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# **Pragmatism in International Politics: US-China practices between 1991 and 2021**

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## Abstract

This research argues that the foreign-policy conduct of both China and the US shows that neither of these countries complies with a particularly coherent ideology. This is not to underestimate the growing values gap between western powers on the one hand and rising non-western powers on the other hand. Instead, this is to suggest that ideological distinctions will not be decisive in shaping great power relations in the years to come, and that pragmatism will be far more crucial. A central question, therefore, is why ideology is taking the back seat to pragmatism. Anchored in two angles of the triangle of performance “Concept function, Role of analysts, Exceptions,” the research concludes that it is their pragmatism that induces the US and China to compete when necessary and cooperate when beneficial.

**Key words:** Pragmatism- USA- China.

## المخلص

تدفع هذه الدراسة بأنه، وعلى مدار ثلاثة عقود منذ نهاية الحرب الباردة وحتى الآن، لم ترتكز السياسة الخارجية في كل من الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية والصين على الأيديولوجية بقدر ما ارتكزت على البرجماتية. ولا يعنى ذلك بأن الدراسة تقلل من أهمية وحقيقة وجود فجوات قيمية بين الدول الغربية وعلى رأسها الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية وبين الدول غير الغربية الصاعدة على قمة النظام الدولي وعلى رأسها الصين. وبدلاً من ذلك، ترى الدراسة أن الاختلافات الأيديولوجية لم يعد لها تأثيراً كبيراً في السياسات الخارجية لكل من الصين والولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، كما كان عليه الحال خلال الحرب الباردة بين كل من الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية والاتحاد السوفيتى سابقاً، وأن البرجماتية، وليست الأيديولوجية، أصبحت هي السمة الغالبة في السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية والصينية على مدار الثلاثة عقود المنصرمة ومن المتوقع أن تستمر على هذا النحو في المستقبل. وانطلاقاً من تلك الفرضية، تسعى الدراسة إلى الإجابة على تساؤل رئيس يتمثل في: لماذا تراجعت الأيديولوجية وتقدمت البرجماتية إلى مقعد القيادة والتأثير في السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية والصينية على مدار الثلاثة عقود المنصرمة ولماذا من المتوقع أن تستمر على هذا النحو؟ وارتكزت الدراسة في جانبها النظرى على ضلعين من

مثلث " المفاهيم، المحليين، الاستثناءات" وهما المفاهيم والاستثناءات في فهم وتفسير السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية والصينية على مدار العقود الثلاثة السابقة. وتوصلت الدراسة في نهاية المطاف إلى أن البرجماتية كانت هي المحرك الأساسي في تفسير سلوك السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية والصينية على مدار الثلاثة عقود المنصرمة، وليست الأيدولوجية، وهو ما يفسر نزعة كل من الصين والولايات المتحدة الأمريكية إلى التنافس عندما يكون ذلك ضروريا لهما وإلى التعاون عندما يحقق ذلك منفعة مشتركة لكل منهما.

## Introduction

The purpose of this research is to assess the role of ideology, vis-à-vis pragmatism, in contemporary international politics, particularly in the foreign policy conduct of the US and China between 1991 and 2021. The research defines ideology as a way of thinking, a set of ideas that a society's members adopt and reproduce. Ideologies are articulated and propagated by the dominant groups in a society, and they influence how the rest of society think and act. Political ideology is a set of ideas, principles, myths, and symbols that explain how society should function. It is a map of the imagination, drawing together and synthesizing disparate and perhaps conflicting elements. Though dominant groups assume a salient role, political ideology is collectively produced and collectively embraced, and the latter happens in unpredictable ways. Its collective nature makes it a kind of a public good (Freedman, 2006).

The end of the Cold war appeared to announce the conclusion of great-power competition (Dyer, 2011). However, recent developments in international politics and the competition between the United States of America and China prompted numerous scholars to ask whether the world is reverting to Cold War-style rivalry. The Cold War was as much a geopolitical conflict as it was an ideological one. With its Leninist underpinnings, the Soviet Union viewed itself as the vanguard of a global revolution. The U.S.

similarly believed it was unique, a liberal light unto the nations and committed to defending global freedom (Shapiro,2018).

The recent rise of China as an economic and military global power is raising questions about how the rising superpower will function in the post-World War II, US-structured global order, and how the US will respond. Will China play by the rules of the existing, liberal order or seek to challenge and subvert it? And will the US seek to accommodate a rising China or attempt to sabotage its ascent, using Cold War-era methods? The view from China is not sanguine. A survey of one hundred Chinese scholars released in July 2020 by the Chong yang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University in China showed that more than 60% of respondents believed that the United States is indeed waging a “new Cold War” against China. However, more than 80% believed that a Cold War-type competition between the two countries was avoidable if China decided not to assume a hostile stance (Zhang,2021, p.323). The question, then, is what role does ideology play in either the US or China taking a Cold-War pose toward the other?

This research argues that the foreign-policy conduct of both China and the US shows that neither of these countries complies with a particularly coherent ideology. Ideology is not the source of their foreign-policy choices, nor are such choices rationalized on ideological grounds. Instead, I argue, in both cases, foreign policy conduct over the past three decades is informed and shaped by pragmatic concerns and cumulative practices. So, while there is certainly US-China competition, this competition proceeds along lines quite different from the last century’s Cold War. Despite the challenges posed to the liberal world order by China’s digital authoritarianism and state-led capitalism, and Russia’s sovereign democracy rhetoric, both countries are deeply integrated into the capitalist world system and owe their economic rise and continuing development to the close linkages to the global capitalist

system (Oğuzlu,2021). And to the extent that these two countries pose a challenge to that system, they do so more on the margins, offering more of a “variety of capitalism” (Hall and Soskice,2001) perspective than a non-capitalist alternative. This is neither to underestimate the growing values gap between western powers on the one hand and rising non-western powers on the other, nor to argue that history came to an end with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Instead, this is to suggest that ideological distinctions will not be decisive in shaping great power relations in the years to come, and that pragmatism will be far more crucial (Oğuzlu,2021).

A pragmatism-centered approach focuses on identifying an actor’s practices, and how such practices through iteration and honing are elevated into and articulated as knowledge. It emphasizes the contingency of foreign-policy choices and the evolutionary nature of the actors’ knowledge. As a philosophical approach, it originated in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead were influential figures in articulating pragmatism (Peltonen,2021). The most prominent pragmatist social and political theorist, John Dewey, argues that a pragmatic approach to politics views it as primarily an enterprise of collective problem-solving (though he glosses over political phenomena such as power and conflict which could undercut the hopes for such a shared enterprise (Festenstein,2016). Pragmatism is an approach to decision-making geared toward potential or likely outcomes when addressing social and economic problems, rather than ideological commitments (Harrison and Boyd, 2018). The research is anchored in one major argument: While ideology is never entirely absent, it is fading away, and pragmatism is taking the lead in international politics. To elaborate this, this research is divided into two main theses: the first offers a theoretical framework of pragmatism in international politics. The second thesis presents indicators for

the decline of ideology and the rise of pragmatism in international politics, specifically in the US and Chinese foreign-policy conduct for the last three decades (1991 to 2021) based on two angles of the triangle of performance “**Concept function, Role of analysts, Exceptions**” as a pragmatic methodology in international relations which focuses on the exceptional situations and the different meanings for the same concepts that prompt the leaders of the two countries to act practically away from their designed ideological approaches (Sundaram and Thanker,2019). In other words, the research argues that US and China's foreign policy choices are guided less by ideology than by situational/contingent/particular (that is pragmatic) decisions and that each of these countries eschewing stated goals/rhetoric and going for smaller goals or compromise settlements.

### **Research Problem**

Ideology loomed over international politics for more than a half century, from 1939 to 1991. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the triumph of capitalism over communism and the establishment of a new world order led by the United States of America, prompted scholars such as Francis Fukuyama to argue that that moment heralded “the end of history,” the triumph of liberal democracy and the arrival of a post-ideological world (Fukuyama,1992). For the past three decades, ideology has not proven to be a relic of the past, but still, it did wane significantly as a driver of international politics – the claim by some scholars that a new Cold War is underway notwithstanding. So, putting aside big labels like, the cold war, how are we to describe the new mode of great-power competition? To start, we are living in a virtually multipolar international politics environment. This global system is not populated by equally powerful major powers, but by ones able to deny other advantages and thwart their pursuit of national interests. Second, a characteristic of the global international politics environment is

interdependence, far more so than during the last Cold War. A self-contained US or China is not imaginable. The emergence of cross-cutting, overlapping, multidimensional and multidirectional linkages has transformed the globe into a much smaller and interconnected place than ever in world history. Competition among major powers today cannot possibly turn the world into polarized camps in the manner of the last century's Cold War.

And third, many actors in today's multipolar environment simultaneously interact in terms of different kinds of relationships with each other. They cooperate on some issues and confront each other as rivals or potential enemies on others. A frenemy-like relationship is rising as a commonplace mode of engagement in an ever-compartmentalized structure; it is the new norm of pragmatism. This research will discuss why an ideology-centric approach fails to account for the conduct of two major powers, explicate the reasons for the pragmatic turn and illustrate its utility – as well as discuss the consequent implications. **A central question, therefore, is why ideology is taking the back seat to pragmatism.** The inquiry unfolds under two sub-questions: What are the major assumptions of pragmatism in international relations? And what is the evidence for the decline of ideology and the rise of pragmatism in international politics? Tracing the conduct of the US and China over the past three decades, this research will demonstrate how two major powers devise and largely articulate their policies in terms of pragmatic interests far more than ideological commitments.

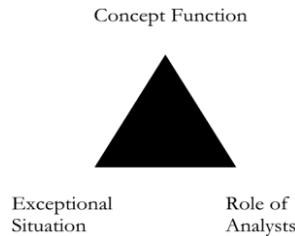
### **Research Methodology: Triangle of Exceptions, Analysts and Concept Functions**

The practice turns in International Relations has recently gained attention as a significant angle to examine international politics. **A triangle of Exceptions–Analysts–Concept Functions** is used as a practical approach for the study of practices in international politics. First, exceptions, anchored

in John Dewey's writings (1981–1990), are defined as “problematic situations where a normal course of activity is interrupted, compelling actors to exercise moral judgment in order to re-evaluate the situation in and through practices” (Sundaram and Thanker,2019).Second, an analyst encounters a vast array of facts in studying actor performances and is thus continuously making choices in arriving at interpretations. In an exceptional situation, the analyst must reveal their normative standpoint. Third, foregrounding exceptions and the role of analysts regarding the logic of practices allows a mapping of the semantic field and offers avenues to analyze how a concept functions within, and explains, political performance. This pragmatic methodology enables an understanding of how a concept of central concern to an analyst function in a political discourse (Pouliot and Cornut,2015).

The research methodology underscores action as meaningful only against the backdrop of reasons, justifications, and judgments offered by the actors, in the face of uncertainty, controversy, and dispute around the plurality of possible options. This methodology connects normativity and concept function in practices through the reflective role of analysts. As analysts exercise their normative evaluation of practices, exceptional situations of practitioners' performance offer significant opportunities to study the reasons, justifications, and the moral judgment of actors. And it must be recalled that practitioners are planted into webs of meaning. Analysts' interrogation of their actions can show how a concept functions in political performance. Thus, the role of analysts, their normative understanding of exceptional situations, and the concept function all together form one continuum, one whole. In other words, one cannot understand international-politics practices/choices independent of the actors, and actors cannot be fully understood in absence of revealing actions/choices. And the analysts and the actors are nodes in an iterative, mutual learning process. This is the triangle

of performance in international politics (Figure 1), which offers a pragmatic way forward for systematic empirical inquiry of foreign-policy practices.



**Figure 1.** Study of International Practices. (Sundaram and Thanker,2019).

## Exceptional situations

Practices evolve in multiple ways in practitioners' performance. In studying such performance, the analyst encounters a dizzying number of details. Political actors engage in the world through linguistic and nonlinguistic structures and make sense of the world in extraordinarily complex ways. Focusing on breaches of normality as an access point to capture the conditions and processes through which actors encounter tensions in practices, offers a valuable route to understand their negotiation of practices. Exceptions are what John Dewey calls morally problematic situations where a normal course of activity is interrupted, compelling actors to exercise moral judgments. They are worthy objects of scrutiny because they enable us to re-evaluate the situation and resolve it by specifying a logic of practice. First, exceptional situations raise questions about what count as good, just, right, or appropriate practices, and creates an occasion for deliberation in politics. Through linguistic and/or nonlinguistic cues they bring to the fore the implicit practices underling the actor's performance. At the same time, exceptional stances are not subjective, as the moral component in the situation has its own meaning. Furthermore, to reach resolution, the agent must coordinate with others. Second, actors hoping to resolve a morally fraught exceptional situation have no choice but accommodate the tensions attending to existing practices.

Agents' engagement in exceptional situations is practical in the sense that the objective is some form of resolution (Sundaram and Tanker,2019).

In a nutshell, then, exceptional situations are, first, revelatory. They uncover implicit logics and habitual modes of thought on the part of the practitioners and may induce a rethinking of such logics and modes. Second, they are dialectic, informing and instructing the analyst and simultaneously getting shaped by her discursive and conceptual constructs. And finally, they serve as landmarks of analogy for the practitioners, informing and coloring the understanding of and engagement with future policy crises. Another important contributor to the creation of exceptional situations' meaning, as well as the articulation of their value orientation, is the analyst.

### **The Role of Analysts**

In making sense of exceptional situations, it is analysts who verbalize a logic of practice and keep track of actors' stances, reasoning, and moral quandary. By doing so, analysts identify the boundaries, meanings, and proprieties of practices in particular situations. Observers trying to get a handle on the actors' practices may struggle with their apparent haphazardness and may find them desultory. Analysts, in contrast, take a longer view. They diligently seek to spot patterns, phrase new conceptions, and offer normative grounding for new understandings of exceptional situations. Alongside practitioners, thus, analysts help dispel or mitigate the uncertainty baked into morally fraught situations (Grimmel and Hellmann,2019).

### **Concept Function**

Once analysts assume their normative role and foreground exceptions, we begin to gain a practice-based understanding of how concepts work in international politics. First, exceptions allow analysts to map the semantic field and foreground how practitioners as concept users engage similar concepts in and through practices. Utilizing exceptional situations and practitioners' stances, and practitioners' reasoning for them, enables analysts to understand how practitioners treat exceptions, their connections with some inferences and not others, their justifications, and their variable associations with assorted practices. This mapping exercise enables a recognition of the diverse meanings imparted by practitioners, observers, and analysts in relation to a particular situation or setting. Consider, for instance, diplomats. Their negotiations are motivated by the desire of attaining tangible benefits for their governments. But their sense of what is tangible, and their conception of their governments' needs, are all shaped by their conceptual frameworks. Concepts, however, do not operate in isolation; they operate in a matrix of relations. Actors understand concepts not in abstract isolation, but through a particular historical consciousness.

Hence, for different actors, concepts may take on different meanings. Consequently, I argue that actors have their own scripts, or associative codes, through which they attribute meaning and make sense of different concepts. The objective is not to accurately represent the concepts utilized by practitioners but to offer an incisive understanding of the functioning of concepts (and their relationality) in the political discourse. Thus, exceptions provide important analytical sites to understand how concepts function in political discourse. Analysts scrutinize the exceptional stances by practitioners, assess them normatively, and consequently draw connections among a host of practical activities by the performing agents. In sum, then, practice theory pays attention to normative contestations in exceptional

situations, underscoring the reflective role of analysts in mapping how concepts function in international politics, and how such contestations get resolved (Sundaram and Thanker,2019).

## **Pragmatism in International Relations: The primacy of practices.**

One of the obstacles hampering pragmatist IR theories and research methods is the difficulty of defining pragmatism, and whether we should aim for a more generic definition, or one narrowly tailored to the goals of IR theorists and researchers. There are three kinds of pragmatism that philosophers typically invoke: generic, paleo-pragmatism and neo-pragmatism. There is extensive disagreement among scholars over the term's meaning. Indeed, disputes can be traced to at least three distinctly different usages. In the generic sense, pragmatism signifies an American temperament or a widespread feature of the American way of life. In this vulgar sense, pragmatic has multiple synonyms: practical, expedient, useful, and even entrepreneurial. Etymologically, the Greek root "pragma" refers to "things, facts, deeds, affairs" and "action, from which our words "practice" and "practical" are derived. In the second sense, pragmatism is a sophisticated way of thinking about knowledge, existence, and social-political affairs, and it was initiated by several American philosophers (classical paleo pragmatists) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, Jane Addams, and George Herbert Mead (Ralston,2011, pp:74-75).

In the third sense, pragmatism is a relatively recent movement in philosophy termed "neo pragmatism" or "new pragmatism." New pragmatism revives features of classical pragmatism as well as ideas found in continental, postmodernist, and analytic philosophy. Contemporary philosophers who consider themselves neo pragmatists include Hilary

Putnam, Nelson Goodman, Richard Rorty, Donald Davidson, and Cornell West. Rorty's neo pragmatism merges with Dewey's paleo-pragmatism in its rejection of epistemological theories that posit some objective reality (reason, sensations, clear and distinct ideas) as the ultimate ground for meaning (or the relationship between word and object) (Ralston,2011, pp:76-77). Pragmatism is understood as instrumentalism taking effectiveness as purpose and experiment as method. The word "pragmatism" is derived from Greek "pragma" (action). Pragma originally meant capacity in industry and commerce as well as law. It changed to the meaning of "pragmatic" through long-term evolution. Pragmatism was introduced into the modern U.S. philosophical landscape in the 1870s. It became a particularly powerful philosophical strand in the U.S. at the turn of the twentieth century. Pragmatism prizes practical experience over theoretical and conceptual constructs. Knowledge for pragmatists is best gleaned through doing, and actions instruct far more than ruminations. Actions test, verify or disprove theories. A pragmatic position pursues solutions to real-life (rather than hypothetical) problems. As a method, pragmatism is indifferent to metaphysics. It's characterized instead by its positivism, stressing "life," action," and "effect." In the dialectic of action and thought, the former takes precedence over and originates the latter. As such, pragmatism overlaps with behaviorism. Not surprisingly, it is often called the philosophy of action, or practical philosophy (Lil and Wu,2016).

While, say, engineering is about the realization of plans (building a new hospital or airport), politics is about deciding on those plans in the first place (say, whether and where to build a new hospital or airport). Politics determines the aims, engineering the means. In practice, however, the aims may have to be adjusted (sometimes substantially) in the light of the means and vice versa. It was Dewy who worked through the implications of

pragmatism for politics, arguing that any sharp distinction between aims and means was likely to lead to errors in thinking. As a result, he developed a new approach emphasizing that ends and means should be codetermined in the light of specific circumstances or context (Ormerod,2020). Pragmatism turns the typical story of action rooted in interests and ideas on its head. Instead, it sees action as creating openings that then shaping interests and ideas. There are several key elements to pragmatic political behavior. First, it takes action to solve problems. Second, it appeals to collective concerns. Third, it remains open to connections, information, and new ways of thinking. And fourth, it focuses on the consequences of action. The pragmatic wager is that behavior shaped by these features is most likely to generate paths toward collective action to solve concrete problems without violence (AVANT,2021, pp:1128-1129).

The core of this theory is the primacy of practice- “perhaps the central” principle of the pragmatist tradition (Hellmann.ed,2009). Practice approaches to international politics center actions and practices as the core unit of analysis, thereby presenting fresh insights into the conduct of states. They move away from models of interest calculation and norm evaluation for actors. Though launching from different assumptions, practice approaches have in common with perspectives in IR - such as the cultural, critical, cognitive and constructivist approaches - the interest in producing new knowledge. And instead of operating with concepts such as “ideas,” “frames” or “discourse,” practice approaches view actions as the impetus that drives the world and makes it “hang together.” Practice approaches study how collectives perform practical activities in world politics to renew and reproduce social and political order. Thus, the everyday practices of diplomats, terrorists, environmentalists, or financial analysts become the

object of investigation to unveil order and change (Bueger and Gadinger,2015).

## **American and Chinese’s practices (1990-2021): The Primacy of Pragmatism.**

This part covers the application of two angles in the triangle of (Exceptions–Analysts–Concept Functions) on the US and Chinese foreign-policy choices over the last three decades. It presents the evidence (practical explanation) showing that ideology was in decline and that pragmatism was, and still is, on the rise. The discussion unfolds by zeroing in on exceptional situations that required problem-solving practices in both the United States and China, highlighting the different meanings offered by each side in their political discourses for the same concepts. Arguing that pragmatism is a skill much more than an attribute, this research demonstrates how this understanding of pragmatism can help achieve better foreign policy outcomes. It does so by examining the ways in which the United States and China have incorporated pragmatism into their approaches to foreign policy.

### **A. China/Pragmatism**

Deng Xiaoping’s has famously said that “it does not matter whether a cat is black or white; if it catches mice, it is a good cat.” (Mahbubani,2010) This begins to point to how a pragmatist thinks. A pragmatist is willing to accept any approach that furthers the interest he has chosen. If we accept that pragmatism is a problem-solving approach, then perhaps another definition of pragmatism is compromise. Compromise at the decision-making stage is often evident in a willingness to accept the imperfections of one’s situation, and those of the goals one eventually attains. Often compromise is essentially an acceptance of scarcity: while every state has ambitious goals, these tend to be constrained by the available resources, and hence less-than-optimal outcomes must be accepted. The transition of post-1978 China from a state

governed according to Maoist doctrine into one driven by a thoroughly capitalist system in all but name, under the banner of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” illustrates a pragmatic tilt. [Note that China, of late, calls itself a democracy, a “democracy that works”] (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China,2021).

First, Deng Xiaoping understood that a country’s military power and geostrategic influence were a function of its economic performance. A departure from the Mao-era failed and disastrous economic experiments was thus necessary. Second, while sovereignty is often cast as a red line in Chinese foreign policy discourse, in practice the leadership is willing to be patient on the issue of territorial claims, recognizing that the long-term (50–100 years) trends favors its position. On the topic of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, for example, both Deng and Jiang explicitly stated that they were willing to wait a hundred years or more with the issue unresolved (Hyer,2015, pp:3-5).

Taiwan is also a more formidable example of Chinese pragmatism in relation to sovereignty and territorial disputes. For China, the Taiwan issue is used on the mainland to whip up nationalist hysteria but simultaneously is played down (at least until Xi) in talks with the US. The Chinese two-fold practice for producing an assertive nationalist stand on the Taiwan issue while pursuing a pragmatic economic plan resulted in a policy of encouraging greater economic integration of Taiwan with the mainland even while not ruling out military action (Gupta,2005, pp:248-249). President Xi Jinping’s statements in Fujian, in March 2021, have shown the economic pragmatism of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) towards Taiwan. President Xi’s emphasis on the exploration of a new integration and developmental path for mainland China and Taiwan, can be seen as evidence of merging Chinese pragmatism with a nationalist rhetoric targeting the Chinese public (Hing,2021). Third, the “whatever works” approach favored by the Chinese

leadership in addressing foreign policy often produces pragmatic policy hybrids. The “one-country-two-systems” approach to integrating Hong Kong within the mainland political system would be one example, as would the joint development of the Diaoyu Islands and South China Sea (Hyer,2015, pp:5-8). In apparent contradiction to this paper’s argument, several scholars have noted a change in China’s attitude under president Xi, becoming more aggressive regarding, among others, its South China Sea claims (Nan,2021). However, the American/Chinese standoff over the South China sea, did not prevent both the delegations from both countries from sitting down to talk about other practical issues, such as climate change and their cooperation in dealing with Covid-19 (Hing,2021).

Indeed, despite the frequent references to territorial sovereignty as a red line in official communications, successive Chinese governments have, in practice, demonstrated a remarkable willingness to find creative solutions to territorial ambiguity. While territorial disputes elsewhere in the world are a regular source of armed conflict, China’s contested claims are generally managed with comparative tolerance and willingness to accommodate short and medium-term uncertainty. How modern China was pragmatic in handling its territorial disputes (both continental and maritime) was the focus of *The Pragmatic Dragon* by Eric Hyer (2015). One of the major obstacles to settling long-standing disputes has been Beijing’s far-reaching historical claims. Those claims have understandably alarmed China’s neighbors – never mind Beijing’s professed willingness to conclude boundary treaties based on realistic historical, geographic, and security considerations. In the end, China has proved to be shrewd and willing to compromise to establish legitimate boundaries through peaceful negotiations, even ceding territory believed by both parties to belong to China historically (Hyer,2015, pp:4-6).

Often, the Chinese leadership explains its compromises on these issues with reference to the maxim “flexible application of principles.” While official policy may follow stated ideological principles, its implementation can be done in such a broad fashion as to maximize the freedom of action for the policymakers, to the extent that actions might temporarily appear to be in contradiction with the stated intention. Thus, while the official policy is to accept no infringements of national territory, policymakers may prefer patience (i.e., doing very little) in the short to medium terms. Principles can be interpreted flexibly if flexibility achieves the ultimate desired policy objectives. In Chinese, this is referred to as ‘dynamic application of principles to a given context’ (Phau,2022, pp:35-46). The most recent example of Chinese pragmatism is eloquently summarized in the comments made by the Chinese Ambassador to the United States, Qin Gang, regarding the Russian invasion to Ukraine. He was quoted as saying: “China and Russia’s cooperation has no forbidden areas, but it has a bottom-line... the tenets and principles of the U.N. Charter, the recognized basic norms of international law and international relations.” In other words, the Chinese leadership can offer Russia rhetorical assistance, but not military support. That is why the Chinese regime has never officially recognized the Russian invasion to Ukraine, but, in the meantime, shied away from condemning it (Wong, 2022). In conclusion, Chinese Pragmatism regards “peace and prosperity as ends,” and is willing to do whatever it takes to reach that end, even if this means disappointing friends, and cooperating with rivals. To put it differently, if the Chinese regime is ideology-driven, it would have perceived opposing enemies as an end, even if this comes at the expense of peace and prosperity (Yun Ang, 2022).

#### **B. The United States of America/Pragmatism.**

US foreign policy is best described as a product of the coexistence of realism and idealism. The exact configuration of this coexistence depends on the circumstances. There is a strong pendulum effect in US foreign policy; most administrations will start off with a more ideological stance, reflecting their position during the election campaign that brought them to power, before gradually becoming more pragmatic as the weight of circumstances begins to bear on their decisions (Phau,2022, p:89). US foreign policy thinking has produced a variety of conceptual frameworks, of which Walter Russell Mead's four paradigms are among the best-known. Mead divided foreign policy thinking into Hamiltonian, Wilsonian, Jeffersonian, and Jacksonian strands, and elaborated their evolution through US history (Mead,2002,p:310). These were later summarized by Perry Anderson as the "Hamiltonian pursuit of commercial advantage for American enterprise abroad; Wilsonian duty to extend the values of liberty across the world; Jeffersonian concern to preserve the virtues of the Republic from foreign temptations; and Jacksonian valor in any challenge to the honor or security of the country." (Mead,2002, p:311).

Mead notes that actual foreign policy behavior could cut across the four paradigms according to context. The ability of the four schools to form varying coalitions in response to external or internal pressures reinforces the pragmatism and flexibility of American foreign policy. It also helps that seldom are members of US political elites passionately attached to one school and only one school, but are, rather, responsive to the appeals and logic of the different schools to different degrees at different times (Mead,2002, p:312). For instance, the 2003 War on Iraq for which Democrats, including Joe Biden, have voted (CORN,2019). Recently, the Biden administration has acted pragmatically toward China despite Biden's aggressive rhetoric during presidential campaign. Biden's pragmatism is derived from the facts that the

U.S. trade demand for China is still huge, the U.S. financial sector continues to safeguard its interests in China, and China's cooperation remains indispensable to Biden's Administration in terms of fighting the pandemic, renovating the economy, instigating the Green New Deal, stabilizing Afghanistan, the fight against climate change and other issues which could not be resolved without the Chinese cooperation (Yan,2021).

History shows that candidates running for the US presidency tend to reckon a hardline stance on China politically profitable; it demonstrates their shrewdness to the electorate, regardless of the low likelihood of success in obtaining their stated goals. Historically, tough measures against China have tended to be ineffective in achieving their aims, simply because of China's ability to absorb all but the most extreme foreign sanctions with relative equanimity. As Winston Churchill famously observed: "punishing China is like flogging a jellyfish. (Phau,2022, p:90)" For this reason, talk of sanctions and tariffs tends to be more about domestic politics than about obtaining policy concessions from China. Once candidates are in office, a combination of internal and external factors generally obliges US policymakers to take a more conciliatory approach. Consider, for instance, the Clinton administration. In 1992, Clinton criticized George H. W. Bush, the 41st US president, for indulging dictators and opposed renewal of China's most-favored nation status on human rights grounds. As President, he pursued this policy via a May 1993 executive order explicitly linking trade and human rights in China. However, this was quickly reversed. By May 1994, he was lamenting "tough human rights policy [as] hampering the US in pursuing other interests. (Phau,2022, pp:91-92).

George W. Bush, the 43rd US president, was inaugurated in January 2001. His anti-China rhetoric during the campaign and the early part of the presidency included comments such as: "no strategic ambiguity: US

will defend Taiwan against China,” “China is a competitor, not a friend,” “do whatever it takes to defend Taiwan, including military action.” (Phau,2022, p:92) After September 11, however, Bush reversed his position, apparently on the basis that the US could only afford conflict with one major adversary at a time. Collaboration arrangements on anti-terrorism and North Korea, amongst others, were finalized when Bush visited China in February 2002. This was followed by the US-initiated the US–China Strategic Economic Dialogue (SED) in 2006. It took G. W. Bush ten months to reverse his stance, a process that may have been expedited by September 11, but which would – given previous history – likely have happened to a greater or lesser degree even without this contributing factor (Phau,2022, p:92).

Barak Obama began his term with a conciliatory position, describing China as a strategic partner, before bewildering and irritating all Asian powers with the clumsily handled “pivot to Asia”. By contrast, while Trump followed the pattern of being more aggressive at the beginning of his term and more conciliatory later, this appears to have been part of a conscious negotiating strategy aimed at lowering Chinese tariffs on US goods, rather than campaign exuberance followed by a reluctant embrace of realism (Phau,2022, p:46). Two decades into the 21st century, I argue that the United States has used “multilateralism a la carte” and new networks for new challenges (Avant,2021, pp:1136-1138). By this I mean: problem-solving in rapidly changing circumstances after the Cold War, for example, prompted institutional innovations that that helped coordinate collective action, because of some old global-order institutions losing their vitality. A pragmatist might re-label “a la carte multilateralism” and “new networks” as a particular sort of “public action” that takes account of interdependencies and seeks to gather stakeholders around reinforcing action to manage them, as Dewey (1927) recommended nearly a century ago (Avant,2021 pp:1136-1138).

In sum, pragmatism is America's most distinguishing contribution to philosophy. Developed by lots of American philosophers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, pragmatism claims that the significance of any idea draws heavily on its practical outcome. An example would be President Nixon's decision to visit China when he realized that dogmatism would not help him out to face his failure in the Vietnam war. A more recent example could be seen in the fact that, even though U.S. President Joe Biden argued that the Russian invasion to Ukraine had carried the rivalry between democracy and authoritarianism into a new phase, he confirmed that his administration has no intention to get into a new cold war with China, or to threaten China through enhanced coalitions (Yun, 2022). As such, it can be argued that the most useful and efficient decisions in the American foreign policy are frequently associated with a full commitment to pragmatism, and a complete rupture with dogmatism.

### **Exceptional Situations: Financial Crisis, Trade War, Covid-19, and Climate Change**

I contended above that exceptional situation can reveal the inadequacy of the unexamined thought patterns the practitioners espouse, provoke new conceptions on the part of analysts, and induce the embrace of new (situational) knowledge about conduct in international politics. The three exceptional situations to discuss in this section are the global financial crisis in 2008-2009, The US-China Trade War, and US and Chinese Policy Choices on Climate Change and Covid-19.

#### **A. The Global Financial Crisis of 2008-2009**

The U.S. and China are the two largest economies in the world today, and how they manage their relationship has far-reaching implications for the

functioning of the global trade and financial systems. These two economies are becoming increasingly integrated with each other through the flows of goods, financial capital, and people. The global financial crisis has brought this relationship under international attention. There is a deep irony in the fact that China's high national saving rate, and its policy of tightly managing the external value of its currency have all enabled U.S. profligacy, providing cheap goods and cheap financing for those goods, setting the stage for a cataclysmic crisis. Even amid the turmoil in world financial markets and the dearth of safe and liquid financial instruments, China continued to invest in US debt as the preferred instrument of parking its immense foreign reserves. During September to November 2008, when U.S. financial markets were in deep turmoil, Chinese purchases of U.S. Treasury bills and bonds amounted to nearly \$123 billion (Prasad,2009, pp:223-231).

China introduced the largest stimulus package in the world in late 2008, in the wake of the global financial crisis (Wong,2011). In November 2008 the government introduced a four-trillion Yuan stimulus package (14 per cent of 2008 GDP) for 2009 and 2010. In addition, to help stabilize the U.S. economy, China boosted its holdings of U.S. Treasury securities, which helped fund the Federal Government's borrowing needs to purchase troubled U.S. assets and to finance economic stimulus packages (Morrison,2009). China also managed to achieve a high degree of interdependence with the US to ensure that American policymakers would think twice before trying to contain China. Hence, while China relies on US markets for exports, it created an equal dependence in the US on China to purchase US Treasury bills. There are many reasons why the former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton chose to visit East Asia on her first overseas tour in February 2009. But one key reason was that at the height of the financial crisis, the US needed assurance from Beijing that it would continue purchasing US Treasury bills as American

deficits skyrocketed. The paradox about this growing interdependence is that both China and the US feel vulnerable as a result. This mutual vulnerability leads to caution and prudence in the management of the bilateral relationship (Mahbubani,2010).

## **B. The US-China Trade War 2017-2021**

The second exceptional situation is the trade war between Washington and Beijing. In the middle of July 2017, a trade war broke out between the two economic superpowers. The mutual relations had been consistently worsening, leading to the imposition of the first indirect economic customs on China at the beginning of 2018. The second stage of the trade war took place at the beginning of July 2018. Accounts of past episodes of trade warfare around the world focus on the negative consequences for the countries involved (Jaskula,2019, p:172). Worsening trade relations between the US and China could impede the development of the global economy. With around a fifth of global exports generated by China alone, and the fact that the US is their top outlet, it is quite difficult to anticipate that the present trade conflict between Beijing and Washington could be profitable for either in medium or long-term. In fact, the trade conflict is leaving corporate America aggrieved. After all, China is a significant investor in the US and one of the largest importers of the US-made goods. Hurdles to trade with China imposed by Trump's administration seem to have left the economies of both countries worse off (Jaskula,2019, pp:173-175). Besides, Beijing has sent a message that liquified natural gas (LNG) from Alaska is not indispensable, and that the country has other options – Russia being one of them (Shlapentokh,2020, p:24). The turn to Russia as an alternative collaborator and source of gas is not designed as a goal. It is most likely designed to incentivize Washington to make concessions to Beijing, or at least not to engage in a full-fledged war (Shlapentokh,2020, p:25).

By the beginning of 2021, the US-China trade war has been halted after a phase-one trade deal and the pandemic. In announcing a trade deal, the United States and China have effectively accepted a truce in trade hostilities. The tit-for-tat tariff war was replaced with a "phase one" deal, whereby both sides agreed to lower some tariffs, but kept others in place (Pelsie,2020). Trump's trade war with China appears to have failed to attain its objectives. His assertion that trade wars are easy to win quickly to prove untenable. Congressional and economists' studies estimate the trade war has cost the U.S. half a percent in GDP growth and increased inflation by as much. The US trade deficit, previously predicted to decline, increased by \$100 billion from 2016 to 2019. The tariffs Trump claimed the Chinese would pay were shouldered by American consumers in the form of higher prices. Manufacturing jobs long lost to China were predominantly redirected to even lower-cost countries in Southeast Asia rather than returned to the U.S. The trade war temporarily affected the Chinese economy but was nothing compared to the advantage China realized thanks to its more effective containment of the coronavirus (Walker,2021, p:23).

### **C. US and Chinese Policy Choices on Climate Change and Covid-19.**

The third exceptional situation is the US-Chinese agreement on climate change by the end of 2021. Despite the escalated tensions between the two countries, China and the United States have pledged to increase cooperation on climate action at U.N. talks in Glasgow October-November 2021. The agreement stipulates "concrete and pragmatic" regulations in decarbonization, reducing methane emissions and fighting deforestation (Plumer and Friedman,2021). The world's two biggest emitters temporarily put aside their differences at the Cop26 climate summit and issued a joint declaration (U.S.-China Joint Glasgow Declaration on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s) that would facilitate close cooperation on cutting down

emissions to the levels recommended by scientists for the next 10 years (the goal is to avoid an increase in global sea temperature by more than 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2050) (Plumer and Friedman,2021). As for the global pandemic crisis (Covid-19). A recent study foresees the possibility that COVID-19 will increase the risk of a military conflict between the United States and People's Republic of China (Bapat,2020, pp:1-2). The rationale of this analysis is that COVID-19 weakens US economic output, which undermines the U.S. capability to project power. This enables China's efforts to revise the status quo. Although a rapid collapse of American power due to COVID-19 might theoretically increase the likelihood of an armed conflict, this scenario is unlikely due to the centrality of the U.S. dollar in the global financial system. To conclude, while COVID-19 increases the short-term risk of military crises, particularly in the South China Sea and Persian Gulf, it does not significantly increase the likelihood of a global power transition or full-scale war. The long-term prospects hinge on how well the U.S. responds to COVID-19 over the coming few years (Bapat,2020, pp:2-9).

### **Concept's function: Democracy – Same Concept, Different Meaning**

Leaving behind Deng Xiaoping's famous "hide and bide" directive, President Xi Jinping recently opened a "new era" of China's global rise with a more self-confident projection of power and a strategic vision for the global order. During the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, he also announced that China is now willing to share its experiences of one-party rule with other countries and to advocate China's political model. China presents itself as a more self-assured, more authoritarian player with new international ambitions (Hackenesh,2020, p:723).

In November 2021, China released a significant document about its own perspective on democracy. The Chinese document referred to "concrete pragmatic practices and the [Chinese] problem-solving attitude" (The State

Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China,2021). U.S. efforts to counter what it sees as an erosion of democratic principles around the world are facing a new challenge from China, which is seeking to redefine and appropriate the very term in the service of its one-party model of rule. In a white paper issued days before U.S. President Joe Biden's December 9-10 Summit for Democracy, Beijing's State Council Information Office argues that its system - in which all power is firmly entrenched in the Chinese Communist Party - constitutes "a true democracy that works." (Liu,2021). The message of the Chinese document is that Western democracy is dead or dying and that China's top-down, centrally directed socialist system is the model of the future. In this view, democracies of the West have proved to be messy and chaotic, and fraught with violence, racism, rule by wealthy elites and rampant individualism. China boasts an "accountability system" - its leaders eschew the term "authoritarian" - that prizes obedience over individual rights. As evidence of the superiority of the Chinese system, China contends, Western democracies have failed in their response to the Covid-19 pandemic because of their emphasis on personal freedom over the common good. China has largely kept infections to a minimum through draconian lockdowns, aggressive digital tracking, and mandatory mass testing, all of which would be anathema in the West (Richburg,2021). However, this is a false ideological dichotomy. It will intensify global polarization and fuel geopolitical competition at a time when international solidarity is desperately needed to deal with climate change and other shared challenges. Yes, the conflict between Washington and Beijing is about political values and the ways in which society, economy, trade, and technology are managed. Yet Washington and Beijing share many similarities. In both the US and China political elites have endeavored to advance their respective countries' economic/business interests globally, by among other measures promoting

their respective high-tech sectors. Both the US and China are explicitly or essentially capitalist systems, with the former characterized by the domination of private capital and the latter by state-owned enterprises. The rivalry between the two countries should therefore be seen as a competition essentially between two different political-economic models (Richburg,2021).

The contestation is not purely economic because as I just underscored both the US and China are capitalist. And it is not entirely political either because democratic governments such as Poland's or Hungary's can, and do, engage in authoritarian practices but that does not make those resemble China. That is why I find the democracy-versus-autocracy framework to provide only a poor foundation for the 'new Cold War' between the United States and China. The new "Cold War" is likely a contestation between the US and China to win over converts to either of the countries' models. Each model is a combination of the following variables, in no particular order: effective provision of the goods and services expected of modern states (including efficacious responses to major public health crises); the ability to mobilize society's resources for economic prosperity and military power; guarantees of freedom and protection for both expression and private enterprise, both essential for economic prosperity; and finally the provision of narratives of social cohesion, ones that create nations out of disparate groups/individuals. Unlike the last century's Cold War, in which US–Soviet contestation took place in terms of liberal-capitalist versus collectivist-communist camps, the "new Cold War" will feature less prominently the ideological, religious- or civilization-inspired conflicts or ways of life. The ideological battle between Washington and Beijing plays out on a level far below that of the last Cold War (He,2021).

One more reason the democracy-autocracy dichotomy is not very useful is that democracy is hardly the guiding principle of US engagement in various regions of the world – including Asia. While democracy has provided a solid basis for the AUKUS agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, some authors argue that the agreement’s real foundations are a white racial heritage and these countries’ shared history and culture. Indonesia, ASEAN’s largest democracy, has expressed its deep concern with AUKUS. Democracy is also a weak foundation for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which India joined for geopolitical reasons, not the group’s democratic credentials. India, the reader will recall, is becoming increasingly autocratic as Prime Minister Narendra Modi promotes his brand of Hindu nationalism (He,2021).

## **Conclusion**

Anchored in two angles of the triangle of performance “Concept function, Role of analysts, Exceptions,” the research concludes that it is their pragmatism that induces the US and China to compete when necessary and cooperate when beneficial. The three criteria usually cited as constituting the US–Soviet Cold War are: ideological confrontation, rivalry between two blocs, and proxy wars, with ideological confrontation as the core feature. The competition between China and the United States hardly features any of the above three criteria. The research thus argued that ideology is of subordinate significance in the China-US competition. That competition has not escalated into a full-blown confrontation between two opposing camps, and it seems unlikely that the world would split into two opposing camps led by United States and China, respectively. The argument this research puts forth is based on four findings.

The first finding claims that Chinese foreign-policy conduct over the past three decades is constructed by pragmatic practices. Reflecting upon

Deng Xiaoping's argument that "it does not matter whether a cat is black or white; if it catches mice, it is a good cat," it can be understood that China's military power and geostrategic influence depends heavily on its economic performance. Therefore, China's transition from being a state governed by Communist dogma into a capitalist system is per se a testimony to its pragmatic approach. Taiwan stands out as another piece of evidence on Chinese pragmatism, so far as sovereignty and territorial disputes are concerned. The Chinese one-country-two-systems style, meant to annex Hong Kong to the Chinese territory, is a third piece of evidence. A fourth piece of evidence is the fact that the American Chinese conflict over the South China Sea did not compromise their willingness to cooperate over other issues, such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second finding demonstrates that the American foreign-policy conduct over the past three decades is constructed by pragmatic practices as well. Throughout the American history, there has been a well-established tradition that successive administrations usually rely heavily on ideological campaigning; however, once in power, they begin to adjust their policies and decisions to be more pragmatic. This tradition was present from Nixon to George W. Bush, and from Obama to Biden.

The third finding contends that in exceptional situations, the tendency of the Americans and Chinese to make compromises can reach a high level. The research argues that, during in the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, the US-China Trade War, the climate change crisis, and COVID-19 pandemic, the two countries reached a common ground because it was in their best interest not to escalate these crises.

The fourth and last finding is that, unlike the situation during the Cold War era, the democracy-versus-autocracy context did not represent a solid basis for a new Cold War between the United States and China. To put it simply, democracy has never been the top guiding principle of the American foreign policy conduct towards many countries, including China. Democracy, thus, has always been used as an instrument to galvanize the American interests in moral values. On the other side of the fence, when China resealed its own standpoint on democracy by the end of 2021, it referred to its first choice: pragmatic practices and the problem-solving attitude which signifies its flexibility and willingness to adhere to whatever practices that shall fulfill its goals. This is how pragmatism is driving international politics.

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