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U.S-Sino Strategic Competition: Policy shifts and conflicts from trump to Biden

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Abstract

This paper uses comparative analysis and case study methods to explore the evolution of U.S.-Sino strategic competition during the presidencies of Trump and Biden, based on historical documents, government reports, academic literature and media reports. Using offensive realism, it examines the structural dynamics in U.S.-Sino relations, focusing on the continuity and transformation of the two presidents' strategies toward China. Trump first proposed the concept of "strategic competition" and adopted a confrontational strategy to weaken China's rise through means such as trade wars and technological blockades. Biden continues this framework, but emphasized the use of international cooperation and ideology in dealing with China's challenges. The study finds that although both administrations view China as a "strategic competitor", their policies and strategies are different, reflecting different perceptions of international order and power. The study also highlights that U.S.-Sino strategic competition plays a vital role in reshaping the global power structure.

Keywords: U.S-Sino, Biden, strategic competition, trump

1. Introduction

1.1 Research background

The U.S.-Sino strategic competition has become a key issue in global politics in the 21st century, influencing the reshaping of international order and changes in the global power structure. As China's comprehensive national strength rises, the U.S.'s global leadership is facing unprecedented challenges, especially in political, economic, technological, and ideological fields. This shift in the balance of power has not only affected the international political landscape but has also profoundly altered the domestic political environment of the United States. Against this backdrop, both Presidents Trump and Biden have defined China as a "strategic competitor," but with different approaches to "strategic competition." This study aims to explore the policy changes and underlying dynamics of U.S.-Sino strategic competition, analyzing the continuity and changes in the two administrations' China strategies.

1.2 Research significance

1.2.1 Theoretical significance

This paper uses offensive realism as the theoretical framework to deepen the understanding of the strategic behavior of great powers, particularly the role of power distribution and strategic competition in driving policy choices. By conducting a comparative analysis of the evolution of U.S.-Sino strategic competition during the presidencies of Trump and Biden, as well as the underlying policy transformations, it enhances our understanding of the logic of great power strategy within offensive realism. This theoretical framework also helps reveal the deep strategic motivations behind U.S. policies, providing valuable theoretical insights for further exploration of the future development of U.S.-Sino relations.

1.2.2 Practical significance

This paper analyzes U.S. policies during the Trump and Biden administrations to reveal the dynamics of U.S.-Sino strategic competition and its impact. As the two largest economies in the world, the strategic competition between the U.S. and China extends beyond their bilateral relationship, deeply influencing the global economy, international security, and geopolitical landscape.

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Therefore, understanding the policy adjustments under different U.S. administrations, particularly from the perspective of offensive realism, helps the international community more accurately predict the future trajectory of U.S.-Sino relations. For other countries in formulating foreign policy, especially policies related to China and the U.S., this analysis provides practical insights and guidance.

2. Theoretical level of U.S.-Sino Strategic Competition

Offensive realism argues that the anarchy of the international system essentially determines the interrelationships between States: in the absence of an authority above the State to guarantee security, each State must rely on its own power to ensure its survival. Against this background, power becomes the central variable in international relations, and the maximization of relative power is the fundamental way for states to achieve security. The State is not only concerned with the growth of its absolute power, but also pays particular attention to changes in their power status compared to other States, since this relative gap has a direct bearing on security and strategic initiative^[1].

In this theoretical framework, the competition between China and the United States is viewed as a structural necessity, a product of the development of the relationship between China and the United States to a certain stage. As the existing hegemonic power, the United States has overwhelming economic, military and institutional advantages in the global system, and its strategic goal is to maintain the existing international order and its dominant position. However, with China's sustained economic growth and increasing military strength, China has gradually narrowed the power gap with the United States and directly shaken the global hegemony of the United States, and has put forward some challenging international initiatives, such as the "The Belt and Road Initiative"(BRI) initiative and the promotion of the internationalization of the RMB. In addition, the rise of global populism, the crisis of globalization and the redistribution of international power have further exacerbated tensions between China and the United States.

The core of this competition lies in the struggle for dominance over the international order. China seeks to shape international rules more favorable to its own development, enhancing its global discourse power and influence. As Yang Jiechi, then State Councilor of China, stated in November 2017, "Western governance concepts, systems, and models are increasingly unable to keep pace with the new international realities." In Yang's view, the Western-dominated global governance system has "failed" and is "irreparable"^[2]. Meanwhile, the United States aims to curb China's rise through measures such as strengthening alliance systems, imposing economic sanctions, and implementing technological blockades. In this process, both sides have adopted offensive strategies to enhance their relative power, including military confrontations, competition in critical technological domains, and clashes in global value promotion. This competition is not only reflected in bilateral relations but also spills over into regional and global cooperation and conflicts. Due to its significant stakes, long-term nature, comprehensive scope, and far-reaching impacts, this competition between China and the United States is referred to as "strategic competition." At its core, this competition represents a

redistribution of power and interests.

The root of U.S.-Sino strategic competition does not lie in the mistakes of individual national leaders or policy choices but rather in the power dynamics dictated by the structure of the international system. In an anarchic international environment, the rise of a great power is bound to provoke vigilance and countermeasures from the existing hegemon, following an inescapable zero-sum logic. Thus, the competition and confrontation between China and the United States are not coincidental but an inevitable outcome of the workings of the international system. Even if both sides attempt to ease tensions through diplomatic efforts, structural factors will fundamentally shape their strategic behaviors, perpetuating ongoing tensions and mutual distrust.

3. Policy level of U.S.-Sino Strategic Competition

3.1 Trump Administration

During Donald Trump's presidency, U.S.-Sino relations officially entered an era of "strategic competition." This phase marked a significant departure from the cooperation-oriented policies of the Obama administration. The fundamental shift in the U.S. stance toward China was articulated in the Trump administration's National Security Strategy (December 2017) and Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy. In these reports, the U.S. first explicitly introduced the concept of "strategic competition" and identified China and Russia as "revisionist powers," highlighting the unprecedented challenge China posed to the United States. This indicated a significant reassessment of the international landscape, transitioning from the post-Cold War optimism of "great power cooperation" to the pessimistic outlook of "great power competition." The reports proclaimed the end of the era of great power cooperation and the return of the great power competition era^[3].

Behind this strategic shift, China's domestic and foreign policy adjustments under Xi Jinping's leadership are seen by the United States as an important driver of the escalation of strategic competition. The Communist Party of China has further enhanced its national governance capabilities by consolidating power, strengthening political control and promoting economic reforms. At the diplomatic level, China has demonstrated growing confidence and global influence. China has also expanded its role in global affairs through the "The Belt and Road Initiative"(BRI), active participation in international organizations and high-profile science and technology innovation policies. These measures have not only consolidated China's rise, but are also seen by the United States as a potential threat to the current international order. At the same time, China's diplomatic style has also shown a tougher feature, which has attracted widespread attention from the international community. On December 8, 2020, Germany's Daily Mirror published a critical report titled "China's Wolf Warriors". The article believes that China "has made such a fierce response" and the behavior of Chinese diplomats is "more aggressive", and it is defined as "Wolfwarrior Diplomacy"^[4]. This more offensive diplomatic posture has further strengthened Western countries' vigilance against China's strategic intentions and exacerbated tensions in U.S.-Sino relations. It is in this context that the Trump administration, with the help of the framework of "strategic competition", has comprehensively promoted a tougher policy toward China. This shift has

profoundly shaped U.S.-Sino relations in the new era. Changes in the domestic political environment in the United States have also contributed to the intensification of this competition. The polarized political climate in the United States has made a tough policy toward China one of the few areas where bipartisan consensus can be reached. During its administration, the Trump administration also linked the dissatisfaction of the American working class with accusations of unfair trade against China, blaming China for economic problems. This strategy not only consolidated Trump's support among voters, but also provided political legitimacy for the tough tone of his China policy. These factors together formed the background for the deterioration of U.S.-Sino relations during the Trump era.

Unlike in the past, the Trump administration's definition of "strategic competition" was more confrontational, emphasizing the necessity of comprehensive opposition to China across all domains. Compared to the Bush and Obama administrations, which relied more on long-term planning and diplomacy, the Trump administration passed the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (NDAA) in 2019, adopting a "whole-of-government" strategy that requires all executive departments to take a uniformly tough stance on China policy ^[5]. Although "strategic competition" became the core label of the Trump administration's foreign policy, the concept itself lacked a clear definition. Beyond confronting China in economic, technological, and military fields, the administration failed to establish effective coordination regarding strategic objectives, implementation methods, and priority areas. As a result, "strategic competition" functioned more as a consensus within the U.S. strategic community and a rhetorical political tool, describing a phenomenon rather than serving as a concrete diplomatic policy framework.

Trump's "strategic competition" not only marks a break with the Obama's "engagement" policy in terms of policy, but also shapes the United States' understanding of contemporary international relations at the conceptual level. Through this label, the Trump administration shows that they are determined to get rid of the engagement policy and adopt a more confrontational strategy toward China. The core logic of this shift is to regard China as a "revisionist power" and believe that its rise directly threatens the international order dominated by the United States. Unlike the policy during the Cold War, the Trump administration did not try to prevent the escalation of strategic competition, but actively sought competition in all areas. This attitude reflects the Trump administration's basic understanding of great power relations: strategic competition is not an inevitable structural condition, but the result of specific policy choices.

The "strategic competition" policy during this period also had a profound impact on U.S.-Sino relations and the global landscape. On the one hand, the United States tried to weaken China's competitiveness in key areas and limit the expansion of its global influence through trade wars, technological blockades, military deployments and other means. On the other hand, China also took a series of countermeasures, including strengthening economic cooperation with other countries, promoting independent innovation, and playing a more active role in global governance.

However, this confrontational competition also has its limitations. Although the government emphasizes a "whole-

of-government" tough attitude toward China, and the Democratic and Republican parties have reached a rare consensus on this point, each administrative department has acted independently in specific implementation, further exacerbating the incoherence of policies, making "strategic competition" lack clear goals and coordinated policy paths in practice. In addition, the "strategic competition" policy does not provide an effective solution to alleviate the structural tensions in U.S.-Sino relations. Since the fundamental contradictions between the two countries in the international system cannot be resolved through policy adjustments, strategic competition has become a long-term feature of U.S.-Sino relations and may continue to intensify in the future.

3.2 Biden Administration

When the Biden administration came to power, U.S.-Sino relations were at a historic low. The extremely confrontational policies of the Trump era had put the relationship between the two countries in a state of tension. Biden did not fully embrace the concept of "strategic competition" at the beginning. In the early days, Biden opposed viewing China as the biggest geopolitical competitor and ridiculed the statement that "China is going to eat our lunch?" ^[6]. However, as the situation changed, Biden continued the thinking of the Trump era, positioning China as an "all-round strategic competitor", emphasizing that U.S.-Sino relations are not just economic competition, but also a competition in many aspects such as global order, technological development, international influence, and ideology. China is committed to challenging and replacing the United States' hegemony in the Indo-Pacific and even worldly, and emphasized that "the United States must be tough on China" and that the United States will take "aggressive and coercive actions" to confront China. Senior US officials, such as Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, have repeatedly mentioned that China is the "top strategic challenge" to the United States and use "strategic competition" as the core framework for understanding and handling US-China relations. In 2022, the Biden administration also views China as "the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it" ^[7]. This means that the United States and China will continue to compete comprehensively in all areas of foreign policy, especially in the struggle for global influence.

Unlike the Trump administration's "whole-of-government" confrontational strategy, the Biden administration has placed greater emphasis on cross-departmental coordination and assessment in implementing "strategic competition." Biden outlined three key areas for U.S. competitive strategy: strengthening domestic economic and technological innovation, addressing China's challenges through alliance-based cooperation, and promoting American values and democratic systems. This highlights that the competition between the U.S. and China has transcended traditional economic and military domains, extending into the realm of values and governance models.

The Biden administration has introduced large-scale infrastructure investment plans, technological investments, and protectionist policies to boost domestic manufacturing and technological innovation, aiming to prevent China from surpassing the U.S. in global economic competition. Key

initiatives such as The American Jobs Plan ^[8] and the CHIPS and Science Act ^[9] were heavily promoted to stimulate economic recovery while ensuring that the U.S. maintains its leadership in critical technological fields. In strategic areas such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and 5G technologies, the administration imposed technological restrictions on Chinese companies and pushed for a global "decoupling" of technology from China.

Compared to the Trump administration's "America First" isolationist policies, the Biden administration places greater emphasis on cooperation with traditional allies to address China's rise. Biden has explicitly stated that "America will win the strategic competition through alliance cooperation" and has focused on repairing relationships with allies in Europe and Asia. The Biden administration underscores the Indo-Pacific region as the core arena of U.S.-China competition, with restoring ties with key allies like Japan and South Korea being central to countering China's challenges. By strengthening strategic dialogues, conducting joint military exercises, and promoting shared democratic values globally, the administration seeks to build a broader network of cooperation in the context of "strategic competition." The Biden administration has also bolstered the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) and its strategic partnerships with Australia, India, and Japan to establish a multilateral framework aimed at countering China's rise ^[10]. Through alliance-building, the administration aims to create a strategic encirclement of China, increasing Beijing's pressure in global affairs.

Biden places greater emphasis on linking "strategic competition" with America's democratic values. He views U.S.-Sino competition not merely as a contest of economic and military power but as a systemic rivalry between democracy and authoritarianism. The administration consistently highlights differences with China on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in international forums, framing these as integral to its competitive strategy against China. During his first trip to Europe in 2021, Biden explicitly stated, "The United States will unite the world's democracies to address the long-term strategic competition with China" ^[11]. At the 2022 Summit for Democracy, he stressed the need to revitalize global democracy, defend the shared values of the free world, and underscored that competition with China is not just geopolitical or economic but a clash of political systems ^[12]. Following the outbreak of the Ukraine war, the Biden administration further categorized China alongside other authoritarian states like Russia, emphasizing the inherent conflict and value-based confrontation between the U.S. and democratic nations against authoritarian regimes.

Although Biden rhetorically emphasizes "strategic competition," the policy implementation of this concept has been somewhat vague and broad, lacking a clear long-term plan. For instance, although protectionist measures have been taken in terms of technology blockades and trade barriers to prevent the flow of technology to China, cooperation with China is still maintained in many areas, especially on global issues such as climate change and public health, which is different from the all-out confrontation during the Trump era. The Biden administration has not clearly articulated the specific goals of strategic competition, nor has it clearly defined how to measure the success or failure of competition, let alone what

it means to "win the strategic competition." As his term comes to an end, these questions seem unlikely to be definitively answered.

4. Conclusion

Overall, both of the Trump and Biden administrations recognize China as the primary challenger to the U.S.'s global dominance, and offensive realism effectively explains the U.S.'s strategic response to China's rise. The policy direction of the United States underwent a significant transformation during the Trump era, manifesting itself in a more radical nationalist and protectionist tendency. Through the "America First" policy, Trump emphasized the need for all government agencies to adopt a unified, tough stance on China, particularly through the trade war and technology blockades, aiming to limit China's economic and technological rise. These policies revealed that, against the backdrop of a shifting global power balance, the U.S. sought to maintain its dominant position in the global order through "preemptive" measures. After Biden came to power, he returned to multilateralism and international cooperation. This shift reflects the United States' policy toward China, from direct bilateral competition to global competition. However, there was no fundamental change in the broad direction of U.S. domestic policies or its strategy toward China compared to Trump. The core features of offensive realism remain, with the U.S. continuing to pursue a more subtle but sustained strategic competition to maintain its global hegemonic status. The ongoing strategic competition under both administrations also reflects a policy inclination in the U.S. to take a tough stance against any potential challengers in the international system.

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