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China vs America

China versus America: war in the Pacific?

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China flew a hypersonic glide vehicle — a manoeuvrable spacecraft that travels at more than five times the speed of sound — on an orbital rocket system, demonstrating the ability to hit any part of the US with nuclear weapons. The HGV launched a missile as it flew over the South China Sea, revealing a capability that stunned the Pentagon because of the difficulties of firing a projectile while flying at such a speed.'

FINANCIAL TIMES, 2/12/2021

'FEARS that Beijing will wage war have soared after a Chinese nuclear-powered submarine was spotted in the Taiwan Strait on satellite imagery from the European Space Agency.'

DAILY EXPRESS 2/12/2021

Despite the current crisis on the Russia/Ukraine border, America's military leadership does not consider Russia to be its most important rival. On the contrary, as one observer put it, 'China is the new Soviet Union'. [\[1\]](#)

The quotes at the top of the page are just two of a single day's stories hyping the possibility of military confrontation between the United States and China in the Pacific and the South China Sea. How does the possibility of such confrontation fit together with the idea of greater collaboration between the two states in an arrangement that has been called a Global Police State?

Advocates of the Global Police State idea have stressed the internationalisation of capital, and in particular the integration of US and Chinese capital. [\[2\]](#) But US-China tensions seem to be at a high point, and inter-imperialist political and military rivalry seems frantic. And without doubt, it is the military stance of the United States that is aggressive on a great power level. [\[3\]](#)

The announcement of the so-called Aukus—Australia, the UK and US— security alliance in the Pacific area, which is clearly about much more than nuclear submarines, seems to counter the idea of Chinese-US interdependence. Surely Aukus is a sign of deep rivalry, and in particular military rivalry between China and the US? How does all this fit together?

A series of articles at the influential Brookings Institution caution against exaggeration of the dangers of conflict, and put forward the idea of competitive interdependence of the two economies. Ryan Hass argues that there is 'deepening interdependence' and, at the same time, a 'hardening competition' between two powers that are both way ahead of all their rivals, economically and politically. And Hass is insistent that war, or even an attempt to wreck the Chinese economy, would be disastrous for the United States. Investment and trade are growing despite Trump-imposed sanctions, and the two economies are completely intertwined, he argues. This competitive interdependence, says Hass, is the 'new normal.' His view, like the Brookings Institution on most things, tends to reflect a lot of big-business thinking, as well as that in much of the Democratic Party. [\[4\]](#)

AUKUS

When AUKUS was announced in September 2021, the mass media presented it mainly as a decision by Australia to buy American nuclear submarines rather than French diesel-electric subs. But it is much more than that. It is a comprehensive defence initiative, involving sweeping co-operation over weapons, technology, surveillance, planning and overall strategy. Given the military and technology relationship of forces, this ties the slavishly pro-American regimes in Britain and Australia even more firmly behind US objectives in the region.

Who was really the target of the AUKUS announcement? China mainly, but the AUKUS declaration also coincided with the planned announcement—to the exact day—of the new EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. [5] The EU document represents an attempt to get Europe to speak with one voice on the region, and chart an independent course, especially in relation to China, away from the US position. [6] AUKUS was a precisely aimed torpedo that badly holed the EU strategy. Which was very revealing about the differences between Trump and Biden on China, militarism and the Pacific—much more limited than many US liberals and business people had hoped.

Defence alliances in the 21st century necessarily involve technology alliances. Adoption of a particular technological framework from major states ties smaller states into political alliances and dependence. As we discuss below, the key focus of US military planning and weaponry today is occupation of the Pacific around China and a planned war aimed mainly at the Chinese coastline and inland cities and military facilities.

That's how the US military see it, but that is not everything as far as US business is concerned, for one simple reason. China produces 30% of the world's manufactured goods, many of them on behalf of US companies. The list of US companies with major investments in China is amazing—if they are big, they are in China, even if like Northrop Grumman they are key defence companies. [7] Northrop Grumman helps manufacture America's most important defence system, the Lockheed Martin F-35 stealth fighter (see below), which is being prepared to blow up its own Chinese facilities. Well, maybe not, but you can see the dilemma.

A war with China would wreck the Apple Corporation and Walmart, GAP and Dell Computers and a huge swathe of other US companies. More than that, it would devastate key US exports. For example, the most important market for Texas natural gas is China, and a collapse of Chinese orders would be ruinous for the state. In terms of simple economic logic, it would not appear to make sense for the United States and China to be pursuing a militarised contest. But in the Global Police State apparent economic logic doesn't always hold sway. Conflict with China in the epoch of 'militarised accumulation' means huge profits for defence and hi-tech companies like Amazon, Microsoft and even Facebook.

The ramping up of political and military tensions got supercharged when Donald Trump became US President in 2016. Trade sanctions were put in place in a torrent of accusations against China of theft of intellectual property, breaking of WTO rules on state subsidies, lax labour laws allowing ultra-cheap labour and currency manipulation. For the first time since World War Two, the US faces an opponent that seriously rivals it on the economic, financial and technological fronts. According to Abraham Denmark and Richard Hass, Trump's anti-China sanctions resulted in 'More Pain than Gain' for the American economy; their article is a warning of the dangers of a general confrontation. [8] But in the era of the rise of the authoritarian right, and in the United States a deeply reactionary military and defence establishment, what is logical for the American economy may not always win out. And we are likely just two years from having another extreme right American president. Indeed it could even be Donald Trump himself. But any Republican president would ratchet up anti-China rhetoric and militarism. A return of extreme right Republicanism to the Oval Office would make Biden in power seem like a brief interlude in the political 'new normal' of a major capitalist party whose authoritarian right-wing politics blend into fascism. And in which bellicose militarism plays an important domestic political role.

AUKUS was about building a political bloc which would scupper any European plans for the region and ensure US dominance of the anti-China alliance in the region, one that includes Taiwan, the Philippines, Japan, South Korea and a raft of South East Asian countries. And as we have seen since the formation of NATO in the late 1940s, military alliances and shared weapons systems are crucial ways of tying political relationships together.

The F-35 Stealth Fighter: preparing for war with China

Because nationalism and its attendant militarism are key factors in US domestic politics, neither Republicans nor Democrats will significantly reduce their anti-China rhetoric or the military pressure on China any time soon. If military competition, with huge amounts of ultra-lethal weaponry involved, can go hand in hand with economic collaboration, nevertheless there is no guarantee that the major US corporations will always be able to control the political and military dynamics, especially if Trump or a similar Republican becomes the next US president in 2024. (The Republican victory in the Virginia gubernatorial election in November 2021 has convinced many observers that the Democrats will lose the presidency in 2024.)

America's offensive military stance towards China, focused especially on lethal attacks on the Chinese coastline, depends on the huge power of US aircraft carriers, and their flotillas of frigates and destroyers; as well as bombers from the Guam and other air force bases, and the back up and landing forces of the Marine Corps. That's where the F-35 fighter and submarine warfare come in—the former to dominate the skies, the latter to defend the aircraft carriers and launch their own (non-nuclear) missiles.

Throughout the last 60 years, America's military stance and tactics have been highly theorised, by think tanks, corporations and the military itself. In the 1970s the doctrine of AirLand Battle emerged, mainly aimed at the Soviet Union. It was followed by AirSea Battle aimed at China, which has morphed into Multi-Domain Operations, whose focus can be seen through the F-35 stealth fighter project. [9] Multi-Domain operations are about having the technology and weapons to open up many fronts which an enemy cannot deal with, and to have the surveillance capacities to 'see' over vast areas to enable multiple successful strikes, some fired from a distance of 200 miles, against the enemy.

The F-35 is much more than an air dominance or ground attack fighter. It can link with satellite technology and has advanced radar to 'see' over huge areas. It is alleged to be much more capable than its main rivals, the Chinese J20 'Great Dragon' and the Russian Sukhoi S-35. But the F-35 has benefitted from a huge sales effort by the United States. Indeed in commercial terms it is sweeping the board, with immense political and alliance-building consequences. More than 1000 F-35s have been ordered by 13 countries. Seven 'core' countries contributed finance to its development—Britain, Australia, Canada, Italy, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands. Turkey was expelled from the original core group for buying Russian anti-aircraft missiles. Britain contributed £220 million to project development, and already has enough of the ship-based F-35B version to enable the Queen Elizabeth advanced aircraft carrier, but unfortunately not yet enough to fit out the Prince Charles carrier. [10]

The *Queen Elizabeth* battle group (the carrier with its F-35 planes, plus destroyers and support ships) recently went on manoeuvres in the East Pacific as part of a joint operation with the United States. On its return, in a highly choreographed and symbolic operation, Italian and American F-35s landed on its decks. Just as during the two Gulf wars, the United Kingdom will follow the US lead. Embarrassingly, on the outward and inward bound trips in the Mediterranean the Queen Elizabeth and support ships were 'buzzed' by Russian jets flying out of Syria (the whole caravan went via the Suez Canal). Vladimir Putin was sending a hilarious message to the embarrassed Brits and the West in general. Your battle group could be sunk before it leaves the Med.

America expects to have eventually around 3500 F-35s on active service. Norway says a single F-35 will cost it more than \$7bn over its perhaps 20- or 30-year lifetime. Britain is expected to have between 60 and 80 F-35s. These figures are astounding. A world total of 4-5000 of these aircraft at any one time is an amazing over-supply of military resources, at gigantic cost, with potentially appallingly dangerous consequences. But China and Russia have been busy with their own massive defence projects, including hypersonic missiles, which are exactly what they sound like.

Chinese Imperialism

China, as shown by the imprisonment of the Uighurs—the cultural genocide of a whole people—and the destruction of Hong Kong democracy, is a brutal dictatorship, and very far from being a ‘socialist’ country, as its ‘campist’ defenders believe. [11] China certainly has a defensive military stance vis-a-vis the United States (there are no Chinese aircraft carriers off the coast of San Francisco); but as we discuss below, China is being drawn inexorably into international military competition with the US. In addition, to promote Chinese economic and military interests, the Chinese Communist Party leadership has shown itself willing to strong-arm its neighbours, including Vietnam, the Philippines and others, over control of the South China Sea, and potentially the mineral wealth beneath it.

In his excellent article “A New Imperialism Emerges”, Pierre Rousset quotes a document that points out that:

To secure its sea lanes (merchant or military), Beijing has taken possession of ports in many countries, from Sri Lanka to Greece, using the weapon of debt when necessary. A default in repayment can allow it to demand that a port territory become a Chinese concession for a period of up to 99 years (which was Hong Kong's colonial status!). [12]

In addition it has been widely argued that a key objective of its forward naval deployment is to defend the route through the Straits of Malacca, which is the main conduit of oil from the Middle East. But defending sea lanes is much wider than that, and in particular China's key aim is to ensure its routes to Africa. China's relationship with Africa is classically imperialist—exports of capital and imports of raw materials.

Africa is the fastest urbanising area of the world, now surpassing India and China. [13] By 2025 a hundred cities in Africa will have more than one million people. The result is likely to be an infrastructure revolution. More than 10,000 Chinese companies are operating in Africa and the value of Africa-China trade since 2005 has been more than two trillion dollars. China is the biggest external investor in Africa. Africa's capitalist leaders seek rapid industrialisation and importing foreign capital is the quickest way to do it. It is said that you cannot find a building site in Africa over three stories high which does not have Chinese capital supporting it somewhere, or a new road of more than three kilometres that does not have Chinese engineers building it. [14] Through these partnerships China wants to be in on African manufacturing, agriculture and minerals.

This is a classic imperialist nexus. Whether China is imperialist or not cannot be gleaned from whether it has an aggressive military posture towards the United States or a defensive one, any more than you could assess who was imperialist at the start of the First World War by tracking who was the most militarily aggressive. The United States seeks to leverage its military dominance to confront China's economic challenge, no doubt. That does not disprove the idea that China is imperialist.

The term ‘Global Police State’, which emphasises the interdependence of the UJS and Chinese economies, does not

indicate a single military, economic or political structure. It is a metaphor that stresses the globalisation of capital and its strong integration between the major players. A war would be a disaster for both China and the United States.

As a well-informed commentator notes, China's hi-tech military development is proceeding apace. [15] Arguably it already has its own equivalent to the American F-35 stealth fighter, the J-20 'Great Dragon', and is pouring in vast amounts of money to sustain its arms race with the US. China has built its first military base in Africa, near a large port in Djibouti. It sent troops and warships to rescue its citizens and those of other countries caught up in wars in Libya in 2011 and Yemen in 2015. And it has peace keeping troops in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The country's international military outreach is growing fast.

The New Baroque Arsenal

In the early 1980s Sussex university academic and peace campaigner Mary Kaldor coined the term 'Baroque Arsenal' to characterise the vast oversupply of weapons under Ronald Reagan. [16] Today we have a Baroque arsenal on steroids. The massive wastefulness of this—from the point of view of human need, not from the point of view of world capitalist profit—is highlighted by the tragi-comic stories of the US Navy Rail Gun, the Advanced Naval Gun and the Zumwalt frigate, all of which were abandoned after the expenditure of billions of dollars. [17] But the cost of these failures was not borne by their main developers—companies like BAE Systems, General Atomics, L-3 Applied Technologies, Saft America Inc. and Apple Technologies. Corporations across America, all got paid. The Baroque Arsenal Mark2 is not just an alliance builder, but a massive profit builder, what William I Robinson calls 'militarised accumulation.'

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[1] Quoted by Justin Bronk, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQedM3qBXgc>.

[2] Notably William I Robinson in his book *Global Police State*, strongly supported by Neil Faulkner and myself.

[3] Which does not exclude China using its military might, or threat thereof, to strongarm countries on its border. But China's military outlook since the revolution in 1949 has been one of defence vis-a-vis the United States. See the book *Active Defence, China's Military Strategy since 1949*, J. Taylor Fravel, Princeton University Press, 2009.

[4] Brookings, 12 August 2021 "[The "new normal" in US-China relations: Hardening competition and deep interdependence](#)".

[5] European Commission, 16 September 2021 "[Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific](#)".

[6] Some EU thinkers want to have a European aircraft carrier in the Pacific to counter the US. This will never happen. The finances and political will do not exist.

[7] Forbes, 5 July 2010 "[U.S. Companies That Invest Big In China](#)".

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[8] Brookings, 7 August 2020 "[More pain than gain: How the US-China trade war hurt America](#)".

[9] Lockheed Martin "[What is Multi-Domain Operations/Joint All-Domain Operations?](#)".

[10] An F-35 on board the *Queen Elizabeth* recently fell into the sea on take-off. Britain has asked the US to help recover it.

[11] <https://www.learningfromchina.net/author/john-ross/>.

[12] Pierre Rousset "[China: a new imperialism emerges](#)".

[13] Council on Foreign Relations, 12 September 2018 "[Africa is the Fastest Urbanizing Place on the Planet](#)".

[14] Forbes, 3 October 2019 "[What China Is Really Up To In Africa](#)".

[15] Bronk, op cit

[16] Baroque because of its huge complexity and over-the-top superfluous scope. Mary Kaldor [The Baroque Arsenal](#).

[17] The Rail Gun is a device which sends a solid projectile at vast speed that pulverises anything in its way. It is powered by an electromagnetic charge, which takes huge amounts of electricity to work. After spending \$800m on the project, the Navy realised that the only ships that could generate this amount of electricity were its aircraft carriers. These are ships that already have a huge amount of armaments, able to destroy anything within a couple of hundred miles. Aircraft carriers don't need a huge piece of electric junk littering their decks. So the Rail Gun was sunk. The Advanced Naval Gun took 25 years to develop, cost billions, but was eventually found to be surplus to requirements, especially as its main platform—the Zumwalt frigate—had a tendency to sink when waves were behind it (!).