

## **A REALIST/LIBERALIST VIEW ON CONTEMPORARY GREAT POWER RELATIONS: WHERE DOES AFRICA STAND?**

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### **Abstract**

The stability of the international system depends on the progression of relations between and among “Great Powers.” Even though China does not consider herself a Great Power, her rhetoric and actions show tremendous influence on international relations (IR). While the realist and liberalist have varying explanations for contemporary events, this paper uses their theoretical postulations to review contemporary USA-China relations. The paper also uses such theoretical underpinnings to predict potential areas of conflicts (and if escalated, a possible war) and how such contemporary situation draws from classical IR theories. This paper argues that the actions and inactions of the US and China in areas of cyber security, politico-economic issues around the South-China Sea (and the Pacific), as well as an ‘x-factor’ event(s) have the potential to cause further conflicts and even war between these contemporary power poles. The paper adds to existing literature on Great Power relations with the developing world using the African continent as a unit for analysis. It concludes that Great Power relations and conflicts can be considered in their attempt to win either Africa’s support (however tacit) to sustain or reformation global governance systems. This could be by either by power balancing (as indicated by the realist) or international cooperation and institutionalization (as indicated by the liberalist).

**Keywords:** Africa, Great Power relations, Liberalism, Realism, USA-China Relations

### **Introduction**

The belief held by most scholars since the end of the Cold War is that the international system has been mostly unipolar. The disintegration of the Soviet Union shifted the balance of power which existed towards a Washington dominated western bloc. The post-cold war period thus presented some people<sup>6</sup> with the view of a triumph of the capitalist ideology against a social system which they considered as inimical to their global order. It can be considered that the past one hundred years has been an “America century” where the United States sees herself on the top of the international pecking order. However, while such celebrations might have lasted since the 1990s, with the rise of China, it seems, has challenged this existing order.

What befuddles scholars and policy analysts is the fact that China rose on so many levels within a short period. By 1978, when China began economic reforms, about 90

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<sup>6</sup> In often cited works, this is called Liberalism.

percent of Chinese people were living on less than 2USD a day; but according to the World Bank, poverty headcount ratio, the level of poor people in China is currently at 0.7 percent of her total population who lived on less than 2USD a day.<sup>7</sup> China has become the leading trading partner for most countries of the world. China in 2017 maintained her position as the world's largest exporter by value, as the Chinese shipped over USD 2.2 trillion worth of products around the globe in 2017 (International Monetary Fund -IMF, 2018). To drive these policies on the international system, the Chinese President Xi Jinping, outlined the "Chinese Dream"<sup>8</sup> which means "... the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." The dream sets the target of becoming a moderately well off society by 2021, and modernization goal of China becoming a fully developed nation by about 2049 – the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic.

No doubt what this portends to inter-state relations and the international system is that it appears that such Chinese economic improvements and rise have ultimately put the US on her toes. Comparing the sizes of Chinese and America economy since 2004, Graham Allison in presenting data during a congressional hearing contends that by 2004, China's economy (in GDP) was about 5760 billion –half the size of US economy. By 2014, Chinese GDP was equal to the US, and the trajectory posits that by 2024, the Chinese economy will be twice the size of the US (Graham, 2018). Apart from China challenging the US dominance in the global economy, China has made tremendous inroads towards international politics and global institutions with the desire to re-shape the existing order and create a new form of great power relations. Furthermore, China's appeal to developing countries in Africa and elsewhere endears her to most of their development causes and projects; thus making it more difficult for the US and other Western economies to maintain established in-roads.

Against this background, this current research hopes to attend to issues of China rising cum challenge to the existing system and what areas can potentially lead to a "war"<sup>9</sup> between the United States and China. By combining the postulations of neo-realism and liberalism theoretical framework, the research tends to subsume some contemporary global events within the contexts of a possibility of war and great power relations. Furthermore, this research attempts to situate Africa within this mix of great-power relations. Africa remains a veritable partner for both the USA and China and any future conflict between both countries would affect invariably the African continent as well as the international system.

### **Realist Views on China's Rising and Implications/Reactions to the US**

As the one of the leading theories guiding international studies, realism (or classical realism) and its contemporary form, neo-realism (or structural realism) has been used

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<sup>7</sup> See The World Bank [Data Set on Poverty and Equity Data Portal in China](#) (Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2019)

<sup>8</sup> For more on the Chinese Dream, See *The Economist* May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013 "Chasing the Chinese Dream." p.24-26

<sup>9</sup> In referring to "war" between the US and China, this paper considers this within the context of actual armed conflict involving military forces, allies, and technology; somewhat to what existed in the First and Second World Wars.

to interpret states actions and inaction on the international system. Assumptions from realist that concerns this study include those put forward by Kenneth Waltz<sup>10</sup>, John Mearsheimer and Hans Morgenthau. Summed-up, realist views the international system as a reflection of state-centric self-centrism thus driving the desire to power. They believe that this selfish nature of states is what makes the international system anarchic where central actors compete for power and security (Morgenthau, 1973). Realist solution to this anarchic international system, besides competition, is for states to engage constantly in “self-help” systems that would only guarantee state survival. Such would entail making the state strong enough to avoid been dominated by another power. In addition, “balancing strategies”<sup>11</sup> as put forward by Morgenthau, would be another means to ensure a state is (/or) remains strong. In relation to China’s rise, consideration of military expenditure in the past decade would suggest directions of her rising and how if it intends to unseat the US.

Expansion of military expenditure between the US and China in the last two decades further strengthen realist postulations on power within the context of China’s rising and the possibility of war between both countries. However, these assumptions should not be considered fully, but as aspects of concern raised by scholars and policymakers alike. China, while recording economic improvements in the last two decades have translated such into her and military sector. A report shows that most of the Chinese investments have focused on military and technological advancement (The Economist, 2012). Between 2003 and 2012, the Chinese government increased its military expenditure by over 170 percent, more than any other country in the world (SIPRI - Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2012). The report showed that in financial terms, China had invested over 170 billion USD in defense spending. Such data shows that although China has committed more to its military expenditure, this has not equaled the amount spent by the US within the same period<sup>12</sup>. More so, the percentage of military expenditure as part of total country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) shows that China is less when compared to America<sup>13</sup> (SIPRI - Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2012).

Realists, in explaining this trend envisage that both countries in their bid to secure (or retain power) have taken steps to ensure that in the eventuality of a war, they would not be caught unaware. This reflexes the same logic which governed the Cold War period between the US and the Soviet Union (Sandler & George, 2016). Furthermore, the fact that both countries continue to arm themselves “to the teeth” is in preparation of the possibility of war or a war-like scenario between both countries. Also from the prism of the realist, the type of military expenditure also gives credence to the type of

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<sup>10</sup> See **Invalid source specified.**, **Invalid source specified.** and (Morgenthau, 1973)

<sup>11</sup> Chapter 11 of Morgenthau’s book explained this concept of Balancing strategies and how it can be used.

<sup>12</sup> Scholars like Dutheil de la Rochere, G. Josselin, and Rocaboy are of the opinion that increased US military expenditure is because of her commitments to NATO and other defense pacts. (See **Invalid source specified.**)

<sup>13</sup> Data on military expenditure as a percentage of GDP shows China’s 2 percent military expenditure is less than half of the United States which stands at 4.4 percent. Other countries mentioned in the report include the UK (2.5 percent), Russia (4.4 percent), France (2.3 percent), India (2.5 percent) and Saudi Arabia (8.9 percent).

‘war’ that these two countries might engage in the future. Expenditure on improved military technology and intelligence gathering shows an area for competition between the US and China which might lead to tussle or war. This trend was also seen during the Cold War when both blocs attempted to gain an advantage in aspects of intelligence gathering. This period saw the prominence of intelligence institutions and other apparatus to gain such an advantage. Recent reports (Akdag, 2018) indicate there is a power play between the US and China in intelligence gathering and cyber security. On the international system, there is tension between both countries in intelligence and cyber security circles; most often, these tensions are extended to private institutions concerning global information sharing and monitoring. The US it seems is in no way allowing China to have an edge in information technology, which is an essential component for her military and security.

Another aspect of concern for a potential ‘war’ between both behemoths is the level of the increased (or rejuvenated) alliance by both countries in the past two decades. These alliances can be considered from the perspective of the realist as set-ups for “power balancing.” A realist like Morgenthau considers power balancing as a means to either de-throne or curtail a hegemon. The current pro-US or western alliance order and the bid to create a new normative order by Chinese policymakers can be viewed as the former slowly eroding its post-Cold War appeal and the latter gaining momentum inside Asia and elsewhere. Inference suggests also that China is challenging pro-US alliance systems and hopes to re-invent the order by creating new alliances to her benefit. These efforts can also be seen as ‘new balancing strategies’ which realists have put forward. In response, Western critics and feelers from Washington have critiqued the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which they see as China’s response to creating a new international alliance order with Beijing playing an increasingly larger role than her current role in the current international system. This view was aptly captured by Chance (2016) as:

Geopolitical concerns significantly frame Americans’ view of BRI. The initiative is sometimes viewed [as] a deliberate attempt to economically marginalize the United States, to create a Eurasian sphere of influence,<sup>14</sup> or as a pretext for expanding China’s overseas military presence. At the very least, perceptions that China is embarking on a new, “assertive” phase of statecraft elevated the scrutiny BRI faces.

Although this might not present the true picture of the BRI as China has made impressive efforts to improve infrastructure development in areas it considers within her scope of ‘peripheral diplomacy’, scholars like this constantly cite loopholes in such initiatives and see them as means of advancing Beijing’s alliance strategy. This remains a key aspect of what realist considers as power balancing strategies.

The realist would view this creation of alliance as a means to provide suitable allies when there is increased tension over certain issues. Such alliances can then be called

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<sup>14</sup> For more on this view of improving China’s statecraft in Europe, see **Invalid source specified**.

upon when such ‘war’ and/or war-like scenarios might arise or act as a buffer during actual conflicts between both parties. The period of WWI and WWII shows how such alliance structures was called to function when actual conflicts eventually breaks-out. The realist in interpreting the US response to China’s rising have summed current policies as “containment”<sup>15</sup> – a tool used within the Cold War era to curtail the spread of the Soviet Union. Events which provoked such views from the realist is the increased activity of US which include: the increase naval assert in Singapore, strengthen military hardware for its allies in the Pacific (including South Korea) and a commitment that 60 percent of US Navy asserts will be deployed to the Asia-Pacific region by 2020 (Keck, 2014).

### **Liberalist Views on China’s Rising and Implications to the USA**

Liberalism, which emerged at the end of WWI, has predominantly explained inter-state relations from an idealist standpoint. Liberalist like Koehane and Nye, (1987) are known to be more optimistic towards the international system and the conduct of inter-state relations. They hold strong views that inter-state relations can exist devoid of conflicts, crisis and even wars. They believe that these can be averted via interdependence, strengthening of international institutions, and adherence to democratic principles.<sup>16</sup> Liberalist postulations attempt to shift focus from states to international institutions, inter-governmental agencies, and non-governmental actors. Such views suggest these actors will play significant roles in averting the anarchic nature of nation-state relations. To them, states interest cannot exist in isolation thus, they need to cooperate as such cooperation can avert wars. An assumption put forward by the liberalist is:

If there is no such interdependence among states objectives, a rational state will conduct no international relations, satisfying itself with an isolated and autarkic existence. Conflictual goals increase the incentive for political disputes. Convergence of underlying preferences creates the pre-conditions for peaceful coexistence or cooperation. (Moravesik, 2010, p. 54)

Focusing on win-win gains, which states can record via cooperation, the liberalist, push for establishment international institutions that can move relations from war towards more cordial relations. While commenting on realist for its emphasis for the development of the military (as raw power), liberalist sees “the consequences of using [these] military power often outweigh the benefits, [and consequently] states have vested interest in engaging in cooperation” (Hudda, 2015).

In view of China’s rising, the liberalist do not only see Chinese status rise, but also the level and possibility for increased interdependence between the US and China. This

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<sup>15</sup> This policy is popularly known as ‘pivot’ or ‘rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific region. This was coined by Former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton during the Obama Administration. Some part of it has been extended in the Trump administration.

<sup>16</sup> Liberalist like Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye research in the 1970s titled “Power and Interdependence” is one of the best examples which captures some of the liberalist views of the international system.

interdependence exists in areas of international transactions of imports and exports as well as foreign direct investments (FDI). Such interdependence is made possible with advances in technology and the benefits of globalization. This increased interconnectivity between both countries makes economic advancement partially dependent on each other. While the US is the major destination for Chinese exports<sup>17</sup>, the US depends on China for the consumption of some of its agricultural produce (notably soybeans)<sup>18</sup>; the US also depends on Chinese consumption of Intel Chips for manufactured computers in China.<sup>19</sup>

To the liberalist, they see that increased economic interdependence between the US and China in a sensitive aspect of great power relations and this deepens ties and reduces the possibility of war. The existence of international institutions deepens such interdependence is another high point which liberalist continue to point towards. China has increased her participation in major international organizations, institutions, and frameworks while joining some others. As of 2018, China is a proactive member of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), G20, The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Shanghai Cooperative Organization and the United Nations Security Council. Also in 2010, China agreed to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). With her membership in these complex politico-economic regimes, interdependence between both countries is strengthened. Interdependence with the US aside, China has made significant in-roads (economically) across the world with increase Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) that some statistics say totals about USD 75 billion. Through fostering greater cooperation among and across continents, China has become the trade and manufacturing hub of the world.

To the liberalist, Chinese increased participation in international regimes and global interdependence would benefit her, thus a war might be difficult too since there are many areas which there exists “shared common interest” and “common grounds on issues of common interest in pursuit for win-win progress”<sup>20</sup> cannot induce a war. In concluding liberalist views on China’s rising, the progenitor<sup>21</sup> of the “Thucydides Trap” concept, cautioned for new ways to consider China’s rising by the US; and called for the need for new political thinking to avoid a war between both countries.

### **Areas of Concern and Possible “War”**

The views of the realist and the liberalist are valid in predicting what could happen in great-power relations between the US and China. However, to predict exactly if this

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<sup>17</sup> In 2015, the US accounted for 20 percent of Chinese exports. See John Mauldin “Three Graphics that Explain US-China Relations” *Forbes* April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> The export of soybeans to China has not increased as much as the US wants; as such the Trump administration is reconsidering the import tariff on this. See *Reuters* “US-China Trade: Trump says China to buy more US farm products” *Reuters* May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> With the development of the Tianhe brand of Chinese computers, the demand increased. Currently, the Chinese have developed her own computer chips and thus placed a ban on chips importation from the US.

<sup>20</sup> These quotes are credited to the President of China –Xi Jinping.

<sup>21</sup> This is credited to Prof Graham Allison. In a TEDtalk, he explored the potentials of a war between the US and China and advocated for the need for new thinking among policymakers to avoid this. See (Graham, 2018)

relationship would lead to a “war” might be a cumbersome task. The task of the current author is to identify areas of concern within such relations, and show how this could either cause a deterioration of relations between both countries. Furthermore, the current author attempts to situate the African continent within the context of these great power relations vis-à-vis contemporary issues in international trade and appeal of both sides to major African countries. Although policymakers are aware of some areas that this paper highlights, the author attends to these issues from the perspective of realist and liberalist underpinnings. Among areas of concern discussed are cyber security; political and trade issues within the Asia/Pacific area; and what the author dubs as an ‘X-factor’ or immediate causal event(s) – a small, hitherto ignored issue(s) which has the potential to inspire actual war.

### **Cyber Security:**

In the past decade and due to the emergence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab, 2016), China (as well as most developing countries) has made impressive strides in information communication technology (ICT). Significantly, some of the private organizations no longer depend on the US to provide vital computer components, which had been a veritable area of inter-state relations and private sector cooperation. With high-speed computers operating with high technologies in processing and connectivity, China has become a major hotspot for cyber security issues. Fiber optic trunk lines in China have also improved significantly. As of 2014, there were seven ‘Tier 1’<sup>22</sup> providers in the telecommunication industry. Many US private companies like Yahoo, Dow Chemical, and Adobe Systems have reported cases of cyber-attacks and cyber-espionage most often connected to military interest. Under the President Obama’s administration, the US attempted to introduce a ‘Net Neutrality’<sup>23</sup> a policy that might hurt access to global internet provided by service providers. In President Trump’s administration, after lobbies by the Federal Communications Commissions and US Internet giants, such policy was repealed (Shen, 2018). Analysts say that such actions are regarded as a salient declaration of war to some degree; although international law is silent on this. Such cyber security threats have heightened the levels of relationship between the US and China and have cause accusations and counter-accusations of cyber-attacks and internet security breach. Demonstrative of this, in October 2018, the US Vice-President –Mike Pence – said “Beijing was meddling in the vote [i.e. Mid-term elections] to counter tough trade policies against China.” In response, Hu Chunying, a Chinese foreign ministry representative, said Beijing objected to Pence’s “groundless” allegations and urged the US to stop hurting already existing ties between the two countries (Borger, 2018). The US has constantly accused China of forcing its privately owned telecommunications companies to transfer their tech-know-how to Chinese companies, thereby stealing trade secrets and making its systems porous to hacking. In view of this, President

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<sup>22</sup> Tier 1 categorization refers to classifications of largest fiber optic lines which improve access to the backbone network through providing access via the mainland’s access point to the global internet.

<sup>23</sup> A Net Neutrality requires internet service providers to offer access to all web content; this prohibits internet providers from charging more for certain content or giving preferential treatment to certain websites; something which could affect certain end users. See **Invalid source specified.**

Trump initiated the 'Trade Wars' with China to punish Beijing for what it called 'predatory tactics' to supplant the US of her technological supremacy.

Consideration of this situation against neorealist backdrop, the current author believes there already exists a "war" between the US and China in cyber security fields, as both nations have overtime introduced policies to guarantee or threaten the existing cyberspace order. The realist would examine the number of times official US policy statements have actually mentioned a cyber "war" with China and vice versa, and would rightly agree that such tension and body language could eventually lead to further conflicts and possibly intensification of such war. Both countries, it already seems, are at war on the internet spaces as these cyber-attacks have the potential to compromise any country's security architecture. For instance in 2010, the Stuxnet computer worm compromised and stalled Iran's Natanz uranium enrichment programme and this was followed by a series of accusations by the Tehran government towards the West (Shen, 2018) (Holloway, 2015). Since the US had been most vocal about Iranian nuclear enrichment programmes, fingers have constantly directed towards Washington's direction.

On the Liberalist side, to avoid possible escalation of tension on cyber-security, there is the need to strengthening international institutions concerned with legislation against cyber-attacks and cyber-espionage. This field is still developing and attempts have been made by scholars to articulate the operationalization of institutional mechanism to deal with issues often associated with the cyberspace mostly among Great powers in international relations. Choucri, Madnick, & Koepke (2016) are of the opinion that an examination of "institutional theories and empirical consensus" which can assist such development as well as the conglomeration of "international-technology-development linkages" that enhance the development and processes still under construction. Although this can be cumbersome considering mode of operation and deniability of cyber-attacks, such said, it is difficult to find a single country culpable for attacks. Furthermore, since the process for institutionalization of cyberspace security is still novel, punishment or holding nations-states accountable for actions or inactions of non-state actors originating from their countries remains an uncharted territory for inter-state relations despite the postulations of liberalist. Despite these obstacles, Liberalists believe that for the avoidance of conflicts (and/or war) among Great Powers in the future, increased attention should go towards allegations and cases of cyber-attacks. Cyber-attacks on a country's key infrastructure requires deeper investigation by international governance institutions and should be discussed within the scope of international law and the framework for regulations on cyberspace's strategic stability.

### **Political and Territorial Issues within the Asia-Pacific Area:**

The Pacific represents a major flash point in US-China relations and has the potential to increase conflict, which could escalate further in the coming years. Specifically, the history and politics surrounding the South China Sea is filled with contemporary intrigues of territorial claims and dispute that covers spheres of trade, history, economic sustenance, power play, alliance and counter-alliance. Available information contends that China's growing energy demands as well as her desire to diversify energy supplies and reduce its dependence on imported oil motivated increase offshore



production around the Pearl River basin and the South China Sea (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2011). The region holds about fourteen trillion barrels of natural gas and sixteen to thirty-three billion barrels of oil in proved and probable reserves. Consequently, there exist competing claims among Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and some ASEAN member countries on the territories of the South China Sea. China's major stake on this area is based on history, "but such claims do not carry much weight in international law, which from the Chinese perspective downgrades China's ancestral heritage and is a source of resentment" (Buszynski, 2012, p. 140). The conflicting interest in this region also includes India (and Japan both are external players) that remains a strategic partner to many countries and still has some existing territorial disputes with China. Further complicating the already heated situation of territorial disputes is the rivalries over fishing and ocean resources of the South China Sea. Since 2005, the persistence of fishing boats seizure among countries like Vietnam, China and some ASEAN member countries has increased in number and frequency without each country accepting the claims of the other.

From the realist perspective, the rise of China also coincides with a steady developing of its naval power and the development of Chinese naval strategy. According to some political scientists, this creates further conflict between the US who has been the major dominant naval power in the Western Pacific (since WW II) and China (Buszynski, 2012). China's military power growth (including advances in her naval capabilities) over the last decade with the growing economic inter-dependence of the economies of this region further convince these countries to tie security to China (Ikenberry, 2008). Furthermore, there is the fear among some that China's dominance of the naval architecture of this area, would allow her push forward her desires and designs for the South China Sea to the chagrin of other smaller nations in the region (Yoshihara & Holmes, 2010). Buszynski (2012) contends that China's recent naval expansion in the South China Sea is based on three strategy missions which impacts on US strategy in the region. These missions include: (i) to prevent Taiwan from declaring independence while deterring the United States from supporting it with naval deployments in the events of a conflict; (ii) to protect China's extended trade routes and energy supplies that run through the Indian ocean and the Strait of Malacca, through which an estimated 80 percent of its oil imports are shipped; and (iii) to deploy a sea-based second-strike nuclear capability in the Western Pacific, which was another result of the Taiwan crisis of 1995-1996 (Buszynski, 2012, p. 145).

In spite of this, China's approach towards the South China Sea issue has been one centered on the " Charm offensive" strategy and usage of all its 'Soft Power' arsenal which encompasses the theoretical underpinnings of liberalism and cooperation to tend to these heated issues in around the South China Sea. For instance, Beijing has continued its diplomatic commitment to the 'Code of Conduct in the South China Sea' alongside members of ASEAN which resulted to both sides commencing formal consultations (Thayer, 2013) (Severino, 2010). China's approach towards the sensitive issues around the South China Sea has seen members of ASEAN tone down their initial response to Beijing, who on her part recognizes the strenght in numbers of ASEAN member countries is shaping the outlook of regionalism of this area (Okere, African Economic Growth and Development: Lessons from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), 2019).

In sum, US-China relations on matters surrounding the South China Sea has left political scientists pondering what the outlook would be in the decades to come. Questions of what nature or form it would take remain un-answered. Will it be marked by a convergence towards deepening cooperation, stability, and peace or deterioration, leading to increasingly open competition, and perhaps even war? (Friedberg, 2005)

#### **X-Factor or Immediate Causal Event(s):**

Events that most often than not instigate wars between two belligerent and their allies are usually immediate and quick. Historians agree that in WWI, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand to Austria-Hungry in 1914 by a Serbian acted as the immediate causal fact for the war. During the First World War, it was the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany. Such German external aggression occurred while England and France had guaranteed the Poles protection. For this paper to predict what the “x-factor” or immediate causal event in US-China relations that might eventually lead to a war is impossible, but it can guarantee that the magnitude of such event would be overwhelming. This paper understands that although the epochs of WWI and WWII were different, this “x-factor” depends on the level of tension between these two countries on varying issues. In addition, leadership ingenuity in handling matters, which might increase either increase or defuse the tension between countries, is important to avoid a war. Historical analysis on leadership and its effect on conflict management carried out by Roberts Jonathan after the post-1945 period showed that majority of national leaders face problems of fatigue, communication difficulties when faced with major international crises and such problems have remained constant. These challenges further contribute to the potential of war within the international system (Roberts, 1988). Aside challenges faced by leaders during crises, the character of leadership in the USA and China, play a significant role in navigating this labyrinth of great power relations.

The international community is not used to the kind of leadership that former President Donald Trump brought to the White House, but his supporters believe this was needed to rejuvenate populism within America. Actions and speeches from the White House under Trump suggest readiness for open confrontation with China. Some researchers are of the opinion that since the world is undergoing profound changes, Trump’s eccentric personality worsens the situation by alienating America’s age long allies and driving the balance of power towards China and her tools for power balancing (which might include the Belt and Road Initiative) (Nordin & Weissman, 2018). Liberalist opinions suggest that “China should maintain its strategic will and focus” for which most nation-states in the international system is receptive to (Shen, 2018). In addition, Beijing should endeavor to prepare for the strategic games among major powers as she continues to rise within the international system.

#### **Africa’s Positioning in Contemporary Great Power Relations**

The importance of the African continent to the future of Great Power relations cannot be overemphasized. However, while some countries within the continent continue to push their agenda on the world stage, the overall role of the continent in the global community is not at levels which most policy analyst and international political economist expect. Great Power interest in Africa continues to exist even in this contemporary time, although with minor changes. Firstly, the US and China interest in

Africa is mostly centered on energy and the provision of crude oil for her teeming population needs; as the United States is the largest and China the second largest consumer of oil in the world. According to Shinn (2007), “China uses about 7 million barrels of oil a day while the United States consumes about 20 million barrels.” Africa’s leading oil producers like Angola, (South) Sudan, Equatorial Guinea (but to mention a few) remain centers where the US and China compete for supply of crude oil within the continent. Estimates have it that over two-thirds of African crude exports end up in China while twenty-two percent of U.S crude imports come from African countries. Consequently, the structure and strategies of engagement with Africa for both the US and China is pre-determined based on the continued supply of crude oil towards their countries. In view of this, international political economists agree that the overall long-term strategy is for both Great Powers to promote political stability, good governance, fewer human rights abuses and less corruption (Tarrosy, 2013). While approach employed to achieve this is more pronounced by the US, China’s strategy dwells mostly on how these issues impact on its global business and economic relations with Africa; therefore a minimalist and “win-win”<sup>24</sup> cooperation strategy is being peddled to most Africa countries. In spite of this, both Great Powers generally see the need for political stability within the continent to ensure better oil security. The major change that has occurred with this strategy over the last five years borders on issues of climate change and global warming. The US and China have intensified their efforts towards renewable energy and this has the potential to significantly reduce their dependency on the Africa (and other oil producing regions) for its energy needs. While both countries continue to explore sustainable options for their energy demands, this reduces individual African oil producing counties’ income stream.

The theoretical perspective to Africa’s position in the context of Great Power relations focus on how the US and China continues to maintain its influence within the continent to ensure energy supply. While realist theoretical underpinnings might not strictly apply to the African case, realism still agrees that the US and China are involved in a race to either gain/maintain existing power balancing alliances, or up-turn the status quo to favour their strategic designs. For instance, China over the last decade has intensified efforts to create a positive perception towards her from Africa. As such, power relations between China and African countries depend a lot on outlook. In view of this, her ‘Soft Power’ strategy towards the continent is geared towards areas that she feels will continue to improve how Africa perceives her. This has been achieved via intensification of its media presence to correct what she considers false rhetoric about her presence in Africa, while assisting African countries, via media digitization, tell their stories to the world (Marsh, 2019). In addition to this, China continues to engage with many African countries on immediate pressing issues concerning the development of infrastructures needed to improve socio-economic indices. Via fora like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), she intends to bring to bear similar normative power<sup>25</sup> deployed in the Asian region to win African countries to her side of the power balance. China projects a win-win strategy while she partners with African continues to fill myriad infrastructure gaps; a feat that exists despite structural

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<sup>24</sup> See (Alves, 2013) (Tan-Mullins, Mohan, & Power, 2010)

<sup>25</sup> For more on how China’s normative power is influencing global governance institutions see (Peng & Tok, 2016)

and institutional problems evident in the many African countries (Okere & Okeyika, 2019). Also, with the Covid-19 pandemic and developed economies accused of ‘vaccine apartheid,’ China in its usual bid to project friendship with African countries, opted to provide its Covid-19 vaccine (*Sinovac*) to almost 40 African countries (Time Magazine, 2021).

It can be argued that such moves to build Africa’s perception towards China have motivated a slight change in US strategy while engaging with Africa. Sparked by increased political, economic and socio-cultural engagement with the continent by China, the US strategy is thus targeted at diluting China’s influence on the continent, as such the rivalry between both Great Powers has over the last five years moved from mild, to moderate and now intense. While attempting to sell the idea of re-colonization, political statements from many in and around Washington, have cautioned African countries about their engagement with China. In tandem with this, efforts to increase (and re-activate) meetings of engagement between the US and most African countries have significantly increased over the last decade. Only in April 2021, President Joe Biden invited five African leaders to a virtual summit on Climate. This is considered as an improvement in Washington’s engagement efforts (under President Trump) with African leaders. The US has been concerned with China’s in-road to Africa using strategies like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and bold support for ‘going global’ businesses in Africa which has seen tech companies like Huawei make significant presence while many Western companies still express concerns towards the volatility of Africa’s markets and its investment climate.

Information communication technology (ICT) issues in areas like tech start-ups, “techpreneur<sup>26</sup>,” blockchain, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) remain significant areas which contemporary trends in and outside Africa plays a significant role in the future of Great Power relations. Over the last decade, African countries have made impressive strides in the tech landscape. Many Africans, by personal development or opportunities and support provided globally, have built tech institutions that are committed to leveraging on the potentials of Africa’s young population as well as opportunities of advancement in global tech spaces. This period has witnessed a rise in projects like iHubs and m:labs both as tech incubators and innovation centers for providing solutions to myriad tech needs in Africa. Additionally, the position of Africa in blockchain technologies has increased alongside internet access and the affordability of smartphones across the continent. Such technology is recognized for possessing the potential to cause major economic, political, and social transformation in the Global South (with Africa inclusive) (Kshetri, 2017). While Africa might have been left behind during past industrial revolutions, advances recorded in the tech landscape of fusion of digital technologies and the utilization of new technologies (artificial intelligence, cloud computing, robotics, 3D printing, the internet of things) make her attractive as a marketplace and source for tech innovations desirable by both the US and China. It can be argued that there exists a competition between Great Powers for major in-roads in Africa’s tech spaces with Africans themselves innovating and creating relevant opportunities for competition among

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<sup>26</sup> Entrepreneurial activities in the information communication technology sectors which serve as means for employment.

Great Powers. In recent time, there has been preponderance of America and Sino support for tech innovations in Africa; which has seen various companies (originating from Great Power countries) either supporting Africa's tech innovations, or developing required human capital resource needed to saddle the responsibilities of this industry. There appears that understanding and urgency from both Great Powers to be part of the African tech success story, as this would not only assist their objective for either power (re)balancing, but also create a veritable ally needed for inter-state relations.

A particular feature of Great Power relations in Africa that remains absent is the response of Africa's political leaders to the intrigues of US-China relations. It is unclear if any country in the continent has developed an appropriate strategy to engage both Great Powers; even when Africa's position on pressing issues could play a decisive role in the balance of power between the Great Powers. In the years to come, her political leaders need to develop a strategy to engage with the US, China and any other behemoth that might emerge in the future. This is needed because it appears African countries are satisfied with their current position on the international system while other regions are managing the Great Power rivalry to their benefit.

### **Conclusion**

While contemporary international studies as a discipline have many aspects, Great Power relations remain imperative due to its reverberating effects across the international system. Using realist and liberalist theoretical interpretations, this paper situated contemporary events and data to predict areas of concern and conflict between the United States and China. From increase military expenditure and efforts to seek alliance and geopolitical influence; to improved cooperation within international institutions, realist and liberalist views agree that the current levels of tension between both countries is a source of concern. For war or war-like situation to happen, this paper identifies areas of cyber-security and an "x-factor" which might cause a war between both countries. Leadership and character of political leader also play significant role to determine if a war is bound to occur between both countries. In the coming years, both countries should be cautious of the level of propaganda that tends to fuel tensions to greater heights. Propagandas tend to shape public opinion both locally and internationally. Most often than not, propagandas depict situations which might not be true. Furthermore, propaganda tends to sway the other country's view. This might be the case with China shaping Africa's perception towards her, while the US hopes to curtail China's influence on the continent. Scholars of international relations are now charged with the responsibility of devising ways to explain the future of Great Power relations better relations between the US and China, while hoping that if a transition would occur, it would not be violent and involve conflict/war within the international system.

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