

“The world is in a new phase of multipolar competition with strong overtones from the U.S.-China bilateral rivalry”

FÉLIX E. MARTÍN

Associate Professor in the Department of Politics & International Relations in the School of International and Public Affairs at Florida International University in Miami. Dr. Martín is a graduate of Columbia University in the City of New York where he earned an M. Phil. in Philosophy and a Ph.D. in Political Science. He also holds a master's degree in Political Science from the University of Chicago. His areas of expertise include international relations theory, security/peace studies and international political economy. He is a specialist in the security and political economy of Latin America and Southern Europe. He is currently working on the notion of *dis-development*, its theoretical foundations and its manifestations in Latin American countries. His publications include articles in academic journals in various countries and in the United States, and his books: *Militarist Peace in South America: Conditions for War and Peace*; *Latin America's Quest for Globalization: The Role of Spanish Firms*; and *Russia and Latin America: From Nation-State to Society of States*.

Below is the interview given to the editors of CEBRI-Journal.

The world is heading toward a new era of competition between the United States and China. For some pundits, the period will be characterized by intense competi-

tion in the areas of trade, technology and security, while for others the Chinese-American relationship will be defined not only by mere competition, but rather by

a rivalry that can lead to international instability and even war. In your view, what is the prospective of cooperation and peace between the U.S. and China? Is the likelihood of war between the two becoming higher?

FÉLIX E. MARTÍN: The world *is* in a new phase of multipolar competition with strong overtones from the U.S.-China bilateral rivalry. So, the short answer to these questions is that it depends on which sphere of social interaction we focus on in the answer. The prospect for successful cooperation (meaning adjusting and coordinating policies mutually) is exponentially greater in the economic domain than in the political, military and geostrategic realm.

The second question centers on the probability of a hegemonic war between the U.S. and China. The potential of war in the East China Sea and the Strait of Taiwan is presently more probable than at any other time since the end of the Korean War in 1953. However, it does not mean the war is imminent or probable in the foreseeable future. However, as we know, wars are extreme and rare events, but they do break out when one least expects them. They evolve from deep-seated and proximate causes. So, it is complicated and daring for any analyst to predict the outbreak of war before they are imminent. Subsequently, I elaborate on my responses, but first, a clarification follows to contextualize my answers.

The assumptions motivating these two questions presuppose a connection between two separate but related areas of social interaction at the international level: general international economic competition; and political, military and geostrategic rivalry. Nonetheless, these two spheres of social interactions operate according to different logics and dynamics. The economic sphere (the global market) is a more forgiving context than the military and security domain (the interstate political system). Thus, cooperation in the global market is more probable than collaboration and positive peace in the interstate political system, should a war break out involving a core national security interest or an existential threat for either great power.

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Some scholars have been calling attention to China's unchecked and unmatched economic growth and expansion since the beginning of the century. China has been benefiting primarily from the openness of the

U.S. and European markets, extracting resources from the Global South, and supplying their needs for profits. These scholars claim that China has earned enormous wealth, enabling it to convert its vast financial and economic assets into military capabilities. Ultimately, China has become more powerful, assertive and bold regionally in the military realm, as it is evident in the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. Thus, U.S. decision-makers must not ignore China's economic and military expansion and ascend.

China is a regional (and aspiring global economic) hegemon that benefits more from stable global economic activity and expansion than military conquest and political meddling in multiple corners of the world.

Nevertheless, Chinese leaders do not appear reckless as president Putin has been in his war against Ukraine. The Chinese know the greater and more sophisticated U.S. relative military power and prowess. China is a regional (and aspiring global economic) hegemon that benefits more from stable global economic activity and expansion than military conquest and polit-

ical meddling in multiple corners of the world. In short, China is the twenty-first-century incarnation of the seventeenth-century Dutch economic or commercial hegemony.

It is essential to underscore that while U.S.-China competition may be intense in the economic realm, it does not portend a lesser prospect of international economic cooperation. In fact, despite the competition, which is a healthy sign of economic activity and progress, both great powers work and operate primarily within the accepted norms and rules set by the liberal international economic order.

Regarding security, geostrategic and military rivalry, and political competition, the world may experience more turbulence and even the possibility of a military clash in the East China Sea, the Strait of Taiwan, the Sea of Japan, the South China Sea and the greater Pacific Basin. It is part of the system. Global politics constitute a system. Accordingly, there will always be instability; it is essential for the life, functioning, and dynamism of the interstate political system. It is how system dynamics operate. However, sometimes instabilities or disturbances in the system may lead to a military confrontation or a war resulting from opposed national interests and the perception of existential threats. That may prove highly unlikely presently and in the foreseeable future.

Based on the Russian experience in Ukraine and, thus far, the tepid

Chinese reaction to Russia's request for weapons and logistics, it is doubtful the Chinese would dare to launch an assault or invasion against Taiwan shortly. The Chinese did the numbers (*i.e.*, calculated potential costs and benefits). They figured staying on the sidelines of the war in Ukraine was more beneficial than antagonizing the Americans and Europeans. The risk of economic retaliation and attendant costs were clear to the Chinese. In addition, they benefit immensely by acting as intermediaries for Russian resources and commercial needs.

In closing, compared with the U.S., China is an aspiring global economic or commercial hegemon with a comparatively (albeit increasing) modest military and low degree of power projection beyond its immediate region and theater of military operation. Unimpeded commercial activity globally is of paramount importance for China. A U.S.-China war is unlikely outside the East China Sea and the Strait of Taiwan in the next two decades. Consequently, negative or contested peace will prevail between these two great powers in the Pacific.

Some analysts argue that the distinct political and economic models of the U.S. (democracy and free market) and China (authoritarianism and state intervention) are the fundamental causes of the growing rivalry. Other analysts argue

that, in addition to these differences, there are fundamental geopolitical issues that structure the rivalry, such as the growing Chinese influence in Asia and the need for the U.S. to prevent this growth. In your view, which of these ingredients are most relevant? Is there a hierarchical order between them?

FEM: All the ingredients listed are relevant to the Sino-American competition. Nonetheless, the systemic balance of power between the U.S., the reigning global hegemon, and China, the challenger, is the fundamental or central ingredient in the structure of their global rivalry and potential military conflict in the East China Sea and the Strait of Taiwan. The hierarchical order of these components places a systemic balance of power at the top, followed by geostrategic matters, particularly in the Pacific Basin, and distantly last the variant economic and political models. China may pursue these models at home but behaves internationally closer to the norms, principles and rules of the liberal international economic order.

The different domestic political and economic models are contributing factors to the rivalry. However, these are expedient national choices, ideological components and historical developments intrinsic to each great power. The Chinese models may have successfully lifted this vast country from dismal socioeconomic development and backwardness to a more affluent stage.

Regrettably, though, for the Chinese people, this achievement has come at enormous political costs to the average citizen. In due time, this may present a fundamental, even existential, political threat and challenge to the political leadership in terms of citizens' demands for greater spaces of economic and political freedom, civil rights, and more representation and inclusion. The Chinese leadership will have to opt for either increased internal political control and coercion or a significant opening and moving closer to the U.S. economic and political models at home. In sum, getting along with a like-minded competitor is easier than one with an objectively different mindset and ideology.

Similarly, the expansion of China's economic and political influence in Asia and other far-flung areas can exacerbate discord and expand U.S. resistance to China's global reach. These are facilitating factors to increase bilateral tensions and competition. They are not the critical threshold the crossing of which would tip the systemic balance of power dynamic and cause a major or hegemonic war.

As a systemic strategy, China may be looking to advance its commercial relations and, ultimately, political influence worldwide to distract or diminish U.S. attention and influence in the Pacific. The U.S., on the other hand, may continue upping the ante in the Pacific to protect Taiwan and other partners and force China to increase its

attention to the direct American military presence and political influence in the Pacific. The U.S. does this successfully via several significant economic and multilateral military arrangements like military alliances with South Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and the Quad, formally known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, to mention a few.

With the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China has held high-level talks with authorities from both countries, taking the role of informal mediator, although its proximity with Moscow is clear. Being a mediator in such consequential conflict is a new element of the Chinese foreign policy, which has historically kept a low profile in international conflicts. In this context, what should be the U.S. reaction to such a role played by China in the Ukrainian crisis? Can China profit from this conflict? Moreover, how would the Chinese position in the Ukrainian crisis affect the rivalry between the U.S. and China?

FEM: A successful and trustworthy mediator (formal or informal) ought to possess and maintain objective credibility of fairness, neutrality and transparency in a conflict. China has none of these elements in the war in Ukraine. Its only asset to mediate was its close relationship with Russia. Accordingly, since

the war's inception, China has pledged its political support for Russia and has never sided publicly with the international community's multiple condemnations of the Russian invasion. In fact, before the Russian invasion, China agreed that its relations with Russia had no limits. So, its proximity to Russia is evident, but its traditional behavior of low or no intermediation has remained throughout the war. At a minimum, China's mediation does not reveal any concrete results.

Based on available evidence from reputable news outlets and geostrategic study centers, China has done little or has been unsuccessful in talking president Putin out of his military adventure in Ukraine. If China has supported the so-called mediation efforts, it has been only by refraining from direct participation and providing war matériel to Russia. China has profited handsomely from this conflict because it serves as a conduit for Russian financial needs and services and as a primary customer at a highly discounted price of Russian natural resources, particularly crude oil and natural gas.

Finally, China appears to have stopped on its track toward supplying war matériel to Russia once the U.S. and its European allies clarified that it was unacceptable and would cost China commercial access to the lucrative European and North American markets. If the Chinese position in the Ukrainian War is what we know now, there is lit-

tle effect on the rivalry with the U.S., except for the added distrust for China. Even Russia one day may question China's utilitarian behavior during the war and its approach to profit and remain noncommittal to Russia's war effort in Ukraine. In brief, while we live in a short collective historical memory era, China may lose international respect and reputation in the long run due to its actions and nonactions in the Ukrainian War.

Given the nature and structure of bilateral trade ties between Latin America and China, there have been concerns across the region on whether the relationship could create or intensify new forms of economic and political dependence, similar to what happened between the U.S. and the region in the past. In this context, some analysts argue that the United States has historically only paid strategic attention to Latin America when an extra-regional power has interfered locally (the Cuban Crisis in 1962, for example). Do you believe that this is the current scenario in the region? With the growing importance of China, will the United States finally react strategically to the Chinese incursion? If so, how should the U.S. react in your view?

FEM: It is fundamental to separate economic and political dependence for a helpful response. Most countries in the

Global South are usually susceptible to falling into the trap of economic and political dependence on great powers. First, their extractivist economies render them excellent candidates for economic dependence on a significant actor. Second, various political elites often trust their regime and political survival on external political support. Thus, they foment the state's political dependence on a great power like the United States in the twentieth century or Cuba's reliance on the former Soviet Union during the Cold War for its political and economic survival.

Although many Latin American states have increased and refocused their economic relations with China and away from the U.S. and Europe, the prospect of economic dependence solely on China is less significant today than it ever was with the U.S. and Europe. The fundamental difference now, compared to yesteryears, is the diversity of available and independent economic actors to choose from as trade partners.

It is true. In the past, the U.S. paid closer attention to the region when facing (real or perceived) political and military threats from an extra-continental power like Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. That is quite different now, where Russian and Chinese political inroads into the region are modest. Russia has little or nothing to offer economically to Latin America except, perhaps, provide some political thugs in Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela with

surreptitious ways to plunder their state coffers. Only China serves as a significant pole of economic attraction to Latin American states, but little in terms of political dependence, except perhaps providing some of the new populist leaders in the region an authoritarian and distant political model to extend or perpetuate their tenure in office.

So, suppose Latin American leaders and decision-makers play their cards correctly and intelligently; the region can benefit handsomely and remain free from the vagaries of pernicious economic dependence on a single buyer of natural resources and one supplier of finished products. Presently, Latin America (and, for that matter, most of the Global South) faces a diverse plurality of great economic powers to engage in healthy economic relations. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union offered Latin America little by way of economic diversification. It is not the case in the twenty-first century, where the region enjoys greater latitude of action in the economic sphere and a more significant number of actual or potential trade partners internal to the region and globally with the Chinese, European, and North American economies. The crux of the matter centers on the foresight of Latin American political and business leaders.

The word "incursion" to define Chinese economic relations with Latin American countries is loaded and denotes a sort of Chinese military and

political meddling in the internal affairs of countries or the region. Times have changed, and China has benefitted from the U.S. political benign neglect of the region. However, the U.S. is still the top investor in Latin America. The region's political culture aligns better and more willingly with the American political style and popular culture. Traveling throughout Latin America, one can confirm that Latin American countries, even Cuba and Venezuela, still long to maintain and strengthen stable and respectful relations with the U.S.

In this context, it is unsurprising to confirm that most Latin American students who study abroad choose to study in the U.S. or European universities, not in Beijing or Shanghai. Popular culture, music, fashion and style do not appear to imitate Chinese attributes. Business practices, firm models and business culture are much closer to American and European styles than to Chinese. In addition, the Chinese bring their investments, financial packages, management, labor skills and people. In other words, the Chinese use the business location but fail to win over the hearts and minds of the locals, despite their efforts through social media to spread a strategic narrative to strengthen their presence, prestige and national style in Latin America.

Contrary to Chinese economic practices, the U.S. invests and employs local workers and shares in the political and popular culture of the region; the

Chinese lag lightyears behind in these aspects. In brief, China may be making headways in its economic activity and trade. However, they fail to deepen economic, political, cultural and business cultures in Latin America, Africa, and other regions in the Global South. The Chinese appear foreign to the locals. Thus, the U.S. should continue its engagement with Latin America. In the end, China's economic model depends primarily on maintaining a positive trade balance. It is export-oriented, the external sector is the center of its economic success.

On the other hand, the American economic model privileges domestic activity, technological developments, discoveries, inventions and developments.

In closing, it is difficult to see how strategy may or may not play a role on the part of the U.S. At the time of this interview, the U.S. is advancing an economic package and strategy to bring South, Central and North America closer together. The U.S. should not prioritize the world at the expense of neglecting, even benignly, the Western hemisphere. The U.S. has several geostrategic core objectives (militarily, politically and economically). Latin America and, more generally, the Western hemisphere is one, with Asia-Pacific, access to oil in the Middle East and Europe.

Several Brazilian governments have sought to establish stable

and respectable relationships with both China and the United States. Nowadays, China is Brazil's main trade partner and second investor after the United States. In turn, the U.S. has an immense political and cultural influence in the country. As the rivalry between the two intensifies, what long-term strategy would be more effective for Brazil to keep its political and economic integrity? Should Brazil take sides? Or should it create a heading strategy to avoid unnecessary risks? In other terms, how secondary powers like Brazil, located far from the epicenter of the competition, should behave when facing fearful odds of war between two great powers?

FEM: Brazil is not another middle or secondary power. On the contrary, it is an essential international actor, particularly in Latin America and generally in the Western hemisphere. It shares the leadership of this hemisphere with the U.S. and Canada. Argentina and Mexico trail behind it. Thus, Brazil should maintain a clear set of core strategic objectives in the economic, political and military domains.

Further, Brazil's grand strategy must involve not only its selfish, narrow national interests but, equally important, the economic competence and well-being of the region and its security and prosperity. Thus, Brazil's potential unilateral gains by playing off the U.S. and

China for economic expediency and gains in the short- and long-run would be meaningless if the entire hemisphere becomes highly volatile and dangerous. Playing great powers off each other is the tactic of small actors like Cuba and the product of a narrow mentality. Brazil is none of this. Accordingly, it should act toward China's economic inroads in the region within the mindset of a regional or hemispheric leader, not as a small, insignificant and opportunistic state actor.


Brazil's grand strategy must equally include its national and hemispheric interests. In this sense, Brazil should behave like Canada and the U.S. It does not hurt Brazil to maintain excellent economic relations with China as long as they do not hurt its narrow national and broader interests as a hemispheric leader.

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Finally, if war comes to pass in the next two decades between the U.S. and China, Brazil must weigh in and accept its regional and hemispheric responsibilities. This behavior would not be new

to Brazil. It is historically consistent with its commitment to peace and security worldwide and in the hemisphere.

In the final analysis, Brazil must guard against the manipulation and abuse of its core national institutions. It must prevent any tendency toward per-

sonalistic and populist political leadership. Brazil must believe itself to be one of the hemispheric and regional leaders and not as an opportunistic, small actor under the shadow of the bigger global powers vying to dominate and lead the global order. 

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