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Spatial Imaginaries and Geopolitics in US–China Rivalry

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Introduction

Great power rivalry is back once again (Layne 2012; Buzan and Cox 2013; Mearsheimer 2014; Graaff and Van Apeldoorn 2018; Ikenberry 2018a, 2018b; Lake 2018). In the 21st century, post-COVID-19 pandemic world order, China and the US have emerged as the two most powerful state actors, if several quintessential economic, military, and sociocultural indicators are considered. The economic front is indeed an area of great power contestation. According to the World Bank (2022a), while the US in 2021 had the world's largest gross domestic product (GDP; constant 2015 US dollars [USD]) with 20.3 trillion USD, China recorded 15.8 trillion USD. China's enormous economic wealth that it has accumulated over the last few decades, however, has to be shared by the country's 1.4 billion people. China's 2021 GDP per capita (constant USD for 2015) remains remarkably low at 11,188 USD, compared to the US that has 61,280 USD. Notwithstanding, China has overtaken the US as the world's largest manufacturer of products that are then exported to all countries. Consequently, China has the largest percentage share of the world's exports of goods, with 14.7 percent in 2020, while the US only has 8.1 percent (Razo 2021). Nearly 124 countries recorded China as their top trading partner, while the US was recorded as the top exporter in only 56 countries (Arte 2022).

In global financial governance, China challenges US dominance as the former established the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the vast rail, land, and sea global network that connects China to a large number of countries in almost all world-regions (Kuo and Kommenda 2018; Nordin and Weissmann 2018; Jones and Zeng 2019). In a bid to stimulate development outcomes

elsewhere, China founded the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which is a multilateral financial institution that invests in various economic, social, and sustainable development projects in at least 105 member countries (Kubalkova 2015; Babones et al 2020; Lai 2022). China's BRI and AIIB constitute attempts to upstage the Washington DC-based World Bank and the Manila-based Asian Development Bank, both of which predominantly reflect US interests. Because global dominance is largely contingent upon a country's access to key natural resources that are crucial for industrial production and exports, the so-called "rare earths," which refer to 17 soft heavy metals, are necessary in the manufacturing processes of nearly all electrical technologies, lasers, magnetic devices, and many other industrial work-processes (Ferreira and Critelli 2022). On that aspect alone, China possesses nearly 80 percent of the world's rare-earths imports, while the US has 15.5 percent only, thereby making the latter's industrial capacities highly vulnerable to the former's export policies (Subin 2021; Garside 2021).

In the military dimension, the US retains its position as the world's biggest spender on national defense, with a budget pegged at approximately 778 billion USD in 2020 (39 percent of total world military expenditure), while China is positioned in a distant second with 252 billion USD (Zhang 2021). Although the US is widely considered as having the world's most powerful navy with 300 navy ships and 11 aircraft carriers that are highly mobile and strategically positioned in a wide variety of distant territories, China has 360 navy ships and three aircraft carriers. Even in the Asia-Pacific front, where China is expected to claim naval dominance, the US possesses some clear advantages due to Washington DC's control of many military bases strategically located in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Brunei, Guam, Singapore, Indonesia, Australia, and several islands in the Pacific (Arte 2022). US military advantage also includes the recently established 2021 AUKUS Agreement, which functions as a trilateral military security treaty between the US, UK, and Australia. The AUKUS agreement allows the US and the UK to provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines—a collective pact among allies that could be seen by China as Western attempts to undermine Beijing military ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region (Barnes and Makinda 2022; Wilkinson 2022).

In global governance, while the US remains as the key state actor in a large majority of intergovernmental organizations, China has been actively co-operating with Russia in various key voting issues in the UN Security Council (Machaffie 2022). As the world's largest state contributor to UN peacekeeping missions, China commissions 2,500 peacekeepers as of 2019 and contributes a 12 percent share of the total budget of the UN. China, meanwhile, comes second after the US, which is the UN's largest state donor, with contributions valued at 22 percent (CGTN 2020). Meanwhile, in the international development sector, the US is the world's biggest donor

of bilateral foreign aid, with nearly 200 recipient countries and territories. China, however, remains in the second position, and the scope and the purposes of Beijing's foreign aid programs are, however, opaque to public scrutiny (Regilme 2021; Regilme and Hodzi 2021).

In those aforementioned arenas of great power contestation, China's increasing assertiveness is not the only challenge to US dominance; rather, domestic political crises constrain the sustainability of American hegemony (Regilme 2019). Over the last two decades, the US has struggled to resolve multiple transnational crises: transnational non-state terrorism, the 2007/2008 global financial crisis, climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the deep political polarization that crippled the government's legitimacy and effectiveness in addressing domestic and global problems such as extreme material inequities, economic insecurity, systemic racism, and gender inequality (Bieler and Morton 2018; McCoy and Somer 2019; Regilme 2020, 2021; Theidon 2020; Zaidi 2021; Albert 2022; Liodakis 2022; Mandelbaum 2022). In response to the 9/11 terror attacks, the US, under the Bush administration, launched its so-called global war on terror, which poured in billions of dollars on militaristic policy strategies that eventually generated widespread human rights abuses—rather than primarily investing in socioeconomic programs that could have uplifted the most marginalized communities within and outside the US (Kutz 2014; Sanders 2017; Regilme 2018a, 2018b; Moyn 2021). Amid the 2007 global financial crisis, the US government provided hefty billion-dollar bailouts to corporate behemoths, while the socioeconomic welfare of the many minoritized groups remained at the bottom of the policy agenda (Helleiner 2011; Blyth 2013a, 2013b). In such crises, the legitimacy and effectiveness of the US as a model for governance have been called into question. The unparalleled US military power appeared to be ineffective in delivering its intended outcomes of fostering peace and economic development in many places in the Global South, where America's violent interventions persisted—including Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite being the world's largest economy in terms of GDP, the US, with its model of neoliberal governance, has been unable to respond effectively to the socioeconomic needs of its most marginalized communities (World Bank 2022b).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration systematically discarded the need for intensified multilateral cooperation for the sake of global public health, while thousands of Americans died amid Trump's disregard for scientific expertise and indifference toward the dignity and health of his constituents (Gramer 2021; Regilme 2022a, 2022b; Sandlin 2022). In an effort to clean up the mess of his predecessor, US President Joseph Biden has sought to intensify US contributions to global governance, reinvigorate his country's economic development, and effectively manage the COVID-19 pandemic (Regilme 2022a, 2022b). Yet, the Biden administration's

commitment to sell democratic governance—as the legitimating discourse of US global dominance—both to his domestic constituents and the rest of the world has proven to be difficult. While nearly six in ten surveyed American respondents confirmed that US democracy is in deep trouble and at the risk of collapse (Rose and Baker 2022), global public opinion in 2021 confirmed that 56 percent in 17 Global North countries that are constitutional democracies expressed their discontent with how their political systems were unable to deliver economic growth, demonstrate managerial competence, and foster fairness in the distribution of material wealth (Wike and Fetterolf 2021). Overall, those global and domestic problems faced by the US in the last two decades illustrate the difficulties of maintaining the country's hegemonic status in the international system.

Amid the perception of the tarnished moral appeal of the US as a global power, China has re-emerged as one of the most powerful state actors that could credibly challenge the dominance of the US (and its Western allies) in the post-Cold War international system. Among the re-emerging powers such as India, Russia, and Brazil, China is perhaps the only country that demonstrates the ambition and potential to enhance its military capabilities, economic influence, and social legitimacy in ways that could constrain US influence in many places worldwide. China has become the world's largest manufacturing country and biggest exporter of economic goods, while bolstering its global military apparatus and influence in global governance institutions (Murphy 2022). The Chinese state's ability to deliver rapid economic growth in just a short period of time has been remarkable. After opening up its economy to world trade in the late 1970s, China's economic growth averaged at least 10 percent a year and nearly a billion people escaped extreme poverty—an achievement that is often attributed to Beijing's long-term technocratic planning. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, China nonetheless registered 8.1 percent growth—a remarkable rate that is more than twice the rate of economic growth of the US and its Western European allies (Tan 2022). With those remarkable economic success, the Chinese state has been determined in converting that economic power into military might. In 2022, the Chinese Ministry of Finance confirmed a remarkable increase of 7.1 percent in military spending, which is estimated at around 230 billion USD (Cheng 2022)—a rate that is much higher than the 6 percent average in recent years but still remarkably low compared to US military spending of at least 778 billion USD in 2022 (SIPRI 2022). Notwithstanding, China is betting on the potential of innovative and revolutionary technologies such as autonomous systems, quantum, cyber, and biological instruments in a way that could undermine US dominance in the Indo-Pacific region (Horowitz and Kahn 2021).

If indeed the post-Second World War global order faces an accelerated pace of profound global transformation, what is, in theoretical terms, meant by

global transformation or shift? In its broadest terms, global shift pertains to “the transformative, transitional, aggregate, and multidimensional processes whereby a state, or a group of states, actively and strategically challenges the dominant power position of a status quo global hegemon or a leading group of states” (Regilme and Hartmann 2019: 1). There are so many notable ways in which the US—the status quo global power—faces significant challenges that could threaten its fundamental interest of maintaining its dominant power position. In Europe, Putin’s militaristic aggressions in Ukraine since early 2022 have intensified the threat of a full-scale, enduring, and extremely devastating war that could spill over to other parts of Europe and beyond—a possibility that could challenge US power in this particular geographical front. In the Asia-Pacific, China’s relentless construction and militarization of artificial islands in the disputed South China Sea enables Beijing some significant control in this important maritime route, which more than 60 percent of global trade passes through (Mai and Zheng 2017; Zhang 2017; Ramadhani 2019). Beijing’s intensified militaristic showmanship and rhetorical threats of invasion of Taiwan undermine the sustainability of US military dominance, which is underpinned by its treaty alliances with Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand, strategic partnerships with Malaysia, Vietnam, and Singapore, as well as a panoply of military bases worldwide (Yeo 2011; Regilme 2022a). While the Biden presidency is committed to providing military aid to Ukraine in a bid to defend US interests in Europe, Beijing has been busy in entrapping traditional US allies in Asia within China’s sphere of influence—a pattern demonstrated, for example, by the shift of Thailand’s military junta toward Beijing and the Philippines’ Duterte presidency amidst its unprecedented support for China’s leadership in the region (Chachavalpongpun 2011; Jory 2014; Busbarat 2016, 2017; Pongsudhirak 2016).

Theorizing the puzzle of US–China rivalry

Considering the global context as described in the previous section, this book raises the following core questions: How is great power rivalry and cooperation formed, contested, and transformed across various territorial spaces and geographic scales in the international system? How and why do those patterns of contestations and cooperation manifest and vary in different regions of the world? Both questions constitute the puzzle of US–China rivalry in the era of 21st-century global transformation.

That puzzle was formulated with three global-structural conditions that must be considered in analyzing US–China rivalry. First, the post-Second World War international system is entering a global interregnum. While US hegemony appears to be receding, China has emerged as the world’s largest manufacturing country, and its military and political influence are

expanding beyond its immediate regional security environments (Arrighi 2007; Wallerstein 2009; Go 2011; Lachmann 2014; Mearsheimer 2014; Chase-Dunn and Podobnik 2015; Brooks and Wohlforth 2016; Chase-Dunn and Friedman 2016; Regilme and Parisot 2017; Schwarzer 2017; Ho-Fung 2018; Regilme 2019; Zaidi 2021; Murphy 2022; Thompson 2022). Both the US and China are the two most powerful yet rivalrous state actors in the international system, even amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the seemingly imminent inflation crisis that is hitting Global South and North countries alike. Second, the exact features and conditions of such a great power contestation vary across geographic spaces because each physical space of contestation possesses a unique constellation of actors, institutions, sociocultural factors, economic resources, and historically bounded beliefs that shape, enable, and constrain the processes and trajectory of US–China relations (Cheng and Liu 2021; Maya and Urdinez 2022; Murphy 2022; Schindler and DiCarlo 2022). Third, the ideational and normative foundations of the Western-dominated liberal international order are in deep crisis, while unjust distributive politics has fueled discontent and resentment among the most marginalized sectors of the world’s populations (Regilme 2014, 2019; Ikenberry 2018a; Elliott 2019; Babic 2020; Barnett 2020; Oxfam 2020). Systemic hypocrisy—or the mismatch between ideational claims for leadership and actual practices—does not match the actual series of actions of powerful state actors. The US has consistently demonstrated its systemic hypocrisy through its persistent invocation of human rights and democracy promotion, but it has always failed to do so in favor of militarism and unfettered capital accumulation (Acharya 2007; Moyn 2021). China, on the other hand, claims to be focusing on the socioeconomic rights and collective interests of its population. Yet, Beijing’s policies have persistently generated the curtailment of civil and political rights in favor of perpetually empowering the very top leaders in Beijing and their allies, while the unprecedented economic growth has also generated remarkable material inequalities across the Chinese society (Inboden and Chen 2012; Kinzelbach 2014; Inboden 2015; Peyrouse 2022; Üngör 2022). In both countries, and nearly all parts of the globe, capitalism is credited for improving the lives of millions of people, yet that same political-economic system is also blamed for extreme inequalities, political polarization, and growing resentment against state institutions (Robinson 2014; Fraser 2015; Mickey et al 2017; Cárdenas-García et al 2021; Gunderson 2022; Liodakis 2022).

Unfortunately, many previous scholarly studies on global transformations and great power contestations often deploy mainstream theories of International Relations (IR), without a nuanced empirical analysis that explicitly teases out the relationship between geographic space and great power contestations (Doshi 2021; Bergsten 2022; Economy 2022;

Friedberg 2022; Rudd 2022). As Sjöberg (2008: 484–485) compellingly maintains, “the tenets of political realism (international anarchy as a foundational assumption), political liberalism (cooperation for gains), and political constructivism (the influence of ideas) are necessary but insufficient to understand and explain global politics”; specifically, “they are missing sufficiently complicated understandings of process and of the relationship between the social and the physical.” Hence, this volume offers an alternative approach. Specifically, this book upholds that great power rivalry vary across different geographical spaces and scales, and it seriously considers geographical spatial imaginary to be contingent on social relations that are produced within a particular territory, historical period, and political system (Murdoch and Marsden 1995; Sjöberg 2008; Jessop 2012; Watkins 2015).

Focusing on great power rivalries of 21st century, this book considers spatialization as a key conceptual tool for understanding socio-ideational and material processes and their relationship with geographical physical space (Lefebvre 1991: 26–27; Sjöberg 2008). This book situates the scholarly analysis of the US–China rivalry within the intersections of physical geography, social relations, and global politics from several disciplinary, methodological, and analytic perspectives from various world-regions. In this way, the book offers a truly global yet multiscalar examination of global transformation in the 21st century. This analytic objective responds to recent calls for a more fruitful conversation between Global IR theory and area studies, which allows for a more rigorous probing of mainstream approaches as well as the innovation of new theoretical perspectives that were developed in light of empirical evidence from various parts of the world (Acharya 2014; Regilme 2021; Dian 2022). Indeed, spatialization enables us to make more insightful, theoretically innovative, and evidence-based analysis than the often universalizing and Eurocentric discussion of US–China rivalry. How is that even possible? By asking IR theorists who are also experts of specific world-regions, this book upholds a Global IR approach. As Acharya explains (Acharya 2014: 649), Global IR pertains to the analytic desire that:

- is committed to pluralistic universalism, which recognizes the diversity in political communities;
- is based in world histories, and not just Euro–American historical experiences;
- incorporates and engages with current IR theories and approaches;
- utilizes the evidence and theoretical perspectives from area studies, regions, and distinctive areas of the world;
- disregards exceptionalism; and
- upholds the manifold manifestations of political agency in addition to material power, such as resistance, collective actions, and localized visions of global order.

Beyond the general US–China rivalry debate, recent scholarship that upholds features of Global IR has emerged, and offers innovative theoretical insights that meaningfully contribute to broader puzzles of world politics (for example, [Lee 2017](#); [Getachew 2019](#); [Benabdallah 2020](#); [Regilme 2021](#); [Zarakol 2022](#)).

As such, the chapters herein demonstrate that global power shifts and systemic transformations should be theorized and empirically investigated by examining how political contestations are constrained, enabled, and bounded within a given temporal period, material space or geographic place, and social relations. In this way, this volume upholds a scalar and place-based approach to the analysis of US–China rivalry, thereby highlighting the links between intersubjective relations and geographical features that constitute and produce a wide range of repeated as well as dynamic political processes ([Sjoberg 2008](#): 489). This anthology provides a multifaceted and spatially oriented analysis of how China’s re-emergence as a global power impacts the dominance of the US as well as the domestic state and non-state actors in various world-regions, including the Asia-Pacific, Africa, South America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, Europe, and the Arctic. This volume offers the core argument that the great power rivalry between the US and China must be examined by considering the many geographic scales at which it is generated, imagined, enacted, and transformed. The volume analyzes the 21st-century’s great power rivalry’s multiple and, at times, divergent scalar and spatial expressions.

This collaborative project distinguishes itself from current scholarly and policy debates on global governance and global transformations in several ways. First, it highlights the patterns of rivalry as well as cooperation between China and the US, as they manifest in distinctive territorial spaces and varying geographical scales of the contemporary international system. Second, the edited volume showcases the careful deployment of relevant theoretical perspectives to understand a given empirical puzzle emanating from a particular geographical space and scale, thereby demonstrating theoretical pluralism and diversity as well as analytic eclecticism in its approach. Third, departing from popular discussions on global shifts that usually focus on state actors and geostrategic as well as economic issues, the scope of chapters herein illustrate topical diversity, in a way that features issues beyond those that directly concern military security and economics, particularly by considering the underappreciated roles of non-state actors and civil society groups.

State of knowledge: US–China rivalry

This rivalry between the world’s two most powerful states has often been characterized in mainstream scholarly and public debates in ways that do

not seriously consider how great power rivalry has varying causes and consequences across different world-regions and territorial spaces. This edited volume reflects on how and under which conditions does the US–China competition (and cooperation) vary across regions and territorial spaces and what such variations actually mean for the prospects of war and peace, global cooperation, and human welfare. In the anthology *China's Challenges and International Order Transition* (Feng and He, 2020), the editors interrogated China's external security, political, and economic challenges and their dynamic relationship with the deployment of power, rules, and norms. While the volume by Feng and He (2020) provides an insightful reflection on whether China challenges the current global order, the chapter contributions therein did not fully investigate *how* the China's foreign policy initiatives varied across many parts of the world. Meanwhile, the anthology titled *US–China Foreign Relations* (Ross et al 2020) aimed to investigate the consequences of China's rise on the US, Europe, and Asia, but the book did not adopt a multidisciplinary approach, while it failed to cover other regions of the world in its analysis, notably Asia, the Middle East, and the Arctic (see also similar examples: Doshi 2021; Hass 2021; Bergsten 2022; Vinodan and Kurian 2022). In addition, Dawn Murphy's (2022) *China's Rise in the Global South* is a perceptive account of re-emerging powers' impact in many places in the non-Western world, but that monograph did not cover Southeast Asia, in a way that this book does. Other recently published volumes, however, focus on China as just of one of the other rising powers or as a case study for broadly theorizing great power competition (Nadkarni and Noonan 2013; Thies and Nieman 2017; Regilme and Parisot 2017; Xuetong 2019; Schoen 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, other re-emerging powers, such as Russia, India, and South Africa, have demonstrated their notable structural weaknesses and limited capabilities in ways that made China appear to be more comparatively resilient and the most credible challenger state of US hegemony. Other recent monographs, meanwhile, focused only on one geographic space of contestation: the case of US–China rivalry in several arenas such as Taiwan (Chen 2017), Thailand (Zawacki 2021), the broader Indo-Pacific Region (Chan 2013; Goldstein 2015), Europe (Ross et al 2020), the global order as whole (Allison 2017), or global finance as an imagined space (Fok 2021). Those aforementioned works, while insightful, did not take a global perspective that compares patterns of contestations across geographic regions.

Other recently published edited volumes pertaining to contemporary China in world politics are analytically innovative, but this book remains distinctive from those outputs. For example, the two volumes, *The China Questions* and *The China Questions 2* (Carrai et al 2019), offer a comprehensive overview of the contemporary US–China bilateral relations and their impacts in world politics. Yet, those two volumes heavily focus on the domestic and

foreign politics of China on a thematic policy basis rather than explicitly highlighting how such bilateral dynamics differ across various regions of the world, as it is demonstrated through a spatialization analytic frame as deployed in this volume. Another example is *China and the World* (Shambaugh 2020), which is another notable analysis of US–China relations, but that output does not analytically focus on geographic differentiation of such bilateral power dynamics, as this volume does (see also Thurnston 2021).

While various single-author books and several edited volumes cover some of the issues addressed in this book, none of them combine both the empirical scope *and* analytic ambitions of this project. This anthology provides a much-needed eclectic forum for examining US–China rivalry through a variety of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives as well as spatially oriented analyses, thereby making it possible to develop theoretically informed and empirically rich perspectives of the issue that are so crucially needed.

This volume demonstrates topical diversity and one of the few studies on US–China rivalry that explicitly theorizes on *geographic space* and *spatialization* as the core analytic frames for investigating the multifaceted expressions of global power transitions and transformations in the 21st century. The volume emerges out of frustration at the narrow scope of existing work on the topic, whereby so much of the influential scholarship deploys mainstream theories of IR without an explicit theorization and empirical analysis of the role of geographic space and its material as well as ideational–social dimensions. Additionally, this anthology features chapter contributions by a diverse range of established and emerging scholars, coming from a wide variety of institutional affiliations (located in the Global South and the Global North) and disciplinary perspectives (humanities, social sciences, and public policy), thereby enabling opportunities to situate the book in multiple scholarly, disciplinary, and political conversations. Remarkably, the volume features one chapter focusing on the African continent and one chapter about the Arctic region, considering that both geographical spaces are often discarded and misunderstood in mainstream IR literature as well as public debates on global transformations and US–China rivalry.

Summary of chapters

The organizational logic of the book is divided into three main sections. **Part I** of the book highlights the broader analytic issues and theoretical perspectives pertaining to the rivalry and cooperation between the US and China. In addition to this introductory chapter, **Part I** features the political economy-oriented chapter written by sociologist James Parisot and political scientist Jake Lin. The two authors take the perspectives of political geography and international relations as a way of investigating how the scholarly debates on uneven and combined development help us reflect on the implications of

US–China rivalry in a world underwritten by global capitalist logics. Parisot and Lin contend that economic development instigated by the rise of China and US hegemony should be understood by highlighting the agential roles of exploitative transnational capitalists and the world’s working populations—an analytic strategy that overcomes the analytic limitations of mainstream IR literature’s state-centrism. This insightful chapter suggests that the debate about US–China rivalry should not be about choosing which hegemon is “better” for world politics; rather, our discourses should refocus instead on democratizing world politics through the intensified inclusion of working-class interests in the formation of domestic and foreign policies.

Part II, on the other hand, features chapters that focus on US–China bilateral relations in various world-regions. Through the deployment of spatialization, these chapters demonstrate the distinctive geographies of US–China bilateral relations, particularly in ways that differ from the often-simplistic characterizations of great power competition offered by international media outlets and mainstream IR theorists.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Southeast Asian region as a geographic site of rivalry between the US and China. I ask why the claimant states in the South China Sea dispute, especially China, have recently increased militarization activities and public diplomacy efforts, particularly in unprecedented ways that were relatively absent in the previous decades. The chapter focuses on the increased militaristic and public diplomacy assertiveness of Beijing and its impact on Washington’s strategic interests in the Southeast Asian region. I underscore three notable findings. First, the confluence of China’s economic growth in recent decades vis-à-vis the domestic power struggle within the regime of Xi Jinping likely amplified enduring Chinese insecurity. Thus, it highlights Beijing’s increased strategic resolve to militarize the disputed South China Sea region, which is fast becoming a spatial site of great power competition between the US and China. Second, Southeast Asian countries’ foreign policies and domestic public perception of US power in the region suggest stronger support for continued US military and political assertiveness under the Biden presidency. Third, the chapter calls for smaller claimant states (for example, Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Vietnam) to cooperate with each other and use multilateral bodies to call for a more peaceful resolution of the dispute.

Focusing on South Asia, IR scholar Deepshikha Shahi acknowledges the complexity of international relations as sets of multiple practices with diverse actors as well as multifarious patterns of competition and cooperation. Understanding US–China relations in South Asia requires the analytic departure from traditional Western realism, which considers the sphere of “the international” as governed by dualisms and oppositions. In **Chapter 4**, Shahi deploys the non-dualistic Global IR theory inspired by the Indian philosophy of Advaita to evaluate India’s strategic response to the ongoing

US-China competition in the South Asian region. In doing so, Shahi offers six fundamental principles of Advaita in order to tease out the complexities of contemporary quadrilateral interactions of non-state and state actors between India, Pakistan, China, and the US in the imagined geographical space of South Asia. Shahi highlights the diverse realities of such interactions, in ways that traditional IR theory failed to appreciate; those realities experienced by actors in South Asia, however, are still bounded to the same core reality—that of *single hidden connectedness*, or the holistic interdependence of global politics.

Focusing on the East Asian region, meanwhile, political scientist Jing Sun underscores in [Chapter 5](#) how physical geography has shaped China's quest for great power status and what such a quest means for other state actors, particularly the US. This sense of geography functions as a useful social construct that is relevant for framing Chinese national identity and security in ways that are instrumental to the state. Jing Sun underscores a spectrum view of *tianxia* (All under Heaven) as a spatial-positioning idea, which includes accommodation and domination on opposite sides of the range. The author introduces *tianxia* as a Chinese philosophical concept that imagines a utopian world with a benevolent and effective leader positioned between Heaven and Earth, ruling one's subjects through the mandate of Heaven. As such, Jing Sun explains that *tianxia* functions both as spatial concept and moral instrument that are used to explain and justify the supposedly harmonious and cooperative spatial and normative positionings of all living beings on land. China's rapid and dramatic economic growth, and its consequential accumulation of political influence, poses a challenge to the traditionally land-based conception or interpretation of *tianxia*. To further reinforce its economic growth, Beijing seeks to secure its control over its nearby maritime regions, thereby facilitating the necessity to reframing the idea of *tianxia* as a way of legitimizing its overreaching maritime claims that have been persistently disputed by other neighboring states. This conceptual reframing emerges as a useful discursive technique that bolsters Chinese leaders' domestic political motivations of resurrecting sensibilities of Chinese greatness, or also known as the "Chinese Dream." Yet, this recent reframing of justificatory narratives of Chinese ascendancy and influence in the maritime region generated fear and insecurity among less militarily powerful states in the Northeast Asian region. Moreover, China's maritime expansion consequently challenges the enduring dominance of US military power in those aforementioned regions. As such, the US recalibrated its security strategy in the region, thereby pushing the White House to rebrand its expanded militarism in the region as part of its "Indo-Pacific" strategy. Jing Sun emphasizes that this geography-inspired contestation between two powerful states is besieged with uncertainties, and that conflict could undermine the relative stability in the Northeast Asian region. Competing Chinese political actors deploy alternative interpretations of *tianxia*, whereby

the more China's geographical positioning is emphasized, the more assertive one's discursive construction of China's global aspiration would become. In this regard, the regime of Xi Jinping has been justifying its rapid maritime expansion and militaristic activities through the invoked shift of *tianxia* from land to maritime regions. Consequently, this intensified militarization of disputed maritime regions such as the South China Sea facilitated the emergence of militarization by, and insecurity among, regional neighbors and also the increased securitization by the US.

Analyzing US–China relations in the African region, political scientist Lina Benabdallah commences her investigation by acknowledging the broader context that the US–China rivalry has spilled over beyond the officially recognized borders of both states. In her innovative approach to analyzing Chinese power abroad, Benabdallah contends that our understanding of Beijing's influence in Africa should transcend the simplistic counting of the number of ports, bridges, and other infrastructure projects built by Chinese enterprises and funded by Beijing. Alternatively, the author focuses the investigation on party-to-party diplomacy as a site of China's foreign policy making in Africa, whereby a relational approach is deployed in order to tease out the mechanisms or instruments of social and human capital as well as professional network-building opportunities. Benabdallah highlights the fundamental difference between the US and China in their foreign policy approaches in Africa: whereas US state leaders primarily invest in counterterrorism initiatives with their African counterparts, China focuses on building relations and social capital with elites, government officials, and civil servants. China's approach is indeed remarkable, considering that Benabdallah acknowledges how scholars of relationality and *guanxi* maintain that investments in deepening and expanding personal as well as professional networks between Chinese and African elites are crucial to uncovering the advantages and weaknesses of Chinese influence in Africa. Benabdallah provides empirical evidence on how Chinese influence is generated through the creation of social exchange platforms as well as training opportunities that eventually serve as elite capture mechanisms.

In [Chapter 7](#), legal scholar and IR analyst Juan E. Serrano-Moreno focuses on the ongoing US–China relations in Latin American and Caribbean countries. Specifically, Serrano-Moreno claims that the participation of many states in the BRI illustrates how China has been seeking to fill the apparent void left by the US presence in its traditional sphere of influence. The author contends that the BRI serves as an ambiguous and flexible cooperation platform for initiating investments, infrastructure projects, and trade transactions with China. Serrano-Moreno argues that it is unclear if the BRI has beneficial effects for the people in the region, but it does have concrete diplomatic advantages for Beijing. Through a critical examination of the relevant literatures and official documents pertaining to the BRI, the

author highlights two key factors for the initiative's success. First, the BRI offers partner governments to choose or craft their degree of involvement with Chinese actors. Second, the BRI reinforces the rhetoric of regional connectedness, and that initiative addresses the enduring infrastructural deficits in the region. For Serrano-Moreno, the BRI can also be considered as a discursive strategy that frames China as a benevolent and equal partner in the region through its insistence that it is part of the semi-periphery in the modern capitalist world-system.

In [Chapter 8](#), IR scholars Chien-Kai Chen and Ceren Ergenc explore contemporary US and Chinese foreign policies in the Middle East, particularly the structural conditions upon which those policies are produced, implemented, and eventually changed. In promoting their interests, including oil extraction as a way of fulfilling energy needs, Beijing and Washington DC adopt differing policy approaches. Whereas Beijing is less assertive and non-interventionist, the US adopts a more militaristic, blatantly assertive, and interventionist strategy. In their analysis, the authors use the concept of “path dependence” from the historical institutionalist literature, which pertains to the patterns of reproducing and constraining consequences of the decisions and actions made in the past on the outcomes that are currently being produced and those that will be generated in the future. Using a scalar and place-based approach, the authors examine how repeated dialogical interactions between the actors from the US, China, and the Middle East have created and sustained varying “paths” that the US and China have been traversing in the region in terms of foreign policy. In addition, the chapter discusses how the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 could shape a new political-economic climate in the region and a new “critical juncture” or opportunity for China to shift from its non-interventionist path toward more involvement and assertiveness in regional security issues.

In [Chapter 9](#), security and defense studies scholars Cameron Carlson and Linda Kiltz investigate US–China relations in region that is perhaps the least studied by many scholars—the Arctic region. Carlson and Kiltz begins with a contested geographical frontier as an ideal backdrop where one could analyze inter-state relations. The authors maintain that the Arctic Council and its constituent member states are legitimate Arctic actors, with significant geographical claims and long-standing relationships with the Arctic as a contested region. The Council is composed of eight member states, including Sweden, the US, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Iceland, Canada, and Russia. Each of those member states has claimed sovereignty over the lands within the Arctic region and have had single decision-making authority over policies therein. Yet, China has presented itself as “near-Arctic state,” even though the country is remarkably distant and thousands of miles away from the nearest Arctic territorial region. Carlson and Kiltz advance the claim that China views the Arctic as a new strategic frontier with its seabed

and space construed as ungoverned or under-governed public areas. The authors underscore evidence that Chinese military pronouncements admit that the “great powers” are in a position to contest other states’ territorial claims over global public spaces such as the Arctic. While the Arctic Council does not deal directly with policy issues concerning military security, an opportunity for China to reinforce its interests in the Arctic could emerge, while the rest of the traditional Arctic states might be preoccupied with other foreign policy issues elsewhere.

In the final empirical chapter, governance and IR scholars Richard Maher and Till Schöfer examine contemporary Europe, which, they claim, is neither the core site nor the quintessential prize of US–China competition. Although the important flashpoints of great power rivalry could be in the Asia-Pacific region, both the US and China consider Europe as a foremost strategic partner, and Europe indeed has served as an increasingly contested space for economic competition between the two powerful states. Maher and Schöfer uses the case study of Huawei’s presence in Europe’s fifth generation (5G) wireless networks in extrapolating important insights about US–China competition in Europe. In doing so, the authors find three key findings. First, Europeans’ desire to deepen their economic relationship with China stands in conflict with their enduring dependence on the US for defense and security guarantees. Second, Western European countries are unlikely to stand in blatant opposition against China despite the apparent convergence of views between the US and Europe. Third, despite internal conflicts within Europe, which in turn could prevent it from emerging as a cohesive actor in US–China rivalry, Europe is likely to retain its capacity to influence the dynamics of its immediate region, oppose US and Chinese demands, and perhaps shape US–China competition elsewhere in some ways.

The aforementioned chapters illustrate the multiple and spatially contingent expressions of US–China rivalry in the 21st century. Some chapters focus on disputing claims of ownership on geographic regions (South China Sea and the Arctic), while others focus on economic affairs, social capital, discourses, and the weaponization of international institutions. Taken as a whole, the perspective developed by bringing these analyses together, I hope, is something bigger and more useful than each taken individually. Hence, the chapters illustrate the careful use of theoretical and analytic frameworks to understand the evidence from a particular region, which enables the contributor to illustrate accurately the particular expression of US–China rivalry that is bounded within a particular geographic space, temporal condition, and social context. I do not claim that this anthology successfully completes the task of bringing perspectives from political geography in the key theoretical debates in IR pertaining to US–China rivalry. I do, however, hope that this anthology inspires other scholars to be mindful of the analytic advantages and possibilities of using spatialization as well as other concepts

from political geography in our analyses of global transformations and great power rivalry.

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