsheimer, 2021). However, opportunities exist for fostering collaboration and mutual understanding. By promoting cultural exchange, appreciating diverse perspectives, and acknowledging each other's strengths, the US and China can face their social challenges in order to build a more cooperative future in a globalized world.

3. International Presence: OBOR vs B3W

In the previous section, the deep economic, political, and social interdependencies between the US and China have been explored, highlighting their complex relationship. Economic ties extend beyond trade, while political interactions are shaped by changing discourses of leaders, affecting perceptions and strategies. Finally, globalization has also fostered cultural exchanges and educational collaborations, challenging traditional nationalism. However, the international presence of both countries remains to be questioned, and this thesis aims to explore their global initiatives, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (OBOR) and the US-led Build Back Better World (B3W). These initiatives reflect their strategies for international engagement and also their competitive attempts to expand their global influence.

Firstly, the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, also known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), stands as a defining feature of Chinese foreign policy under President Xi Jinping. This ambitious project was launched in 2013 and it envisions a vast network of infrastructure projects connecting China to Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia, reviving the ancient Silk Road trade routes for the 21st century. While the initiative promises grand visions of economic integration and shared prosperity, its true motivations remain a subject of debate (Cai, 2017).

On the surface, OBOR appears as a purely economic endeavor. China, a powerhouse with a powerful economy, faces internal challenges. Uneven development within its borders has left inland regions lagging behind the prosperous coastal areas. OBOR seeks to bridge this gap by directing infrastructure investments towards underdeveloped regions, stimulating economic growth and creating new markets for Chinese goods. Additionally, China possesses a significant amount of excess industrial capacity. Building infrastructure across continents provides outlets for this surplus, keeping factories operational and workers employed (Anwar, 2019).

Furthermore, OBOR presents an opportunity for China to establish itself as a global leader in technological innovation and engineering. By setting the standards for construction across a vast network of projects, China can shape the technological landscape of participating countries. This, in turn, could create long-term advantages for Chinese industries, fostering dependence and loyalty among partner nations (Ghiasy, 2018).

However, a closer look reveals a potential geopolitical agenda intertwined with OBOR's economic goals. By investing heavily in infrastructure projects across Eurasia and Africa, China strengthens its economic ties with participating countries. This creates leverage, potentially influencing political decision-making and fostering a sphere of influence. Additionally, improved infrastructure facilitates the movement of resources and military assets, potentially enhancing China's strategic projection (Cai, 2017).

On the other hand, the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative is a global partnership launched by President Biden and G7 leaders to meet the substantial infrastructure needs in low- and middle-income countries, which have been intensified

by the COVID-19 pandemic (Adams, 2021). At a G7 summit in June 2021, the West set out its plan with a key pitch as a “values-driven, high-standard, and transparent infrastructure partnership led by major democracies”, aiming to mobilize private-sector capital in key areas such as climate, health, digital technology, and gender equality. When announcing this partnership, the United States and its G7 partners expressed a unified vision for global infrastructure development (The White House, 2021, para. 8).

The initiative builds on the Blue Dot Network, a project established by the Trump Administration to enhance the role of the private sector and civil society in developing infrastructure projects. This network, grounded in the principles of sound governance, environmental stewardship, and transparent operations, aimed to lure private investment towards infrastructure projects in developing nations. It also sought to provide a global benchmark for infrastructure project financing and construction, ensuring that they were suitable for their intended purpose. This initiative was inaugurated alongside the 35th ASEAN Summit, in collaboration with the Development Finance Corporation (DFC), the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Carrai, 2021).

However, the B3W initiative encounters the issue of securing sustainable funding sources. With the economic burdens brought on by the pandemic, developed nations are generally hesitant to engage in investment with uncertain returns. Even with willing investors, the lending terms offered by G7 nations are unlikely to match the competitiveness of those from China (Memon, 2021). Even government funding poses a challenge; particularly as the US faces with national debt levels surpassing 130% of its GDP, a figure that is projected to grow in future decades (Carrai, 2021).

In the context of the United States, the government has largely stayed clear from incorporating infrastructure into its foreign policy since the Marshall Plan era. Instead, it has channeled investments through institutions like the Bretton Woods system. Domestically, the US maintains a relatively low infrastructure investment rate, not having exceeded 1% of GDP since the 1950s—a trend influenced by administrations focusing on short-term objectives. Just to maintain its deteriorating infrastructure, the US would require approximately \$2.59 trillion (Carrai, 2021). Considering these challenges, it

would require a significant shift in approach for the US to emerge as a global frontrunner in infrastructure development.

The US-led B3W embodies represents a distinctly Hamiltonian approach to international relations, one that places a strong emphasis on using economic leverage as a means of power projection on the global stage (Memon, 2021). This perspective is rooted in the philosophy of Alexander Hamilton, one of the founding fathers of the United States, who advocated for a robust federal government with a vigorous economic policy. The B3W is essentially a modern manifestation of this doctrine, seeking to extend America's influence by directing foreign investments into infrastructure projects across developing nations. This approach deliberately shifts the focus from traditional, Jacksonian foreign policy, which has historically prioritized military strength as the cornerstone of international influence.

Simultaneously, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is reflective of its stated principle of "peaceful rise and development" (Memon, 2021, para. 11). The BRI is designed to foster collective growth and economic integration by creating a network of trade routes and infrastructure projects that span continents. It underscores China's strategic push towards portraying itself as a benign global power that champions mutual benefit and "win-win" partnerships (Zhao, 2021).

Despite their differences, BRI has a significant advantage - it's already operational, encompassing over 140 countries and \$3.7 trillion in investments. B3W, though ambitious with a projected \$40 trillion investment, remains largely on paper, lacking a detailed operational plan. This competition between the US and China presents developing nations with a wider range of options. However, the US and its allies must recognize that dismantling existing BRI projects is unrealistic due to long-term binding agreements (Crystal, 2021).

Both initiatives rely heavily on loans, raising concerns about potential debt burdens for developing countries (Rizvi, 2021). This dependency syndrome could lead to exploitation by creditor nations. BRI has already faced criticism for resembling economic imperialism, as there have been instances where, due to the inability to repay the loans, countries have had to hand over control of strategic assets to China. A notable example is

the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, which was leased to China for almost a hundred years after Sri Lanka struggled with the repayment of loans (Hillman, 2018).

The situation has always been cited as a cautionary tale of the "debt trap diplomacy", where countries might be coerced into ceding control of key infrastructure or making geopolitical concessions because of unsustainable debt levels to China (Himmer & Rod, 2022). It has also fueled debates on the strategic intentions behind the BRI and raised awareness about the risks of high-debt infrastructure projects financed by foreign loans, especially those from China.

Furthermore, loan agreements often include clauses like "cross-default" and "stabilization" that can disadvantage borrowing countries. The "cross-default clause" implies that defaulting on a BRI loan could trigger automatic default on B3W loans, putting immense pressure on repayments. Therefore, the potential alignment of interests between BRI and B3W stakeholders could further entangle developing nations in a web of debt. Developing countries must carefully consider the long-term consequences before accepting loans to ensure they don't compromise their sovereignty or development objectives (Memon, 2021).

As mentioned, the differences in funding are significant between both BRI and B3W. As an addition to this topic, BRI relies heavily on funding from Chinese state-owned banks, allowing China to offer a more comprehensive package that includes financing, insurance, and even construction for projects. Essentially, China acts as a one-stop shop. B3W, on the other hand, tries to attract funding from private companies in G7 countries. This approach is proving challenging because these companies are often hesitant to invest in developing countries due to perceived high risks and low returns (Carrai, 2021).

Therefore, it can be concluded that China is both a challenge and a competitor for the US, and that the US should focus on actionable goals to leverage its soft power in the developing world. However, will it be worth the effort for the US to focus on reinvesting in infrastructure to improve its foreign policy?

According to Carrai, there are better ways for the United States to reassert its soft power. For instance, the United States could consider its own nature of being an importer of capital in service industries to strengthen international relationships and enhance diplomatic connections. As a matter of fact, for the United States, China stands as a crucial ally in addressing global issues. It would be wise for the US to pinpoint where collaboration with China is not viable due to national security concerns. Yet, it would be equally important to seek opportunities for joint efforts with China and other nations from the Western hemisphere. Recognizing the distinct nature of each country's approach to development, the US could benefit to discover mutual advantages within an open and inclusive framework. By competing and cooperating when needed, China and the United States have the potential to refine their respective approaches to development and make significant contributions to the construction of global infrastructure and the promotion of sustainable growth (2021, p. 12).

Therefore, it would be imperative for both countries to enhance their collaboration and unite their international infrastructure efforts. This means ensuring resources are deployed efficiently, avoiding redundant projects, and most crucially, addressing the genuine needs of developing nations rather than advancing purely geopolitical and strategic interests. Many recipient countries are not willing to fall into the new Cold War divide, which has already been discussed in the conceptual framework, and it should be encouraged to both countries to become partners for the journey.

Finally, the success of each initiative, BRI and B3W, relies on its ability to deliver tangible benefits and avoid exploitation, while remaining true to its core values. A future where BRI and B3W co-exist and collaborate could foster a more equitable and prosperous world for all; “however, higher the dependence, higher the vulnerability, and higher the imperial outreach of the powerful states” (Memon, 2021, para. 20).

PART IV: CRITICAL ANALYSIS THROUGH THE FRAMEWORK

This critical analysis examines US-China relations through the established theoretical framework. It will assess how recent developments align with these theories, evaluating the existing hypotheses about the future of this crucial relationship. By analyzing real-world observations, we can determine whether these hypotheses are supported or contradicted. This combined approach, examining theory and evidence, aims to provide a deeper understanding of the current state and potential future trajectory of US-China relations.

The relationship between the United States and China is a complex relation, best understood through the lens of the Cold Peace hypothesis. As it has been explained in the introduction of this thesis, this theory suggests a period of heightened competition and suspicion between nations, falling short of outright war. Recent developments, like China's assertive actions in the South China Sea and the ongoing trade war, which have been explained in the analysis, exemplify this dynamic. Unlike the Cold War standoff with the Soviet Union, deep economic interdependence prevents complete decoupling between the US and China. This creates a situation where competition and cooperation coexist, defining the essence of the Cold Peace.

The traditional approach of containment, a hallmark of the Cold War, is inadequate for dealing with China. Instead, the US needs a more defined strategy that goes beyond just China. This thesis proposes the United States to embed its China policy within a larger Asia-wide framework, intensifying every one of Washington's other bilateral relationships in the region (Blackwill & Campbell, 2016). By creating a web of strong relationships across Asia, the US can counter China's influence and prevent the region from falling under its dominance. This approach fosters a multipolar Asia, a stark contrast to the hypothesis of the bipolar world of the Cold War.

Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first Prime Minister, aptly criticized the US for neglecting Asia with his famous quote:

You Americans seem to think that dealing with Asia is like freezing a frame of a movie. While you turn your attention elsewhere, you imagine that nothing moves

out here until you once again remember us. We cannot seem to persuade you that Asia is not like that, and that China is here every day (Blackwill & Campbell, 2016, p. 36).

This quote shows the need for a sustained US focus on the region. Asia's growing economic and geopolitical importance necessitates a more active US engagement. By deepening ties with other Asian nations, the US can shape a more balanced and cooperative regional order.

However, one of the key obstacles between China and the US ties lies in China's domestic political landscape. The Chinese leadership prioritizes maintaining a stable regime and its party-state system above all else. As the thesis suggests, economic engagement and trade are viewed with a "grudging acceptance" because self-reliance and freedom from external influence are seen as even more important long-term goals (Fingar & Lampton, 2023, p. 58). This inward-looking approach, often prioritizing security over economic growth, avoids cooperation with the US. Additionally, entrenched bureaucratic interests benefit from the current status quo, making significant policy changes challenging.

Further complicating the situation is the historical baggage that weighs heavily on the relationship already mentioned in the victory and victimhood narratives explained in the conceptual framework. China views the US with a deep suspicion, believing it harbors "malign intent" and seeks to constrain China's rise. This historical distrust impedes progress on building a more trusting relationship. President Obama's 2015 statement, "We have to make sure the United States—and not countries like China—is the one writing this century's rules for the world's economy" reinforces a zero-sum mentality, where one nation's gain is seen as the other's loss (Obama, 2015, as cited in Cai, 2019, p. 7) . It implies competition rather than cooperation in shaping the global economic order. This statement also feeds into China's historical narrative positioning itself as a victim of Western dominance, reinforcing China's suspicion that the US seeks to limit its rise and control the global economy for its own benefit.

National interests also clash, creating further tension, as China may not fully accept the long-term US presence in Asia. The US, on the other hand, desires to see China change its internal governance structure, which China views as an unacceptable intrusion into its domestic affairs. These conflicting interests create a tense environment that makes cooperation difficult.

Despite these challenges, there are steps both nations can take to build a more stable and cooperative relationship. As the Chinese proverb goes: "One hand cannot clap." (Fingar & Lampton, 2023, p. 58). Both sides need to acknowledge each other's core interests. The US should accept China's long-term presence in Asia, and China should respect US concerns about its internal governance without viewing them as regime-change efforts. This mutual respect can pave the way for more productive dialogue.

A shift in focus is also crucial. Instead of using each other as scapegoats for domestic issues, both countries should prioritize cooperation on global challenges. Addressing these shared threats can foster a sense of shared purpose and lay the groundwork for broader cooperation. The US should engage with China in international institutions, fostering a rules-based order that benefits all nations. However, China, needs to play a sizeable role in devising and upholding those rules, creating a more stable international environment for both nations.

The path to a more stable US-China relationship is unlikely to be a straight line. China is likely to continue following a "zig-zag path" in its attitude towards the international system (Bader, 2016, p. 15). However, by avoiding actions that make cooperation harder and demonstrating a willingness to reduce tensions, both nations can build trust and pave the way for future collaboration. The stakes are high, and fostering a more stable and cooperative relationship is not just a possibility, but a necessity for facing the challenges of the 21st century.

PART V: CONCLUSIONS

The relationship between the United States and China is arguably the most consequential geopolitical dynamic of the 21st century. This thesis, titled *"New Contests, Old Shadows: The Cold War's Influence on Modern US-China Dynamics"* has explored, beyond surface-level analysis, the enduring influence of the Cold War on this complex rivalry, delving into the theoretical facts that show the historical legacies shaping contemporary US-China relations.

The initial step involved constructing a conceptual framework. The Cold War and the Cold Peace were examined, acknowledging both periods of conflict mitigation and cooperation in Sino-American relations. This framework was further enriched by Conflict Theory, which showed the inevitability of conflict in the system of international relations. Finally, victimhood and victory narratives were analyzed through the Critical Constructivism Theory to understand how each nation perceives the other. By drawing similarities between the former Soviet-US relationship and the current US-China dynamic, this comparative approach provided a foundation for understanding the present rivalry with a historical context.

However, one potential limitation of the chosen methodology lied in the inherent bias that could have existed within the academic literature. While a comprehensive review of scholarly articles and expert opinions is crucial for constructing a theoretical framework, a significant portion of this literature could have been rooted in the Western academic tradition. This focus could have effectively represented the strategies of Western actors like the United States but may have struggled to fully capture the perceptions of non-Western actors like China. Nevertheless, this potential bias was mitigated in the present study. The methodology employed a conscious effort to integrate both Western and non-Western sources throughout the research process. This included incorporating academic literature, scholarly articles, and expert insights that reflect diverse theoretical frameworks and cultural perspectives.

The analysis then focused on the current dynamics through the lens of the Interdependence Theory. The concept's double-edged nature was explored, recognizing that economic, political, and social interdependences can foster both cooperation and

competition. The analysis of China's Belt and Road Initiative (OBOR) and the US's Building Back Better World (B3W) initiatives further highlighted how each nation sought to shape the global order in accordance with its own vision.

The final section, which consisted in a critical analysis through the framework, served as the crux of the thesis. Here, the established conceptual framework was connected with the contemporary analysis. This allowed for an empirical examination of the current rivalry, demonstrating how the Cold War's "old shadows" continue to influence the "new contests" unfolding between the US and China.

In conclusion, this thesis has demonstrated the profound and persistent influence of the Cold War on US-China relations. The hypothesis of "Cold Peace" proves remarkably significant, capturing the current dynamic of heightened competition and suspicion intertwined with a web of economic interdependence that prevents a complete destruction of ties. Traditional containment strategies are simply outdated for this new reality, the new dynamic is marked by deep economic entanglement, which differs significantly from the Cold War standoff.

Finally, the US should integrate its China policy into a broader framework encompassing all of Asia. By strengthening bilateral relationships across the region, the US can foster a multipolar Asia, a stark contrast to the bipolar world order of the Cold War. The path forward is sure to be fraught with challenges. China's unpredictable foreign policy may continue its erratic course. However, both nations hold the key to building trust and paving the way for future collaboration. By refraining from actions that inflame tensions and demonstrating a commitment to reducing them, the US and China can navigate the complexities of the 21st century together. This collaborative approach is not merely a possibility, but an essential step towards a more stable future, not just for these two nations, but for the entire international community.

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