

CHINA'S EXPANSION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN ARGUMENT EXPLORING INTERNATIONAL THEORY WITH REGARD TO A NEW ERA OF STRATEGIC CONTAINMENT¹

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INTRODUCTION: METHOD AND INTERNATIONAL THEORY

According to Kevin Rudd, new strategic factors with great destabilizing potential have been observable in the Indo-Pacific macro-region since 2014, warning of the real possibility of profound changes with great impact on the international system as a whole². The appraisal of China's rise marked by inescapable expansionist ambitions, both at geoeconomic and commercial level and at the strategic and military level – already defined as “Sino-globalization” – assumes, in this context, an urgency that requires careful reflection³. As Billeter points out, when the current Chinese regime evokes longingly China's “grandiose past”, it is the Empire it has in mind, that is, the “imperial greatness it intends to restore”⁴. Moreover, since the 1990s, according to Friend and Thayer, a new form of Han-centric “identitarian” and “chauvinistic hypernationalism” has increasingly defined Beijing's policy, with serious consequences for the future of international politics⁵. In this sense, in an ambitious enterprise to go further in the theorization effort on the issue of Chinese expansion, we point out the following preliminary assumptions:

- Firstly, all theories possess strong and weak elements. What we define as a scientific theory, that is, a coherent set of propositions which have among themselves deter-

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to build a rational case about China's burgeoning expansion, revisiting the interrelated questions of the long cycles, hegemonic transitions and the so-called “Thucydides's Trap” among other analytical dimensions, drawing mainly upon some of the most important theoretical propositions from Thucydides, Kautilya, Organski, Modelski, Gilpin, and G. Allison. The conclusion points to the idea that the current international system already reveals a new phase of strategic containment.

Keywords: China, United States, Europe, strategic containment.

RESUMO

Este artigo explora a construção de uma problemática racional sobre a crescente expansão da China, revisitando as questões conexas dos ciclos longos, das transições hegemônicas e da chamada «armadilha de Tucídides», entre outras dimensões de análise, na base de alguns dos mais importantes delineamentos teóricos de Tucídides, Kautilya, Organski, Modelski,



Gilpin e G. Allison. A conclusão aponta para a ideia de que o atual sistema internacional revela já uma nova era de contenção estratégica.

Palavras-chave: China, Estados Unidos, Europa, contenção estratégica.

minable relations, is always subject to the proof of deduction and experience. They are provisional stipulations. They aim to approximate and locate causal links. But there is another equally important aspect: as Kenneth N. Waltz (1924-2013) highlighted, being in possession of a series of facts is of no help if we think about these facts in the wrong way⁶. Waltz emphasized, in particular, that the

researcher's work only begins when the theoretical questions themselves are posed, in the sense that the theoretical exercise aims to methodically isolate a phenomenon from others, so as to make it intelligible.

- Secondly, the need to distinguish the notions of internal validity and external validity of theories. The first concerns the quality of the concepts, which Plato called *stable referents* or *purity of forms*. External validity, on the other hand, has to do with the degree of generalization, that is, the ability to account for a large number of phenomena, cases or situations. Typically, that capacity diminishes whenever we attempt to include too many propositions in the same theory. When this occurs, the explanation loses sharpness and becomes less consequential, wherefore theoretical acuity gives way to description, however interesting the latter may be. A theory establishes hierarchies, therefore it cannot “include everything”.

- Thirdly, it is important to be aware that refuting a theory (or a theoretical model) is potentially more important than confirming it. The case of the *exoplanets* is one of the most interesting examples: should the hypothesis of their existence not be confirmed, we may be faced with a different type of star or other cosmic formation heretofore unknown, that is, we may be discovering something truly new.

- Fourthly, the scientific character is usually based on a combination of two strategies: induction and deduction. What we want to emphasize is that the “final” construction of a theoretical proposition will always derive from the crossing of these two paths in order to produce an axis of thorough and internally coherent explanation about a particular phenomenon, that is, to achieve as robust a theory as possible.

- Fifth, echoing Einstein, to mention that *error* is perhaps the most important element in the scientific process, right from the theorization process. Why is that? Because it indicates what remains unknown, that is, the *distance* that lingers between the observer and the object of analysis.

- Sixth, it is equally important to underline that the analytical exercise in Political Science and International Relations is especially arduous. This scientific area deals with political dynamics, power relations, choices, and untimely incidents, which implies that – methodologically – it confronts “moving” objects or targets. Unlike with natural or physical sciences, in international politics we operate with calculations, strategies, tactical or strategic movements, individual or collective psychologies, contradictions, whims, vanity and often lies and conspiracies which escape the account of events or

the historical documents of the chancelleries. In this regard, the psychological conception formulated by Robert Jervis in his works on the logic of images and the problems of perception in International Relations takes on special importance⁷. The obstacles facing researchers are quite formidable. It is worth noting, by way of illustration, that in 2021 not all documents on World War II were made available by the English, American and Russian governments for free consultation. We must therefore be especially aware of the class of phenomena we are given to analyze in the field of International Relations. On the other hand, as the great Hellenistic scholar Jacqueline de Romilly (1913-2010) pointed out, “un train peut en cacher un autre”, that is, the *true cause* of a given event may be hidden by another equally important one, but which is not the main one⁸. There is a hierarchy that needs to be assessed, so it is *mandatory* to look into it more than once. Lastly, it is essential to always keep in mind that in advanced studies of International Relations other analytical opportunities present themselves, namely the so-called non-Western epistemologies. Let us mention to this purpose, for instance, the contribution of the great Indian thinker Kautilya (350 a.C.-275 a.C.), also known as Chanakya or Vishnugupta, who lived a century after Thucydides (455 a.C?-399 a.C?), and who bequeathed us a remarkable work entitled *Arthashastra*, in which he reflects on the fundamental traits of interstate relations from a *protorealist* perspective. In particular, his “circle theory of states” is a fascinating proposition about the logic of alignment and the policies of alliances.⁹ Reflecting empirically on the interstate dynamics which he observed in the context of the Indian subcontinent, Kautilya spotted a recurring pattern: neighboring states were, as a general rule, *enemies*, and the survival of a particular state was contingent on the establishment of alliances on the periphery of its neighbors, a subject we shall delve into further ahead apropos of the ongoing realignments in Southeast Asia.¹⁰

THE END OF THE THIRTY YEARS' WAR, ENSHRINED
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In the construction of the present argument concerning the rise of China, in addition to this introduction, we raise four main vectors, interconnected, which we shall designate in this instance as the *criterion of the method*: 1) nexus, continuities and transformation; 2) the fundamental nature of the international arena; 3) some effects on the *status quo* ensuing from China's expansionist ambitions; and, 4) a conclusion that points to the dawn of a new era of strategic containment.

NEXUS, CONTINUITIES AND INTERNATIONAL TRANSFORMATION: THE LONG CYCLES OF MODELSKI

The end of the Thirty Years' War, enshrined in the Treaties of Westphalia of 1648, opened a long international period marked by the centrality of the *Territorial State* (a notion that we favor in counterpoint to the concept of *Nation-State*). George Modelski (1926-2014)

would formulate an *evolutionist* theory of International Relations precisely from the patterns identified in the Westphalian system, relying primarily on three hypotheses articulated on a *long-cycle* basis¹¹:

- 1st long cycle - 500 years on average. It involves large-scale social or historical formations, currently the modern system of States. In the previous period, the historical formations of reference were mainly the empires, or more particular cases such as the Hanseatic League. It should be noted, however, that in the context of the present international cycle other subtypes of political communities, such as confederations, have coexisted. But what most specifically raises this hypothesis by Modelski? The significant time elapsed since Westphalia – 373 years – may suggest that the interstate historical system could have already entered its *declining* phase.

- 2nd long cycle - 100 years on average. It corresponds to *phases of hegemony* or *international leadership* and bears particular relevance and interest to the present case. What does, therefore, the hypothesis expressed in Modelski's 2nd long cycle point to? It implies the likeliness of periodic changes or alterations in the hegemonic element – or in a given hegemonic arrangement – within the international system, raising the fundamental problem of hegemonic transitions. Moreover, in international systems, historically, the major powers, due to their relative power, hold the primary “responsibility” of *leadership*.

- 3rd long cycle - 30 years on average. It relates to *specific phases of international politics*: the Cold War, the post-Cold War period, or the post-post-Cold War, an ongoing period that has already been referred to as a “new Cold War”.¹²

THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA: DECENTRALISATION, SELF-HELP SYSTEM AND THE SECURITY DILEMMA

The Westphalian system is characterized by the lack of an authority or structure above the States, in itself indeed a negative formulation. But we ought to be aware that, unlike excessively straightforward readings, that same system is very fragmented. An atomization which globalization – only partial in any case – has not phased out, and which, on the contrary, the particular case of sub-Saharan Africa has made especially manifest.¹³ In fact, the differences as to development and prosperity are ‘laid bare’ – actually they become more transparent and immediate – as an extraordinary result of combining the computer with the satellite. The decentralized nature of the system suggests that States operate in an environment of *anarchy*, which forces them to anchor themselves or to sustain themselves, *prima facie*, in their relative power. This structural condition has not changed in essence. The system is thus defined by the concept of *self-help*. Even the United Nations Security Council – which has held the exclusive prerogative of the use of force in international relations, according to the UN Charter, since 1945 – is contingent upon the prior agreement, or the lack of opposition, of its five permanent members.

It should be noted that the Security Council was virtually paralyzed during the Cold War, a period during which there were more than 190 vetoes. As States are forced to seek more security in this potentially hostile environment, this need creates a persistent problem of insecurity: the so-called *security dilemma*.¹⁴ A simple definition could be phrased as follows: when a State increases (or strives to increase) its security it almost automatically generates a sense of mistrust and disadvantage in third parties – often the mere perception of it is sufficient – which typically skews arms race, active defense or even offensive actions, and the possible escalation of hostilities, with the potential to significantly affect the *status quo*. Thucydides (455 a.C?-399 a.C?) revealed for the first time this dilemma – which we might call the true “hallmark” or “watermark” of a *self-help system* – in its pivotal *History of the Peloponnesian War*: the growth of Athens’s might as a result of its commercial and military expansionism elicited an undisguised fear of disadvantage in Sparta, the main rival and leader of the Peloponnesian league, a dynamic that made exponentially increase the likeliness of war.¹⁵ This is the scenario defined by the so-called Thucydides’s

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Trap, in the well-known phrasing of Graham Allison.¹⁶ It should be noted, however, that war was not inevitable, a proposition that Thucydides is particularly zealous to safeguard. Let us be reminded

of the famous challenge of the delegates of Sparta to the Athenians, demonstrating the will to avoid war: “Give us a sign of temperance, tear down at least part of the walls!”. (Thucydides was referring to the imposing wall of protection between the port of Piraeus and the city of Athens.) The modernity of Thucydides – which we have had the opportunity to highlight in recent years – is expressed in the so-called *doctrine of causality*, which already pointed to a world that could be explained without reference to mystical or esoteric claims.¹⁷ His philosophical basis was influenced by the great Democritus (460 a.C?-370 a.C?), deemed one of the forerunners of *scientific research*, and also by Hippocrates (460 a.C?-377 a.C?), a contemporary of both¹⁸. When we speak of Thucydides’s remarkable pioneering effort in building a *science of political phenomena*, we refer in particular to the profoundly innovative attitude of the researcher of interstate dynamics, in a show of intellectual confidence unprecedented in his *History*, which he himself presents as a “possession for all times”.¹⁹

Thus, the decentralized nature of the international system and the ensuing security dilemma will generate a permanent concern for survival. To a large extent, we are faced with a precarious system of *armed peace* – a notion anticipated by Nicolas Oresme (1323?-1382), perhaps the greatest European intellectual of the 14th century – or *insecure peace*, which in turn will lead to *balance of power* dynamics, in order to ensure the preservation of its components. The *balance of power* model relies on three main propositions: to prevent

the preponderance of a single State (or a group of States); to preserve States and their territorial integrity; and, also to ensure the preservation of the *system of States* as a whole.

This last element is a particularly important dimension of the model, as it prevents the imperialization of the international arena.

HOW CAN WE DIG DEEPER INTO THE CHALLENGE THAT CHINA'S EXPANSION REPRESENTS NOT ONLY FOR THE UNITED STATES, BUT ALSO FOR THE OVERALL OPEN INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM?

And it is this feature of the international system what helps to explain, for instance, the existence and survival over time of *micro-states*. The question of the *distribution of power* in the system is therefore a central element

in the concrete assessment of any period or international situation. By the same token, this requires, for the most part, that those same States protect their interests and safeguard their integrity – a typical behavioral dynamic in a *self-help* system.²⁰

THE EFFECTS ON THE INTERNATIONAL STATUS QUO ARISING FROM CHINA'S EXPANSIONIST AMBITIONS.

A FEW HISTORICAL SCENARIOS OF HEGEMONIC TRANSITION

How can we dig deeper into the challenge that China's expansion represents not only for the United States – the leading liberal power in the current cycle – but also for the overall open international system? As Gilpin has highlighted, the liberal powers have since 1945 guaranteed the essential conditions for both the international regime of free trade and the freedom of navigation on the high seas – the so-called *admiralty realm* – and the security of freights and foreign capital²¹. I therefore propose to take a look at some historical scenarios of hegemonic transition. According to Graham Allison, the United States and China may eventually avoid engaging in war if they address two prior issues: first, in the current trajectory, the war between the two is not only possible, but much more likely than is recognized (in fact, by underestimating the real danger of such an event occurring, the risks increase); secondly, war is not necessarily inevitable to the exact extent that the great powers are able to “manage” their relationship with their main rivals without resorting to armed conflict, even in the face of threatening signs. However, this was only the case in four of the sixteen situations detailed in Allison's aforementioned study²². Indeed, in that thorough exercise of applied history, it is revealed that in twelve of these sixteen processes of challenge to the structure prevalent in the international relations the outcome was war, that is, in 75% of the cases. The high likelihood of war in similar episodes notwithstanding, Allison “invites” the reader to reflect on the four periods in which the results did not translate into open conflict: Portugal and Spain at the end of the 15th century (Treaty of Tordesillas in 1484); the United Kingdom and the United States at the beginning of the 20th century²³; the most extreme and paradigmatic case of the “balance of terror” during the Cold War (peace ensured by the MAD doctrine); and the post-1990 European scenario shaped by the complex challenge that Germany's *reunification* posed to both France and the United

Kingdom. In those four historical instances, the respective contemporary powers managed to elude the “Thucydides’s Trap”, therefore deserving special attention in the context of current Chinese ambitions. They are evidence that war is not inevitable, as Thucydides took it upon himself to stress in respect of the conflict between Sparta and Athens – a war avowedly undesirable for those powers. This is, moreover, an essential point of Thucydides’s argument, of remarkable scientific value, insofar as it refutes predetermined epilogues or inconsistent determinisms, and which the four historical analogies explored by Allison make plain. As can be read in the author’s insightful comments, “only those who fail to dig deep into the tragic circumstances of the past are condemned to repeat them”²⁴. To this extent, the record of successes and failures offers important lessons for policy makers.

It is precisely in the thorough study of those sixteen historical instances of severe structural stress – as Allison himself designates them – that his work is especially incisive for the current international cycle. In particular, Allison’s 7th scenario is particularly useful for interpreting the present moment, that is, the period between the late 18th and early 19th centuries when revolutionary France openly challenges the then preponderant power on land and at sea – Britain. While it is a fact that the Napoleonic affront to British leadership at the international level will provoke a period of widespread wars on the European continent and in the surrounding oceans, the long cycle that follows, after 1815, of mostly systemic peace, requires a closer attention. In this regard, Henry A. Kissinger’s doctoral dissertation – published under the title *A World Restored* in 1957 – highlighted how post-revolutionary France is integrated into a new security architecture by the more “conservative” European powers (or powers of the *status quo*, perhaps more appropriately)²⁵. The main protagonists of the Vienna Congress (1814-1815) – the Austrian chancellor Metternich and Britain’s Robert Stewart Castlereagh – would structure a virtuous system of *balance of power* that largely enabled the continent to maintain a systemic peace for nearly a century. It should be noted, in the construction of this system in particular, the literal invention of a *buffer state* – Belgium – with the function of “halting” France’s access to the North Sea. This maneuver eventually resulted in the division of Flanders in three, a division that is still in place today: Dutch Flanders, Belgian Flanders, and French Flanders. The English never “forgot” Napoleon’s illustrious statement about the strategic importance of the great port of Antwerp: “Anvers est un pistolet braqué sur le coeur de l’Angleterre”.²⁶ In Hedley Bull’s formulation (1932-1985), the said system *power balance* has fulfilled three essential functions in the modern system of States: 1) it has prevented its capture and transformation into a universal empire; 2) regional balances of power have protected the *autonomy* and the *territorial integrity* of States; and, finally 3) it has provided the conditions for the development of other institutions essential for the maintenance of the system itself, such as diplomacy, flexible alliances, crisis management, sanctions, international law and war as a *legitimate means* to prevent expansionist policies or hostile actions of conquest.²⁷ With

regard specifically to the logics of (re)alignment underway in the Southeast Asian region, the significant reorientation of alliance policy by China's neighboring states can be illuminated by Kautilya's pioneering modelling, i.e. the so-called "circle theory of States" we initially referred to, and which the following scheme helps enlightening:²⁸

Figure 1 > Theoretical scheme of the circle of states and the logics of alignment

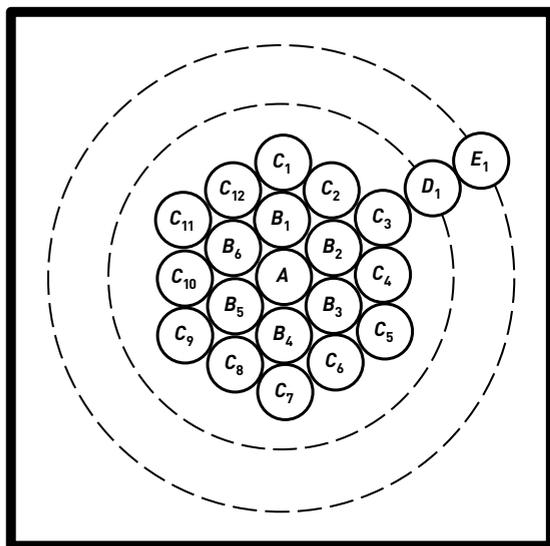


Figure adapted from Finley and Hovet, 1975.²⁹

Taking as reference, by way of example, this outline of five concentric circles with State A at the center, Kautilya considers that this same State is more likely to ally itself with State C. In fact, should it feel threatened by State B₁, the likelihood is that State A will establish alliances with States C₁, C₂ or C₁₂ against State B₁. State A may make a temporary alliance with B₂ and B₆ against B₁ but, Kautilya warns, these cannot be long-term agreements. According to Kautilya's model, in the example above, the alliances may involve circles A, C and E in opposition to circles B and D. The author therefore concludes that any State in position A can discern its logical allies in circles C and E. Kautilya's argument, transposed into the present scenario of Southeast Asia, makes it to some extent possible to better relate the dynamics that are seen there in the framework of which China's neighboring states seek to establish or strengthen alliances in the most distant circles, in order to mitigate the potential threat posed, in their view, by the great power, and to maintain the regional balance of power which, as Metternich always stressed, was the "only guarantee" of international peace and security.³⁰

We can say that the international subsystem of the Indo-Pacific largely reissues the 19th-and early 20th-century power balance Europe, in which the security dilemma is a

central factor. In this subsystem, as was the case in 1800-Europe, ideology plays a marginal role in determining the state of relations between the main powers³¹. The likelihood of open conflicts between strategic rivals (China, Japan, the two Koreas, India, Pakistan, Russia and a few others) is not at all an impossibility, fueled as it is by significant out-breaks of tension and macro-regional instability factors – the more pressing cases being the Korean peninsula, Taiwan, and the Southeast Asian seas. It should be noted that the United States as the only power still genuinely *global* is also – *et pour cause* – an Asian power working as the key balancer on the Asia-Pacific geostrategic chessboard. On this specific point, the question therefore arises as to how the model of liberal *hegemonic stability* will evolve, led chiefly by the United States and its allies, and which has, for all its purposes, ensured freedom of trade and navigation on the oceans over the last seventy-six years. It is also a fact that this international subsystem shows a low density in terms of regional organizations, as can be said with regard to institutional links or the absence of significant *dialogue forums* between the countries concerned.

How to accommodate China's new prominence in the construction of this argument? The first requirement for a "Metternich-type" solution relied on the previous defeat of the *revisionist power* – a notion established by Kissinger – and the resolution of the then known as "French problem", a France which was consigned to the "natural" borders of the Hexagon. Indeed, it was only after the Napoleon disaster in Russia in 1812 that there was occasion for the diplomatic developments that would lead to the so-called Concert of Vienna. The question emerging today, which is more complex – and, we might say, especially intricate – is whether it is possible to achieve, without a "Chinese defeat", a diplomatic arrangement that secures international peace. As Kissinger suggested in his thesis, in the diplomatic bargain leading to peace in Vienna the essential element of the "new balance" was for France to renounce expansionist claims or even to exert undue hegemonic influence. In the present case of China, the challenge of a more ambitious diplomatic opening will require the identification of the critical interests of the key powers and the points of convergence and divergence, assuming, *a fortiori*, that reason will prevail on all sides. On the other hand, it may well be that the ongoing 'dialogue' lays bare the impossibility of achieving an updated version of the understanding reached in Vienna. This would be bad for all parties and, let it be said, for the world.

The layout of an *international theory* attempted here – combined with the botched cases pointed out in Allison's important study – seems to suggest that if China continues to act as a revisionist power with the intention of expanding and projecting its economic and military power in an immoderate or intimidating fashion, already apparent in the attempt to create "spheres of influence", then the possibility of a *containment war* may be on the horizon. But this course of action would, in our view, be profoundly wrong on China's part – as was Napoleon's unwise decision to exacerbate French aspirations and march on Moscow. As Robert Gilpin (1930-2018) pointed out, the first way to "deal

with” a serious imbalance between an existing structure and the process of redistribution of power is a *hegemonic war*. In the perhaps more precise definition of Raymond Aron (1905-1983), a *war of hegemony* is a type of conflict which determines which State or group of States will prevail.³² This is therefore the ultimate test of change in a system of powers, gauger of a possible hegemonic transition.

What can we make out of the current ‘Chinese problem’? In an increasingly Westphalian Asia, the United States still have the key role of *balancer*. They are simultaneously the most important ally of Japan and South Korea – and, let it be said, Taiwan – and a partner of China, a historical situation comparable to that in which Bismarck, who held a very keen sense of the balance of power system, made an alliance with Austria shortly assuaged by the signing of a treaty with Russia. Paradoxically, it was this “constructive ambiguity” – in Kissinger’s well-known expression – that preserved the flexibility of the European balance. On the other hand, it would be its relinquishment that would trigger a cascade of confrontations culminating in World War I. We have in mind, in particular, the continentalization of London’s foreign policy from 1899 onwards – consummated in the *Entente Cordiale* with France on 8th April 1904, followed, towards the end of 1907, by the creation of the *Triple Entente* constituted by Great Britain, France and Russia, with a view to serving as a counterweight to the *Triple Alliance* already in place and formed by Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy³³. The rigid logic of these alliances would make it especially difficult to halt the course of events which eventually materialized in 1913-1914. Now, in the case in China, the deterioration and unchecked aggravation of Sino-American relations might lead to the two States falling into the “Thucydides’s Trap”, representing in all likelihood the catalyst for a large-scale conflict³⁴. According to Tammen et al. – in the context of the important studies on *power transitions* by A.F.K. Organski (1923-1998) – the potentially “most dangerous condition” of the international system occurs when a country at the top of the global hierarchy is overtaken by a rapidly rising nation with a substantially larger population; such “overreach” exponentially increases the likelihood of a large-scale conflict³⁵. And, as Mearsheimer reminds us, the great powers are never willing to let other great powers gain power at their expense.³⁶

CONCLUSION: A NEW ERA OF STRATEGIC CONTAINMENT

Elements of empirical evidence are numerous and especially revealing, attesting, in one way or another, to the markedly *expansionist* – not merely emerging or rising – profile of China. The deliberate formulation of a strategy called Belt and Road Initiative, articulated exclusively on the basis of a single center – Beijing – includes two components: the “belt” (a term in itself somewhat dubious and suspicious), which refers to the land route, and the “route”, relating to the sea route, representing an expansion strategy which we address, in the context of this tendentially realist reflection, in terms of neo-imperialism. It should be noted that a third “polar route” is indeed already being cham-

pioneered by Beijing³⁷. According to Brands and Gaddis, China aspires to a “hybrid hegemony of an unprecedented scale”, they stress, “never attempted by the Germans or the Russians with such ambition and specificity”.³⁸ In the well-known typology of Morgenthau, shaped by a conception of power as a critical manifestation of international politics, the hypothesis we raised would have correspondence in the taxonomy of *politics of imperialism*, in contrast to the *politics of the status quo* or even to the *politics of prestige*.³⁹ The *neo-colonial* contours are already patent in several instances: from the construction of air and naval infrastructures in the South China Sea and bases and naval infrastructures in Kiribati, Cambodia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka (the deep-water port of Hambantota and also in the huge new port of Port City in Colombo), Djibouti, and Tanzania, to the establishment of trade positions of enormous scope and even economic dominance in Africa (Zambia being possibly one of the most striking cases, among others), in South America and, perhaps more unexpectedly, in Europe⁴⁰.

As regards EU’s economic relations with China, the former appears to be the “worst-off bloc”, raising the question of the true scope of its autonomy regarding Beijing; examples of China’s growing influence and penetration are the obtainment of control and management positions not only in Adriatic ports, but also in the ports of Genoa and Piraeus. Eastern Europe is even seen as a “pivot of China’s”, the significant “Chinese penetration” in countries such as the Czech Republic or even Belarus deserving special highlight⁴¹. As far as Portugal is concerned, indeed one of the Member States of the European Union (EU) with the highest incidences of Chinese *penetration* according to an important study by François Godement and Abigaël Vasselier, the explicit inclusion of the deep-water port of Sines in Beijing’s strategy, as had already been the case regarding the port of Lisbon, denounces the potential vulnerability of the country⁴²; T. J. Lowi, who suggested the concept of the *penetration factor* in his pertinent reflection on globalization, considers that its effects are not the same as simple interconnectivity⁴³. This conceptual image foreshadows a negative impact on the relative autonomy of the State and on the whole of Portuguese economy. In this context, Severiano Teixeira points out that it is crucial taking into account that “Xi Jinping’s China is more authoritarian at the domestic level and more aggressive at the international level”. Warning of the need for greater prudence regarding the investment agreement between the EU and China signed in December 2020, the author enquired: “To what extent might short-term trade advantages translate into long-term political and strategic losses?”⁴⁴. Strictly speaking, human rights issues in China, with particular relevance in the democratic involution in Hong Kong, the Uighur problem, or even the press freedom issue in Macao, or even regarding the responsibility, albeit accidental, for the origin of the coronavirus (Covid-19), cannot be ignored in

AS REGARDS EU’S ECONOMIC RELATIONS WITH CHINA, THE FORMER APPEARS TO BE THE “WORST-OFF BLOC”, RAISING THE QUESTION OF THE TRUE SCOPE OF ITS AUTONOMY REGARDING BEIJING.

this period. Moreover, as Lee Kuan Yew – Prime Minister of Singapore from 1959 to 1990 – pointed out, the Chinese empire of the past “did not have to worry about the rest of the world”; in present times, on the other hand, “without access to the resources such as oil, nickel and other essential raw materials, its growth will simply stall”.⁴⁵ At the general level of geopolitics – and in the face of the new international scenario in place, which we have endeavored to highlight – the Western subsystem’s concern about the Chinese orientations is discernible. The new developments establish China as the main *strategic competitor* and contribute to giving effective expression and content to a new phase of international politics – in the Modelski model operationalized in this paper – which we conceive of as a new era of strategic containment. Indeed, in his first major address – as US Secretary of State for the new Biden Administration – Antony Blinken reaffirmed the United States’ vision of China as “the greatest geopolitical challenge of the 21st century”, adding that “China is the only country with the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to seriously challenge the *stable and open international system* – all the rules, values and relationships that make the world work the way we want it to be” [added italics].⁴⁶

In the same vein, the EU avowedly regards China as a *systemic rival*.⁴⁷ The dilemmas of how to deal with this great emerging power are increasingly evident, as the French Foreign Minister points out: “the EU must be firm with China but avoid the risk of confrontation.”⁴⁸ But it is not only Europe, the United States and the whole of the Western *political subsystem* – with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand deserving special reference – who put themselves in a clear position of overt alertness⁴⁹. The same is true of countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam or Malaysia, and, *a fortiori*, India⁵⁰. Of particular significance in the macro-region of the Indo-Pacific were the “warnings” against China’s “neo-colonialist” practices uttered by the experienced former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, betraying the “unrest” and “dread” that Beijing’s policy has elicited⁵¹. Symptomatic of these moves and of the new strategic game, which “provoke resistance on the part of anxious neighbors”⁵², and their respective “realignments” taking place in the seas of Southeast Asia – in Kautilya’s conceptual projection – was also the docking, for the first time since 1975, of an American aircraft carrier in Vietnam in March 2018⁵³. In turn, at the cybersecurity level, “malicious activities” from the Chinese territory are also a source of growing concern for the EU.⁵⁴ In this domain, the innovative theoretical developments proposed in particular by Fischerkeller and Harknett and by Harknett and Smeets, anchored in the concept of *persistent engagement* (PE) maintain, on the one hand, that “deterrence is not a credible strategy for cyberspace” and, on the other hand, that what is observed in so-called cyberoperations “are primarily attempts to achieve strategic objectives without the need for armed attacks”; the argument used by these authors is, therefore, that the ongoing surveillance effort in cyberspace will henceforth require *persistent engagement* strategies, increasingly central to the containment of cyberthreats.⁵⁵

In the context of Modelski’s evolutionary model – which conceptually provides the organization and framing of relevant international phases, as observed – we note that roughly thirty years have actually elapsed since the beginning of the post-Cold War period in 1989, thus suggesting the advent of a new cycle of international policy defined mainly by the rise of China. Giving expression to this new phase, the most important change in the US concept of national security strategy is patent in the Blueprint report of December 2017, which no longer places terrorism and low-intensity conflicts at the top of the scale, prioritizing instead the challenge posed by China. The document also highlights strategic concerns regarding Russia, but underlines above all the “Chinese problem”⁵⁶. In the same vein of inescapable concern about China’s growing economic and military might, NATO – at its 20 November 2019 meeting – decided to expand its defense perimeter to include *space*, complementing the measures it has been pursuing in recent years on cybersecurity. We might say that this is the return of *high politics* “at full throttle”. The perennial logics of the so-called *raison of State* – *ragion di stato*, an expression coined by the great Italian Renaissance intellectual Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540) – continue to define the international reality, now marked by the hegemonic ambitions of an increasingly authoritarian China at the internal level, overtly intent on becoming the greatest power in the international system, while challenging the premise and stability of an open world shaped by the advent of democracy, freedom of navigation and the free movement of goods. Such is the considerable dilemma looming at the international level. **RI**

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- 1 A Portuguese version of this paper was first published in *Relações Internacionais*, No. 71, September 2021.
- 2 RUDD, Kevin – «Lessons from Europe 1914 for Asia 2014: reflections on the centenary of the outbreak of World War I». In ROSECRANCE, Richard N.; MILLER, Steven E., org. – *The Next Great War? The Roots of World War I and the Risk of U.S.-China Conflict*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015, p. 206.
- 3 On the designation of China as “expansionist power”, see «UM LIVRO sobre “a melhor ideia da história”». In *Público*. 21 May 2019, p. 7; ROCHER, Sophie Boisseau du; PRISQUE, Emmanuel Dubois de – *La Chine élit le monde: Essai sur la sino-mondialisation*. Paris: Odile Jacob, 2019. See also, «BIDEN raises concerns with China’s Xi in first call since election». In *The New York Times*. 10 February 2021. Retrieved: 10 March 2021. Available in: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/10/us/politics/biden-xi-jinping-call.html>; see also, «U.S.-China strategic competition in South and East China seas: background and issues for congress». Congressional Research Service. 8 February 2021. Retrieved: 10 March 2021. Available in: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42784.pdf>.
- 4 BILLETTER, Jean François – *Pourquoi l’Europe: Réflexions d’un Sinologue*. Paris: Éditions Allia, 2020, p. 65.
- 5 Cf. FRIEND, John M.; BRADLEY, A. Thayer – “The rise of handCentrism and what it means for international politics”. In *fashion Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*. Vol. 17, No. 1, 2017, pp. 91-114.
- 6 Cf. LOBO-FERNANDES, Luis – «Uma teoria nomotética da política internacional ou a construção da verdade em Waltz: algumas considerações». In *Relações Internacionais*, No. 39, 2013, pp. 15-24.
- 7 It is noteworthy, however, that Jervis’s theoretical modelling has not been given its possibly due attention. Cf. JERVIS, Robert – *The Logic of Images in International Relations*. Nova York: Columbia University Press, 1989 (1970). See also JERVIS, Robert – *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976.
- 8 Cf. ROMILLY, Jacqueline de – *La construction de la vérité chez Thucydide*. Paris: Julliard, 1990.
- 9 A 2019 publication by Deepshikha Shahi on Kautilya’s important work – in terms of a non-Western formulation – is precisely titled *Kautilya and Non-Western IR Theory*. LondResP: Palgrave Pivot, 2019.
- 10 Cf. BOESCHE, Roger – *Kautilya: The First Great Political Realist*. Nova York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017.
- 11 It should be noted that Modelski’s evolutionary modelling stems initially from the so-called “biological life cycle” – inception, growth, maturity, decline and death of living systems – which has also been applied in economics studies (*product life cycle theory*, for example). MODELSKI, George – *Long Cycles in World Politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987. See also MODELSKI, George – “Evolutionary world politics: problems of scope and method”. In THOMPSON, William R., org. – *Evolutionary Interpretations of World Politics*. London: Routledge, 2021.
- 12 «CHINA braces for new Cold War with U.S. after emboldening its leader». In *The New York Times*. 28, 2018, p. A7.
- 13 KEOHANE, Robert O. – *Power and Governance in a Partially Globalized World*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- 14 A usual feature of dilemmas is the absence of optimal solutions.
- 15 LOBO-FERNANDES, Luis – “From Thucydides to Guicciardini: perennial factors of realism in International Relations and the rise of the new Asian colossi”. In *Relações Internacionais*. No. 16, 2007, pp. 7-19.
- 16 Cf. ALLISON, Graham – *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?*. NewYork: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017 (see, in particular, «Appendix 1: Thucydides’s Trap Case File», pp. 244-286).
- 17 Cf. LOBO-FERNANDES, Luis – “The dilemma of security and the absolute modernity of Thucydides”. In *Relações Internacionais*. No. 55, 2017, pp. 135-138.
- 18 Cf. CARTLEDGE, Paul – *Democritus*. Nova York: Routledge, 1999. Anaximander’s influence is deemed equally decisive as a great pioneer of the scientific spirit. See ROVELLI, Carlo – *The First Scientist: Anaximander and His Legacy*. Yardley: Westholme Publishing, 2011.
- 19 Cf. LOBO-FERNANDES, Luis – “Introductory study”. In *História da Guerra do Peloponeso*. Lisboa: Syllable Editions, 2008.
- 20 Any system has two fundamental dimensions: *structure* and *process*. In the scope of International Relations Theory, the term *structure* is commonly used to refer to the distribution of capabilities among States; in turn, *process* relates to the ways or patterns according to which States relate to one another.
- 21 Cf. GILPIN, Robert – *The Political Economy of International Relations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987, especially pp. 72-92, on the theory of hegemonic stability.
- 22 ALLISON, Graham – *Destined for War...*
- 23 On the specific subject of the United Kingdom-United States hegemonic transition by the end of the 19th-century, see SCHAKE, Kori – *Safe Passage: The Transition from British to American Hegemony*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.
- 24 Cf. George Santayana as quoted by Allison, Graham, op. cit., p. xvii
- 25 KISSINGER, Henry – *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the problems of Peace 1812-22*. Brattleboro: Echo Point Books & Media, 2013 (1957).
- 26 Antwerp is a shot aimed at the heart of England.
- 27 Cf. BULL, Hedley – *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002 (1977).
- 28 FINLAY, David J.; HOVET, Jr., Thomas – *7304: International Relations on the Planet Earth*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1975, p. 30. On the new sensitivities and realignment dynamics see, for instance, «MAHATHIR Mohamad warns against “new colonialism” during China visit». In *Financial Times*. August 20, 2018; see also «U.S. AIRCRAFT carrier arrives in Vietnam, with a message for China.” In *fashion The New York Times*. March 4, 2018. Retrieved: March 10, 2021. Available in: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/04/world/asia/carl-vinson-vietnam.html>.
- 29 Subtitle proposed by FINLAY, David J.; HOVET, Jr., Thomas – *7304...*, p. 30.
- 30 Cf. David J.; HOVET, Jr., Thomas – *7304...*, pp. 29-31. Perhaps one of the most paradigmatic illustrations of Kautilya’s model is the Luso-British alliance dating from the end of the 15th-century and materialised in the Treaty of Windsor, in which Portugal – country A – sought alliances in circle C with a view to mitigate the potential threat posed by its neighbour State and ensure the maintenance of the regional balance of power.
- 31 See EVANGELISTA, M.; PARSİ, V. E., eds. – *Partners or Rivals? European-American Relations after Iraq*. Milão: Vita & Pensiero, 2005, pp. 24-25.
- 32 Check GILPIN, Robert – *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 197 (see moreover the important discussion on the hegemonic transition in chapter 5, «Hegemonic war and international change», pp. 197-209, and in the final chapter, «Epilogue: Change and war in the contemporary world», pp. 231-244).

- 33 Cf. HENIG, Ruth – *The Origins of the First World War*. 3rd edition. London: Routledge, 2003.
- 34 Check, for instance, ZOELLICK, Robert B. – «U.S., China and Thucydides». *The National Interest*. 25 June 2013, and XIAOHUI, Su – «Thucydides trap can be avoided». In *China Daily*. 25 June 2013. See also «PEQUIM adverte que “independência de Taiwan significa guerra”». In *O Jornal Económico*. 29 January 2021. Available in: <https://jornaleconomico.sapo.pt/noticias/pequim-adverte-que-independencia-de-taiwan-significa-guerra-694933>.
- 35 Cf. TAMMEN, Ronald L., et al. – *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century*. Washington: CQPress, 2000, pp. 17-18. According to *The New York Times*, in view of the current framework of a «chilly relationship» and «mutual mistrust», the last summit between Presidents Biden and Xi Jinping was important to «stave off the prospect of a conflict between the two superpowers». Check MYERS, Steven Lee; SANGER, David E. – «US-China Summit produces little more than polite words, but they help». In fashion *The New York Times*. November 16, 2021. Retrieved: November 29, 2021. Available in: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/16/world/asia/biden-xi-usa-china.html>.
- 36 MEARSHEIMER, John J. – «The inevitable rivalry: America, China, and the tragedy of great-power politics». In *Foreign Affairs*. Vol. 100, No. 6, 2021, p. 58.
- 37 Cf. BRADY, Anne-Marie – *China as A Polar Great Power*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017. See also, by the same author, «MAGIC weapons: China’s political influence activities under Xi Jinping». 18 September 2017. Available in: <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4053774-Magic-Weapons-China-s-political-influence.html>.
- 38 Cf. BRANDS, Hal; GADDIS, John Lewis – «The New Cold War America, China, and the echoes of history». In *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2021, p. 12.
- 39 Apropos of the remarkable value of these Morgenthau taxonomies, see in particular JÜTERSONKE, Oliver In WILLIAMS, Michael C., org. – *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau in International Relations*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 107.
- 40 More recently, in the Atlantic, China likewise aims to obtain permission to establish naval bases to ensure «repair» and «support» to its naval fleet, as is the case of the southern coast of Namibia. MIZOKAMI, Kyle - «China is trying to build an Atlantic naval base». *Popular Mechanics*. May 11, 2021. Available in: <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/a36385283/china-trying-to-build-atlantic-naval-base/>.
- 41 «EASTERN Europe’s China pivot». In *Financial Times* (James Kynge and Michael Peel), 28 November 2017, p. 7.
- 42 Check GODEMENT, François; VAS-
- SÉLIER, Abigaël – *La Chine à nos portes: Une stratégie pour l’Europe*. Paris: Odile Jacob, 2018, p. 201. Regarding Chinese penetration in Portugal, it is worthy pointing out the dominant positions held by companies of the Chinese State in the sector of electrical infrastructure in Portugal – largely considered strategic errors – but also in the water sector, a somewhat worrying situation that seriously affects the strategic autonomy of the country. Likewise, China has long launched “scientific” expeditions in the Azores Sea that probably warrant closer monitoring by the Portuguese authorities. See, in addition, «ESTUDOS europeus segundo Luís Lobo-Fernandes». In CAMERLO, Marcelo; MALAMUD, Andrés; VAZ-PINTO, Raquel, org. – *Ciência Política à Portuguesa: A Disciplina Contada pelos Seus Protagonistas*. Lisboa: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2020, p. 268.
- 43 LOWI, T. J. – «Globalization, war, and the withering away of the state». In *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*. Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 243-256.
- 44 Check TEIXEIRA, Nuno Severiano - “Are the Europeans crazy?”. In fashion *Public*. December 30, 2020, p. 8. Considering the crucial issue of the integrated circuits, in truth, a genuine tipping point on the technological scale, between the three blocs – the United States, China and the European Union – Europe is the worst-off geopolitical bloc – with only 10% of the world’s semiconductor production. Check FERRAND, Victor – “Dependence on Asia: the integrated circuit has become a key to sovereignty”. In *Public*. 15 March 2021, p. 25.
- 45 Check YEW, Lee Kuan – *The Grand Master’s Insights on China, the United States, and the World*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013, p. 9.
- 46 Check «PC CHINESE technology and repression in Hong Kong». In *Daily News* (César Avóá), March 4, 2021, 18.
- 47 Check PENA, Paulo – «China na Europa: parceiro ou rival?». *Euronews*. 28 de setembro de 2019. Retrieved: 4 March 2021. Available in: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2019/09/china-na-europa-parceiro-ou-rival.shtml>.
- 48 Check «A UE TEM de ser firme com a China, mas evitar o risco de confronto». In *Diário de Notícias* (Helena Tecedeiro), 4 November 2021, p. 20.
- 49 In the face of the growing Chinese naval power, Japan decided to build an aircraft carrier for the first time since World War II. «JAPÃO comprará mais de 100 caças e terá porta-aviões pela 1.ª vez desde a Segunda Guerra». In *O Globo*. 18 December 2018. Available in: <https://oglobo.globo.com/mundo/japao-comprara-mais-de-100-cacas-tera-porta-avioes-pela-1-vez-desde-segunda-guerra-23313073>. As regards New Zealand in particular, there has been repeated reports of gross interference by China.
- 50 India is also no stranger to the arms race in the macro-region of the Indo-Pacific and presented the first aircraft carrier built in the country. Check «INSIDE India’s aircraft carrier: first seatrial done, Vikrant in new avatar ready for fighter jets to take off». In *India Today*. 14 August 2021. Available in: <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/ins-vikrant-inside-indias-aircraft-carrier-first-sea-trial-done-1840846-2021-08-14>.
- 51 Check also «MAHATHIR Mohamad warns against “new colonialism”...».
- 52 BRANDS, Hal; GADDIS, John Lewis – «The New Cold War America...», p. 12.
- 53 Check also «U.S.-China strategic competition in South and East China seas...».
- 54 Check, on this issue, the declaration of the high representative of the European Union (COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION – “China: statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union urging the Chinese authorities to take action against malicious cyberactivities from their territory”. July 19, 2021. Available in: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/pt/press/press-releases/2021/07/19/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-urging-china-to-take-action-against-malicious-cyber-activities-undertaken-from-its-territory/>). In this respect, in a formal statement from the United States Department of Justice, Portugal is likewise expressly referred to as being the target of commercial espionage by China. Check “EUEU acusa a agentes chinos de robar secretos comerciales a 12 países». In *The country*. December 20, 2018. Available in: https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/12/20/actualidad/1545334674_408431.html.
- 55 FISCHERKELLER, Michael P.; HARKNETT, Richard J. – “Deterrence is not a credible strategy for cyberspace». In fashion *Orbi*. June 23, 2017. Retrieved: 29 November 2021. Available in: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/06/deterrence-not-credible-strategy-cyberspace/>; and HARKNETT, Richard J.; SMEETS, Max – «Cyber campaigns and strategic outcomes». In *Journal of Strategic Studies*. No. 10, pp. 1-35. It must be pointed out that the author of this article was a student of Richard J. Harknett’s at the University of Cincinnati between 1991 and 1995, the year in which he integrated his doctoral examination jury (PhD in Political Science [1995]). Since then, he has collaborated extensively with Professor Harknett, the current director of the Department of Political Science whose conversion into the new School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA) of the University of Cincinnati is currently underway.
- 56 Check «NATIONAL SECURITY Strategy of the United States of America». 18 December 2017. Available in: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/document-december-2017-national-security-strategy-and-transcript-remarks>

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