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## Explaining the US presence in the Indo-Pacific: Marxist-Gramscian-Kautskyian approaches

### **Introduction**

The US' role in the 'Indo-Pacific' region is deep, extensive, and long-lived. It involves a wide range of powers deeply embedded in the US-led regional order, including Japan, Australia, India, and South Korea, as well as several multilateral organisations such as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and even the successor to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership). US General Douglas MacArthur called the Pacific Ocean an "Anglo-Saxon lake", a racialised Monroe doctrine for the region (Parmar, 2016). The US role in the region is normally considered in the context of its Liberal International Order (LIO), fuelling debate on present and future dynamics, particularly strategies that are more or less hegemonic (Obama era) or coercive (Trump, and more recently Biden). Recently, the US approach to the region and its key states has revolved around the specific power dynamics of Sino-US relations. There is a renewed emphasis in the US and the West on the authoritarian character of China's political system, its statist economic strategy, its strategic rivalry and ambitions, conditioned by a racialised undercurrent that considers China inscrutable and even mystical. The politics of 'Yellow peril' orientalism may not drive US strategy but it has undoubtedly been present in successive administrations (Turner, 2013; 2014), and is recognised and politicised by Chinese elites as a 'century of humiliation'. Yet, China's re-emergence as an economic power-house remains a factor for a competitive, even turbulent, peace between the great powers, particularly due to unprecedented levels of economic interdependence between them. US regional allies are wary of supporting policies that threaten the economic opportunities China's market offers, significantly reducing the chances of war. Nevertheless, we should expect tension and friction in the relationship, principally exacerbated by *domestic* political imperatives, and broader US geopolitical and pragmatic concerns over China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' partly designed to provide a commercial land-bridge across Eurasia to western Europe. This would potentially reduce the influence of US sea-power to enforce sanctions on its adversaries, and on China's allies (Parmar & Bhardwaj, 2020a; Bhardwaj, 2020).

How may we conceptualise and theorise the US' position and role in the Indo-Pacific? Though realist and liberal theorists' arguments undoubtedly have some traction, neither

accurately teases out current or future dynamics and trajectories. Realists' principal, and timeless, argument suggests near-inevitable inter-hegemonic war between the US and China (Layne, 2017; Allison, 2017). Meanwhile, liberals categorise the US-led regional order as largely positive-sum 'benign' collaboration. Yet, liberals fail to contend with both changing relative power dynamics, and rising levels of inequality within societies, at least partly fuelled by capitalist globalisation (Huo & Parmar, 2019). Finally, liberals and realists fail to acknowledge that the LIO is capable of hierarchically-co-opting and integrating emerging powers, enabling the US to challenge, and potentially re-shape, counter-hegemonic forces.

This chapter therefore advances a theoretical approach to Sino-US relations that synthesises a Gramscian approach to hegemony with Karl Kautsky's concept of 'ultra-imperialism'. Within this approach, the power technology of the LIO are 'elite knowledge networks', the operational core of Gramscian hegemony (Parmar, 2012). The elite knowledge network is a key foundation of US hegemony, playing a crucial role in integrating key states of the Indo-Pacific into the US-led order, crucially in this case at the *invitation of local Chinese and other political elites*. It was US and Chinese recipients of public funds and private foundation grants, from the late 1970s to the present, who formed transnational networks to open up opportunities for exchanges of people, money, and ideas (Gao, 2018).

This pivotal feature of Gramscian hegemony has been fundamental in building US hegemony and also managing radical 'threats' to the LIO (Parmar, 2019, Bair, 2009; Golub, 2013). Yet, China represents a rather different proposition than any Asian power the US has attempted to 'integrate' or 'co-opt'. Gramscian elite knowledge networks blend well with the Kautskyian conception of 'ultra-imperialism', providing a more powerful explanation of the recent and future trajectories of regional and China-US relations. Kautsky's concept contends that to exploit the world's people and resources, ruling classes form international class-based alliances (Kautsky, 1914). Those alliances lead to co-operation across a range of domains as determined by the balance of power between dominant states. While competitive, they help moderate competition via common rules and norms, and through official and unofficial diplomacy. Understanding US hegemony as consisting of transnational elite knowledge networks, in which are embedded key elements of the power elites of other great powers, best explains Sino-US relations' 'ups and downs' as two interdependent powers jostling for position while cooperating on several fronts. It also explains the domestic sources of class-based resistance and turbulence in the relationship, as elite knowledge networks try to

manage popular opposition to the effects of globalised interdependence and the redistributions of work that led to economic change, and rising inequalities.

The chapter begins with a discussion of Gramscian hegemony and ‘historic blocs’ to illustrate how US material power and ideas work through elite knowledge networks. Following that, we discuss the importance of ‘ultra-imperialism’ in understanding the present and future US role in the Indo-Pacific. The chapter explores some key events of the recent-past to illustrate the theoretical approach and to suggest that it provides a better explanation of the dynamics of US relations with Indo-Pacific states, and Sino-US relations, than realist and liberal arguments. The Gramscian-Kautskyian argument suggests that the US and China are much more, and differently, inter-connected and interdependent than realists and liberals allow, influencing the trajectory of the relationship. It is the deeply-embedded drivers and maintenance mechanisms of this inter-connectedness and inter-dependency— transnational elite knowledge networks underpinned by ultra-imperial shared interests – that not only maintain a balance of power that favours the US, but manage and block threats to the order simultaneously. As a result, there will be turbulence, amid heated rhetoric, in the relationship, counter-balanced by deep and broad interdependencies and shared interests.

### **The Marxist Foundations of Gramscian Theory**

Although Gramsci made significant conceptual departures, there is no doubting the influence of Marxist ideas. Therefore, it is to brief discussion of the core elements of Marxist thought that we first turn.

At the heart of Marxism is the notion of class inequality and conflict, founded on one’s relationship to private property. With unequal economic relations, it is considered logical by orthodox Marxists that the political system will reflect such economic inequalities. With some qualifications, orthodox Marxists view material factors – wealth, for example – as determining social, political, and intellectual life. The state is a ‘mere’ reflection of a class-divided society: an instrument of the dominant economic class (Marx & Engels, 1848).

The state is led by elite politicians, civil servants, judges, and military officers from or linked with the dominant class. They define the ‘national interest’ in capitalistic terms and shape policies – domestic and foreign – to suit such interests. Democracy, therefore, is largely a myth, extending only to the extent that it does not threaten capitalist class prerogatives

(Miliband, 1973). Since economic and financial power is so unequally distributed, capitalists exercise great power over the main political parties because they finance elections and party bureaucracies, and own and control the most important media through which their platforms are advertised to the electorate who, effectively, are fed a diet of falsehoods to confuse and disorient them into 'false consciousness'. According to Marx, the ruling ideas in any era are ruling class ideas, and their principal purpose is upholding the status quo.

The ultimate consequence of class struggle would be a revolutionary transformation from capitalism to socialism, led by the organised working class. It therefore challenged Marxists when the first successful socialist revolution occurred in semi-feudal, semi-industrial Russia, while revolutions in the West either failed to occur or were suppressed. That variation between theory and history provided Marxist thinkers an opportunity to re-think their positions.

### **Gramsci and Hegemony**

To Gramsci, a coercive Russian state, under strain of war, lacked the popular legitimacy of an active layer of civil society organisations to survive revolutionary challenges in 1917 (Pass, 2019). Hence, the Gramscian view, though founded on recognition of economic inequality, makes a radical departure from economic-determinism. Contra Russian autocracy, Gramsci noted the existence in liberal-democracies of important protective layers of (pro-bourgeois) ideology and institutions that shape consciousness in favour of the status quo. Gramsci located ideological, political and cultural struggle more centrally into Marxist thought. Liberal societies normally featured greater levels of popular legitimacy, which ultimately protect ruling-class hegemony. He thereby elevated the role of intellectuals, those whose social function was the construction, elaboration, and diffusion of ideas, a second line of defense of established order (Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 1971).

Gramsci argues that there is no objective way to define capitalist interests. They are a matter of debate, interpretation, and intellectual and political struggle. It is the role of "organic intellectuals" – intellectuals linked with and springing from specific social classes and strata - to develop and disseminate dominant ideas, to struggle to make "common-sense" what are, in reality, ideas that principally support the ruling class. Such battles for hearts and minds occur constantly because the dominance of any idea or philosophy is contested, uncertain, and insecure.

As popular consent is so vital to political arrangements, organic intellectuals engineer popular consent (Parmar, 2000) through numerous channels. The process involves organisations that make up the core of agencies and institutions that wield power and influence – state agencies, elite universities and think tanks, philanthropic foundations, and their allies within the ‘historic bloc’, the ruling coalition.

‘Hegemony’ – the temporary and unstable broad agreement between key groups within a society or between societies on a governing concept that serves the interests of the historic bloc- is constructed by an alliance of state elites and private ruling class organisations. Central to the self-concept of private elites is Gramsci’s concept of “state spirit” which inspires leaders to take personally the concerns of state and nation, and subordinate narrow interests to the broader interests of the state/nation, and inter-state relations. State-spirited leaders contextualise themselves in the broad sweep of national and global historical development.

One fundamental US institution that expresses “state spirit” in hegemony-construction is the corporate-philanthropic foundation, in conjunction with a variety of elite think tanks and universities, all within the orbit of the American federal executive. Foundations like Ford and Rockefeller are central to the building of transnational elite knowledge networks.

*Network building: The foundations of US hegemony*

Integrating elites behind particular hegemonic projects has been the foundations’ principal long-term function. Foundations have constructed domestic and international knowledge networks, as ends in themselves and as means to their ends. Networks are a technology of power (Wertheim, Tournès, & Parmar, 2018) that normally include official policy-makers and perform two broad but vital functions:

*Internal functions:* what the network does as a system of scholar, knowledge, and money flows, inter-institutional connections, and source of attraction. For example, one of the functions of networks is to incorporate and socialise scholars through providing research funds and career-building structures such as professional societies, conferences, and journals.

*External functions:* network members as sources of symbolic capital, producers of legitimate knowledge taken seriously by media and policy-makers. Knowledge networks regulate the

“free” market of ideas, the intellectual environment within which “thinkable thought” occurs which affects the network’s ability to reproduce itself by assimilating new generations of scholars. Networks bolster US hegemony by promoting specific forms of cooperation and integration for achieving nationalistic, rather than philanthropic, ends.

The Big 3 US foundations – Ford, Carnegie, Rockefeller - behaved this way because they are a part of the American ‘power elite’, especially significant within the east coast foreign policy ‘establishment’. The major US foundations are unrepresentative elite institutions: their trustees are Wall St. bankers and lawyers, State Department officials, leaders of both main political parties, national media, and ‘Ivy League’ scholars. Demographically, their trustees are overwhelmingly male, white Anglo-Saxon protestants (WASPs).

### **Gramsci and the Indo-Pacific**

It is often noted that Gramsci paid little attention to world affairs (Pass, 2019). This is far from accurate as his pre-prison and prison writings are replete with analyses of colonialism, comparative studies of Chinese, Japanese and Indian intellectuals, the impacts of the European balance of power on Italian political development, and the growing significance of the United States in world affairs. He noted the shift of world power to the Asia-Pacific, and wondered about its impact on the transatlantic bloc (Germino, 1990).

At the heart of the process of integration of the US-led LIO is a hegemonic order driven by elite knowledge networks. The major foundations’ overseas endeavours were seemingly benign in the deployment of foreign aid for developing nations. Yet, their foreign aid targeted Asia-Pacific civil society elites (including China, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea) thereby forging fundamental connections as part of an intricate hegemony-building process, engineering an international elite consensus (Parmar, 2015; Ikenberry & Kupchan, 1990; Roberts 2018). This dovetailed with significant foundation programmes in Australia and New Zealand to build an Anglo-Saxonist ‘imagined community’ spanning the English-speaking world (Parmar, 2004).

American foundations pioneered transnational networks in a range of fields and academic disciplines to create a broadly ‘pro-American’ environment of values, methods and research institutions (Parmar, 2015). Yet, intense demands from postcolonial states for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in the 1970s forced the US to begin the integration of

the global political economy in what later became known as the ‘BRICS’ (Golub, 2013). The process of integrating China into the US-led global economic system began in the late 1970s, at the invitation of the Chinese Communist Party’s leadership (Gewirtz, 2017). China was permitted to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, strengthening cooperation, and reducing conflict between the two nations. The US hoped China would become a “responsible stakeholder” in the US-led order (Zoellick, 2005).

### *Ultra-imperialism dovetails with Hegemony*

Combining Kautsky’s concept of ‘ultra-imperialism’ with a Gramscian understanding of transnational elite knowledge networks between strategic elites and states provides an interesting way to analyse the construction of a regional strategy. Kautsky defines ultra-imperialism as the tendency of national ruling classes to form international partnerships to jointly exploit the world’s natural resources and peoples - eventually leading to significant levels of cooperation, alongside competition, between capitalist states (Kautsky, 1914). This inter-capitalist corporate/state alliance is manifest in cartel-type agreements and even a ‘league of states’ (Holloway, 1983). Kautsky’s model is evident in international arrangements, for example the European Union, where an international complex of civil societies and states collectively cooperates, despite competition, to overcome tensions.

A global-level example of ultra-imperialism is the US-led LIO itself, as even critics of Kautsky agree that his ideas apply more to the post-1945, and post-1989 eras, than previous periods (Thomas, 2002). Rivalry within ultra-imperial relations is not uncommon, especially as international relations are conditioned by uneven development, differing levels of exploitation, and the prevalence of international hierarchy (Kautsky, 1914), which impacts alliances. International alliances are always in flux and subject to renegotiation. Hence, in terms of the US-led LIO, tensions are expected within a structure prone to experience power shifts, placing pressure on international institutions, and featuring destabilising effects of demands for power redistribution.

The significance of Kautsky is illustrated in the depth of understanding that ultra-imperialism brings in two key areas of importance: the possibility of war between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific, and the nature of elite power at home and abroad. First, ultra-imperialism makes it clear that despite tensions – and for reasons other than liberal internationalism’s benign ideas on interdependence – war is not inevitable between great powers. The second

point is a deepened understanding of the alliance between elites, who hold shared interests despite their wealth coming at the expense of their own populace, meaning that transnational elite cooperation is for rather narrow but shared interests, which is then subject to the pitfalls of its unstable domestic foundations.

Existing studies by neo-Gramscians (Cox, 1983; Gill, 1990) concentrate on American hegemony in Europe during the Cold War. The analysis here is applied to the US presence in the Indo-Pacific. This comes with its own challenges due to the intricacies and pivotal processes which are exclusive to China, where political and cultural incorporation into the US-led order requires a more tailored approach (Schake, 2017), demonstrating a heightened potential for turbulence. Recall, for instance, the statement regarding China's 'rise' by Kiron Skinner, the-then director of the policy planning staff at the US State Department: China was neither part of the "Western family," nor "Caucasian," and therefore posed a greater long-term threat than had the Soviet Union (Chan, 2019).

### **A Gramscian-Kautskyian analysis of Sino-US relations**

A Gramscian-Kautskyian approach suggests the US-China relationship is a complex mix of inter-elite collaboration on shared agendas, and competition, as opposed to realist forecasts of inevitable military conflict. It also rejects the liberal claim of popular mutual benefits of elite Sino-US collaboration, including the latter overlooking inequalities of power in the two states.

Transnational historic blocs composed of US and Chinese corporate executives, political elites, and elite civil society organisations, were forged adding depth to explanations of how China became so integrated into the US-led order, and also why the laws of uneven capitalist expansion and geopolitical interests merge to generate turbulence and competition (Parmar, 2018). Competition can include military competition, mitigated by 'back channels' to avoid miscalculations (Delaney, 2020). Even the 'safe passage' from British imperial power to Pax Americana featured competition and naval rivalries (Schake, 2017); hence such turbulence is to be expected.

Using a Gramscian-Kautskyian approach, we argue, the US presence in the Indo-Pacific-most importantly pivoted around the US relationship with China - is convincingly characterised by competitive/conflictual cooperation between elites who preside over

increasingly unequal societies, whilst managing mass unrest and division amid a constantly evolving global order. The Gramscian-Kautskyian approach describes and explains the expansion of US hegemony, explains the US presence and role in the region and, more importantly, projects future trajectories.

Transnational elite knowledge networks embody long-term relationships that enable pathways for globally and regionally circulated ideas, people and money. As the relationship between elite knowledge networks and Indo-Pacific states became interwoven, the scope of the network created a broad international umbrella with deep reach into regionally-strategic states (Hodgson, 1973; Parmar, 2015). The US-led ‘hub-and-spokes’ security order in the Indo-Pacific was underpinned by influential elite networks with Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Australia, and India, among others (Matsuda, 2007; Parmar 2015; Brazinsky, 2009). These elite knowledge networks were designed to manage, channel or block threats to the US-led order.

### **Networking China into the US-led order**

This section of the chapter shows how American transnational elite networks helped build knowledge and understanding of revolutionary China’s politics and economy, transformed the teaching of the economics discipline in China’s universities, the climate of opinion in favour of market economics, and assisted economic reform. In this regard, the networks followed a well-trodden path previously charted across Asia. In particular, the Ford Foundation (alongside the World Bank and the American Economics Association) played a fundamental role. Although the process aimed at transforming China into a ‘responsible stakeholder’, it unintentionally also succeeded in building China’s self-confidence to such a degree that it became increasingly perceived as a serious strategic competitor. Hence, while the Obama administration merely ‘pivoted’ to Asia, such seemed the growth of Chinese ambitions that the Trump administration felt forced to declare China a dangerous ‘strategic rival’ (See Turner and Parmar, 2020). The Biden administration’s continuation of the Trumpian strategy is summarised by the 3 Cs: “competition when it should be, collaboration when it can be, adversarial when it must be” (Brookings, 2021).

China’s integration into the LIO was driven by the development of economics education and training in evolving networks that facilitated economic policy reform, and promoted new thinking that engineered a pro-reform climate of opinion (Gao, 2018). The formation of these

new networks and institutions came in the period from the late 1970s to the 2000s – when Ford alone invested \$400m in Chinese state or state-licensed institutions (Spires, 2011), not to mention large funds across the rest of Asia (Ford Foundation, 2020).

These programmes involved long-term state-private group initiatives; the US state backed Ford's initiatives. Visits from neoliberal economists including Milton Friedman in 1979 helped reform how economics was taught in China. Hence, new think tanks were formed by the governing State Council, Communist Party, and multiple universities. Alongside this, new intellectual and financial connections to the World Bank developed (Noble, 2006).

Ford has been constructing China-US elite knowledge networks since the 1950s, creating triangular relationships with US and Chinese states. American and Chinese grant-recipients created networks for multidirectional exchanges of ideas, penetrating China at the invitation of Chinese political elites (Wheeler, 2013). This is why Sino-US relations are better characterised as inter-elite collaboration as opposed to Realist notions of inter-state conflict. Conversely, the liberal approach neglects non-state actors whilst claiming that collaborations brings equal benefits to Chinese and American peoples, eliding inequalities of power in the two states, a factor noted by Ford (Ford Foundation, 2002). Ford created a transnational knowledge network that operated like an international cross-class coalition, generating new ideas and developing technical skills in recipient societies to influence policy making – while making it appear domestically-driven (International Association of Agricultural Economists, 1979; Hardin, 1979).

The process was boosted in the 1970s as post-colonial states' (with India, Indonesia and others via the 1955 Bandung conference) demands for a New International Economic Order intensified. The US began to integrate the global political economy in (what became known as the) 'BRIC' (Brazil, Russia, India, China) nations. When China joined the WTO in 2001, having followed stringent conditions, it was embedded in a transnational knowledge network facilitated by Ford's networks. As China developed its economic policies, both the US and China became economically-interdependent, guided by "modern economics" and market-oriented concepts (Gewirtz, 2017).

The study and teaching of economics as a university discipline was central to Ford's interventions, with success in transforming policy through technocratic elites in other nations, for example Indonesia's 'Berkeley Boys', trained in US doctoral programmes framed by

modernisation theory (Parmar, 2015). The emergence of modern economics in China started with its State Education Commission sponsoring students for doctoral training at elite US universities, whilst Chinese scholars relocated to Western universities (Ford Foundation, 1991). As technocratic elites emerged, policy-oriented think tanks influenced economic policy-making. The Chinese state drove economic reform, strongly aided by Ford's networks (Gewirtz, 2017), which influenced developments in three key ways: US scholarships and research on China's economy from the 1950s onwards; development and expansion of studies in economics; and assistance with China's economic reform programmes. Following a system tried-and-tested throughout Asia, including Japan, Indonesia, India, and South Korea, Ford began with US-based contemporary China economic studies at the University of Michigan and Harvard (Han, 1997), promoted economics in Chinese elite universities including Peking and Wuhan. Doctoral students in economics were taught in Western universities or by non-Marxian visiting professors. This produced new networks as Ford enabled Chinese scholars to strengthen exchange programmes with domestic universities. These networks served Chinese economic reform programmes linking China to the capitalist world economy, especially with the influence of Nobel laureate economist Lawrence Klein (Liu, 2010; Chow, 1990).

Ford's investments in masters and doctoral exchange programmes produced over 500 graduates in micro and macroeconomics, econometrics, and international finance (Garnaut, 1994). That provided China's prominent think tanks relevant experience and expertise through collaborative research and training in applied economics. Ford also funded internationally-trained Chinese scholars to build independent policy research institutes like the *China Center for Economic Research* and the *China Center for Agricultural Policy* – products of collaboration between Chinese analysts and US colleagues (Ford Foundation, 1997).

US foundation spending has been consistent and substantial over the last four decades, with over \$400 million invested by Ford and almost \$200 million by Rockefeller (Ford Foundation, 2020). Foundation support renovated universities, facilitated community development, and strengthened family planning initiatives. Foundation support extended to non-governmental organisation-building programmes such as the Tsinghua NGO Centre. Other foundations (Luce, MacArthur, and Asia Foundation), invested \$270 million between 1988 and 2005. The deep involvement of US foundations in China is illustrated in the \$400

million Ford investment in state-licensed ‘civil society’ building initiatives, which constructed partnerships between government researchers, NGOs and ordinary citizens (Bresnan, 1978). 95% of US philanthropic funds were awarded to *state-licensed* elite organisations, not grass-roots civil society groups (Spires, 2011).

*The challenge to elite knowledge networks – the ‘rise’ of China*

Despite inter-connectedness, decades of investment and mutually-beneficial cooperation, China’s growth rates, increased capabilities, and extended influence is of great concern to the US. This was exemplified in May 2018, when US Pacific Command (PACOM) was renamed Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), formalising the procedural tightening of US-led relationships to tactically bolster inter-oceanic strategic spaces. Andrew Korybko believes this to signal intensification of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s greatest rivalry. The US plans the ‘containment’ of China through enabling India to increase its reach into French Indian Ocean naval facilities, as well as a new US base in Indonesia located near the Malacca Straits (Korybko, 2018).

Former US President Trump’s hostility towards China (which followed increasingly evident pessimism throughout the preceding Obama administration) is broadly backed by the Democratic leadership, media analysts, and the national security establishment (Lawder, 2018). The US stepped up attempts to make the Chinese economy subservient, especially by curbing its technological edge, whilst criticizing its “state-driven” economic strategy (Rubio 2019). Yet, this categorisation of the Chinese economy is heavily contested (Zitelmann, 2019). Whilst the US tries to contain China’s military operations, it has also applied punitive tariffs for alleged intellectual property theft alongside other free-trade violations as it accuses Beijing of undermining the WTO’s role in dispute resolution (Brands & Cooper, 2019).

Unsurprisingly, consultancies like *The Eurasia Group* see Sino-US rivalry as a major geopolitical risk (Eurasia Group, 2019). Hence, President Trump’s National Cyber Strategy, consistent with his NSS 2017, declared US readiness to wage cyber warfare against China. Yet the approach to China extends beyond Trump, to the Democrats, the Pentagon, the *New York Times*, and influential factions of the progressive left. Despite ideological domestic differences, there is a shared view that the US and China are long-term rivals, and that US trade and national security policy should be amalgamated (Feroz, 2018; Abi-Habib, 2018).

The US is countering challenges by strategically realigning regional powers through multilateral organisations and renewal of bilateral agreements. This is seen in at least two ways: first, the passage of the 2018 Asia Reassurance Initiative Act provides a framework for US cooperation with ASEAN, APEC and regional states on human rights and democracy promotion; and, secondly, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), to align the US with India, Japan and Australia to contain China's military aspirations (Bhardwaj, 2018; Babones, 2019). Bhardwaj argues that China's Belt and Road Initiative is in direct competition with the bases of Anglo-American global dominance, as it bypasses US-dominated sea routes that currently facilitate 90% of world trade (Bhardwaj, 2018). This is an era of intensifying great power rivalry with increased risks of military conflict (Swaine, 2019).

### **Conflict, co-operation and turbulence**

Despite the challenges of a 'rising' China, near-inevitable military conflict is unlikely due to high levels of interdependence, including a "balance of financial terror" with global implications (Friedberg, 2017). Ultimately, China-US tensions are not ideological but competition over strategic, economic, and market power. Beijing, like previous rising powers, is leveraging market access in return for technological transfers.

A key issue, which illuminates our Gramscian-Kautskyian synthesis, is the US' role in bringing China to its current position. Sino-Capitalism, as McNally conceptualises it, is complex, as it is state-led, bottom-up free-enterprise with global reach - epitomizing the hybrid nature of Chinese power, alongside simultaneously competing-with whilst-complementing Anglo-American concepts (McNally, 2012). And the distance between the LIO's economic models and Sino-Capitalism has diminished, especially since the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 global pandemic which demanded greater state intervention (Parmar & Bhardwaj, 2020b).

### *The China-US elite knowledge network since 2015 - conflict amid cooperation*

The China-US elite knowledge networks associated with the Ford Foundation have been joined by new actors including the Asia Society, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Heritage Foundation, and the Center for China and Globalisation, an independent but influential Chinese think tank (Steinberg, 2017). It was no wonder that

President Xi Jinping praised globalisation and economic reform, boldly rejecting isolationism at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in January 2017. Tellingly, President Xi acknowledged that it was a diverse combination of ideas that reformed the Chinese economic system, and also influenced the BRI network-creating trade programme (Jinping, 2017).

Surveys conducted by *China Economist* in May 2017 indicated that 81% of Chinese economists believed that China-US relations would improve despite challenges, with only 5% believing that fundamental conflict was inevitable (Gang & Qumei, 2017). Cooperation remains significant between US and Chinese think tanks. They continue to work together as shown by China Finance 40 Forum (CF40) and the Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE) jointly organised annual academic exchanges between US and Chinese economists. CF40 and PIIE made it clear that China-US economic complementarity will continue as it has proved jointly-prosperous for both nations.

Knowledge networks continue to promote dialogue and collaboration. Co-operation between US, Russian and Chinese elite think tanks highlighted a lack of BRI contract opportunities for western companies, calling for more transparency (Yujun et al., 2019). They note potential for Sino-US-Russian cooperation, a platform to discuss differences, including over Taliban-dominated Afghanistan. Unofficial diplomacy shows a desire of Chinese companies to participate in upgrading US infrastructure, whilst US desires participation in the BRI (Zhang, 2017; AOWG, 2017). Indeed, US companies such as General Electric and Caterpillar have earned billions of dollars from BRI contracts (General Electric, 2018). Such semi-official diplomacy regulates great power relations, including hegemonic transition, illustrating the relevance of a Gramscian-Kautskyian perspective (Parmar, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 global pandemic of 2020 added exceptional turbulence to Sino-US relations. When in office, Donald Trump labelled COVID-19 the “Chinese virus”, and the World Health Organization (WHO) as “very China-centric”, and announced withdrawal from the organisation (McNeil & Jacobs, 2020). This caused increasingly negative views among US public opinion of China, and an increase in racist attacks on Asian-Americans (Pew Research Center, 2020). The Biden administration has largely continued the aggressive strategy and rhetoric Trump initiated.

Yet it is vital to consider the significance of Sino-US relations with due regard to US' regional strategy, which remains reflective of a 'conengagement' approach, albeit accompanied by elevated hostile rhetoric. This means that the US' relations and arrangements for security, investment and trading cooperation with its regional allies are fundamental to bilateral Sino-US relations. Those relationships form part of the strategy to 'contain' China as a security issue, while also engaging with it as an economic opportunity. This was the case even during the Trump administration with the passage of the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018. The operations of the Quad show the intention to reinforce the strategy, however inadequately up to the present. This indicates the deeper rhythms of the relationship that will outlive the impacts of any specific event or source of tension, or administration.

China – despite US vilification – has tried to capitalise on US' withdrawals from international responsibilities, further undermining Washington's global reputation (Borger, 2020). It is likely that Trump's United States fell further behind due to mishandling the COVID-19 pandemic. The US under Trump moved away from international cooperation towards coercive nationalism by weaponizing US power; Biden has only partially shifted in trying to strengthen regional alliances.

Although the pandemic added fuel to the fire of intense US-China rivalry and competition, this should not be seen as detracting from the levels of interdependence and interconnectedness of the major global economies, or their mutual interest in peace and stability. Whether the trade deal of January 2020 remains intact or faces alterations, a certainty is that COVID-19 is not the end of China-US inter-dependency or interconnectedness. Despite Trump's statements on China, over 70,000 US companies remain registered in China, with business worth over \$700 billion to US firms alone. The pandemic may impact supply chains, especially as movement and travel has been restricted (Choo et al., 2020). Despite talking about 'decoupling' there is still greater incentive in cooperation for both parties, as well as the likelihood of entering and competing in third party markets.

Although the dynamics of the November 2020 US presidential election played a key role in the Trump administration's increasingly shrill rhetoric regarding China, US allies' reactions point the way to a more tempered approach by the Biden administration. This is suggested by the responses of close US allies who signalled disagreements over US China policy. Australia's foreign minister noted the necessity of maintaining good relations with China

despite differences of opinion over human rights, Hong Kong, etc... Australia's foreign minister also declared that Australia's national interest lay in "strong economic engagement, other engagement...in the interests of both countries...The relationship we have with China is important, and we have no intention of injuring it, but nor do we intend to do things that are contrary to our interests..." (Bhadrakumar, 2020; Kortunov, 2020). This suggests that the Biden administration will also temper its strategies towards China in recognition of significant continued interdependencies, and the necessity of maintaining favourable relations with its allies (Financial Times, 2021).

State-elite networks are strong, as are the complex interdependencies between China and other major regional and global economies. Those factors are fundamental in influencing the US-China relationship's trajectory. The relationship requires complex diplomacy characteristic of elite knowledge networks described above that connect US, regional, and Chinese power elites (Yujun et al., 2019; Parmar 2015).

Those networks will continue to manage the contentious Sino-US relationship, including within the context maintaining and strengthening regional alliances and partnerships with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and states throughout south-east Asia. Yet, the dynamics of relations between the US and China remain a source of tension, likely to be heightened at times of crisis, and elections, as parties vie with one another to be "tough" on competitor states. Hence, there will be turbulence (Choo et al., 2020). Yet, the state-private elite networks that built the US-China relationship are deeply embedded, carefully-directed, and adept at managing turbulence, within the bi-lateral relationship but also in the context US of regional partnerships. Their position and role is best explained by a synthesis of Gramscian hegemony and Kautskyian ultra-imperialism.

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