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## **The Relationship between the United States and China**

The influence of political leadership

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# Abstract

The relationship between the United States of America and China is characterized as dynamic and constantly evolving. Given that this relationship will continue to have a significant impact on the global stage, it is crucial to identify the key factors that directly influence mutual understanding. In the interest of maintaining an enduring international order, it is imperative for both countries to discover effective means of collaborating, tackling shared challenges, and advancing global stability and prosperity. Therefore, the objective of this research is to analyze whether changes in the American presidency have had a direct impact on the relationship between these two countries. Hereby, the focus will lay on the concept of leadership.

**Keywords:** United States, China, Leadership, Power, US-China relations



# 1. Introduction

Since the start of the 21st century, the relationship between the United States of America (USA) and China, two of the world's largest economies, has been complex and taken to different levels. They are both important economic partners, with China representing a significant market for American exports and a major source of imported goods for the USA (Miller, 2023). From cooperation to competition, topics such as trade, national security and geopolitical influence have shaped the relationship. While both countries have been looking for a common ground, tensions have particularly risen on topics related to human rights, military balance, Taiwan and foreign policy. Some concrete and recent examples include, the visit of Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan in August 2022, their divergent points of views on the War in Ukraine and the balloon incident of February 2023.

Despite these ongoing tensions, both countries have expressed their willingness to pursue a constructive relationship and have engaged in diplomatic efforts to address their differences. Regardless of these tensions, the two countries have managed to cooperate on a range of issues such as promoting global health, addressing climate change and encouraging non-proliferation. Both countries are always balancing on a thin line. For example, China benefits from globalization, but faces trade restrictions imposed by the USA (Rammeloo & Verhaegen, 2022). The trade war between both countries has been ongoing since 2018. Nevertheless, it did not prevent trade between the United States and China from hitting records in 2022 (Miller, 2023).

The relationship between China and the United States of America could best be described as dynamic and continuously evolving. As this relationship will continue to have a major impact on the global international scene, it is important to identify which key factors are directly impacting the common understanding. In the interest of a sustained international order, it is essential for both nations to find effective ways to collaborate, address common challenges and promote global stability and prosperity.

This research aims to analyze the relationship between the United States and China by focusing on the influence of political leadership. The underlying objective of this paper is to provide an answer to the following question: To what extent does the political leadership of the American president impact the relationship with China? How did the political leadership of Donald Trump and Joe Biden influence this relationship? The hypothesis at the start of this study assumes that the relationship between J. Biden and Xi Jinping would improve, as the Democrat President has announced a more international policy compared to D. Trump's "America-First" Policy, which focused less on the foreign policy of the United States of America.

The decision has been made to narrow the analysis to the presidencies of Donald Trump and Joe Biden. This allows a more in-depth analysis of the relationship. Nevertheless, it is important to provide historical context on the relationship between the two countries to understand the actual situation. Consequently, a brief chapter will be dedicated to the historical background.

This research will be conducted through the realist approach to international relations. An approach that sees war and conflict as consequences of anarchy which forces actors to confide in self-help. Whereby anarchy should be understood as the decentralized distribution of power in the international system (Nau, 2019). Within this frame of reference, the struggle for power is seen as the primary context of what happens in international relations. Furthermore, the causal primacy to explain the external policy of a country is the anarchy of the international system (Battistella & al, 2019). The world is therefore largely viewed as a struggle for relative power with strong actors dominating and weak actors resisting. Furthermore, states are willing to maximize their interests. Next to that, the neoclassical realists have rejected the idea that international relations theory should be separated from the theory of foreign policy. These scholars argue that the responses of states to necessities are impacted by a range of factors going from domestic politics, to decision-making, perceptions and lessons learned from the past. The underlying thought is that decisions on foreign policy are taken by human beings, political leaders and elites (Kaarbo, 2017).

It is also important to note that this analysis will contain some limits. First of all, the analysis of the Chinese point of view relies on translated documents. This may result in elements and nuances being "lost" in translation. Secondly, the focus will be limited to the presidencies of J. Biden and D. Trump. A more in-depth analysis covering a longer period is necessary to confirm or to disconfirm the findings of this research. Furthermore, the term of Biden is not over yet. Some changes in his policy can appear in the coming months before the next elections of 2024.

Moreover, and as will be explained in this paper, our understanding of leadership and power is still based on the dominance of the Western powers. Lastly, this research is conducted through the realist approach to international relations. Using another approach which focuses on different elements could lead to other conclusions.

This paper will be structured into several chapters to provide a comprehensive narrative of the relationship between China and the USA. The first chapters of the paper consist of a literature study used to explain the concepts that will be the fundamental elements of the case study. The first chapter will explore the concepts of leadership and power, which are fundamental to describe the relationship between the two nations. The second chapter will investigate the recent background of the relationship including a description of their respective position in the international system and how it has affected their relationship. The third chapter, which is the analytical part of the paper, will be focusing on today's case study. This section will explore questions concerning the approach China has taken, the factors that influence the relationship and the best way to describe the communication between the two countries. Finally, the last chapter will contain the conclusions of the research and provide an answer to the research question.

## 2. Leadership & power

The relationship between countries is a complex interaction of several factors, including the role of leadership and power. Therefore, it is important to consider and analyze these important concepts. This first chapter will lay out a theoretical framework which will be used to study the relationship between the United States and China. Over the years, several definitions of leadership have been suggested, encompassing perspectives that consider it to be a trait, an emergent attribute of a system, or a social construct (Hurwitz, 2017). In the framework of this paper, the following definition of leadership will be used: “*Leadership is a process whereby an individual exerts influence over a group of individuals to achieve a common goal*” (Chatwani, page ii, 2018). In this definition, various factors that influence leadership are taken into account, including the leader’s power, the institutional instruments available to the leader and the actions taken by the leader in a given environment (Hurwitz, 2017). Furthermore, Organski, as stated in Struye de Swielande & Honoré (2013), maintains that the type of relationship between two countries influences the way in which power is used. This chapter aims to formulate an answer on key questions such as: *How can leadership be defined? What are the different types of leadership and power? Which kinds of leadership are characteristic of different political leaders?*

### 2.1 State’s leadership

In the past as well as in recent years countries such as the United States and China have had ambitions to extend their zone of influence, but did not always achieve their ambitions. One could wonder why such powerful countries do not succeed. One of the possible underlying questions behind these failures and successes can be the fundamental conditions for leadership (Fei, 2022).

Nevertheless, leadership is not all about power capabilities. The literature shows that there are other determinants of leadership (Fei, 2022). The internal dynamic of the political and economic system of a country also plays an important role. To illustrate this, the recent example of the COVID-19 crisis can be used. If the United States want to maintain their place on the international scene, it will need a strong economy. Nonetheless, the public debt of the country exploded after the crisis and the American institutions have been paralyzed. Moreover, the

polarization between Republicans and Democrats did not help (Struye de Swielande, 2021). In addition to the economic system, the political system also influences the type of leadership. As Wiatr explains, the political system can affect the personality of the leader (Wiatr, 2022). This means that placing the same leader in a different political system, could change his way of leading the state. Nevertheless, this does not imply that one political system brings forward one type of political leader. Political systems and the cultures can produce a wide variety of leader personalities (Karboo, 2017).

Furthermore, ideas, interests and the strategies of regional powers influence the policy and the regional hierarchy (Fei, 2022). However, they are not the only additional elements affecting a nation's leadership. Consequently, the rise of civil society alongside globalization have presented challenges to the ability of national politics to govern with authority and effectiveness. As a result, nation states and their governments have faced significant pressure from economic globalization and international companies, the supranational political level and economic institutions, NGO's and the public opinion (Wineroither, 2013).

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that our common understanding of leadership and power in the context of international relations is still based on the dominance of Western powers. According to Struye de Swielande (2021), today's period will be characterized by the revivification of competition and great powers. This might impact our future perception of leadership and power. The United States could take the lead and redefine its understanding of leadership. In our system of peer leadership, a single actor procures authority to the leader on a conditional basis. Whereby peer support is essential for the good working of the system. However, the United States hold the potential to bring about a new system based on equal authority, responsibility and power. This change would introduce the idea of systemic leadership, which could provoke a theoretical shift in how leadership is understood and practiced (Struye de Swielande, 2021).

To sum up, leadership is thus not all about raw power. It is much needed to talk about the means or mechanisms giving the opportunity to exercise leadership such as institutions, rules and norms. Nevertheless, leadership has different ends or needs towards it can be directed. Therefore, a distinction has to be made between the levels at which leadership can appear: structural, institutional and situational (Ikenberry, 1996). Furthermore, leadership is as old as humanity. It is an inevitable and pervasive phenomenon (Blondel, 1987).

## 2.2. Political leadership

Political leadership encloses the capability to influence decision-making and political outcomes that emerges from actions taken by an individual holding political office, which is closely linked to leadership style and personality traits of the leader (Wineroither, 2013). The primary objective of political leadership is to utilize state power as the key instrument for attaining desired goals. These leaders strive to capture and exercise control over the state as a means of achieving their objectives, whether or not they are successful in doing so. While they may employ religious or moral justifications, their main focus is on wielding political power (Wiatr, 2022). On the international scene, political leadership is still strongly depending on the leadership of the most crucial countries (Blondel, 1987).

Historically, political leadership has been associated with leaders that have based their power on the notion that they were not equal to the rest of the human beings. Over time, the validity of this form of leadership has come under scrutiny, and a more logical and, in some parts of the world, a more democratic style of leadership is now sought. Although, personalistic and populist charismatic leaders are persisting in contemporary times (Pena, 2021). Different types of leaders have emerged on the international scene including leaders who seek to use their power to change the course of history, and leaders who solely focus on the daily issues of the state. Thus, distinguishing between transformational and transactional leadership (Hermann & Hagan, 1998). Nevertheless, these two types of leadership are not mutually exclusive (Nye, 2008).

Weber's analyses of leadership brought forward three different types of authority: traditional, legal-rational and charismatic authority. These different types of authority have an influence on the relationship between the followers and their leaders and thus on the leadership (Breuilly, 2011). Whereby the charismatic authority derives from the charisma of the leader and where knowledge and capabilities are not relevant as long as the authority is respected. Traditional authority derives from traditions and customs and the monarchy is used as an example. As long as the authority is not challenged in such a system, the leader will stay in power indefinitely. Lastly, the rational-legal authority has an individual or ruling group that exerts power through legal office, such as in modern democracies (Weber, 1947).

Next to that, leaders have to perform the necessary functions for the survival of their system. According to Williams (1965), leaders have to respond to two functions: achieving goals and maintaining a group.

The overall evaluation of political leadership can be realized in terms of effectiveness or in terms of its ethics (Wiatr, 2022). When looking at the effectiveness of the leadership, one needs to determine in which way the leaders have been able to modify the society they have been ruling. Therefore, it should be remembered that the impact a leader can have is depending on the environment. Leaders should adapt to the problems their society is facing (Blondel, 1987).

As noted by Hermann and Hagan (1998), theories exploring political cognition, socialization and leadership are often focused on when there is one single prevailing leader. It is particularly evident in the case of China where Xi Jinping is the subject of much attention and brings interest in understanding his worldview and personality. The effect of the leader's personality characteristics on the leader's decisions, values and governance has been well-documented as highlighted by Wiatr (2022). Hence the importance of incorporating the leader's personality as a factor when doing an analysis on political leaders.

To sum up, in a democratic system effective political leadership relies strongly on analyzing institutional and cultural parameters, as well as situational factors. However, it is essential to approach this analysis with precaution. For instance, uncertainties at the constitutional level in the United States have offered opportunities for some presidents to act as innovators (Wineroither, 2013). Despite the existence of a multipolar world, leadership continues to play a crucial role. Leaders are tasked with explaining and contextualizing global events to their governments and constituents. Furthermore, an increasing number of leaders are participating in regional and international organizations that establish the principles and standards that will shape the global system in the twenty-first century (Hermann & Hagan, 1998). For this reason, careful examination of the potential impact of various factors on political leadership is needed before any conclusions can be drawn.

Nonetheless, it is important to focus on the role of the political leaders as they can have consequential influence on the role their states play in international politics (Hermann & Hagan, 1998). The head of state in foreign policy is crucial (for the state, but also for the international order) as the leader can drastically affect foreign policy, regardless of the political system, whether democratic or authoritarian regime (Hurwitz, 2017). This importance is well

demonstrated by the fact that discussions about foreign policy and global politics frequently center around specific leaders and their leadership qualities, capturing our interest in individuals who hold office beyond their own nation's boundaries (Hermann & Hagan, 1998). While liberal democracies aim to reduce hierarchies and distribute power, political leadership still plays a vital role in the realm of democratic politics (Wineroither, 2013). The personality of the leader is key when it comes to starting the process of influence (Hurwitz, 2017).

The importance of the leader and its characteristics can have different degrees of significance. As noted by Kaarbo (2017), the significance of leaders and their qualities may be amplified in particular circumstances that involve ambiguous, intricate, uncertain, or dynamic bureaucratic, domestic, or systemic contexts. This may also be the case when foreign policy options require trade-offs, when symbolism is a factor in foreign policy choices, and when decision-making authority is concentrated and limited to the top leader (Kaarbo, 2017).

The importance of a leader's personality has been well formulated by Hermann and Hagan (p. 126, 1998), who emphasize that *“Leaders define state’s international and domestic constraints. Based on their perceptions and interpretations, they build expectations, plan strategies, and urge actions on their governments that confirm with their judgments about what is possible and likely to maintain them in their positions. Such perceptions help frame governments’ orientations to international affairs. Leaders’ interpretations arise out of their experiences, goals, beliefs about the world, and sensitivity to the political context.”* Both authors thus underline the fact that the personality of the leaders frame their policy and their leadership style in governing their country. This statement will be used as a common thread to realize the comparison between the United States and China in this case study.

The personality traits of a leader can affect its responses to national and international challenges and opportunities (Kaarbo, 2017). As already mentioned, combining all the personality traits will produce the leader’s global orientation or even leadership style in the foreign policy (Hermann & Hagan, 1998). However, in today’s volatility, uncertainty, and complexity, it is crucial to consider the human element, including empathy and emotional connection with the population as fundamental and indispensable prerequisites (Pena, 2021). The development of these soft power skills has been particularly important since the start of the information age (Nye, 2008). Additionally, it is worth bearing in mind that these leaders are limited by their internal political system, their institutions and the context. As underlined by Bryce et al. the behavior of legislators is likely to reflect the influence of their institutional norms and structures

next to individualistic factors (values, motivations, etc.) (Dietrich et al., 2012). Nevertheless, history has shown us that strong leaders are capable of changing these internal limits to their advantage.

As Wiatr (2022) noted, while some leaders may prioritize winning and maintaining power as their primary objective, there exists a significant distinction between such individuals and true leaders who are driven by a broader and more ambitious vision. Genuine leadership requires a strong commitment to an idea, an aspirational concept that extends beyond the acquisition of power. Great leaders have attained their status by formulating ambitious objectives and mobilizing others to work towards their realization.

It is important to recognize that leaders seem to hold power because they are in a position of authority (Hurwitz, 2017). Leadership has changed in recent years, particularly, due to the evolution of digital communication. This trend has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased the complexity and uncertainty of policy-making. As a result, drawing a roadmap became much more challenging, and the impact on individuals' daily lives added to the difficulty of the task. The limitations of national and international institutions to manage global issues have also been highlighted. Nevertheless, according to Pena, there is little focus on understanding fame and how this impacts the leader in political science. For sure, the developments of digital communication make it more important to try and understand which impact this can have as it affects not only the leader, but it also redefines leadership (Pena, 2021).

To conclude, it is imperative to direct our attention towards the impact of leadership and leader traits on foreign policies. To address this query, various approaches can be taken, such as exploring how leaders conceptualize and represent ill-defined issues, examining their political beliefs and perceptions of other nations, assessing their risk attitudes, evaluating potential pathologies and illnesses, and analyzing their cognitive shortcuts, misinterpretations, and motivated reasoning (Kaarbo, 2017).

In terms of leadership, power is often pursued as an aim in itself because of the various benefits it brings to those in positions of authority, including material gain and the ability to satisfy their desire for control over others. It would be simplistic to overlook the fact that many politicians see power only as a means to obtain these benefits. However, true political leaders are

characterized by their ability to use power as a mechanism to make a lasting impact on history, rather than seeing it as a goal in itself (Wiatr, 2022).

#### 2.4. Power

Just as for the concept of “*leadership*”, the notion of “*power*” is difficult to define, in part because the boundaries of the concept are in constant evolution (Struye de Swielande & Vandamme, 2015). For the purpose of this research, the theory established by Holsti will be the guiding principle. He demonstrated that power surpasses the material capabilities of a country and underlined that power has three dimensions: the relations, the means and the processes. It is important to integrate these dimensions in the analysis, rather than solely discussing a country’s military force and not the influence the country has at international level (Holsti, 1964). Which is also not at all the objective of this research. According to Holsti and in the context of international relations, power can best be described as the “*act of influencing other factors; it includes the capabilities used to make the wielding of influence successful; and the responses to the act*” (Holsti, 1964). In short, power can be explained as the ability to influence the behavior of others to achieve personal objectives. Consequently, narrowing down the concept of power to just military or economic factors is a flawed approach that leads to inaccurate predictions regarding the future of the global system (Struye de Swielande & Honoré, 2013).

Furthermore, as explained by Fei (2022), power plays an essential role in the control of the system. When looking at the international system from the realist point of view, the world is mostly seen in terms of a struggle for relative power with actors that dominate and actors who are dominated (Nau, 2019). Dominant states exerting the necessary power have the possibility to control the system and to put forward their self-interest as political, economic or other interests (Fei, 2022). This is a very important aspect for the scholars of the realist approach as countries have to defend their national interests.

In the literature on international relations power is often divided into different types such as soft and hard power, and smart and sharp power. Hard power can be seen as the usage of coercion and payment; while soft power relies on attraction to achieve the best outcomes. Smart power refers to the capabilities at disposal (Nye, 2009), while sharp power involves “*the deceptive use of information for hostile purposes*” (Nye, 2020). Both the USA and China utilize these different types of power to increase their influence on the international system. According

to Nye (2008), leaders need to combine soft and hard power skills. The most important skills are emotional intelligence, communications, vision, organizational and political skills.

In order to translate their potential power resources into actual power, countries need to develop a thoroughly planned policy and proficient leadership (Nye, 2002). Additionally, as power is related to status and legitimacy, if a country wants to be the dominant power, it should be recognized and accepted as such by others (de Swielande & Honoré, 2013). For example, middle powers have participated in military exercises with China, which can strengthen their mutual trust. Moreover, this bond can then be used by the middle power to pressure the USA to maintain a more constructive approach towards China. Alternatively, the middle powers could also use leverage to put pressure on China (Struye de Swielande, 2019). The ways in which a state or a person can affect behaviors include threats of coercion, inducements or payments, and attraction and persuasion (Nye, 2020).

A significant limitation on the use of power is that even a large and powerful state has a vested interest in establishing and maintaining a political system that is viewed as legitimate by other nations. A dominant leader cannot afford to preside over a global order that requires constant use of force to secure the cooperation of other states. Legitimacy is achieved when the political system is based on reciprocal consent. This occurs when secondary states voluntarily embrace the rules and norms of the political order as a matter of principle, rather than as a result of coercion. To promote the emergence of a legitimate political order, a hegemonic power must articulate principles and norms, and engage in negotiations and compromises that are separate from the exercise of power (Ikenberry, 1996).

Despite the potential for positive outcomes, power has often received a negative perception in the literature and in public opinion because of its association with control, domination and subjugation. Nevertheless, it is worth considering that power can also be used to elevate, improve or develop a given situation (Blondel, 1987).

# 3. The relation between the USA & China in recent years

In order to understand the current state of the relationship between the two main actors of the world order, it is important to explore their past relationship. By looking into the characteristics of their previous interactions, some key elements can be identified. Several policy initiatives, such as the Pivot to Asia have had an important influence on the present relationship. Moreover, the financial crisis of 2008 had profound repercussions and caused the international order led by the United States of America to shake (Struye de Swielande, 2021). It is also essential to recognize the importance of the relationship between these two protagonists. Many events in global politics center around the relationships between governments, as multiple states attempt to understand the reasoning behind each other's actions and predict their future behavior (Hermann & Hagan, 1998). This chapter will address several questions namely: *What has been the position of both countries in the international system? What has characterized their relationship? Why is their relationship so important?* The uncertainty over which country holds the global leadership contributes to growing tensions today (NOS nieuws, 2020).

## 3.1. Position in the international system

### 3.1.1. The United States

Opinions on the current status of the United States in the international system diverge among researchers. Some of them argue that the United States still have considerable advantages at the economic, military and technological level and point out that the country is wealthier today than was the case in the nineties (Fei, 2022). However, other researchers like Rose argue that the United States' power has declined since it once was a confident leader in what should have been an era of peace, wealth and freedom. Today the USA have to put away the dream of continued leadership (Rose, 2019). This point of view can be explained by the fact that the era of peace simply never really existed. Indeed, the United States have been involved in numerous wars, including the Gulf War, the War in Iraq and in Afghanistan and interventions in the Bosnian War.

In the past era, the United States and the Soviet Union stood out as dominant leaders, if not entirely uncontested, of their respective alliances of states. With their abundant military might, material resources, and expansive ideologies, they were able to effectively assert their authority over far-reaching regions across the globe (Ikenberry, 1996). During the 1990s, the United States became complacent as no country could match or balance their unrivaled global military, economic, and cultural power following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Nye, 2002). The United States are standing as the sole superpower at that moment in time. Despite their strength, the USA remain vulnerable and isolated in this new landscape. They strive to spread their values across all regions of the globe, which has resulted and continues to result in tensions with major regional powers. These differences in power and culture are likely to make relations between the United States and most major regional powers challenging, as noted by Huntington in 2003 (Huntington, 2003).

Nye argues that the United States' power faces a paradox. At the end of the 20th Century, its power was too important to be defied by another country, but still not important enough to be able to resolve all problems of the international system (Nye, 2002). Beeson and Higgott underlined in 2005 that the United States' historical dominance resulted from its institutionalized position at the core of the liberal economic order. However, currently, the United States are facing a decline in systematic legitimacy, as demonstrated by the inclination of its potential followers in Asia to establish an institutional order that is less reliant on American power and more reliant on rules and principles. In this new order, the United States would be granted fewer privileges and liberties than in the past (Beeson & Higgott, 2005). Whether the fact that the United States violated its own principles on several occasions influenced the choice of potential followers to establish the institutional order is important to consider. For instance, the United States' intervention during the Gulf War can be seen as a violation of the values and principles of a liberal world order, in which security, justice and peace are core values. This example illustrates the importance of relations as a characteristic of power.

To gain the support of potential followers, the leading country must promote favorable social norms that resonate with decision-makers in those nations. The leading country must also act in line with its identity as a global or regional leader. Failure to do so may result in the potential followers rejecting the leading country's position and withholding assistance in achieving shared objectives (Fei, 2022). Following the prolonged counterinsurgency wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a perception has emerged that the United States' dominance as a unipolar power

has weakened, and its capability to steer a global order in politics, economics, and security is declining. The main competitor for this role of world leader is China (Lee, 2015).

In summary, the United States presently face challenges to their position as the leading player in the international system after enjoying more than 25 years of unchallenged dominance. These challenges extend across all realms, including economic, political, ideological, cultural, and military. Moreover, they are even affecting the national scene within the United States (Struye de Swielande, 2021). These situational and environmental elements can have an impact on the leadership of the American President.

### 3.1.2. China

Over the course of three decades of swift expansion, China has undergone a metamorphosis from an economically disadvantaged region to the second-largest economy in human history (Goodman, 2016). China underwent significant political and economic reforms in the early 1990s, resulting in its emergence as a burgeoning superpower. Over the past thirty years, China has experienced an unprecedented period of urbanization, and its remarkable growth has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty (Frankopan, 2020). These improvements are seen as a result of China's most ambitious infrastructure project in today's history, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Ellis, 2018). It can be seen as China's grand strategy to become the next superpower.

Undoubtedly, China is rapidly closing the gap in terms of economic and other capabilities, but still faces challenges. If China intends to rival the United States, it must achieve strength and even dominance in all four power characteristics, namely determinants, means, processes, and relations (de Swielande & Honoré, 2013). A fourth characteristic, namely the determinants, has been described by de Swielande and Honoré (2013) compared to Holsti's description of power characteristics. Holsti included the relations, the means and the processes as characteristics of power (Holsti, 1964). Therefore, China has been developing a more affirmative foreign policy. "Made in China 2025" has been announced in 2015 and aims at making China the most competitive economy based on high-technology industries (Bae, 2021).

China no longer wants to be seen as a rival that has to be kept small. It aims to be treated with respect by Washington and seen as an equal power (Vlaskamp, 2022). Over the years, China has developed itself as a potential disruptor through their evolving position in the international system, with a focus on the multilateral aspect. This means that they do not want to choose a vast partner or an ally, but rather sees strategic partners (Braniff, 2021; Rammeloo & Verhagen, 2022). China's increasing power is hampered by its rapidly aging population and its relatively poor society compared to that of the United States (Scissors, 2020). These elements can have important consequences on its future development within the international system, and the Chinese leaders are worried that the rules of the international system could change them. Therefore, they have to change the system before the system changes them (Nye, 2002).

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the ongoing disorder in the liberal world order, creating space for the rise of competitive ideologies, particularly populism, and alternative cognitive frameworks. In this environment, Beijing has recognized the opportunity to engage in information wars against democracies by criticizing their handling of the pandemic and promoting the benefits of authoritarian systems (Struye de Swielande, 2021). In this way, Xi Jinping has clearly integrated the impact of the environment in his policy and is thus showing that he is able to adapt to the problems his state is facing. Even though he will only do so for problems that would have an impact on his ambitions.

Doubts still persist on whether China could become at least the world's economic leader. Across a variety of crucial economic measures, such as domestic wealth and the proportion of global foreign direct investment, the United States maintains a substantial lead over the People's Republic of China. As China is aging quickly, it is improbable that most of these disparities will diminish, despite common beliefs. Researchers such as Scissors claim that policymakers should therefore not be concerned that China will become the next global economic leader (Scissors, 2020). Others believe that China could overtake the United States and become the largest economy by 2026, potentially leading to a drastic change in the relationship (Carr Jr., 2021). Nevertheless, these analyses did not prevent Xi Jinping from announcing at various times that China wants to become the world leader by 2049. China has taken an increasingly tough and forceful position, with military actions that are seen as aggressive along claimed borders and spheres of influence. Additionally, China has been unyielding on critical global issues, such as free trade, intellectual property, and cyber matters. It has also displayed a growing desire to challenge the current status quo in Asia and expand its role in global affairs (Lee, 2015).

In conclusion, China has made impressive progress in economic, technological and military development, but also faces major challenges such as an aging population and social inequality. These challenges did prevent China from already surpassing the United States' economy. Furthermore, the ambitions presented by Xi Jinping for the upcoming years give a good impression of how he is perceiving his leadership and role.

### 3.2. Describing the relation

The nature of the relationship between the United States and China is currently undergoing significant changes. Although the relationship has always involved a blend of cooperation and competition, there is a growing agreement in the United States that the present-day relationship is primarily characterized by competition. While the United States' administrations pursued a policy of "constructive engagement" with China over the past four decades, this approach is now unjustly seen as discredited (Jarrett, 2021). Since the elections of 2016, the relationship has been shaped by the economic relationship (Scissors, 2016).

The international system's foundations rest on the rules established by the United States after the Second World War, primarily through institutions like the United Nations (UN) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, some countries within the European Union (such as Hungary), as well as United States' competitors like China and Russia, no longer accept these norms. Even the former Trump administration expressed reservations about these rules. To maintain stability in the international system, it is advisable for the United States to remove ideology from the equation and treat its relationship with China (and Russia) as a typical rivalry between great powers. Diplomacy in this context should aim to manage competition through compromise, conciliation, and the search for common ground. Ideological contests, however, are inherently zero-sum in nature. When a rival is perceived as evil, compromise and negotiation become tantamount to appeasement (Struye de Swielande, 2021).

Over the last forty years, the United States and China have often used discussion groups to resolve their problem areas with the Strategic Dialogue as the most important forum. As such, difficult topics should not be a problem for further cooperation. China has been a strong supporter of these dialogues, as they have provided an ideal platform to set aside all topics on which China is not willing to change its point of view. Beijing has the possibility to prevent

governments from interconnecting important dossiers with impossible demands in the field of human rights, for example (Vlaskamp & Persson, 2021).

From the Obama administration onwards, the United States have developed a less interventionist foreign policy. For Obama it was the opportunity to develop the principle of nation-building and strategic patience. For Trump, this meant installing the concepts of “America First” and “Make America Great Again” (Struye de Swielande, 2021). These two cases demonstrate that they have acted in the self-interest of their countries.

Both the United States and China have been challenging to extend their influence on the same areas. The situation in East Asia can be used as a good example. Under President Obama, the United States rebalanced their policy and attempted to promote economic wealth through the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TTP), while also preserving and extending their leading role in East Asia (Fei, 2022). The Obama administration's shift towards East Asia represents a significant breakaway from past American attempts to counterbalance China's rise.

Previous administrations focused on enhancing security cooperation with offshore states in the East Asian region, while the current administration has broadened their ties with mainland states on the fringes of China, including Indochina and the Korean peninsula. However, these endeavors are not only needless to maintain the traditional United States strategy of preserving a divided East Asia, but they also force potentially expensive relationships on the United States that are ultimately ineffective in balancing China's rise (Ross, 2013). The East Asian region has undergone significant changes due to China's rapid economic expansion and America's pivot towards the Asia-Pacific. In the initial period of the Obama presidency, the United States embarked on a strategic endeavor to reinforce its influence in East Asia. This approach has entailed fostering greater strategic collaboration with various countries across the region (Rosss, 2013). This is a result of the emergence of China which has altered the power dynamics in East Asia and has had a profound impact on global economic and security developments (Fei, 2022). From a positive-sum perspective, the American policy toward East Asia has been successful since the early 1990s, despite some resolute problems (Christensen, 2006). Protecting power abroad has always been seen as being part of the leadership role of the United States (Tomes, 2014). Therefore, the United States needed to foresee such a pivot and directly take part in balancing the power of the region, or else China could obtain a regional hegemony in East Asia.

Furthermore, the United States cannot afford to be self-centered if they want to gain the approval of other countries. Assuming that it is in their best interest, the United States should prioritize creating benefits for the collective welfare. Keohane, as cited by de Swielande and Honoré, explains that the leading power "*gains the capability to control and rule its global surroundings while offering enough benefits to small and medium-sized countries to convince them to comply*" (de Swielande & Honoré, 2013, p. 120)." As also stated by Fei (2022), the ideas, strategies and interests of regional powers are having an influence on policy and regional hierarchy. In this way, these elements have an impact on a nation's leadership.

Regarding the power dynamics in East Asia, it must be said that the United States have always based their policy towards China on a "strategic ambiguity". For example, the policy on Taiwan has always involved a political and diplomatic exercise in finding the right equilibrium. Although Washington has a one-China-policy, nonetheless they have always supported Taiwan and have an agreement on military equipment for Taiwan (Van Genechten & Treutens, 2022).

The relations between the USA and China are thus not only limited to their respective countries. Another example is the cooperation in Myanmar. In January 2014, a Joint Statement was published on cooperation in Myanmar. On the one hand this cooperation is part of the common interests both countries share about the stability and development of Myanmar. On the other hand, this cooperation is part of the competition between the two powers in order to influence the country (Sun, 2014). The dedication of both parties to work together is uncertain, and reservations may be necessary. Additionally, it is important to consider China's specific strategy in which for several years, China has been prioritizing multilateral aspects without committing to a fixed partner, which could affect its approach to cooperation with the United States (Rammeloo & Verhagen, 2022). The utilization of trilateral cooperation has emerged as a new approach in the United States' engagement with China. Similarly, the Chinese administration has largely adopted trilateral aid cooperation as a means to strengthen its bilateral ties with the United States. Beijing views this as a novel opportunity to exhibit China's eagerness to collaborate with the United States and allay its apprehensions about China's rapidly expanding aid program. The aim is to portray China as a responsible participant. Trilateral aid cooperation presents a novel chance for both nations to boost their mutual comprehension and build trust (Zhang, 2019). For the United States, the trilateral aid cooperation was seen as a possibility to engage with China and to cooperate in a constructive way. Nevertheless, due to the distrust that reigns between both countries, developing this kind of cooperation seems very difficult, even impossible.

In the United States some researchers are convinced that the relationship with China can be compared to the conflict between Athens and Sparta in antiquity, referring to the “Thucydides Trap”. This means that China and the United States are moving towards a conflict or even a war unless they can find a way to avoid this confrontation (Helle, 2017). According to Allison, as cited by Beddoes, a repetition of the situation between Athens and Sparta is not inevitable, but preventing both countries from ending up in this trap would require some significant efforts (Minton Beddoes, 2021). Nevertheless, history has provided evidence that rising powers have the tendency to cause war. Even though the surpassing of Britain by the United States did not provoke any attack. One of the reasons put forward is that both countries shared the same values and culture (Helle, 2017). In the current case between the United States and China it is clear that there are many differences on these levels. However, both countries are particularly interested in a stable world order and are looking for a higher standard of living and consumption.

Overall, the world is moving from a hegemonic system toward a multipolar system. According to Struye de Swielande (2021), the United States should rather take advantage of this change rather than trying to oppose it. These changing dynamics mean that there can or could be a new redistribution of power. Strong leadership will thus be needed to drastically change the American point of view in order to embrace this new situation.

### 3.3 The importance of the relation

The United States and China are considered today as the global power and its challenger. This means that the relations between both countries are crucial, as the way they handle this relationship can have an impact on the whole international system. This is not only important for the global system, but also for themselves. That the relationship is marked by a lot of tensions, does not make it less important.

Each side has its own reasons for pursuing and investing in the relationship. For example, China is benefiting from globalization and this must be pursued (Rammeloo & Verhagen, 2022). The United States’ prosperity also benefits from international financial stability. Developing codes of conduct and establishing intentional communication to foster mutual trust, mitigate risks and avoid misunderstandings between the United States and China is of paramount importance. The potential human and economic costs of any military conflict between the two nations would be

catastrophic, not only for both countries but also for East Asia and the global community (Harris & Carr Jr, 2021). Therefore, the cooperation of other countries is required (Nye, 2002). The stakes are simply too high for the United States to make any errors in its dealings with China, as the repercussions would not only impact the US, but also have far-reaching consequences for the global community (Jarrett, 2021).

As has been emphasized during diplomatic talks, continued communication is necessary about macroeconomic policy and about securing worldwide food and energy security (Van Genechten & Treutens, 2022). As China's economy experiences rapid growth and the United States pivots or balances toward the Asia-Pacific, the East Asian region has undergone significant transformation. China's rise has not only altered the power dynamics within East Asia, but it has also impacted global economic and security developments (Fei, 2022). Over the past thirty years, China has experienced remarkable economic growth that has enabled them to establish economic interdependence with several of America's closest allies. Consequently, these nations are now more inclined to hedge their bets regarding which side to support in the US-China rivalry (Gupta, 2020). Many people are concerned about the future and the potential for either inevitable confrontation or constructive dialogue between China's continued rise and the United States' enduring preeminence (Carr Jr., 2021). This example clearly demonstrates the conflictual and competitive side of international relations.

Moreover, the United States and China are two essential countries for addressing climate change. The United States and China established a concrete climate alliance during the Obama era that played a vital role in formulating and implementing the Paris Agreement. Nevertheless, Obama was known for being accommodating, agreeable and conciliatory (Immelman, 2008). After President Trump's policy reversals, Biden now has an opportunity to rejuvenate and transform the previous partnership to address the current climate crisis and the broader US-China relationship (Ewing, 2021).

## 4. Case study: the relationship under D. Trump & under J. Biden

In this fourth chapter an in-depth analysis of the current relationship between the United States and China will be provided. Although the current relationship is marked by allegations of espionage and theft of intellectual property, it does not make the relationship less important (NOS Nieuws, 2020). The goal of this chapter is to find answers to the following questions: *Which approach has been set up? What can be learned from the narrative of both parties? What is the impact of the different presidencies on the relationship?*

### 4.1 The American approach on China

#### 4.1.1. Under Trump's presidency

The declining American-led world order is not a new phenomenon. Nevertheless, the decline has been accelerating under the Trump administration. The focus was primarily put on national policies and the international scene was a side issue (Struye de Swielande, 2021). Under the Trump administration, China was perceived as a strategic adversary committed to disseminating its harmful influence worldwide, while concurrently promoting values that ran counter to those embraced by the United States. Consequently, there was minimal inclination towards pursuing any form of bilateral cooperation, even in cases where there existed mutual interests (Jarrett, 2021).

At the start of his presidency, the stakes were high. The world was watching and expecting the new President-elect to find answers to different problems, such as the COVID-19 and the climate crisis, recover the economic situation and the relations with China (Struye de Swielande, 2021). These events could have been an opportunity for Trump to show empathy and emotional connection with his population. In this case, his personality as leader clearly influenced his national and international responses to these problems.

The reign of president Trump has thus not been characterized by a good relationship with China. It could be argued that the relations even deteriorated under his presidency. Under Trump's presidency, a true trade war with China has been developed. One of the most significant actions taken by Trump that impacted the relationship is the implementation of tariffs on Chinese imports. This measure was part of a much larger effort in order to tackle the 'unfair trade

practices' of China and was part of the America First Policy; Trump's notorious mantra (Lecluyse, 2022). This policy often led the United States to make its decision by and for itself. As of 2016, Trump underlined that the doctrine of American leadership has cost the US more than it has gained from it (Lindsay, 2021). From a realist point of view, Trump has shown that the national interest was constituting the main priority of his leadership. Additionally, a deliberate targeting of Chinese technology firms has been established, which can reflect the threat China poses to the United States (Frankopan, 2020). These tariffs and rivalry between both countries have had a negative impact on the global economy.

The trade war is not the only factor that has deteriorated relations between the two countries (Van Genechten & Treutens, 2022). Former President Trump has blamed China for the outbreak of the global COVID pandemic, which he has often referred to as the China virus (NOS nieuws, 2020). Furthermore, the deterioration has also been evident in the former President's official communication. Trump's statements have shifted from "*Xi is a very very good friend of mine*" to "*Who is my biggest enemy, Jay Powell or President Xi?*" (Vlaskamp & Persson, 2021)? Even though communication can be used by a leader to foster mutual trust, the communication methods and narratives used by Trump did not lead to growing trust between the two protagonists.

Moreover, the connections between both countries were hardened at the end of the presidency, not only in terms of bilateral trade or cooperation, but also regarding security and climate issues. Both countries had a preference for swearing on Twitter rather than discussing around a table (Vlaskamp & Persson, 2021). Whereby President Trump put an end to the short, yet significant phase of global climate collaboration between the two largest polluters, dismantling domestic climate policies and largely disregarding international climate initiatives (Ewing, 2021).

To conclude, it can be argued that since Trump took office, he has adopted a very hard policy towards China which led to an increase in tension across all levels including trade, to technology and ideology (NOS Nieuws, 2020). The COVID-crisis and the Hong Kong issue have particularly fueled these tensions. Regarding the characteristics of his leadership, it can be characterized as audacious, driven by a strong sense of competition and self-confidence; forceful, dominant and assertive; spontaneous and lacking discipline; and disruptively challenging established norms, often blurring the lines of truth and legality (Immelman & Griebie, 2020).

#### 4.1.2. Under Biden's presidency

Towards the end of Trump's presidency, the relationship with China grew cold. Many anticipated that Biden would immediately initiate a different approach and engage in a new dialogue with China. However, the China policy at the start of his presidency was uncertain. At first, he sought to demonstrate to his allies that the United States had become a world leader again. By doing so, Biden showed that his leadership would be based on community building. Despite relations with China having cooled down after Trump's presidency, Secretary of State Blinken underlined that cooperation remained possible, particularly on topics of shared interests such as climate change. Washington considers the relation to be "*competitive where it has to be, collaborative where it can and hostile where needed*" (Vlaskamp & Persson, 2021). This demonstrates that Biden understood that relations are a main characteristic of power. Consequently, Secretary of State Blinken organized an Asian Tour to try and make alliances to counter China's rise (Vlaskamp & Persson, 2021). Furthermore, this Chinese rise could form a problem for the United States in East Asia. Here too, national interests are playing an important role in the decision to counterbalance China's power. Without any balance of power, China could obtain regional hegemony. Nevertheless, strategic partnerships have to be developed to be able to maintain this regional balance of power as an external power (Ross, 2013). Which is easier said than done.

Biden's administration did not start with a clean sheet, as has been demonstrated at different occasions. During the 2021 Alaska Summit, Biden made clear that he would not change his predecessor's plans and hard stance, recommending China to demonstrate good intentions. Regardless, differences still remain. In contrast to Trump's inconsistent communication approach, Biden and his administration are in accordance. Furthermore, the United States are now keen to form alliances, as such displaying a common agenda and greater diplomatic power than under the previous America First policy (Vlaskamp & Persson, 2021). Moreover, both leaders had limited contact, with President Biden having had only five calls with the Chinese President Xi Jinping by July 2022. The calls focused on the prospects of their delicate relationship in a time of greater economic and geopolitical tensions (Van Genechten & Treuttens, 2022).

In March 2021, President Biden released his Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, which identifies China as a country with the potential to merge its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological capabilities to launch a lasting challenge against a stable and open international system (Harris & Carr Jr., 2021).

The importance of the economic aspect in the rivalry between the United States and China cannot be overstated. The Biden-Harris administration has a strong determination to confront the People's Republic of China's unjust, exploitative, and illicit actions (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2021). State Secretary Blinken stated that in order to rebuild the world after the economic crises, the pandemic and to cope with the climate crisis and other global problems the rules-based international order should be reformed and defended. According to him this system manages relations between countries, prevents conflicts and encourages the rights of people (Blinken, 2022). In this sense, Biden's leadership is much more driven by ethics.

Another decision that has been maintained despite the change in leadership, is the Indo-Pacific emphasis, initiated by Trump's administration, where President Biden decided to pursue the change from "Asia-Pacific" to "Indo-Pacific (Jarrett, 2021).

Although Biden does not intend to drastically change the line of his predecessor regarding the relationship with China, he is not neglecting its importance. Therefore, he has underlined the need for continuous contact with Xi Jinping. According to Biden, constant communication is part of the efforts the government is willing to provide in order to maintain and intensify the contacts between the two countries. Both countries have to handle their differences intelligently and cooperate in domains of common interests (Van Genechten & Treuttens, 2022). Biden is hereby clearly emphasizing on the importance of soft skills.

As previously mentioned, the United States recognize China's growing power and its ambition to become a global leader. This is reflected in the communication of the State Secretary, who stated that *"while President Putin's conflict persists, our attention will not be diverted from the most critical and enduring threat to the global system, which is presented by the People's Republic of China. China stands out as the sole nation that has the desire to reshape the international order and is steadily gaining economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to achieve it. Beijing's proposed vision would deviate from the fundamental principles that have been the foundation of much of the world's advancements in the past 75 years (Blinken, 2022)"*. In addition to emphasizing China's rise, the United States hereby underline

the importance of the shared values of the Western World. Furthermore, it shows that Biden's communication is consistent and that he is taking into account the facts on the ground.

President Biden addressed the US Congress and the nation on April 28, 2021, outlining his administration's achievements in the first 100 days of his presidency. Throughout his speech, he emphasized the importance of preparing the United States for competition with China, which he believes is essential to secure victory in the 21st century. However, this statement casts doubts about the main objective of Biden's leadership (Jarrett, 2021). Is winning and maintaining power the priority or is he driven by a broader and a more ambitious vision?

Next to that, Biden highlighted China's President Xi's determination to make China the world's most significant and consequential nation, calling attention to the seriousness of the challenge. According to Jarrett, priority must be given to rebuilding the political relations between both capitals and de-escalating tensions (Jarrett, 2021). Unfortunately, there has recently been more escalation than de-escalation in the relationship between these two nations. Moreover, President Biden's policy proposals have a clear objective of overturning the isolationist tendencies of the previous administration. He has shown a stronger inclination towards competing with China's global influence. In 2019, President Biden emphasized the significance of "*creating a united coalition of allies and partners to confront China*" (Robertson & Kankhwende, 2021). Lastly, Biden has repeatedly expressed his commitment to work with China if it serves American and global interest. Nevertheless, the United States would intervene if China would threaten American sovereignty (Miller, 2013). This is in line with the realist theory on international relations as states ultimately depend on their own capacities or power to preserve their national interests, with the survival of the state and territorial integrity as the most important interests.

According to Griebie and Immelman (2021), leaders such as Biden have an interpersonal leadership style. These kinds of leaders are characterized by flexibility, compromise and their accent on teamwork. Most importantly, they are conflict-averse and risk-avoidant. This means that his presidency should likely be conciliatory. This is also underlined by his commitment to rebuild democratic alliances (The White House, nd.).

To conclude, on the 20th of January 2021, President Biden announced a different strategy with China (Harris & Carr, 2021). However, some elements, such as the trade tariffs, were retained from the previous strategy. Contrastingly, the collaboration on issues such as climate change is different, but consistent with the efforts taken by former president Obama. Additionally, and as stated previously, it is important to keep in mind that all responses are impacted by a range of factors such as domestic politics, decision-making, perceptions and lessons learned.

#### 4.2. The Chinese approach on the United States

To understand why the United States are maintaining a certain policy or reacting in a specific way, it is important to see how China is responding to the United States' policy. Historically, China has opted to not intervene in the internal affairs of another country. In this regard, it also did not recognize the annexation of Crimea (Rammeloo & Verhagen, 2022). After the hard relationship with Trump, Xi Jinping sought to quickly make a fresh start with Biden. Beijing needed things to be as before to give China the time to develop its broader geopolitical ambitions. More specifically, China seeks a new world order that is not rooted around Washington (Vlaskamp & Persson, 2021), using its institutional leadership (Ikenberry, 1996) to establish new rules and practices that would guide the relations with countries that would agree to follow these new rules. As such, new rules and expectations will be established as institutions. By doing so, Xi Jinping could take the lead and redefine the understanding of leadership. Furthermore, it would overturn the dominance of Western powers in the context of international relations.

Moreover, by wishing to create a new world order, Xi Jinping can be seen as a “transforming leader”, who is motivated by the conviction that it is needed to change the current state of affairs (Wiatr, 2022). Furthermore, Xi Jinping wants to give China its legitimate place in the world (Zerkak, 2023). In this way, China is underlying its willingness to increase its power and to use that power to serve its national interest.

The war in Ukraine is also influencing China's point of view. In recent months, Xi Jinping has adopted a hardened tone, seemingly examining the situation in Russia from a safe distance. It is uncertain if Xi Jinping sees this as a kind of “testcase”. Nevertheless, according to Chinese state media, Xi Jinping has been emphasizing the importance of continuous communication about macroeconomic policy and securing the world's food and energy supplies (Van Genechten & Treutens, 2022). In line with this, China has invited the United States to

participate in the new Silk Road, indicating its aspiration to be a global actor (Rammeloo & Verhagen, 2022). The development and the implementation of the BRI are the operationalization of Xi Jinping's vision of the future of his nation. His ambition is clearly to unfold a strong China. Which makes one believe that his leadership is driven by a broader goal and vision. Nevertheless, one might not forget that at the same time, he also wants to secure his own future at the head of the country.

To become a global actor, China has to control different aspects. Therefore, China also aims to keep as many American troops in Europe to prevent the Americans from deploying their troops to Asia. As a result of the ongoing war in Ukraine, European countries are uniting and increasing their weapons supply (Rammeloo & Verhagen, 2022). This could lead to a stronger Europe and a reduced need for intervention from the United States. In this sense, the war in Ukraine could in the end also impact China and the balance of power in Asia. For China, the idea of the Western world limiting its rise to a superpower must come to an end. Beijing perceives itself also as the leader of an increasingly powerful Asia. Therefore, they are not amused with America's efforts to form anti-Chinese alliances in the region (Vlaskamp & Persson, 2021).

From an economic perspective, the Chinese policy that is most harmful to American exportations is the subsidization of state-owned enterprises by Beijing (Scissors, 2016). A decision that is clearly serving the national interest of China. Moreover, Xi Jinping has called for the reinforcement of other nations' reliance on Chinese technology, enabling China to use the threat of supply disruptions as a means of deterrence. However, he has criticized other countries for politicizing and weaponizing supply chains during the COVID-19 pandemic (Harris & Carr Jr., 2021). This suggests that China is diversifying its priorities. From a political perspective, the impact of the political system must be underlined. As previously mentioned, the political system is influencing the personality of the leader. This implies that changes in China's system could influence Xi Jinping and thus potentially the US-China relationship. In recent years, Xi Jinping has been changing the rules within the PCC and made sure he could pursue his mandate after 2023. These kinds of changes could in the short- or long-term influence China's political system and thus its leadership. Furthermore, these changes in rules show that for Xi Jinping maintaining power can be seen as a primary objective. Lastly, these interventions show off the personalized charismatic traits of Xi Jinping. His personality leads to self-serving behaviors. Furthermore, he has shown his self-confidence, strong convictions

and ability to manipulate symbols of power. According to Nye's definition, Xi Jinping can therefore be described as a charismatic leader (Nye, 2008).

Nevertheless, it is important to underline that Chinese culture and philosophy are very different from those of Western countries. In fact, Chinese policy and actions are perceived from a different point of view, which creates a biased perception. China does not grant too much importance to the theory-experience ratio, but rather to the importance of a potential situation (Struye de Swielande, 2019). Furthermore, today's Chinese system is based on traditional and charismatic authority. This means that Xi Jinping's charisma is essential to make sure his authority is respected. This also means that as long as the PCC is delivering China's president, the same type of leadership will be promoted.

#### 4.3. Narratives put in perspective

The narratives used by the United States and China to describe their relationship are essential. The communication used by both parties can shed light on how they perceive their relationship and leadership. Differences in narratives can be perceived through the years and differ from leader to leader. In this sense, the narratives of the political leaders also influence the relationship.

Analyzing the values of a leader can prove to be a challenging task. The public statements made by a leader may not necessarily reflect their true beliefs, as they may be used as a means of rationalizing decisions made on alternate grounds. As a result, our ability to rely on such declarations is limited (Wiatr, 2022). In addition, the narratives of the most important global countries have an amplitude that reaches all the corners of the world (Blondel, 1987).

Under Xi Jinping, Chinese assertiveness has become more aggressive abroad and more autocratic at home (Minton Beddoes, 2021). In this sense, it is not surprising that China has been warning the United States even more in recent years, particularly concerning Taiwan (Van Genechten & Treuttens, 2022). In addition to this, China has used its presence in international organizations to propagate its narrative. Over time, China has shown increased assertiveness and self-confidence in international and regional organizations, in particular within the United Nations (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2021). This outreach can be attributed to Xi Jinping's vision of economic responsibility and rights. In 2013, the Chinese President stated that our international economic system should reflect the changes of the economic reality.

Which means that according to him, emerging markets should benefit from a greater representation and impact (Fei, 2022). Furthermore, China seeks to become a global leader and build a “stable international order” by 2049 (Bae, 2021). This demonstrates that as well the American Presidents as the Chinese leader are using their leadership to achieve common goals and national interests. They all want a stable world order and lead the most powerful country of the international system. In fact, this is the purpose of leadership as it is considered to be the art of influencing people, organizations and institutions in order to achieve ambitions that serve public or national interest (Cerami, 2011).

Next to that, Xi Jinping wants to rejuvenate his country and has expressed his desire to erase the century of humiliation. In this way, China’s leadership is echoing within its society and is having a direct link with the history of its society. The conflicting scheme used by the leadership is creating a stronger internal identity. Furthermore, moral justifications are used to approve its policy (Struye de Swielande, 2019).

Even today, many narratives and themes are established by the concept of American exceptionalism (Tomes, 2014). However, the United States are recognizing the growth and the importance of China. Secretary of State, Blinken, stated: *“China is a global power with extraordinary reach, influence and ambition. It’s the second largest economy, with world-class cities and public transportation. It’s home to some of the world’s largest tech companies and it seeks to dominate the technologies and industries of the future. It’s rapidly modernized its military and intends to become a top tier fighting force with global reach. And it has announced its ambition to create a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world’s leading power”* (Blinken, 2022). By doing so, the United States give the impression that they take China’s declaration into consideration. Nevertheless, the United States seem not to do so not solely to respond to China’s demand, but also in their own interests. This is evident in the following statement of Blinken: *“We’ll engage constructively with China wherever we can, not as a favor to us or to anyone else, and never in exchange for walking away from our principles, but because working together to solve great challenges is what the world expects from great powers, and because it’s directly in our interest. No country should withhold progress on existential transnational issues because of bilateral differences* (Blinken, 2022)”. Blinken is hereby clearly justifying the American political leadership by using moral arguments. Nevertheless, the main focus remains on increasing the political power towards China.

#### 4.4. The evolution of the relationship under the two presidencies

In recent years, media headlines have painted a picture of a highly strained, adversarial relationship between China and the United States as the central narrative. This narrative has been characterized by tough rhetoric, including the ongoing trade war, threats of technological decoupling, and the use of severe economic statecraft in the form of sanctions and high tariffs. Under the Trump administration, relations with Beijing were marked by tension and contention, with the norm being strongman and militaristic language. Former President Trump applied harsh rhetoric to curb China's rising global power, as seen in the U.S.-China trade war and verbal attacks against China (Kissane, 2021).

In addition to that, there has been an increasing realization among policymakers on Capitol Hill that today's China is fundamentally different from that of the past, leading to the need for a more determined, targeted, and unwavering approach (Harris & Carr Jr., 2021). This shows that the American leadership is clearly adapting to its environment. Each unilateral decision as reaction to an event, seems to provoke a reaction from the other side. An illustration of this can be seen in the recent closing of the American consulate in the city of Chengdu, which was a Chinese response to the forced closure of the Chinese consulate in the American city of Houston (NOS Nieuws, 2020).

According to China, the United States are using trade relations as a weapon (Lecluyse, 2022). Even if some researchers argue that the impact of the trade war on China's economy might be relatively minor, China still wants to avoid this economic confrontation with the US. This could in fact lead to a destabilization of the reforms that Xi Jinping has been implementing (Garrick & Bennett, 2018). If this should have an impact on Xi Jinping's reform, this could in the end lead to a reassessment of his leadership.

Consequently, a resolution to the trade war is not impending (Vlaskamp & Persson, 2021). This means that trade remains and will continue to be a key element in the relationship between both countries. Nevertheless, despite the ongoing trade war and trade restrictions between the United States and China, trade hit a record in 2022. This shows that both economies still rely on each other despite the hard diplomatic relations (Miller, 2023). The most critical relationship between two nations in the world is characterized more and more by suspicion, rivalry, and ambiguity (Goodman et al, 2019).

China's recent foreign policy shift, particularly in the realm of soft power or what some scholars refer to as “sharp power”, has marked a clear departure from its previous approach. This more assertive strategy has been reinforced by the numerous overseas visits made by senior Chinese officials, which have lent it significant support (Carr Jr., 2021). This illustrates that Chinese leadership is also based on perceptions and interpretations of experiences acquired abroad. As Hermann and Hagan (1998) underlined, leader’s interpretations are also created through experiences. The perceptions and interpretations will help leaders work out and plan strategies.

Nevertheless, this does not imply that the relations are thriving. Both countries still share different views regarding global health, economic policy and human rights. The ongoing war in Ukraine is also impacting the relations as China is still refusing to condemn the Russian invasion.

For the United States, a realist approach solely focused on hard-power containment through military or security-related means is not sufficient to handle China. In fact, this approach could lead to a security dilemma as states would build up their armies to resist as power and security are the primary concerns. Instead, the United States' strategy must be based on bilateral engagement and multilateral diplomatic efforts to prevent miscalculations or inadvertent escalation of tensions. However, the United States must also pursue a strategy that outlines clear objectives for safeguarding crucial American interests in Asia, with appropriate security measures and military capabilities to counteract and discourage revisionist actions that pose a threat to regional stability. This is complicated by China's own ambiguity. China operates on the basis of its official foreign policy, which prioritizes *“major powers as the key, surrounding areas as the first priority, developing countries as the foundation, and multilateral forums as the important stage (Lee, 2015, p.42 )”*.

It must be noted that although Trump and Biden have different types of leadership, they have been working in the same system of authority, the rational-legal authority. In such a system, the leader exerts power through legal office. Their leadership is much more contained and limited than Xi Jinping 's.

Lastly, decision-makers and by consequence leaders, are rational individuals prioritizing the pursuit of their state's interests. According to the realist school of international relations, this means that it would be irrational to take actions that could harm or expose a state's vulnerabilities. Regardless of their political orientation, leaders understand the importance of managing their state's affairs to survive in a competitive environment (Antunes & Camisao, 2018).

#### 4.5 Other influences

This research focuses on political leadership and its influence on the relationship between the United States and China. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that political leadership can also be influenced by political orientation and external factors.

In terms of political orientation of the presidents studied within this case study, it is unsurprising that their ideological background is different. The Republican Party can be characterized as a vehicle for an ideological movement that places a high value on adherence to doctrine, whereas the Democratic Party can be seen as a coalition of social groups that aim to achieve tangible government initiatives. In contrast to the Republicans, the Democrats do not possess a robust internal movement dedicated to enforcing ideological conformity among their elected officials. This provides Democratic officeholders with greater flexibility to navigate pragmatically. However, it also means that the party lacks a shared philosophy to guide its actions and a unifying purpose to rally its supporters around (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2015). The greater flexibility enjoyed by the Democrats to navigate pragmatically could explain why Biden had the possibility to extend some of Trump's initiatives. Notwithstanding that while there are ideological differences, they may not be very apparent in outcomes, as major laws have to pass through the filter of parliaments. Therefore, the difference lies not in the purpose, but in political cultures (Freeman, 1986).

Furthermore, Eriksson argues that the Democrats place a greater importance to communion than the Republicans. Communion refers to the maintenance of relationships and social functioning (Eriksson, 2018). This suggests that the Presidents representing the Democratic party would put more effort in maintaining the relationship with China.

External factors also influence the relationship and thus the perception of leadership between the two countries. One of these factors is the war in Ukraine. China's position is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, China has proposed itself as a negotiator even if it has never condemned the invasion. On the other hand, it is condemning the anti-Western vision whereby the unipolar world led by the United States is denounced (Willems, 2022). Furthermore, the war is impacting the world order as a whole and could consequently have an impact on the US-China relations.

## 5. Conclusion

The importance of the relationship between the United States of America and China is evident. The future of our world, the stability and globalization depend on how the relationship between these two countries will evolve (Rambour, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to have a good understanding of how these countries interact and how their interaction and leadership are impacting their relationship and the international world order. Furthermore, neoclassical realists have emphasized that the responses of states are impacted by different factors such as perceptions and lessons learned from the past. Whereby the underlying thought is that decisions in foreign policy are taken by human beings, political leaders and elites, thus that political leadership is playing a role (Kaarbo, 2017).

By examining the relationship under the presidencies of Donald Trump and Joe Biden, the aim was to analyze if the political leadership of the American president is impacting the relationship with China. However, the research has its limitations and a more in-depth analysis would be needed to confirm or to disconfirm our findings. This research was conducted through the realist approach to international relations. It is important to consider this framework when interpreting the outcomes. If a different approach to international relations had been used, the analysis could have led to a different conclusion. The realist approach assumes that states always act rationally and objectively, but this is not always the case. Furthermore, the main element that was studied is the narrative used by both parties to describe their relationship. Examining different elements such as the economy, trade, the military, etc. could lead to different results. According to Weldes (1999), subjective factors that influence a state's decision-making process must be taken into account to fully comprehend the complex nature of a state's grand strategy and external policy. Two elements that could impact the relationship between these countries. Furthermore, leadership styles are not rigid and leaders can possibly change their styles (Lewin et al., 1939). A change in style could also have an impact.

During the last couple of years, the relationship between these two protagonists has been tumultuous. External factors have played a crucial role, such as the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine. Over the last two decades of geopolitical rivalry between Beijing and Washington, the United States has been perceived as taking a defensive stance, while China appears to be more offensive (Jarrett, 2021). Despite their differences, both countries appear to find common ground on common fundamental interests, such as climate change. Further

collaboration on these themes could serve as basic principles for further cooperation. The question remains whether further collaboration between both countries can align with their respective aspiration to become the world's leader and their national interests.

The previous reconciliation between Barack Obama-Xi Jinping demonstrated the unifying potential of two nations that share a vision, regardless of the specific differences. For this reason and the possible consequences, the Biden administration should prioritize bilateral diplomacy with China as the most pressing and well-resourced matter in its global climate change agenda, and hence redefine U.S.-China relations (Ewing, 2021). This demonstrates that both countries could have a future together if Biden can reconcile with China, as did Obama in the past. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the global context has evolved and presents new challenges.

It is crucial to consider that a new administration inherits the foreign policy of its predecessor, and must carefully evaluate which aspects to continue and which to abandon. Completely overturn everything that has been done in the past and start from scratch, is not feasible. Therefore, establishing a sustainable and long-term foreign policy can mitigate the impact of any single president on foreign policy decisions. Additionally, it is important to note that changing the president does not necessarily lead to an immediate improvement in the relationship with other countries. It thus seems that the power of the American leaders themselves would be limited. According to the realist school of international relations, this can be explained as nation-states are the principal actors and individuals have limited power (Antunes & Camisao, 2018).

Moreover, the Chinese leadership benefits from operating within an authoritarian system that can withstand more pressure compared to a democratic one like the United States. In a democratic system, such as the US, the president has to run for reelection, making them more vulnerable to pressure and public opinion (Gupta, 2020). Whereby the leader's connection with the population plays a more important role. Additionally, the rational-legal authority is containing and limiting the room for maneuver of the American presidency compared to the Chinese's.

There exists significant diversity in the personalities of leaders, even within the same political system and culture. These personality traits, or individual differences, represent a crucial aspect of the heterogeneity of preferences, beliefs, and decision-making processes that shape international politics. Leader personalities have an impact on how they react to both domestic

and international limitations and possibilities (Kaarbo, 2017). From the realist point of view, there seems to be a question of power between these two countries that seems to influence their relationship, irrespective of who is leading the United States.

Regarding China's role in this relationship, it is important to note that the definition of China's role and thus of its behavior in foreign policy is marked by its national and international history. Whereby China's leadership resonates within its society as it has a direct link with the history of Chinese society. By creating a conflicting scheme with external parties, the internal identity is being strengthened. This also implies that China actively seeks to become the world's leader and that its policy is justified as it is legitimized by Chinese history (Struye de Swielande, 2019).

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