

# Holding back China: Aim or Desire

*Péter Sztás, PhD.*

November, 2021

# Holding back China: Aim or Desire

*Péter Szitás, PhD.*

**Abstract:** *The presidency of Donald J. Trump has strongly changed the U.S. policy on the People's Republic of China. Tensions and contradictions between the two nations, that had previously been swept under the rug, broke to the surface with a force long not seen before. A war on customs and technologies erupted a few years ago in which not only states but dominant global companies such as Huawei were also severely wounded. This burdened relationship was aggravated by the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus epidemic, which the former U.S. president consistently named "China Virus" and demanded reparations from the P.R.C. worth around USD 10 trillion for the extermination it has caused. Although America now has a new leader, tensions between the two countries remain. Taiwan does not ease the bilateral relations either, which could become an important arena of conflicts in the near future.*

**Keywords:** *China, USA, Taiwan, Donald J. Trump, Joe Biden, economic war, military development, submarines, conflict of interest*

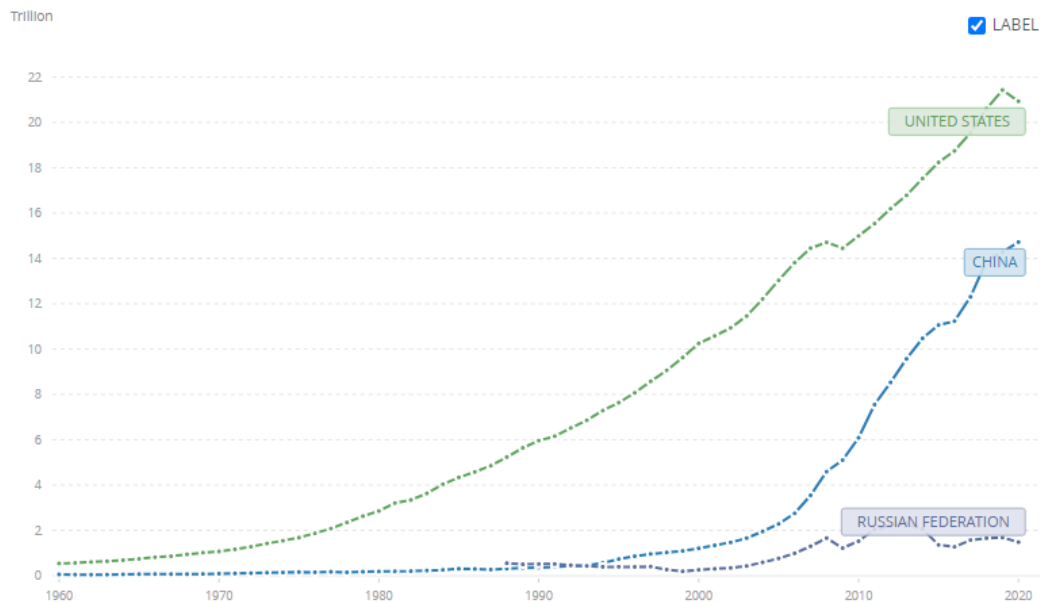
**During the last two decades, China has strengthened dramatically in every field of international relations. For a long time, it seemed that in parallel with its enrichment, the country put ideological questions into the background. However, this myth is constantly being overthrown, enough to think of the disturbing news concerning the Uyghur community, the recent events in Hong Kong, or the tensions in Taiwan. The Anglo-Saxon Western world has created a new alliance aiming to hold the P.R.C. back. If the clash of the two worlds continues, its outcome will be unpredictable.**

## The History Never Ends

After having won the Cold War, a widespread American liberal perspective started to dominate the studies of international relations claiming that the global competition among political ideologies and economic systems ended and the Western democracies' capitalist approach has triumphed forever. Francis Fukuyama's famous article, *The End of History*<sup>1</sup> characterised this standpoint most spectacularly stating that by the collapse of the Soviet Union the philosophical alternatives to liberalism have been eradicated. Today it is clear that Fukuyama's notion proved to be wrong, for numerous reasons. There are still many countries in the world with a non-democratic political system and not aiming to change that. Not a minute has passed since the bipolar world came to an end without gunfire and the United States, as the world's number one superpower is once again facing a global challenger, which is stronger and more dangerous than the Soviet Union had ever been.

## The Emergence of Chinese Economy

Since the seventies there has been an unwritten rule that if you want to have something manufactured, you should set up a supply chain in Asia, more specifically in China. China is a country with a long and unparalleled history, it gives home to more than 1.4 billion people, that was strongly impoverished a few decades ago but now it is fighting for world economic leadership. Its endeavours are neither desperate nor hopeless. This dramatic emergence has been the result of a conscious, many decades long development which now seems to be unstoppable. China has learnt its lessons, many of those were from others' mistakes and the country is standing not just on one foot but on many. Unlike the Soviet Union, China does not try to build its imperial dreams on a minaret-like economy but a steady, pyramid-shaped one. The country maintains a strong army with global nuclear capabilities, however, that does not hinder the continuous growth of the nation's prosperity. All this is faithfully mirrored by the fact that it is no longer just large Western European, Japanese, Korean and American corporations that are able to become leading global companies but Chinese ones as well. In the last decade, China-based giants have emerged from the ground and began competing with the largest transnational companies not just on Chinese, but on European and American soil as well.



GDP (current USD) – China, USA, Russia. Source: The World Bank<sup>2</sup>

As we can see on the World Bank graph above, the economy of China started to grow in the seventies, and then rocketed dramatically in the mid-nineties. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly born Russia, - which performed only minimally better than its predecessor -, was left behind by the P.R.C. in a moment, and the latter is catching up with the U.S. at a rapid pace. Although the economic primacy of the United States is still clear today, if this trend continues, there might soon be a change in the leading position. It is important to note, however, that while the Chinese figures are the outcome of the collective performance of 1.4 billion people, America achieves that level by a quarter of that immense population. At the same time, considering the continuous development of information technologies and robotisation unstoppably happening in the East, this trend may also change quickly.

### Getting Stronger

China's aspiration of becoming an economic superpower commensurate with its military strategy in the last decade. The developments in the national arms industry are spectacular, but the general improvements in the Chinese People's Liberation Army (P.L.A.), especially in the nuclear field, are even impressive. Just one important data: according to the RAND Corporation<sup>3</sup>, the number of Chinese nuclear warheads that might survive a first strike was 4 in 1996 and it grew to between 15-27 in 2017. Today their number may even be higher. This development mainly concerns the mobile

launching capabilities, expanding extensively the sea-based deterrence.<sup>4</sup> These figures mean that there is almost no chance to kneel the P.L.A. without the probable setting into motion of the mutual assured destruction (M.A.D.) doctrine, putting a large-scale direct military attack in any case against China off the table. The rapid development is visible not just in the field of nuclear capabilities but in the other branches of the army as well. Thanks to the purchase and domestic production of fourth generation fighter jets, the qualitative gap between the capabilities of the U.S. Air Force and the P.L.A. has narrowed.<sup>5</sup> According to the RAND, around half of the P.L.A.'s current fighter inventory belongs to the 4<sup>th</sup> generation making the Chinese air capabilities stronger than ever. If we can believe the rumours and the constantly leaking news, the introduction and commissioning of the fifth-generation fighter jets is imminent.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Tension is Rising**

The unshakeable emergence of the P.R.C. is a matter of concern both to the states of the Asia-Pacific Region (A.P.A.C.) and to many Western-type democracies. While China is targeting the leading position of the world economy, its regional, political, and ideological objectives run counter to the aspirations of other actors in the region and to the desires of the United States as well. The main theatre of conflict among these nations is the South China Sea; however, an extremely dangerous subsurface conflict can break out at any moment relating to the status of Taiwan.

## **Struggle for the South China Sea**

Achieving dominance over the South China Sea is crucial for the P.R.C., because of several reasons. The most obvious about these is security: no country likes the presence of foreign navies near its shores, even if they sail in international waters. However, China's insistence on hegemony over the South China Sea has an economic side as well. As the opportunities for the implementation of deep-water drilling technologies increase, the importance of this territory continues to grow. China has been struggling for a long time with a shortage of available raw materials, to which this area could provide solutions in the future. It would be unacceptable for the Chinese to see these treasures extracted by other nations. Last but not least, the South China Sea is one of the most important shipping routes today, and control over it means partial control over the world economy.



Map of the South China Sea.<sup>7</sup>

The majority of the South China Sea is basically considered by the P.R.C. as inland territory, an almost exclusive economic zone, whose Chinese status Beijing is trying to strengthen by building artificial islands and deploying military technology on them. The most famous of these are the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands. China has increased the size of these lands by a special architectural process in recent years and deployed military infrastructure on them provoking disapproval of neighbouring countries and increasing their fears.

## Taiwan

From the perspective of the P.R.C., Taiwan, or as formally called, the Republic of China (R.O.C.) is historically part of the Chinese state, and its independence has never been and never will be accepted. And, surprisingly, not by the P.R.C. only. Taiwan as a sovereign state exists only de facto, since it is not acknowledged by neither the United Nations<sup>8</sup> nor by any major states in the world, including Taiwan's biggest allies and economic partners. This is for one major reason: the territory of the R.O.C. is claimed by the P.R.C., and the latter immediately cancels diplomatic relations with those countries that recognise the former as a sovereign state. No major actors want to jeopardise liaison with the P.R.C., consequently, the relationship that the majority of the world keeps up with Taiwan is pragmatic, but unofficial. There are only 14 countries

that despite the aforementioned threat accept Taiwan's sovereignty, the only one European is The Holy See.<sup>9</sup> Relations between Beijing and Taipei have reached bottom, as today. P.L.A. fighter jets regularly violate the Taiwanese airspace, in part in response to the recently acknowledged news that there are U.S. soldiers on the island. In parallel with these facts the opinion that the P.R.C. will make a military attempt to regain control over the island in the near future is also gaining ground in the media on a much more frequent basis.<sup>10</sup>

## Political Possibilities

While the Trump administration's attitude was rather hostile to China's ambitions and it did everything in its power to curb them, the new Democratic leadership is likely to return to earlier cooperation in the hope that this will dampen today's tense situation. According to the China Monitor, there are five areas<sup>11</sup> where value-based U.S. – P.R.C. cooperation could be worked out in the short term: economic relations, pandemic, climate change, regional rivalry and working with allies. As the cited article points out, the American - Chinese bilateral relationship might not as much be framed in zero-sum terms in the future as it used to be in the previous four years. However, the newly established military alliance that clearly aims to counter China's goals does not hinder, but in no way accelerates the rapprochement of the two nations. This new alliance is called AUKUS and is formed by the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

## AUKUS

On 15 September 2021 the President of The United States, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the Prime Minister of Australia held a joint virtual press conference<sup>12</sup>, where they announced the establishment of AUKUS, a new trilateral security pact, under which the three nations will work together in the future. In the framework of this new cooperation the members will share expertise and technology in order to help Australia build a fleet of nuclear-fuelled submarines. Until recently only the U.K. and no other allies have received the American nuclear submarine technology. It is important to note, and every member of the press conference did so, that these ships will be only powered by nuclear reactors, but they will not be armed with nuclear weapons. Thanks to AUKUS Australia will become the first country in the world that without possessing nuclear weapons will obtain nuclear-powered submarines. Somewhat surprisingly, the announcement did not cause the biggest

repercussions in Beijing, but in Paris. This is because of the fact that Australia signed a contract with France of a total of EUR 34 billion in 2016 to manufacture 12 diesel-powered submarines over a 25-year period.<sup>13</sup> These, however, will no longer be needed, therefore France feels cheated and humiliated. As a result, Paris recalled French ambassadors appointed to the U.S. and to Australia for consultation. This was a historical step as it had never happened before that the French ambassador was called back from Washington.<sup>14</sup> However, the diplomats have already returned to their posts. It is not yet clear what the creation of AUKUS will mean on an everyday basis. This initiating step, however, clearly indicates the fact that China's power has reached a level, where AUKUS members feel they must balance.

## Conclusion

China's economic rise leads to military strengthening. Beijing is increasingly trying to assert its interests in every part of the world but prominently in areas close to its land, especially in the South China Sea. Although the new U.S. leadership broke with President Trump's harsh rhetoric, U.S. action in the region remains unacceptable to China. One consequence of this is the aggravation of P.R.C. – R.O.C. relations, as well as regular airspace violations. Examining current military trends, if China decides to take military control over Taiwan, it is able to do so. If the U.S. comes to the island's military assistance, the consequences could be unpredictable.



## Bibliography

COHEN, Roger – SHEAR, Michael D.: *Furious Over Sub Deal, France Recalls Ambassadors to U.S. and Australia*. <09/17/2021> In. *The New York Times*. Access: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/17/world/europe/france-ambassador-recall-us-australia.html> (11/14/2021)

DW: *China says Taiwan has no right to join the United Nations*. <10/27/2021> Access: <https://www.dw.com/en/china-says-taiwan-has-no-right-to-join-the-united-nations/a-59641954> (11/04/2021)

FATHI, Romain: *Why the Australia-France submarine deal collapse was predictable*. <09/24/2021> In. *The Conversation*. Access: <https://theconversation.com/why-the-australia-france-submarine-deal-collapse-was-predictable-168526> (11/14/2021)

FERCHEN, Matt: *Towards 'Extreme Competition': Mapping the contours of US-China relations under the Biden administration*. <02/10/2021> In. *Merics China Monitor*. Access: <https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/MERICS%20ChinaMonitor%2068%20US%20China%20Biden%20final2.pdf> p.1.

FUKUYAMA, Francis: *The End of History?* In. *Jstor*. Access: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) (11/02/2021)

HEGINBOTHAM, Erik ed.: *The U.S. – CHINA Military Scorecard*. RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, USA, 2015. Access: [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR300/RR392/RAND\\_RR392z1.zhs.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR300/RR392/RAND_RR392z1.zhs.pdf)

JOE, Rick: *The FC-31, China's 'Other' Stealth Fighter*. <02/18/2021> In. *The Diplomat*. Access: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/the-fc-31-chinas-other-stealth-fighter/> (11/04/2021)

NATIONSONLINE: *Topographic Map of the South China Sea*. Access: <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/South-China-Sea-political-map.htm>

O'CONNOR, Tom: *Which Countries Still Recognize Taiwan? Two More Nations Switch to China In Less Than A Week* (09/20/2019) In. *Newsweek*. Access: <https://www.newsweek.com/who-recognizes-taiwan-two-change-china-1460559> (11/05/2021)

RIPLEY, Will – CHEUNG, Eric – WESTCOTT, Ben: *Taiwan's President says the threat from China is increasing 'every day' and confirms presence of US military trainers on the island*. <10/28/2021> In. *CNN*. Access: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/27/asia/tsai-ingwen-taiwan-china-interview-intl-hnk/index.html> (11/10/2021)

THE WORLD BANK: *GDP (current USD) – China, USA, Russia*. Access: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN-US-RU> (11/02/2021)

YOUTUBE: *Statement by PM Johnson, President Biden and PM Morrison on AUKUS* <09/15/2021> Access: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4chEI8Q5PE> (11/14/2021)

## Endnotes

- 
- <sup>1</sup> FUKUYAMA, Francis: *The End of History?* In. *Jstor*. Access: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) (11/02/2021)
- <sup>2</sup> THE WORLD BANK: *GDP (current USD) – China, USA, Russia*. Access: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN-US-RU> (11/02/2021)
- <sup>3</sup> HEGINBOTHAM, Erik ed.: *The U.S. – CHINA Military Scorecard*. RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, USA, 2015. Access: [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR300/RR392/RAND\\_RR392z1.zhs.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR300/RR392/RAND_RR392z1.zhs.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 314-315
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid. Summary, xxiii
- <sup>6</sup> JOE, Rick: *The FC-31, China's 'Other' Stealth Fighter*. <02/18/2021> In. *The Diplomat*. Access: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/the-fc-31-chinas-other-stealth-fighter/> (11/04/2021)
- <sup>7</sup> NATIONSONLINE: *Topographic Map of the South China Sea*. Access: <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/South-China-Sea-political-map.htm>
- 
- <sup>8</sup> DW: *China says Taiwan has no right to join the United Nations*. <10/27/2021> Access: <https://www.dw.com/en/china-says-taiwan-has-no-right-to-join-the-united-nations/a-59641954> (11/04/2021)
- <sup>9</sup> O'CONNOR, Tom: *Which Countries Still Recognize Taiwan? Two More Nations Switch to China In Less Than A Week* (09/20/2019) In. *Newsweek*. Access: <https://www.newsweek.com/who-recognizes-taiwan-two-change-china-1460559> (11/05/2021)
- <sup>10</sup> RIPLEY, Will – CHEUNG, Eric – WESTCOTT, Ben: *Taiwan's President says the threat from China is increasing 'every day' and confirms presence of US military trainers on the island*. <10/28/2021> In. *CNN*. Access: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/27/asia/tsai-ingwen-taiwan-china-interview-intl-hnk/index.html> (11/10/2021)
- <sup>11</sup> FERCHEN, Matt: *Towards 'Extreme Competition': Mapping the contours of US-China relations under the Biden administration*. <02/10/2021> In. *Merics China Monitor*. Access: <https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/MERICCS%20ChinaMonitor%2068%20US%20China%20Biden%20final2.pdf> p.1..
- <sup>12</sup> YOUTUBE: *Statement by PM Johnson, President Biden and PM Morrison on AUKUS* <09/15/2021> Access: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4chEI8Q5PE> (11/14/2021)
- <sup>13</sup> FATHI, Romain: *Why the Australia-France submarine deal collapse was predictable*. <09/24/2021> In. *The Conversation*. Access: <https://theconversation.com/why-the-australia-france-submarine-deal-collapse-was-predictable-168526> (11/14/2021)
- <sup>14</sup> COHEN, Roger – SHEAR, Michael D.: *Furious Over Sub Deal, France Recalls Ambassadors to U.S. and Australia*. <09/17/2021> In. *The New York Times*. Access: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/17/world/europe/france-ambassador-recall-us-australia.html> (11/14/2021)