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WAR AND PEACE IN THE 21ST CENTURY China and the US: Can Bipolar Confrontation Be Avoided?

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“China and the US: Can Bipolar Confrontation Be Avoided?” was the subject of the 21st edition of the “War and Peace in the 21st Century” conference held in Barcelona on March 11th, 2023. Organised in collaboration with EsadeGeo - Center for Global Economy and Geopolitics and supported by Barcelona City Council and “La Caixa” Foundation, the conference provided expert insights into the relations between great powers and outlined proposals for managing the bipolar confrontation between China and the US, while promoting constructive relations for effective multilateralism and global public goods.



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The potential bipolar confrontation between China and the United States could mark a turning point for international politics. Both powers have recently faced decisive domestic political moments. In China, the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party in October 2022 saw Xi Jinping re-elected general secretary. Meanwhile, the US mid-term legislative elections in November 2022 provided an evaluation of Biden’s administration. Very different lines are being drawn in political terms. The logic of rivalry that is growing between them at this decisive moment is added to Russia’s desire to shape the international order through spheres of influence following the war in Ukraine.

Given the threat this bipolar confrontation poses to global governance, multilateral institutions and globalisation, the War and Peace conference **“China and the US: Can Bipolar Confrontation Be Avoided?”** aimed to analyse the relations between the two powers, to identify ways to avoid a bipolar confrontation, and to outline ideas about how to do so. In short, promoting constructive relations and cooperation globally, especially when it comes to global public goods, and tackling transnational challenges like the pandemic, the climate and energy crises, food security, the impact of new technologies and the establishment of effective governance frameworks.

To obtain a wide overview on the issues addressed, the conference brought together academics from the United States, China, India, Canada and the EU.

In her opening speech, **Laia Bonet** (Third Deputy Mayor of Barcelona City Council) emphasised how cities, usually a prime example of coexistence, have been hit by recent crises and the war. In reference to the confrontation between China and the US, she underlined how cities can also be a powerful ally of multilateralism and can help develop cooperation. Taking a European perspective, Ms. Bonet also stressed the need to strengthen the EU’s strategic autonomy given the rise of great power confrontation.

Her contribution was followed by that of **Antoni Segura** (President, CIDOB), who reiterated that the conference aimed to analyse the rivalry and competition between China and the US and ways to foster global cooperation. **Javier Solana** (President, ESADEGeo and Honorary President, CIDOB) stated that the most important issue on the international agenda today is the rivalry and competition between the US and China, which has global consequences in multiple spheres. Mr Solana underlined the deep divisions in the US, where the only issue the two main political parties agree on is the need to check the rise

of China. Also Director of the War and Peace conference, Mr Solana went on to cite the dramatic situation in the Global South, which requires more attention. Most UN member states have taken a different position to the West's on the war in Ukraine, showing that most of the world's population is less involved in the conflict and does not want to choose sides.

Geopolitical tensions and global rivalry

The first panel discussion analysed the current relations between global powers in a changing international order, marked by the rivalry between China and the US, but also including the role of the EU and the Global South. In her introduction to the panel, the chair and moderator, **Cristina Gallach** (Special Commissioner for the Alliance for the New Language Economy, Government of Spain) began by asking about the prospects of managing bipolar confrontation. **Bonnie S. Glaser** (Managing Director of the Indo-Pacific Program at the German Marshall Fund of the US) responded with a reflection on Western and

underlined that the main element of competition between the US and China is not ideology but technology. He concluded by saying that no one desires military conflict, and that peaceful coexistence is possible. Europe can play a role in attaining this outcome.

Disagreeing with the multipolar perspective, **Shivshankar Menon** (Distinguished Fellow, Center for Social and Economic Progress) described an international order that is neither liberal nor orderly, and does not function anymore, citing the pandemic and the war in Ukraine as examples. The world is not bipolar either, as there are many global issues that neither China or the US can address alone. Mr Menon reinforced the idea of strategic dissuasion between the powers and insisted that conflict is neither inevitable nor imminent but needs to be managed. He also introduced each country's domestic political evolution as a key geopolitical risk, given the current strains of authoritarianism and nationalism that ignore global problems. Furthermore, over 50 countries are at risk of being ignored by a power clash that is driving the Global South out of the picture.

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Chinese perspectives of the international sphere. While Western countries conceive of a world with global norms and Western alliances to preserve peace, China rejects an international order that it is considered too favourable to the West, to Universal Human Rights and to the responsibility to protect, among other principles. Strategic competition between China and the US is also a clash between democracies and autocracies that needs to be managed. It is essential that the powers coexist peacefully. Conflict in Taiwan is not inevitable, but a framework of trust between China and the US needs to be established.

Yan Xuetong (Dean, Institute of International Relations, Tsinghua University) did not embrace the term *bipolarity*, but instead referred to the emergence of a multipolar world. The competition between the US and China is getting worse. Being now unavoidable, it needs to be managed to limit the consequences for third countries. The US perceives China as a threat, more than on the contrary, and actually considers the country a global systemic hazard. The only thing a fragmented United States agrees on is containing China, especially when it comes to technological competition. Taiwan puts more international pressure on China, as the US continues sending military assistance to the country. However, the most desirable scenario is a peaceful reunification with China. Finally, Mr Xuetong addressed nuclear deterrence as a way to prevent an actual nuclear conflict, and

Judy Dempsey (Senior Fellow, Carnegie Europe) addressed Europe's role in the bipolar confrontation. The EU is under great pressure from the United States, but also feels intimidated due to being so far behind China and the US in terms of technology. Hence, the EU is greatly interested in avoiding a conflict with China, especially considering its defence of multilateralism and arms control and the risks the conflict between China and the US pose for non-proliferation. Europe does not have a unified opinion or strategy regarding the bipolar confrontation but would like to reconstruct international institutions based on mutual trust.

Throughout the discussion, the **nuclear** issue stirred controversy. While some participants argued that China was modernising its arsenal and posed an actual threat to Taiwan, others considered this to be a deterrence strategy and separated the nuclear issue from the conflict in Taiwan. It was asked what people think about nuclear arms, and the perception of them being a real threat, rather than simple rhetoric. Regarding **territorial integrity**, there was an urge to include the issue in the agenda but disconnecting it from the democracies vs autocracies debate. There was consensus that rules are needed to manage the current **technological competition**. Western concepts were accused of no longer being able to describe the main aspects of international politics, while the international liberal order was also criticised,

and calls made for a new order to be created instead. This position was contested via the defence of the US and the West, which seek to maintain their core values.

How to advance cooperation in a renewed framework of multilateral governance

In the second panel discussion, moderated by **Corinna Hörst** (Advisory Board Member, Women in International Security), the aim was to elaborate on the prospects of cooperation between the US, China and other international actors, particularly the EU, in a renewed multilateral framework.

With **Mikko Huotari** (Executive Director, Mercator Institute for China Studies) unable to attend the event due to a last-minute inconvenience, the chair brought his ideas to the debate. It is vital for Europe to bridge the digital gap. It should work to involve China in the fight against climate change, and to maintain a balance

Michael Kovrig (Senior Advisor for Asia, International Crisis Group) also referred to global cooperation. He said that we are in a new geopolitical era of cross-cutting alliances, partnerships and a narrower form of cooperation, rather than a multilateral one. He offered suggestions like an alliance between the liberal democracies of the West, including the EU, the US, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, which would also be open to any other country willing to defend the liberal values and preserve the rules-based international order. Mr Kovrig also suggested North-South cooperation that should include the “swing states” in this bipolar confrontation. The EU and others should work on better development policies to engage emerging countries and prioritise their concerns, as well as including them in the global governance discussions. There is a need to protect crucial areas of cooperation such as food, climate, human rights, health and sustainability from an East-West confrontation. Finally, he recalled the need to focus on international conflict management through conflict mitigation and conflict containment. Major power

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of power in the Indo-Pacific region. There is also a need to preserve a liberal society and to promote human rights as well as an urgent need to establish an agenda for international organisations to regain the value they have lost in the international order.

In terms of the priorities for action, **Homi Kharas** (Senior Fellow, Center for Sustainable Development, Brookings Institution) addressed the issue of the new role for multilateral organisations. Although he defended multilateral organisations as valid rulemakers, he acknowledged that today multilateralism is under threat because it does not serve the interests of the major powers anymore, and it will only do so if the countries stop only pursuing their national interests. Another problem is that the main objectives of multilateral institutions might be generally agreeable, but the path to reaching these goals is always a topic of disagreement. International trade norms are also in crisis, as there are too many restrictions and a constant search for their own or their ally’s interests, while there is no conception of universal goods or institutions for them anymore, only negotiations around them. Finally, there is no budget for loss, damage or reparation, so the negative consequences, particularly of climate change, will not be financially fixed. The world needs to start thinking about multilateralism as something that is not only intergovernmental, but also involves companies, civil society, cities and philanthropies.

competition should not define all conflict situations. Counterterrorism has been a point of convergence between powers and humanitarian assistance must include countries like China.

The role of China was central to the last debate. The country’s creation of two development banks was attributed to the failure of development to achieve more at global level. This showcases how national interests are more prominent than a rules-based order, turning multilateralism into rhetoric. The EU was criticised for not taking better care of its institutions and establishing more mechanisms for cooperation with China. In order to make cooperation useful again, decoupling strategies should be avoided and coalitions of the willing and able should be open to third parties. Global supply chains should be maintained and the concept of economic security, a concept with no clear boundaries, should be avoided. Competition must be fair and technological cooperation must also be promoted. China and India need to be part of the global discussions and negotiations, particularly on climate. Valid and inclusive rules need to be re-established.

In his concluding remarks, **Pol Morillas** (Director, CIDOB) said that bipolarity needs to be managed, given that it cannot be avoided, while keeping in mind that global challenges remain transnational. He concluded that we live in an age of global disorder due to current

geopolitical tensions and based on domestic pressures on foreign policies, revisionist powers, a mindset of pursuing national interests, eroded multilateralism, and spheres of influence being strengthened at the expense of global cooperation. However, there are minimum thresholds of compliance that need to be preserved to build a positive agenda for multilateralism and to manage competition. Negotiating on tangible issues such as technology, rather than establishing global objectives based on ideological stances, is a promising way out of the current stalemate.