

## FORUM

### U.S. – CHINA RELATIONS THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL-CONSTRUCTIVISM

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#### Abstract

*The twentieth century was marked, especially in its second part, by the rivalry of the United States and the Soviet Union, a rivalry that prompted many analysts to devise theories about this seemingly perpetual bi-polar international system. Yet after 1989 these theories crumbled under the seemingly unexpected dissolution of one of the two poles of the system, and thus new theories emerged, trying to better explain what was happening. One such theory, the Social-Constructivist one, tried to argue that identities, ideas and the way in which these are constructed also play a pivotal role in international relations. In the pages below I will try to analyze what is emerging to be a similarly century-defining rivalry, the one between the United States and the People's Republic of China, through the 'lens' of Social-Constructivism, to find out if the theory laid out by Alexander Wendt almost three decades ago can still aptly explain the world of today.*

**Keywords:** U.S. – China relations, Social-Constructivism, Discourses

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## Introduction

Ever since 1972 and the historic rapprochement between the United States and China<sup>1</sup>, the People's Republic has steadily, but decisively, grown into a major power, and the rise of the Asian nation has been closely linked with its relationship with the United States, especially in terms of their economic cooperation, which at times has seemed so close that it could be seen as symbiotic, prompting the emergence of the term "Chimerica" to highlight the growing interdependent link between the two countries.<sup>2</sup>

Still, the relationship was not always perfect, and even if, given the often disturbing and irrational behaviour and way of conducting himself of Donald Trump, we could be inclined to think that the tensions between the People's Republic of China and the United States originated with the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections and their disruptive and shocking outcome, the divergences between the two countries run much older.

The days of Kissinger, Bush or Clinton are beyond the scope of this paper, thus I will focus on more recent events, namely on the Obama presidency. Even by his first term in office and despite many other grave issues, such as the global economic crisis or the conflicts in the Middle East, the relationship with China was given top priority by the Obama administration, as the rise of China towards the status of major power was starting to be more and more difficult to ignore, and fears of what exactly a powerful China would mean for the U.S. were starting to rise as well. But the Obama administration, with Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State, wanted to avoid any unnecessary sentiments, as Clinton herself put it: "We all know that fears and misperceptions linger on both sides of the Pacific. Some in our country see China's progress as a threat to the United States; some in China worry that America seeks to constrain China's growth. We reject both those views. The fact is that a thriving America is good for China and a thriving China is good for America. We both have much more

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<sup>1</sup> Tsuneo Watanabe, "US Engagement Policy toward China: Realism, Liberalism, and Pragmatism", *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 2(2), 2013, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Andre Browne, "The Chimera that was 'Chimerica'", in *Bloomberg*, 11 July 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2020-07-11/bloomberg-new-economy-the-chimera-that-was-chimerica>, accessed 11<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

to gain from cooperation than from conflict”.<sup>3</sup> Though it is relevant to my argument, the importance given to *fears and misperceptions* by Clinton will be tackled below.

For now, I will focus on the ‘grand strategy’ of the Obama administration and the ‘Asian Pivot’ that it implied. To put it shortly, the view in Washington was that the importance of the Asian continent, but especially China, will greatly outweigh the importance of the Middle East or Eastern Europe in the decades to come, and thus for the U.S. this would entail a ‘geopolitical refocusing’<sup>4</sup> that would see the United States shift diplomatic, economic and military attention and resources on the Asian continent, more specifically around the Asian-Pacific region.<sup>5</sup>

One of the major sources of tensions and fears was the Chinese increasing pressure and policy concerning the East and South China Seas, that saw China trying to wrest control over what is called the ‘nine-dash line’, a series of islands in the South China Sea that, taken together with their Exclusive Economic Zones would virtually give China control over the entire South China Sea<sup>6</sup>. In response to these actions, the Obama administration pursued a policy of ‘hedging and cooperation’, that meant simultaneously deepening existing alliances and partnerships with states such as Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, The Philippines, or Australia in the attempt to put pressure on China, and a closer cooperation with Beijing, often done by summits and meetings of the highest level between Obama and Chinese President Hu Jintao and later Xi Jinping<sup>7</sup>. The discourse constructed by the Obama administration to legitimize such a ‘pivot’ was centered around the idea that the United States is inherently a ‘Pacific’ nation and the emphasis of long-standing links between the United States

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<sup>3</sup> Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century” in *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>, accessed 11<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Georg Löfflman, “The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint: President Obama’s Conflicted Grand Strategy in Asia”, *Asian Security*, 12(2), 2016, p.95.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95-101.

<sup>6</sup> Beina Xu, “South China Sea Tensions”, in *Council on Foreign Relations*, 14 May 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/background/south-china-sea-tensions>, accessed 11<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Garrison and Marc Wall, “The Rise of Hedging and Regionalism: An Explanation and Evaluation of President Obama’s China Policy”, *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 43(2), 2016, pp. 54-58.

and Asian countries.<sup>8</sup> In his speech in front of the Australian Parliament in 2011, Obama underscored that: “The United States has been, and always will be, a Pacific nation. Asian immigrants helped build America, and millions of American families, including my own, cherish our ties to this region. From the bombing of Darwin to the liberation of Pacific islands, from the rice paddies of Southeast Asia to a cold Korean Peninsula, generations of Americans have served here, and died here—so democracies could take root; so economic miracles could lift hundreds of millions to prosperity.”<sup>9</sup>

Yet when put under the lens of practical and substantive change, Obama’s administration did not live up to the level of actions it claimed in its discourse. “Obama endorsed the pivot in his idealistic and normative discourse and succeeded in promoting the legitimacy of the strategy to a global audience. He regularly promoted the pivot in multilateral fora and through discussions with regional leaders. But Obama’s practical policies failed to live up to his exalted discourse. Obama was unable to combine support for Asian states and their multilateral settings with his containment policies towards China. His normative legitimization alienated some regional leaders including Duterte, Prayut and Najib, and his actions in the South China Sea failed to prevent China from conducting assertive policies. Obama’s push for greater military presence in Asia did not materialize.”<sup>10</sup>

### “America First” – Trump and China Discourse

This failure of the Obama administration to act on the discourse that it created was capitalized in the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections by Donald Trump. The rhetoric that Trump was constructing on China was, clearly, from the start of the electoral campaign, an extremely fiery one, foretelling much of the difficulties between the two countries in the years of his tenure in Washington.

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<sup>8</sup> Michal Kolmaš and Šárka Kolmašová, “A ‘pivot’ that never existed: America’s Asian strategy under Obama and Trump”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2019, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament*, Washington DC: The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 17<sup>th</sup> November 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament.>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Michal Kolmaš and Šárka Kolmašová, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

The fact that the Obama administration, as seen above, had taken a tougher stance on China than any previous administration after 1972, did not mean much to Trump, who took every opportunity to direct vicious attacks both towards China and towards Washington. In one of his campaign speeches, he even went as far as to say that: “We can't continue to allow China to rape our country”<sup>11</sup>. Of course, attacks were also levied against his opponent, Hillary Clinton, who was accused of being part of “a leadership class that worships globalism”<sup>12</sup>, clearly indicating the major shift towards isolationism and nationalism that he would implement once in office. Yet, a quite puzzling development also occurred in China during the 2016 U.S. elections, where Donald Trump, despite the abovementioned ferocious attacks on China, developed quite a positive image among the Chinese public, even if at the political level he was not seen equally well in China<sup>13</sup>, and despite arguments that the Trump victory was a massive victory for Beijing.<sup>14</sup>

After the major surprise in the elections results, Trump did not hesitate too much in implementing his promises, with the “America First” doctrine of isolationism in terms of foreign and security policy and protectionism in terms of economic policy being the key concepts and most important elements of the “Trump doctrine”<sup>15</sup>, a doctrine that sparked many fears, especially in traditional U.S. allies in the Asia-Pacific region,

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<sup>11</sup> “Trump accuses China of ‘raping’ US with unfair trade policy” in *BBC News*, 2 May 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-36185012>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Nick Corasaniti, Alexander Burns and Binyamin Appelbaum, “Donald Trump Vows to Rip Up Trade Deals and Confront China” in *The New York Times*, 28 June 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/29/us/politics/donald-trump-trade-speech.html>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Beech, “Donald Trump Talked a Lot About China at the Debate. Here’s What China Thought About That” in *Time*, 27 September 2016, <https://time.com/4509121/china-presidential-debate-hillary-clinton-donald-trump/>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

<sup>14</sup> James Palmer, “China Just Won the U.S. Election” in *Foreign Policy*, 9 November 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/09/china-just-won-the-u-s-election-trump-victory/>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Fumiaki Kubo, “Reading the Trump Administration’s China Policy”, *Asia-Pacific Review*, 26(1), 2019, p. 59.

such as Japan<sup>16</sup>. In reality however, the first element, an isolationist policy, was never truly implemented<sup>17</sup>, for a number of reasons, chiefly among them being the fact that the United States simply had too many partnerships and was involved in too many parts and aspects of the international system to just turn its back on the world at the push of a button. The second element of the 'America First' doctrine was actually carried out by the Trump administration, and the best evidence of this lies not only in its relationship with China and the Trade War that ensued between the two countries, but also in many other aspects of U.S. economic policy, such as the withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations.<sup>18</sup>

A major shift in the Trump administration and its policy on China occurred after, but perhaps exactly during, the bi-lateral visit of President Xi Jinping to Trump's Mar-a-Lago complex in April 2017. All of the sudden the fiery rhetoric that went as far as to outright call the relations between China and the United States as 'rape' were not as grim. "Look, China came to the United States, the President, who I really developed a very good relationship with. I think he is a terrific person. I really got to know him very well over a two-day period. we were together hours and hours and hours by ourselves. We had a 15-minute scheduled meeting and it lasted for three hours. the same thing happened the next day. We have a good chemistry together."<sup>19</sup> Clearly, President Xi must have pushed all of the right buttons with Trump, for such a change to happen and for Trump to even publicly say that "I'm dealing with China with great respect. I have great respect for him."<sup>20</sup> And the newly found friendship of Trump and Xi proved to hold some water and go a bit beyond mere words and

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<sup>16</sup> Shin Kawashima, "US-China Relations Under the Trump Administration: A View from Tokyo" in *Nippon*, 18<sup>th</sup> January 2017, <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/a05302/?pnun=2>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Shin Kawashima, "Japan-US-China Relations during the Trump Administration and the Outlook for East Asia" in *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2017, p. 32, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2017.1328800>, accessed 13<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Byron Wolf, "One reason President Donald Trump changed his rhetoric on China? He really likes the Chinese president" in *CNN News*, 18<sup>th</sup> April 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/18/politics/president-donald-trump-chinese-president-xi-friendly/index.html>, accessed 13<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem.*

declarations when a few months later, in September 2017, China followed the United States lead in imposing economic sanctions on North Korea, a traditional ally of Beijing, prompting Trump to praise the action as “very bold”<sup>21</sup>.

But it seemed that the honeymoon would not last long, as by 2018 the Trump administration yet again turned to a more aggressive stance towards China. The National Defense Strategy, enshrining into policy the realist and nationalist ideology, if we can call it an ideology, of Trump, marked a clear move towards “great-power competition”, a policy that has slowly gained ground for the last decade in the defense policy of the United States<sup>22</sup>. The 2018 National Defense Strategy, prepared by the Department of Defense under Jim Mattis, clearly indicates that “Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security”<sup>23</sup>. Even more, the document signals out China as, alongside Russia and North Korea, the most important adversary of the United States: “China is a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea”<sup>24</sup>. The rise of China, especially in military terms is also seen as a clear sign that Beijing wants to replace the United States in the role of the world’s most powerful nation: “China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage. As China continues its economic and military ascendance, asserting power through an all-of-nation long-term strategy, it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony

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<sup>21</sup> Julian Borger, “Trump issues new sanctions on North Korea and claims China is following” in *The Guardian*, 21<sup>st</sup> September 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/21/trump-north-korea-executive-order-china>, accessed 14<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Michele Flournoy, “America’s Military Risks Losing Its Edge” in *Foreign Affairs*, 20<sup>th</sup> May 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-04-20/flournoy-americas-military-risks-losing-its-edge>, accessed 21<sup>st</sup> May 2021.

<sup>23</sup> *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington DC: Department of Defense, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>, p.1, accessed 15<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future”<sup>25</sup>.

This major shift in the foreign and defense policy of the United States has prompted analysts to outright call the end of the ‘liberal world’ international system that was put in place after the end of the Second World War, with the isolationist turn represented by the presidency of Donald Trump as one of, if not the most important, factors in the decline of the liberal regime.<sup>26</sup>

### **U.S. – China Trade War**

But returning to our case study, 2018 was not only ‘special’ in the relations between China and the United States because of the introduction, or rather formalization, of the U.S. defense policy that portrays China as the clear rival of the United States in the ‘race’ for the top spot in the international system. 2018 was also the year in which the ‘trade war’ between Washington and Beijing truly took off.

January 2018 marked the opening ‘shots’ of the ‘trade war’, with the first attack originating in Washington. Though it did not have a huge impact, the first wave of tariffs introduced by the Trump Administration on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2018 on solar panels and washing machines<sup>27</sup> did signal, yet again, a shift in the U.S. policy under Donald Trump, this time going back to the ‘America First’ doctrine of isolationism and especially economic protectionism.

The first truly meaningful tariffs came a few months later, in March 2018, when the U.S. announced a 25% tariff on all imports of steel and aluminum, this time the move being levied against all countries, not just China<sup>28</sup>. In the same month however, China would be hit with another round of tariffs, this time the impact being much larger, with the United

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2

<sup>26</sup> Richard Haass, “Liberal World Order, R.I.P.” in *Council on Foreign Relations*, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/article/liberal-world-order-rip>, accessed 15<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Jacob Schlesinger and Erin Ailworth, “U.S. Imposes New Tariffs, Ramping up ‘America First’ Trade Policy” in *The Wall Street Journal*, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-imposes-trade-tariffs-signaling-tougher-line-on-china-1516658821>, accessed 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>28</sup> “Trump’s Tariff Folly” in *The Wall Street Journal*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trumps-tariff-folly-1519950205>, accessed 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

States imposing tariffs on Chinese imports worth around \$50 billion, Trump declaring that the reason behind these tariffs was a “tremendous intellectual property theft problem”<sup>29</sup>.

China did not sit around doing nothing, and by April 2018 it announced that it too would impose a 25% tariff on a range of U.S. products, such as cars, soybeans or whiskey, which would amount to 0.3% of the U.S. total GDP<sup>30</sup>. Still, even with only 0.3% of the GDP affected, the situation was looking more and more tense between the two countries and the outcomes were not looking very positive.

A good sign came in May 2018, when after the meeting between Trump and Chinese Vice-Premier Liu He, both parties agreed that they should be “putting the trade war on hold”.<sup>31</sup> However, this pause did not last awfully long, and soon enough the two economic giants were back at it, imposing tariff after tariff, with each wave being met with a counterattack from the opposing side as soon as possible. Thus, the rest of 2018 was marked by this continuing degradation in the economic relationship between Beijing and Washington, as each month, especially June<sup>32,33</sup>, July<sup>34</sup> and August<sup>35</sup>, saw the deepening of the trade dispute.

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<sup>29</sup> Jeremy Diamond, “Trump hits China with tariffs, heightening concerns of global trade war” in *CNN News*, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/22/politics/donald-trump-china-tariffs-trade-war/>, accessed 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Berkeley Lovelace, “Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross: China tariffs amount to only 0.3% of US GDP” in *CNBC*, 4<sup>th</sup> April 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/04/04/commerce-secretary-wilbur-ross-china-tariffs-amount-to-0-point-3-percent-of-us-gdp.html>, accessed 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Crutsinger and Paul Wiseman, “Us, China putting trade war on hold after progress in talks” in *AP News*, 21<sup>st</sup> May 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/north-america-ap-top-news-international-news-steven-mnuchin-politics-41443aaca704426b9f35b16607271a60>, accessed 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Pamela Brown and Julia Horowitz, “Trump announces tariffs on \$50 billion worth of Chinese goods” in *CNN News*, 15<sup>th</sup> June 2018, <https://money.cnn.com/2018/06/14/news/economy/trump-china-tariffs/index.html?adkey=bn>, accessed 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Mark Thompson, “China: ‘The US has launched a trade war’” in *CNN News*, 15<sup>th</sup> June 2018, <https://money.cnn.com/2018/06/15/news/economy/china-us-trade-war/index.html>, accessed 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>34</sup> “China hits back after US imposes tariffs worth \$34bn” in *BBC News*, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-44707253>, accessed 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>35</sup> David Lawder, “U.S. finalizes next China tariff list targeting \$16 billion in imports” in *Reuters*, 8<sup>th</sup> August 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trade-china/u-s-finalizes->

Despite not reaching anything close to the desired results, as the U.S. trade deficit in 2018 with China did not close by any means, but in fact grew to levels reached only before the 2008 economic crisis<sup>36</sup>, the Trump Administration was not deterred and pushed on in its quest to impose tariffs, with the justification being that, according to Donald Trump: “our country can take in \$120 billion a year in tariffs, paid for mostly by China, by the way, not by us. A lot of people try and steer it in a different direction. It’s really paid — ultimately, it’s paid for by — largely, by China. And businesses will pour back into our country.”<sup>37</sup>

Thus, waves of tariffs continued to be imposed by both countries until June 2019, when at the G20 summit in Osaka Donald Trump and Xi Jinping agreed to another truce<sup>38</sup>. A pattern was forming however, and similarly to 2018, this truce would not resist the test of time, and by August 2019 the tariffs were yet again the preferred tool of choice for Trump<sup>39</sup>, with the Chinese response coming only a few weeks later.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the appearance of a pattern being formed, where the United States would impose tariffs followed by a Chinese similar response, that would go back and forth for a few months and would only temporarily be stopped by some unfruitful negotiations, the announcement on 13<sup>th</sup>

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next-china-tariff-list-targeting-16-billion-in-imports-idUSKBN1KS2CB, accessed 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Jim Zarroli, “Despite Trump’s Promises, The Trade Deficit is Only Getting Wider” in *NPR*, 6<sup>th</sup> March 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/06/700650144/despite-trumps-promises-the-trade-deficit-is-only-getting-wider>, accessed 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Louis Jacobson, “Who pays for US tariffs on Chinese goods? You do” in *Politifact*, 14<sup>th</sup> May 2019, <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2019/may/14/donald-trump/does-china-mostly-pay-us-tariffs-rather-us-consume/>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Lemire and Zeke Miller, “Truce in US-China trade war as 2 rivals seek breakthrough” in *AP News*, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-donald-trump-global-trade-osaka-japan-e65bb15053cb437794a464a597ee565f>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Yun Li, “Trump says US will impose 10% tariffs on another \$300 billion of Chinese goods starting Sept.1” in *CNBC*, 1<sup>st</sup> August 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/08/01/trump-says-us-will-impose-10percent-tariffs-on-300-billion-of-chinese-goods-starting-september-1.html>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Yong Xiong and Victoria Cavaliere, “China and the US ratchet up trade war in a day of retaliation” in *CNN News*, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/08/23/business/china-tariffs-trade-war/index.html>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

December 2019 that a comprehensive trade deal was being negotiated between Beijing and Washington<sup>41</sup> showed a glimmer of hope that a more meaningful and long-lasting solution would be eventually found by the two parties. And hope materialized into reality when Donald Trump and Liu He signed the “Phase One” trade deal between China and the United States on January 15<sup>th</sup> 2020.<sup>42</sup>

The agreement was, however, criticized by expert for a number of issues, chiefly among them being the fact that deal did not have any real enforcing mechanisms, meaning that in the case of a dispute, which given the previous relationship and the predisposition of Trump to act on impulses could happen at any moment, both parties could simply back out of the agreement and start re-imposing tariffs again.<sup>43</sup> The lack of a third-party arbitration mechanism in the deal was also seen as a deep blow to the international system of the World Trade Organization, the institution that usually settles such disputes. The declaration of Robert Lighthizer, U.S. Trade Representative under Donald Trump, was particularly symbolic for the unilateralism that defined the Trump Presidency: “The only arbitrator I trust is myself”.<sup>44</sup> Such a clear rejection of the liberal international institutions that the United States has created is perhaps the most clear and important sign that the construction by the United States of a return to great-power rivalry, as stated above, is materializing.

With the deal signed, the trade war seemed to come to an end, which would be a good respite for Beijing, who saw in 2019 the worst economic year in the last three decades, though the Chinese economy still grew by

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<sup>41</sup> Lily Kuo and Dominic Rushe, “China confirms ‘phase one’ trade deal with US” in *The Guardian*, 13<sup>th</sup> December 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/dec/13/china-confirms-phase-one-trade-deal-us-tariffs>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Shawn Donnan, Josh Wingrove and Saleha Mohsin, “U.S. and China sign Phase One of the Trade Deal” in *Bloomberg*, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-01-15/u-s-china-sign-phase-one-of-trade-deal-trump-calls-remarkable>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>43</sup> David Lawder, “In U.S. – China Phase 1 trade deal, enforcement may end in ‘We quit’” in *Reuters*, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trade-china-enforcement/in-u-s-china-phase-1-trade-deal-enforcement-may-end-in-we-quit-idUSKBN1ZE2T1>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Bob Davis, “U.S. – China Deal Could Upend the Way Nations Settle Disputes” in *The Wall Street Journal*, 16<sup>th</sup> January 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-china-deal-could-upend-the-way-nations-settle-disputes-11579211598>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

6,1%<sup>45</sup>, but as we all know it, 2020 was by far a good year for anything, with the global pandemic devastating economies around the globe and claiming more lives than any other factor. The rhetoric of Donald Trump on the coronavirus was also a great blow to the relationship between China and the U.S., with Trump continuously building and defending his argument that the virus is a 'Chinese virus'<sup>46</sup>, a discourse that did not help in any shape or form the growing Anti-Asian sentiments in the United States<sup>47</sup>. The insistence of Trump on blaming China for the coronavirus<sup>48</sup>, along many other factors, especially economic ones, lead to the failure of the 'Phase One' deal between the two countries, as studies showed that targets set by the deal for U.S. export to China were never met, and the figures indicate a 40% shortcoming.<sup>49</sup>

The election of Joe Biden in late 2020 was seen by many as a positive sign for the relationship between China and the United States, and generally speaking a return of the United States to the liberal international system it had created, a system that is not based around policies such as tariffs and trade wars. But, quite surprisingly, the Biden Administration does not seem to plan any reduction of the tariffs introduced under Donald Trump<sup>50</sup>, so it seems that at least for now the trade war is still going on.

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<sup>45</sup> "China's economic growth hits 30-year low" in *BBC News*, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51144892>, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Dan Mangan, "Trump defends calling coronavirus 'Chinese virus' – 'it's not racist at all'" in *CNBC*, 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/18/coronavirus-criticism-trump-defends-saying-chinese-virus.html>, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Mishal Reja, "Trump's 'Chinese Virus' Tweet helped lead to rise in racist anti-Asian Twitter Content: Study" in *ABC News*, 18<sup>th</sup> March 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/trumps-chinese-virus-tweet-helped-lead-rise-racist/story?id=76530148>, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>48</sup> "In U.N. Speech, Trump Blasts China And WHO, Blaming Them for Spread of Covid-19" in *NPR*, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/09/22/915630892/in-u-n-speech-trump-blasts-china-and-who-blaming-them-for-spread-of-covid-19?t=1623877160682>, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Mullen, "US-China trade war: phase one trade deal largely a 'failure', as purchases fall well short of targets" in *South China Morning Post*, 8<sup>th</sup> February 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3120986/us-china-trade-war-phase-one-trade-deal-largely-failure>, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Jonathan Ponciano, "Trade War: Biden Administration Not Ready To 'Yank' China Tariffs, But Open To Talks" in *Forbes*, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathanponciano/2021/03/28/trade-war-biden->

A first question that arises is why exactly is the Biden Administration continuing the Trump Policy of tariffs, beyond the easy answer that economically it would be tough to remove them so easily. One possible answer would be the concept of securitization, a concept developed by the Copenhagen School of International Relations, where political actors, through their discourses or speech-acts, transform elements that relate to economic, cultural or generally speaking civilian matters into matters of state security, thus invoking the need for a greater control or simply justifying certain measures<sup>51</sup>, such as in our case the need of the United States to impose tariffs on China.

Analysts point out the fact that under Trump, many aspects of economic policy have undergone a process of ‘securitization’, such as the analysis of Evan Medeiros, that points to the fact that “perhaps the most worrisome new driver of US-China economic competition is a phenomenon which can be called the “securitization” of bilateral economic relations. This refers to economic challenges—some new and some old—that have now assumed a national security identity”.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, T.J. Pempel argues that a “major mistake in the Trump Administration’s approach is that it has transformed problems endemic to China’s economic practices into an existential threat against the United States”.<sup>53</sup>

### **China and ‘the declining west’**

Aside from the explanation provided by the concept of securitization, another perspective could perhaps be offered by the way in which China, especially under Xi Jinping, has been portraying the international scene in recent years, and the role Xi envisioned for China. Thus, after 2011, the Chinese government has been increasingly moving towards a narrative of China as a superpower, with, or especially as, the

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administration-not-ready-to-yank-china-tariffs-but-open-to-talks/?sh=2b5f09f05e8b, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Williams, “Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics” in *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 2003, pp. 511-515, DOI:10.1046/j.0020-8833.2003.00277.x.

<sup>52</sup> Evan Medeiros, “The Changing Fundamentals of US-China Relations” in *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 2019, p. 99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1666355>.

<sup>53</sup> T.J. Pempel, “Right target; wrong tactics: the Trump administration upends East Asian order” in *The Pacific Review*, 2019, p. 13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2019.1617769>.

West being described as a waning power. “The East is rising and the West is declining”<sup>54</sup> declared Xi earlier this year, as he seeks to move China from a vision of a growing nation to that of a global hegemon.

This move from Xi Jinping is not something out of the blue either, as the top-level members of the Chinese Government have been steadily pushing this narrative in recent years. Former Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs He Yafei has also took a jab at the United States and its position and power relative to China, saying that the United States “will find that its strength increasingly falls short of its ambitions, both domestically and internationally....This is the grand trend of history....The global balance of power and world order will continue to tilt in favor of China, and China’s development will become unstoppable.”<sup>55</sup>

The Chinese narrative also seeks to question the degree to which the West, and especially the United States, has been monopolizing the international public opinion, as the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in a recent meeting with his U.S. counterpart: “The United States itself does not represent international public opinion, and neither does the Western world. Whether judged by population scale or the trend of the world, the Western world does not represent the global public opinion”<sup>56</sup>.

Chinese ambitions are also channeled into, or perhaps it would be better understood as originating from, technological innovations. To that extent, Chinese ambitions to develop a strong, 21<sup>st</sup> century military capability also rely heavily on its quest to become a ‘Wǎngluò Qiángguó’<sup>57</sup>, or a cyber great power or superpower.

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<sup>54</sup> Chun Han Wong, “China Plays Up Ascendancy Over West as It Sets Economic Path” in *The Wall Street Journal*, 4<sup>th</sup> March 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-plays-up-ascendancy-over-west-as-it-sets-economic-path-11614854159>, accessed 19<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>55</sup> He Yafei, “Ushering in A New Chapter” in *China US Focus*, 26<sup>th</sup> February 2021, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/ushering-in-a-new-chapter>, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>56</sup> “How it happened: Transcript of the US-China opening remarks in Alaska” in *Nikkei Asia*, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/US-China-tensions/How-it-happened-Transcript-of-the-US-China-opening-remarks-in-Alaska>, accessed 19<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Rogier Creemers *et. al.*, “Lexicon: 网络强国 Wǎngluò Qiángguó” in *New America*, 31<sup>st</sup> May 2018, <https://www.newamerica.org/cybersecurity-initiative/digichina/blog/lexicon-wangluo-qiangguo/>, accessed 19<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

This discourse of a powerful China, constructed on the basis of its incredible economic growth over the last decades also has its internal shortcomings. Poverty is still an issue for China, and despite the recent boasting of President Xi Jinping that China has eliminated absolute poverty (where absolute poverty is defined as living on \$28 per month or less)<sup>58</sup>, China is far from being a completely developed country, as Premier Li Keqiang recently announced that over 600 million Chinese citizens live on monthly wages lower than \$140<sup>59</sup>. Thus, the degree to which the Chinese economy could actually sustain its grandiose rhetoric remains an open question.

### Looking through the Social-Constructivist lens

In the pages above I have tried to summarize the events that I found relevant in the development of the U.S. – China relationship, especially during the Trump Administration, as well as the constructed discourse about each other that Washington and Beijing, or Trump and Xi, have put together recently. I will now go back to the original purpose of this paper, that is to see if the social-constructivist theory proposed by Alexander Wendt can properly explain these developments.

In the shortest way I can summarize it, the ‘wendian’ theory rests on three pillars: positivism<sup>60</sup>, idealism<sup>61</sup> and holism<sup>62</sup>. These three main elements, taken together with the idea that in the international system (and not only) roles, identities and structures are not pre-given but rather appear as a result of interactions between states and are continuously shaped by those interactions, can be understood as the core idea of Social-Constructivism.

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<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth Economy, “China’s Inconvenient Truth” in *Foreign Affairs*, 28<sup>th</sup> May 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-05-28/chinas-inconvenient-truth>, accessed 29<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Zhou Xi, “Is China rich or poor? Nation’s wealth debate muddied by conflicting government data” in *South China Morning Post*, 29<sup>th</sup> May 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3086678/china-rich-or-poor-nations-wealth-debate-muddied-conflicting>, accessed 29<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 39-40

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 90-137

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 185-190.

Firstly, positivism, the idea that there is a reality outside of our perceptions, can be easily seen through the way in which both countries have had to constantly adjust their policies, which originally were based on their perceptions about the other side, to better match the reality, as exemplified by the mismatched perception of Donald Trump that imposing tariffs on China would dramatically reduce the trade deficit between the two countries.

Idealism, or the role of ideas in the formation of interests and the importance they have over 'pure' power, can be identified in the way in which the United States have developed their agenda in the attempts of reaching a trade deal with China. The dismissal of the international institutions, based on the idea and perception that the United States cannot trust any third-party arbitration because it might go against its national interest, in the arbitration mechanism of the 'Chapter One' deal signed in early 2020, has led to the appearance, perhaps the first time in 70 years, of an international treaty between two major countries that is purely bilateral in nature.

The holistic, or structural, aspect of the argument can be identified most easily in the discourse created by China, in which the pre-eminent role of the United States as the sole superpower is being called into question, and the rise of China towards that position is seen as imminent and impossible to avoid. Another way in which the international structure can be analyzed in light of recent developments in the relationship between China and the United States is the way in which the structure, which I think can be best described as, especially after 1990 and the end of the Cold War, a structure marked by the international liberalism culture of multilateralism governed by international institutions, has been changed dramatically in the span of just 4 years of the Trump Presidency towards a culture of bilateralism in which the international institutions play a much more reduced role. On the last idea, that states that roles, identities and structures are not pre-given, both in international relations and generally speaking in any social system, but are rather the results of interactions between actors, I will dwell a bit more, for it underpins perhaps the most important question: why? Why did the U.S. under Donald Trump change the course of the relationship with China so violently?

A possible answer would be what some researchers called the “60% rule”, an apparent unwritten rule of U.S. foreign policy that indicates that whenever any country reaches 60% of the United States economic size, the U.S. will immediately start to view it as a rival and do everything in its power to stop its advance, just how it did with Japan back in the 1980-1990’s<sup>63</sup>, which does not mean only deploying economic tools such as tariffs, but rather a whole-of-government approach, or as Jeffrey Sachs puts it: “The Trump administration’s conflict with China has little to do with US external imbalances, closed Chinese markets, or even China’s alleged theft of intellectual property. It has everything to do with containing China by limiting its access to foreign markets, advanced technologies, global banking services, and perhaps even US universities”<sup>64</sup>. Without subtracting from this argument, I would opt for another explanation, one based much more on ideas and how they shape identities and interests.

One of the core ideas of realists in International Relations, a camp that we can easily place Donald Trump in, based not only on the people that he chose for his staff, but also on his actions and isolationist, nationalistic rationale behind them, has been exactly what the Department of Defense officialized in 2018 under Jim Mattis, the idea that great-power rivalry is again the most defining element of the international system.

In the words of John Mearsheimer, one of the leading figures of Realism in International Relations: “To put it bluntly: China cannot rise peacefully. It is important to emphasize, however, that I am not arguing that Chinese behavior alone will drive the security competition that lies ahead. The United States is also likely to behave in aggressive ways, thus further increasing the prospects for trouble”<sup>65</sup>. This idea, that China cannot rise peacefully has been the underlying motivation of the actions that the

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<sup>63</sup> Chi Hung Kwan, “The China-US Trade War: Deep-Rooted Causes, Shifting Focus and Uncertain Prospects” in *Asian Economic Policy Review*, Vol. 1, No. 18, 2019, p. 4, DOI: 10.1111/aepr.12284.

<sup>64</sup> Jeffrey Sachs, “The War on Huawei”, in *Project Syndicate*, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2018, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-war-on-huawei-meng-wanzhou-arrest-by-jeffrey-d-sachs-2018-12>, accessed 19<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

<sup>65</sup> John Mearsheimer, “The Gathering Storm: China’s Challenge to U.S. Power in East Asia”, in *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2010, p. 382, DOI:10.1093/cjip/poq016.

Trump Administration took in terms of its relationship with China, for when you believe that a country with the potential of China, a country that is rising faster and more decisive than any other country in recent history, and you believe that that country will not shy away from attacking you, not only in terms of rhetoric but also in an economic as well as physical, kinetic way, your interests and subsequently policies will of course focus on how to stop it.

The role of perceptions must also be highlighted, as they play a crucial role in the shaping of the relationship between the two countries, and has played a great role in the securitization of various elements, mainly economic and technological, that especially the United States has undergone recently. As Medeiros puts it: “the US-China security relationship is now a complex mix of an expanding set of diverging interests combined with an intensifying security dilemma. This is in part due to China’s expanding capabilities and in part due to its increased willingness to use them. The resulting security competition is a function of both US and Chinese behaviors and perceptions”<sup>66</sup>. Of course, it is not only the United States that has changed its behaviour and policy based on changing perceptions about the other, for China is ‘guilty’ of the same pattern of decisions, as “beginning in 2010, due to changing Chinese perceptions about its claims as well as the US role and enhanced Chinese capabilities to protect them, maritime territorial disputes became a new focus of US-China security competition”<sup>67</sup>.

Yet another argument that showcases the power of ideas and how discourses can influence, and to a large extent, shape the views and interests of a society, can be seen in the changing perceptions of U.S. citizens of China after the 2016 elections of Donald Trump, but especially after 2018 and the start of the ‘trade war’.

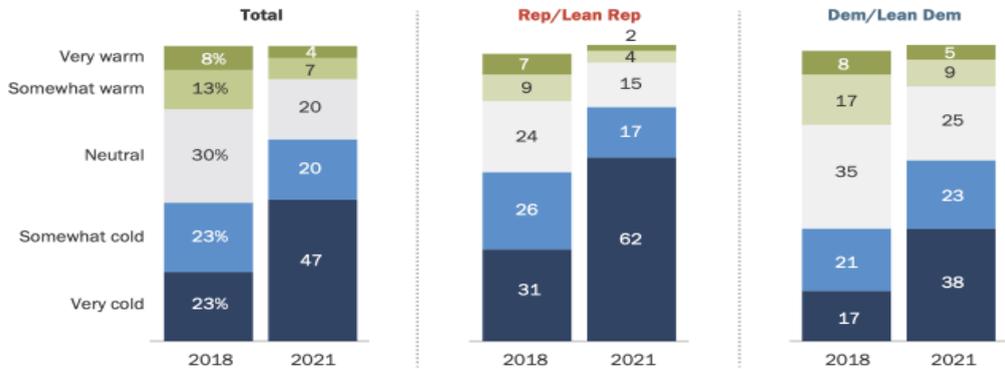
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<sup>66</sup> Evan Medeiros, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 96-97.

**Negative views of China up substantially since 2018**

% who rate China as \_\_\_ on a feeling thermometer from 0 (coldest rating) to 100 (warmest rating)

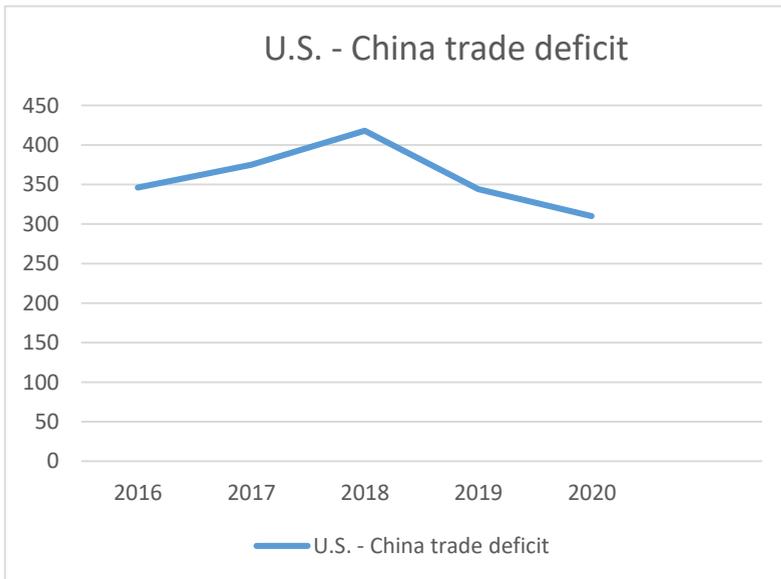


Note: Those who did not answer not shown. "Very cold" refers to ratings of 0-24 out of 100. "Somewhat cold" refers to ratings of 25-49. "Neutral" refers to ratings of exactly 50, and "somewhat warm" and "very warm" refer to ratings of 51-75 and 76-100, respectively. Thermometer was asked as: "We'd like to get your feelings toward some different countries in the world on a 'feeling thermometer.' A rating of zero degrees means you feel as cold and negative as possible. A rating of 100 degrees means you feel as warm and positive as possible. You would rate the country at 50 degrees if you don't feel particularly positive or negative toward the country. How do you feel toward China?" Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Feb. 1-7, 2021. Thermchina. "Most Americans Support Tough Stance Toward China on Human Rights, Economic Issues"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

**Figure 2: U.S. Citizens view of China in 2018 and 2021.**

Source: Pew Research Center



**Figure 3: U.S. - China trade deficit between 2016 - 2020.**

Source: Graph created by author based on figures of the United States Census Bureau.

As Figure 1 shows, U.S. citizens, on both sides of the political spectrum, have drastically more negative views of China now in 2021 than they did back in 2018 when the trade war started. This could be, just as Donald Trump time and time again put it, because of the negative trade balance between China and the United States. But Figure 2 shows us that in fact the trade deficit between the two countries has been reduced by almost \$100 billion between 2018 and 2020, from \$418 billion to \$310 billion<sup>68</sup>, and that would logically imply a reduction in negative views, or at the very least a stagnation, but it cannot justify a doubling of such views.

Thus, the only logical explanation for such a change in the views of the U.S. citizens is that despite the fact that no significant and substantive changes occurred in the trade balance between the two countries, the stated reason behind the policy of waging a trade war, the attitudes of the citizens changed because of the social construction of China as a strategic rival to the position of the United States as sole superpower in the world. The fact that the public perception changed so drastically in the span of only 2 years, and under the administration of one of the most controversial political figures of modern times, can only stand as testament to the fact that social constructions indeed shape the way in which states view their interests and subsequently devise their policies and behaviour, as the fact that the Biden Administration is not reverting the tariffs imposed by Donald Trump exemplifies.

## Conclusion

I have firstly tried to present the facts and key developments of the conflict, such as the Obama's administration "Asian Pivot" that laid the ground for a U.S. economic, diplomatic and military shift away from the Middle East and towards the Asian-Pacific region, even if during his tenure, Barack Obama only managed to do so on a rhetoric level. The 2016 elections and victory of Donald Trump marked a decisive shift in the relationship between the two countries, as Trump started even from his campaign a discourse in which China was portrayed as a rival nation that

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<sup>68</sup> *Trade in Goods with China*, Foreign Trade, Washington D.C.: United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html#2016>, accessed 20<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

tries to replace the United States as the world leader and is using illicit economic ways to achieve such a goal, of course put in much simpler and resonant words by the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the U.S.

The pre-eminent importance given by the United States in its Defense Policy to the 'great-power competition' between itself and China clearly and officially marked the departure, temporarily or not, from the world of liberalism and global liberal institutions, towards a bilateral world in which third-parties are no longer relevant, a fact underlined yet again by the fact that the 2020 economic deal between China and the United States outright rejected a third-party arbitration mechanism.

Further on, I have tried to analyze the equally important ways in which the Chinese state has developed its discourse over the last years, a discourses marked by a move away from the old ideas that saw China as a developing nation and towards the concept of China as an economic, technologic and even military superpower that stands on equal footing with the United States, if not even above it.

Finally, in the last pages of this paper I have tried to show that indeed, Social-Constructivism can aptly explain this conflict. The core of this argument is the fact that ideas stand at the root of identities, and through interactions between states, these identities form the interests of the state and thus their policies and actions. In our case, I have identified the origins of the Trump administration's policy on China in the Realist ideas, such as those of John Mearsheimer, that promote the impending rise of China, and the assumption that such a meteoric rise will not come peacefully. Thus, as Trump and his administration have been sharply defined by the assumption and implementation of realist postulates, the White House, under Donald Trump, has seen China as a dangerous rival to the position of the United States. Given the identity assumed by the Trump administration of the United States as 'Great' and powerful, their interest was to stop, or at least slow down, the rise of China, and the easiest and harmless way to do so was through the waging of an economic trade war with Beijing.

The fact that U.S. citizens perceptions on China have drastically turned negative since 2018 and the start of the trade war, despite the lack of a significant change in the actual, real economic relations between the two countries, only strengthens the argument that interests and identities are

continuously shaped and re-shaped by both the internal discourses and interaction inside states as well as the interactions between states.

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