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Conclusions: Reframing the Puzzle of US–China Rivalry

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At the start of the 21st century, the international system underwent at least three major critical junctures: the 9/11 terror attacks that paved the way for the US-led global war on terror and its consequent human rights abuses (Acharya 2007; Christie 2008; Foot 2008; Herman 2011; Shafiq 2013; Sanders 2017; Regilme 2018a, 2018b, 2021a); the 2007/2008 global financial crisis (Aydn 2011; Helleiner 2011; Drezner 2013; Kiely 2018; Ansell and Bartenberger 2019); and the COVID-19 pandemic (May and Daly 2020; Regilme 2020; Theidon 2020; Greer et al 2021). The most recent critical juncture—the COVID-19 pandemic—killed at least 6.6 million people since 2020 until October 2022. That pandemic, however, is not merely a global health crisis. Rather, it emerged as a powerful vector of other transnational challenges of catastrophic proportions, whereas some of these challenges may not be directly attributable to the pandemic itself, while others may have been reinforced after the start of the pandemic: the widespread inflation crisis in many parts of the globe (Aharon and Qadan 2022); democratic backsliding and widespread human rights abuses (Greer et al 2020; Pleyers 2020; Thomson and Ip 2020; Lundgren et al 2021; Passos and Acácio 2021; Regilme 2021b); climate catastrophes and extreme weather conditions (Bergquist et al 2022; Ford et al 2022); food insecurity (Kumar and Ayedee 2021; Sacks et al 2021; Bergquist et al 2022); energy insecurity (Ghilès 2022); and, the looming probability that Russian militarized aggression in Ukraine could spill over to other Central and Western European countries, which in turn, could trigger intensified military conflict elsewhere (deLisle 2022; Wu 2022).

Consequently, an apparent consensus seems to be emerging, perhaps regardless of one's political ideologies: the world is in deep, multidimensional

crisis (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; Regilme 2020; Steger 2021). What this crisis means could differ depending on your positionality in this deeply hierarchical and differentiated world-system (Anthias 2008; Sakai 2012; Koinova 2017; McIntosh 2020; Soedirgo and Glas 2020). For a white, super-rich man living in the affluent quarters of New York, London, or Zurich, the crisis is likely triggered by a growing popular resistance against capitalism and extreme socioeconomic inequalities, while invoking that their private property rights are violated by state policy actions that redirect wealth to the most marginalized (Hammond 2016; Regilme 2019a; Whyte 2019). For a financially struggling, Black, Muslim woman living in a small Bavarian town in Germany, the terms socioeconomic equality and crisis have life-and-death consequences. Of course, while the systematic persecution from the Chinese state has started even before the pandemic, Uyghur families in the Xinjiang region struggle to escape from the daily realities of imprisonment in government-sponsored concentration camps, enslaved labor, forced sterilization, and many other horrendous abuses that do not only threaten individual Uyghurs but the future of their collective existence (Roberts 2020; Alpermann 2022). Although systemic violence and domination have persisted for most of human history, the aforementioned challenges seem to suggest that the global order legitimized through the discourse of liberal democracy and underwritten by Western militarism is in deep crisis. Whereas it is difficult to ascertain if the 21st-century challenges are extreme or more severe than in previous generations since the age of global interdependence, Walden Bello (2022: 3), nonetheless paints the similarities between climate change crisis and the sociopolitical crises of humanity:

So you see, extreme events are taking place not only in the physical climate. They too take place in the political climate. January 6, 2021, the storming of the Capitol in the US, was another such event. The return of the Marcoses, Trump's incitement to rebellion, Modi's ethnonationalist regime in India, Bolsonaro's fascistoid government in Brazil, and just in the last few days, the electoral triumphs of the far right in traditionally Social Democratic Sweden and, horror of horrors, in the birthplace of fascism itself, Italy—all of these are extreme events, and they are, in turn, symptoms of a much larger extreme event: the deepening crisis of liberal democracy. (Bello 2022)

Amidst this crisis-ridden global system, the US and China have emerged as the two most powerful state actors, despite all the optimism that was invigorated about the so-called 'emerging powers' during the last two decades (Regilme and Parisot 2017, 2020). Notably, political analysts and commentators have overestimated the potential of other re-emerging powers and actors of the post-Cold War global order. In Europe, although not a

unitary state actor on its own, the EU—and its most powerful member states such as Germany and France—is facing a complex crisis that shows the union’s structural vulnerabilities, which in turn, undermine its capacities as a credible partner—if not competitor or challenger—to US dominance in world politics. Once considered as a re-emerging power a few years back, Russia did not live up to its promise as showcased by its horrendous war of aggression against Ukraine, where the tactical and strategic weaknesses of the Russian military became more evident. As the EU’s biggest economy, Germany is facing its most severe economic crisis since the Second World War—a situation directly triggered by the extreme shortages in energy supply due to the country’s enduring dependence on Russia. As the EU and the US imposed sanctions on Russia due to Moscow’s militaristic aggression against Ukraine, Europe’s energy insecurity transformed into a severe existential problem for many households, who have been battling against inflation, unemployment, and job insecurity—many of which were reinforced after the COVID-19 pandemic (Osička and Černoč 2022). Germany is not alone in that predicament; France, Italy, Spain, and others in Western Europe also face the same fate as Germany. It is difficult to imagine the future of a supposed re-emerging power with a severe energy supply problem, which in turn does not only undermine its military security but more so its population’s basic economic and existential security. In South America, Brazil was once touted as the rising power of the region, with staggering economic growth and increased optimism for the future—and that was in the first decade of the new millennium (Sotero 2010; Dauvergne and Farias 2012). Yet, the rise of far-right populism and the horrendous policies of the Bolsonaro government backtracked all the social and economic progress of the preceding government: widespread human rights abuses, severe public security crisis, widespread disinformation, proliferation of extreme poverty and hunger, as well as unprecedented environmental devastation (Hunter and Power 2019). In the Indo-Pacific region, other key regional players such as India and Indonesia have persistently focused on their domestic challenges that are primarily aggravated during this pandemic; in doing so, they have fell short in demonstrating that their influence could transcend their own regions and in ways that either US or China do (Nilsen 2021; Warburton 2022). Despite their severe domestic economic and political challenges, the US and China seem to have the unique capabilities to project their economic, cultural, political, and social influence far beyond their immediate regional neighborhood—at least in comparison to Western European powers (UK, France, and Germany) and other so-called re-emerging or emerging powers.

In the emerging post-COVID-19 global order, scholars, public intellectuals, and influential political commentators frame the question of global transformation as a question of competing states (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020). In 2022, the most anticipated books concerning US–China rivalry,

as written by some high-profile public commentators, problematize the nature of that bilateral relation simply as just that: two nations battling for world dominance (Doshi 2021; Bergsten 2022; Economy 2022; Friedberg 2022; Rudd 2022). As we should have learned during this pandemic, framing serious global challenges as purely an inter-state matter is indeed a widespread but avoidable mistake. The failure of many states to cooperate in ways that could have made medical supplies and effective vaccines more accessible to all countries—all perhaps in the name of nationalistic state interests buttressed by corporate interests holding proprietary rights over vaccine patents—suggests that global challenges should be framed as shared problems of humanity, regardless of one’s nationality (Guttry 2020; Mittelman 2021; Idris et al 2022; Jecker 2022).

For scholars, however, it is high time to reformulate the puzzle concerning global transformation. It is likely the case that, regardless whether it is China or the US that emerges as the most powerful state actor a decade from now, the world’s human population suffering from extreme material poverty will continue to grow (Oxfam 2020; Cousin and Chauvin 2021). On the one hand, China’s blatantly authoritarian political culture, with its economy governed by neoliberal capitalist logic, generated widespread physical integrity rights abuses, blatant dehumanizing and genocidal practices of historically minoritized populations, as well as severe curtailment of dissenting views in the civil society sphere (Roberts 2020; Alpermann 2022). On the other hand, several decades of the US-dominant world order have shown what systemic hypocrisy looks like in global governance. US elites could preach about human rights, justice, and democracy both at home and abroad; yet, those same normatively appealing discourses, among many other lofty ideals, are blatantly disregarded whenever it is convenient for the ruling capitalist class (Acharya 2007; Moyn 2017; Regilme 2019b, 2022).

As such, the puzzle of global transformation should entail an interrogation of what such an inter-state rivalry could mean across various regions and to the less powerful and marginalized sectors of the human population. Those analytic perspectives are unfortunately missing, and that is why this book aimed to provide an alternative space for rethinking US–China rivalry. In all cases, the chapter contributors in this anthology stepped back and interrogated rivalry from the positionality of the region where they specialize as researchers and, perhaps in many cases, are geographically located. The chapters in this volume did so in several notable ways.

First, the need to accumulate capital and crucial resources for continued economic growth are crucial factors in shaping the trajectory of the rivalry, although the precise conditions of such a need depends on *where* this economic conflict occurs. For instance, the chapter by Parisot and Lin focuses on global capitalism as an abstracted space of rivalry, whereby China is described as an authoritarian capitalism, while the US tends to have a more

liberal capitalist system. Nonetheless, Parisot and Lin highlight the problem of capitalist state-centrism that generated uneven and combined development, thereby sharpening material inequalities and bolstering conflict. Similarly, in my analysis of the South China Sea dispute, I highlight the economic motives of all small claimant states, China, and the US. The militarization of the maritime dispute coincided with the rapid economic growth of China, and the naval control of the disputed region has tremendous consequences on which states are most likely to benefit from the so-called “freedom of navigation” rights therein as well as the supposed natural resources of the area. In the aforementioned maritime dispute, I urge claimant states as well as the US to ensure that any conflict resolution framework should ensure that economic gains and resources should benefit the claimant states’ most marginalized populations, whose livelihood, wellbeing, and social identity are intricately imbricated in the South China Sea. Focusing on Europe as another site of US–China competition, Richard Maher and Till Schöfer examine the motivation of European countries in increasing their economic growth through productive trade and financial relations with China, as shown by the case of China’s 5G telecommunications network investments in the continent. Yet, that motivation coincides with the enduring need for Europe to depend on the US for its defense needs, and balancing those two desires constitutes a key challenge as Beijing and Washington DC have conflicting visions of the global order. While admitting that the Asia-Pacific remains the key flashpoint of US–China rivalry, Maher and Schöfer note that not all European countries have converging views on China, and that fragmentation is most likely to prevent Europe from functioning as a coherent third actor in US–China rivalry. Yet, the authors infer that Europe remains in a good position to influence its immediate regional neighborhood, as the continent functions as an important node in global financial networks and global governance institutions, thereby rendering European countries some leverage in shaping how and under which conditions US–China rivalry could impact regional security.

Second, intersubjective interpretations about physical geography and social relations play an important role in the trajectory of great power relations, yet those elements are often sidelined in mainstream scholarly analysis in favor of military- and economic-oriented factors. In the chapter focusing on Northeast Asia, Jing Sun argues that physical geography functions as a malleable social construct that is relevant for weaponizing Chinese national identity as well as a security concept that could be shaped by political elites for what they view as crucial state interest. As such, the influential Chinese concept of “*tianxia*” (All under Heaven) serves as a spatial-positioning discursive device, in which various political actors interpret it in ways that could mean accommodation to domination—and those specific interpretations explain the shift from a policy preference

focusing on Chinese dominance in land or to the high seas. Similarly, in the chapter focusing on Africa, Lina Benabdallah investigates how the Chinese state targets political elites in various African states through what she calls as “party-to-party” diplomacy. In such a mode of diplomacy, the focus is on fostering strong and positive intersubjective views between Chinese and African elites, thereby enhancing trust among participant countries. Whereas so much of the literature on Chinese relations in the Global South focus on concrete material investments such as physical infrastructures and loan agreements, understanding the non-material aspects of international relations such as social platforms through professional training programs could provide another way of enhancing our view of power mediated across national boundaries.

Third, understanding how intersubjective meanings about physical geography change over *time* provides important insights in the analysis of US–China rivalry. As such, spatialization as an analytic tool becomes more useful when geographic space is juxtaposed with temporal conditions, particularly in analyzing great power conflict. In the chapter focusing on the Middle East, Chien-Kai Chen and Ceren Ergenc use the notion of *path dependence* to demonstrate that the contemporary actions of key political actors from the US, China, and the Middle East are shaped by previous policy outcomes. Although they acknowledge that China might emerge as a bit more interventionist in the region due to the instability and political vacuum directly caused by the sudden US withdrawal in Afghanistan, both authors emphasized that the non-interventionist image of Beijing among Middle Eastern states has persisted over time and will most likely remain in the foreseeable future. In the chapter focusing on the Southeast Asian region, I emphasized that the disputed maritime space of the South China Sea has persisted for several decades, yet China’s rapid economic growth and the domestic political struggles in Beijing paved the way for intensified militarization and regional insecurity. As such, long-standing territorial disputes could escalate through intensified military build-up by conflicting parties when certain structural conditions are met. Meanwhile, Cameron Carlson and Linda Kiltz underscore that the rapid warming of the Arctic means the fast disappearance of sea ice, thereby increasing the accessibility to the region. That unprecedented physical transformation of the Arctic region triggers the expectation that China will become more assertive in expressing its interest despite the fact that Beijing has historically been a non-participant in the Arctic Council. Carlson and Kiltz warn that time is likely to favor China, considering that climate research models suggest an ice-free Arctic region during the summer season, and it is very likely that Beijing could increase its presence therein, especially if the US and other Arctic Council members fail to ascertain and counter the long-term strategy of China. Those three chapters show that physical geography only makes

sense in political analysis when one analyzes how intersubjective views about it change over time, or across temporal dimensions.

Fourth, the manifestations of how physical geography emerges as the locus of contestation between great power could be investigated through the developments in institutional structures. Juan Serrano-Moreno focuses on the institutionalization of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the participation of Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries. Accordingly, the BRI emerged as an institutional response of China to the decreasing US presence in South America, which has been a supposed traditional sphere of influence for Washington DC. For Serrano-Moreno, the BRI appears as an ambiguous yet malleable form of institutional platform for generating financial investments, trade deals, and public infrastructure projects that are quite difficult to ascertain whether they are beneficial to LAC countries—although China appears as the biggest winner due to the diplomatic gains accrued through the BRI. As a transnational institution, the BRI functions as a discursive tool that allows LAC governments to discern their preferred degree of involvement, while discursively depicting China as the mobilizer of connectivity and innovation within the region.

Fifth, the chapters herein show the promising explanatory potential of transcending the limits of state-centric analysis in International Relations (IR). Deepshikha Shahi, in her chapter on South Asia, adopts a non-dualistic “Global IR” approach, particularly the Indian philosophical perspective of Advaita as an analytic lens. In doing so, Shahi evaluates India’s foreign policy responses to the ongoing US–China contestations in South Asia by highlighting the notion of “single hidden connectedness” that makes all the actors within and beyond the South Asian region interdependent, thereby making them stakeholders and participants in US–China contestations, albeit to varying degrees. Whereas Western-style IR thinking is fixated on dualistic logics such as enmity/friendship, the Advaita philosophy aids our understanding of US–China conflict in South Asia by acknowledging the complex interactions not only of state leaders but also by other key actors *and* over historical time. Similarly, in the chapter on Southeast Asia, I explained the unprecedented militarization of the South China Sea by espousing analytic eclecticism, whereby domestic and transnational political factors are teased out in order to build a coherent causal story of recently intensified US–China rivalry. In the chapter on Africa, Benabdallah examines China’s power projection in Africa through a “relational power” framework that underscores the processes of party-to-party diplomacy between African and Chinese political elites. Consequently, Benabdallah distinguishes Chinese power mechanisms in Africa from American foreign policy strategies in the African continent.

This book began with the puzzle on how great power rivalry and cooperation are created and transformed across various territorial spaces.

The chapters here contribute to ongoing scholarly and policy debates concerning the seemingly unprecedented challenges of the post-COVID-19 world order. Specifically, the contributors demonstrate that the formations and transformations of US–China rivalry ultimately depend on one’s positionality in a highly interdependent global order: across various world-regions, temporal conditions, and socioeconomic backgrounds. While discussions in the corridors of power and in the academic ivory-tower focus so much on which next great power will emerge at a time in what appears to be a critical juncture of global politics, it is high time that we realize that global politics—for many of those in other parts of the world—is not about great power rivalry. Rather, global politics is a struggle for power, justice, and survival amidst a system that is entrenched by logics of hierarchies, stratification, differentiation, and domination. In realizing that is the case, the question of global transformation should shift from inter-state rivalry to explaining why such perverse logics of oppression persist and to what extent they could be undermined and, in doing so, how global justice could emerge.

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