

## Great Power Competition: Ideological Struggles and Their Impact on Global Stability

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### Abstract

*This study examines contemporary great power competition (GPC) as a multidimensional contest driven, importantly, by ideological struggles. This study portrays that global strategic behavior and major power rivalry arenas are guided by ideological influences rather than customary material forces in realism paradigm through analyzing how U.S. Liberal Internationalism and Chinese Embedded Authoritarianism function as key drivers in global systemic economic competition and political governance tech wars. The research conducts a qualitative method with descriptive analysis approach to garner a better understanding of GPC complex phenomenon which then to answer the research questions. The findings indicate that contemporary GPC in ideology, particularly between the “U.S. liberal democracy and China’s embedded authoritarianism,” is a distinct multiplex concept rather than a Cold War extension version. This ideology influence strategic behavior and foreign policy decision-making of the U.S. and China in their international politics. This research identify that, in recent development, their competition unfold in three domains: economy, technology, and the global governance. In conclusion, this ideological competition profoundly impacts global stability by eroding the authority of international institutions and increasing the risk of armed conflict. Therefore a comprehending global politics in the future requires an integrated theoretical framework where the ideological realm becomes the focal point of analysis, which can be applied in navigating a bipolar reality.*

**Keywords:** Great Power Competition, Ideological Rivalry, Foreign Policy, International Relations, U.S.-China Rivalry

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## INTRODUCTION

The most salient feature of the contemporary geostrategic landscape is a system of great power competition (GPC) between two globally ascendant states, the United States and China. After a short period of limited cooperation and globalization following the end of the Cold War, by the mid-2010s, the two had clearly entered into an undeclared but manifest competition over power. Moment's strategic competition between the United States and China, in the current environment, is multi-dimensional preferably than suggesting the bipolar disputation model that represented the Cold War (Schobell, 2025). DiCicco & Onea (2023) have highlighted that GPC is a staple of contemporary international relations (IR) derived from a conventional Realpolitik-style power politics. In other words, GPC stems from a notion of permanent, compulsory, inclusive, and all-encompassing struggle for paramountcy in a region or domain among those entities that are generally regarded as the principal protagonists of the international system. This rivalry spans military, economic, technological, and ideological aspects, all of which are also intimately intertwined.

The idea of the GPC's resurgence in debates among experts and academics in the field of international relations is a natural one (Popescu, 2025). The notion that the GPC never disappeared in the context of international relations renders claims of its resurgence irrelevant. However, it has become the subject of critical debate among academics. Some IR scholars argue that competition among great powers cannot return because it never truly went away, and that it has always been a central feature of modern international relations. The notion of GPC re-emerging now in policy discourses is, for this reason, more accurately understood not as an empirical resurgence, but rather as the resuscitation of a choice of international politics' framing

(Lynch III & Saunders, 2020). As such, when policymakers choose to view the international system through the GPC lens, they are engaging in the social construction of international reality, one of a zero-sum competition between adversarial states, which can then be used to manufacture domestic political cohesion and support for a "tech war" against China. It also helps to accord it the highest urgency, often at the expense of other urgent challenges such as counter-terrorism or climate change, as was the case in the post-9/11 years (Brands, 2017; Cruz et al., 2020; Gaens & Sinkkonen, 2020).

GPC has long been in the lexicon of strategists and policymakers, but as the phrase has enjoyed particular vogue since 2017, scholars also note that more rigorous analytical work is needed. Conceptual debates around GPC demonstrate that while traditional theoretical tools are used to explicate GPC, most argue that this traditional set of theories is not enough to explain the evolving contemporary phenomenon. In IR scholars, Realism paradigm views states as rational unitary actors who compete for power, but this is often seen as “problematically simplistic” and state-centric, failing to account for domestic politics or the ideology that can inform state interests (Schmidt & Wight, 2023). The importance of GPC as a phenomenon in IR has been noted in scholarship, though few have attempted to grapple with a well-defined theory of GPC to inform specific areas of analysis (Müller, 2024). An area of analysis that has received far less attention than its importance would suggest is the role of ideology in armed conflict.

In great power study, the common approach to technology has been a “functionalist, instrumental” one which sees technology as simply a factor in a state’s power, rather than the fundamental basis for the established order (Bode et al., 2025). That is, traditional great power study has taken a largely reductionist view of technology that fails to account for the constitutive role that technological ideas and ideology have as a structuring element in great power politics (Winkler, 2025; Wu, 2020). The same can be said for the tremendous growth of BRI-related initiatives that have outpaced the ability of scholars to analyze the impacts of this global-spanning political and economic project on regional and international level dynamics. Here, as with technology, a reductionist, materialist approach to the influence of China’s BRI projects in global politics is too narrow, omitting the deeper cultural, social, and political mechanisms undergirding the tech war as a fundamental contestation over two fundamentally different ideas of what society should look like. The disconnect between theoretical development of these concepts, and their full realization in policy and practice, has left a lacuna in scholarship which fails to account for the most fundamental, core differences between the US and China: their differing, ideologically-oriented conceptions of what the international order should look like.

While GPC is often analyzed through a purely power-centric, realist lens that focuses on material capabilities like military might and economic size, this report posits that the ideological underpinnings of the primary actors are the crucial, and often overlooked, drivers that shape the nature and arenas of this competition. Ideology is not simply a rhetoric for leaders or an epiphenomenon of domestic political considerations (Krebs & Jackson, 2007). Instead, it is an identity-constitutive element for states and a powerful driver of foreign policy objectives and behavior (Davydov, 2022; Gries, 2022). The competition for power is not simply about acquiring more resources, but about ensuring one's values, norms, and preferred model of governance become the dominant ones in the international system.

Regarding the research theme on GPC with ideology as one of its domain of competition, there are some previous relevant research on it. Mankoff (2020) study that highlight GPC phenomenon is a form of chronic competition between countries (great power) lasted for a long time where ideology is one of the key driver. Another relevant research was Brand (2018) which underscore the ideology of democracy against authoritarianism, Putri (2024) noted that ideology is one part of the GPC sphere, Budiana (2024) spotting the role of ideology in alliance formation within global politics which also led to compete the adversaries alliance power. An opinion paper by Munoz (2025) on “GPC and its impact on international politics” found that the contemporary

GPC should not only consider the materialize power in realists paradigm but also include other aspects such as ideology parameter as its driver. Furthermore, Goodman's thesis, which conducts a comparative analysis of GPC, although not a central factor, saw that ideology still plays a role in contemporary GPC (Goodman, 2023).

Based on those relevant research, thus, this paper argue that the ideological struggle is one of the important driver of contemporary GPC. Competing models of global order and governance—liberal democracy and authoritarianism, in particular—are already having a profound impact on global security. It's not simply who has more tanks or who has a bigger economy, it's also who has the most compelling influence that is going to define the future architecture of international relations. China's push to sell its surveillance technology abroad is, in other words, not just about making money but about the conscious spread of “data-centric authoritarianism” as a possible model of governance (Bashirov et al., 2025; Bradford, 2023). Accordingly, in order to have a comprehensive understanding of GPC dynamics and outcomes we need to adopt an integrated perspective that centers on ideology.

Based of the aforementioned information, my research aims to answer the following questions:

(1) *How do the differing ideological projects of the United States and China inform their strategic behavior and foreign policy decision-making in the current era of great power competition?* and (2) *In which particular issue areas does the liberal-democracy vs embedded authoritarianism ideological competition manifest and with what direct effects on conflict and instability?*

## RESEARCH METHODS

In conducting this study, the researcher used a qualitative method with descriptive analytic approach. Qualitative method is common in conducting a social science research which aims to understand phenomenon complexity and get the insights (Lim, 2025). The purpose of the study is to describe and analyze the phenomenon of the relationship between ideology and great power competition (GPC). The approach is descriptive because it is focused on identifying the characteristics of the ideational structure of both the United States and China and how they play out in a range of areas in the international system. The analytic is used to break the whole of the GPC phenomenon into its component parts and then to identify the causal relationships between these parts and the states' actions (Furidha, 2024). The data study is based on a literature review of publicly available secondary sources such as scholarly journal articles, think tank policy papers, and primary government sources. It draws on multiple sources for a more triangulated analysis of the issue and, thus, captures the theoretical as well as practical nature of great power competition. It is not meant to generalize or to generate new empirical data but to analyze and reinterpret what is already known and to move toward a more ideationally nuanced picture of the current international system.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### The United States and China Ideological Architectures

Ideologically, the US foreign policy is driven by liberal internationalism and the pursuit of a "stable and open international system" (Deudney & John Ikenberry, 2021). Informed by post-Cold War hubris about the victory of liberal democracy and the convergence of states towards Western values, its founding ideology—promotion of democracy, human rights, and open markets—is a legally mandated "principal" and "fundamental" objective of US foreign

policy. In its pursuit of liberal internationalism goals the US government utilizes multiple approaches such as democracy assistance efforts and economic support along with its involvement in international organizations. The U.S. has often relied on foreign assistance to achieve its geostrategic objectives, arguing that a "transformational rather than transactional" approach to development will lead to democratic governance and poverty reduction.

However, this ideological foundation is not without its vulnerabilities. Many people view this foreign policy as both an enforcement of American values and an unwarranted intrusion into the internal matters of other nations. Yet again, if it is not consistently applied, it is subject to accusations of double standards. The US is regularly criticized for applying different "democracy and human rights standards to its 'strategic partners' than it does to adversarial governments". The US also has domestic issues with its democratic institutions and norms. The policy inconsistencies which these issues create, as a matter of strategy, is its most glaring weakness and one which the Chinese actively exploit. The Chinese state-driven model stands out as stable and functional while its handling of COVID-19 illustrates its supremacy. The U.S. ideology serves as its main soft power source in an ideal case but its flawed application results in a negative counter-narrative which China uses as a major strategic benefit.

China's ideological system under Xi Jinping has transitioned from "fragmented authoritarianism" of competing bureaucracies to an "embedded authoritarianism" in which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is "woven throughout" the state, military, and society in order to direct from the top down but exercise tactical flexibility at the lower levels (Taylor & Garlick, 2025). The result is a more centralized system that is centrally orchestrated but internally coherent and able to adapt to changing circumstances. In its domestic and foreign policies, the CCP is working to actively shape outcomes rather than simply respond to them. Chinese ideology has also shifted from a defensive posture in which it was only focused on justifying its own model to a more assertive one in which it seeks to spread a system of governance that it views as "worthy of emulation by others" (Friedberg, 2014).

This confronts the liberal democratic values of individual freedoms, rule of law, and transparency. China's foreign policy can be described as trying to bring the policy choices, norms, and values of others in line with its own preferences. In the Global South, this involves attempting to co-opt others by, among other things, using state-owned banks to provide infrastructure and trade finance, and political and technical tools to set regulatory standards that benefit Chinese companies. China is also placing more of its own nationals in leadership roles in existing international institutions to promote its views. In addition to co-opting these institutions, it is building alternative, multilateral bodies of its own, for instance is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), to challenge the U.S.-led international order.

### **Ideological Competition Stages**

#### *Economic systems: State capitalism vs. Free markets*

Ideological rivalry between the U.S. and China is also drawn into an economic domain. GPC is not a competition of trade deficits, tariffs, and transnational supply chains, but a fight between two fundamentally different models of development. The free-market development model that the U.S. advocates can take many forms of regulation and protectionism. Still, it is based on a system of private enterprise, open competition, and the free flow of capital and goods under a rules-based order. The Chinese model is state capitalism, in which the state directly owns or controls business and commercial entities and deploys state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to advance national and geopolitical ambitions (Jie, 2020).

The U.S. and China are competing economically. The United States has adopted neo-protectionist strategies and provided benefits to key manufacturing sectors to maintain technological and economic dominance. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) China establishes itself as a global power by forming international partnerships and extending its international influence. The BRI investment projects span more than 140 countries, and with an

explicit commitment to build infrastructure for development, BRI has been called a “21st-century Marshall Plan” (De Conti et al., 2019; Patel, 2025). As a state-directed alternative to Western development financing and investment organizations, BRI’s proposal to help underdeveloped countries meet their development needs with Chinese aid and infrastructure investment has proven to be an enticing one. China has used its economic strength to provide BRI countries with billions of dollars in investments, loans, and aid in “often less stringent conditions regarding governance and human rights,” than Western lenders, thus widening China’s technological and economic influence. This has been described as a pivot away from the neoliberal imperative and toward the state-capitalist imperative to tame markets and harness their dynamism to bolster national security.

#### *Technology and governance: “Tech war” competition*

China’s competition with the United States in AI, 5G, and other high technologies is a key component in the global ideological struggle. It is not just a competition over military or economic dominance but, more fundamentally, a battle over who will shape the future technological infrastructure of the world and its underlying norms and standards. The Chinese model of data-centric authoritarianism is an extension of its domestic embedded authoritarianism, which it is now exporting. Chinese companies like Huawei and ZTE export Safe City surveillance systems and telecommunications networks that make digital repression possible in recipient states, giving leaders in authoritarian countries new tools to monitor political opponents and control online public opinion, thereby globalizing their Chinese model of social control (Roberts, 2023).

The U.S. recognizes the challenge as both inextricably intertwined with competition and an existential one. The U.S. has imposed export controls on sophisticated semiconductor technology to limit China’s AI advancements yet experts such as OpenAI CEO Sam Altman express doubts about the policy effectiveness because China pursues alternative solutions and builds its own domestic supply chains to achieve technological independence (Peng, 2025; Shrivastava & Jash, 2025). This “tech war” is a struggle over setting standards for how data are used, governed, and controlled worldwide. If Chinese standards for mass surveillance and data harvesting are locked in by developing countries, those countries will have locked themselves into a Chinese socio-technical imaginary at odds with the open and liberal system led by the U.S.

#### **The Challenges to Global Governance**

The increasingly severe GPC is having a significant impact on the post-war liberal international order. China, named as a “systemic rival” of the U.S. in the recently released U.S. strategy documents, has increasingly chosen to challenge the existing order and the “U.S.-led international order”. It, however, is more likely to change and bend the rules of the current international order from within rather than subverting international institutions and building alternative ones. For instance, China has succeeded in placing a significant number of its nationals in the headquarter offices of various specialized United Nations (UN) agencies over the last decade, and worked with its economic clout and with its partners from African and Latin American states (which control the largest voting blocs in the UN) to tilt the UN and its various arms in a direction that could serve its own interests and to make global policies and norms more Beijing-friendly (Viña & Schaefer, 2023). An example of the success of such efforts is the recent approval of a Chinese-drafted resolution by the United Nations Human Rights Council to stop a resolution calling for a debate on human rights abuses against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.

The challenge to the existing global governance system by such revisionist states is, however, more than a zero-sum power game. It is also an ideological competition to redefine the purpose of these institutions. The so-called “ecological theory” of competition among great powers predicts that each state in the system will try to bend these institutions in the direction of its own regime type (i.e., liberal or authoritarian) so that it can reap greater benefits (Owen, 2025). That is why Beijing’s move to exclude Taiwan from membership in the International Civil

Aviation Organization is not a one-off political maneuver, but a part of a larger ideological struggle to have authoritarian norms accepted by other international institutions (Chen & Abalos, 2024). The net result of such moves is to hollow out the authority of these institutions, which in turn, makes cooperation on global issues like climate change and nuclear proliferation less likely, as the great powers get caught up in a zero-sum competition over the norms of the game.

## CONCLUSION

The primary finding of this study is that Great Power Competition in the 21st century is, in fact, a distinct multiplex concept rather than an extension of the Cold War. This ongoing multipolar global power struggle between the two hegemonic ideological projects of Liberal Internationalism and Embedded Authoritarianism has become a major dynamic shaping geopolitics in the 21st century, and it is one with dramatic consequences for international stability. The triumphalist dream of a new unipolar moment and the “end of history” has been emphatically repudiated as some of the most powerful nation-states on the planet fight for influence in what is now a genuinely bipolar international system.

This ongoing struggle between two opposing visions for the organization of the international system has significant destabilizing effects on the world order. Among the major consequences of this struggle are an undermining of the credibility of international institutions, the emergence of new means of digital repression as tools of authoritarian influence, and the growing likelihood of armed conflict as a result of an ideological legitimization of military adventurism. The mitigating influence of economic interdependence on the intensifying power struggle is a major source of stability, but the fragile and precarious nature of this relationship is itself under threat by the rising tide of ideological primacy, which in many ways supersedes all other logics.

The most important lesson for policy that can be drawn from this grim and unwelcome diagnosis is the need for a sophisticated understanding of the power struggle as a whole. The contemporary multipolar order must now be conceptualized not only through a materialist and realist lens but also through an ideational one, as the new phase of great power rivalry has become inextricably enmeshed in ideological and identity-based discourses of power.

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