
Balancing Shadows: How Realism Frames Power and Survival Across the Pacific

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Received: 26 December 2025 | Revised: 17 May 2026 | Published: 29 May 2026

Résumé

La concurrence croissante entre les États-Unis et la Chine est souvent présentée comme un conflit inévitable entre grandes puissances, alimenté par l'ambition, l'idéologie ou un supposé « piège de Thucydide ». Cet article remet en cause ces interprétations en appliquant le réalisme défensif aux relations contemporaines entre les États-Unis et la Chine. S'appuyant sur les travaux de Kenneth Waltz et de Robert Jervis, ainsi que sur des recherches récentes sur les transitions de puissance et la sécurité dans l'Indo-Pacifique, ce travail soutient que cette rivalité s'explique avant tout par une insécurité structurelle et des perceptions erronées mutuelles au sein d'un système international anarchique, plutôt que par une intention expansionniste délibérée. À partir d'une analyse qualitative fondée sur la théorie, la littérature secondaire et des cas empiriques — incluant les comportements d'alliance, le découplage économique, la compétition technologique et les dynamiques de sécurité régionale —, l'étude montre que les deux États privilégient leur survie et l'évitement des risques plutôt que la domination. Elle explique également que l'accumulation excessive de puissance est limitée par des pressions d'équilibrage, rendant une guerre de grande ampleur irrationnelle pour les deux parties. Les résultats suggèrent que les relations sino-américaines évolueront probablement vers une « paix froide » durable, marquée par une compétition sans conflit direct. L'article conclut que la prévention des conflits repose non pas sur la confiance ou la convergence idéologique, mais sur la retenue, la transparence, une dissuasion crédible et une coopération limitée dans des domaines non conflictuels. Ces observations contribuent aux débats plus larges sur la rivalité entre grandes puissances en montrant que la peur, la prudence et l'équilibre — plutôt que l'agression — façonnent la politique internationale contemporaine.

Mots-clés: États-Unis, Chine, relations sino-américaines, réalisme défensif, transition de pouvoir, sécurité indo-pacifique, paix froide, comportement d'alliance, découplage économique, compétition technologique, équilibrage, concurrence, piège de Thucydide.

Abstract

Growing competition between the United States and China is frequently framed as an inevitable great-power conflict driven by ambition, ideology, or a looming “Thucydidean Trap.” This paper challenges such interpretations by applying defensive realist theory to contemporary U.S–China relations. Drawing on the foundational work of Kenneth Waltz and Robert Jervis, as well as recent scholarship on power transitions and Indo-Pacific security, this paper argues that the rivalry is best understood as a product of structural insecurity and mutual misperception within an anarchic international system rather than deliberate expansionist intent. Using a qualitative, theory-driven analysis grounded in secondary literature and empirical cases—including alliance behavior, economic decoupling, technological competition, and regional security dynamics—this paper demonstrates how both states prioritize survival and risk avoidance over domination. The analysis further explains why excessive power accumulation is constrained by counterbalancing pressures, making large-scale war an irrational outcome for both sides. The findings suggest that U.S–China relations are more likely to stabilize into a prolonged “cold peace” characterized by competition without direct conflict. The paper concludes that conflict prevention depends not on trust or ideological convergence, but on restraint, transparency, credible deterrence, and limited cooperation in non-zero-sum domains. These insights contribute to broader debates on great-power rivalry by highlighting how fear, prudence, and balance—rather than aggression—shape contemporary international politics.

Keywords: United States, China, U.S.–China relations. Defensive Realism. power transitions, Indo-Pacific security, cold peace. alliance behavior, economic decoupling, technological competition, counterbalancing, competition, Thucydidean Trap

Pour citer l'article / To cite this article: Wagstaff, L. (2026). Balancing Shadows: How Realism Frames Power and Survival Across the Pacific. *Politika: Undergraduate Journal of International Affairs, Politics and Policy*, 3(1), 56-65. 10.18192/politika.7766

Introduction

In a world defined by uncertainty, the United States (U.S.) and China's rivalry embodies the essence of power politics in the twenty-first century. Rising competition between these two states unfolds not merely through weapons or wealth, but through perception, fear, and the structures that govern survival (Fong, 2025). Realism offers a lens through which these tensions become clear. Rooted in the belief that the international system is anarchic—lacking a central authority—realist theory posits that states act above all to secure their own existence (Waltz, 1979). Within this logic, power is not an end, but a means of self-preservation. Using defensive realism, I argue the U.S.-China competition arises from structural insecurity and mutual misperception rather than offensive ambition, and that the prevention of conflict relies on restraint, transparency, and the cultivation of a stable balance of power.

Defensive realism examines great-power competition through direct logic. In an anarchic international system, the absence of central authority creates persistent ambiguity regarding other States intentions, persuading states to prioritize survival over expansion (Waltz, 1979). This uncertainty encourages worst-case assumptions, whereby even defensive

measures—such as military modernization or strategic alliances-building—are interpreted as potential threats by rival states. The results are therefore a security dilemma: any actions taken by one State to increase one's own internal security invertedly reduces the security of other States, promoting reciprocal responses (Jervis, 1978). Over time, this dynamic produces balancing behaviour rather than conquest, as states recognize that excessive expansion invites counterbalancing and increases vulnerability over safety (Waltz, 1979; Jervis, 1978). The aforementioned framework is applied in this paper in reference to U.S.–China relations to demonstrate how rivalry can emerge without aggressive intent and why restraint, rather than domination, remains the most rational strategy for both powers.

This paper employs defensive realism, following Kenneth Waltz's interpretation that states pursue security rather than domination (Waltz, 1979). It argues that the growing U.S.–China competition reflects a cycle of mutual fear and misperception, rather than a deliberate struggle for global conquest. Through this lens, China's assertive posture and the United States' reactive containment are best understood as defensive behaviors

conditioned by insecurity (Waltz, 1979; Jervis, 1978).

Empires in Reflection: The Rise of China and the United States Uneasy Gaze

Within the current international system, global powers are characterized by their capacity to project influence economically, militarily, and institutionally—a statement which defines both the United States and China (Golub, 2013). Historically, after World War Two the United States has occupied a central role in the global economy, leading liberal institutions and promoting globalization (Golub, 2013). However, China's recent transformation into the world's manufacturing hub, its growing technological capacity, and its control over strategic territories—Macau, Hong Kong, and persistent claim over Taiwan—signal a shift in the global balance of power (Zhao, 2013).

Following the Century of Humiliation, for China, these developments represent essential milestones towards securing sovereignty and restoring national dignity (Zhao, 2013). However, United States policymakers perceive China's moves as expansionist, acting as a direct challenge to the established global hegemon (Golub, 2013). Nevertheless, defensive realism reframes China's actions as efforts to maintain survival under anarchy (Waltz, 1979). Waltz's theory further supports this claim by emphasizing that a State's primary motivation is security, not conquest (Waltz, 1979). Yet beyond material capabilities, the roots of rivalry lie

deeper—in perception, culture, and history (Jervis, 1978; Zhao, 2013).

Defensive realism claims that rising powers do not automatically pursue expansion, nor do declining powers inevitably resort to preventive war (Waltz, 1979). Instead, states assess whether additional power enhances or undermines their security. For China, rapid growth increases visibility and threat perception, incentivizing caution rather than instigation to avoid premature counterbalancing by the United States and their allies. For the United States, containment strategies—such as alliance reinforcement and technological restrictions—reflect efforts to preserve relative security without triggering escalation. Kenneth Waltz (1979) argues that excessive power accumulation often produces diminishing returns, as it invites external balancing that ultimately reduces security. Thus, both states face structural incentives to moderate behavior, even amid intensifying rivalry.

The Weight of Perception: Culture, History, and the Making of Rivalry

In "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma", Robert Jervis (1978) refers to a "security dilemma", where a State's defensive action will appear as offensive to other States; with regards to China and the United States, both States historically interpret each other's efforts in maintaining security as hostile intentions (Jervis, 1978).

Jervis' (1978) security dilemma is not the result of irrational fear or ideological hostility, but a structural consequence of an anarchic system in which intentions cannot

be reliably verified. Even when states adopt defensive postures, others must evaluate these actions under conditions of ambiguity, leading rational actors to assume worst-case scenarios. In the U.S.–China context, Chinese military modernization aimed at deterring intervention near its periphery appears to Washington as an effort to revise the regional order. Similarly, United States alliance reinforcement in East Asia, intended to preserve economic stability, is perceived in Beijing as encirclement tactics. Defensive realism emphasizes that these interpretations are not products of misunderstanding alone, but of rational precaution in an environment where misjudgment carries existential risks (Jervis, 1978; Waltz, 1979).

Escalating competition between the United States and China is a product of both structural, cultural and historical misunderstandings (Zhao, 2013). China's dynastic origin has entrenched a subconscious preference for homogenization, hierarchy, and internal unity within its political sphere and social behaviour (Zhao, 2013). Suisheng Zhao (2013) explains, the emphasis on discipline and centralism, where power and decision-making authorities are concentrated to maintain national stability and control, is reinforced through a single party system, a tradition continued by Xi Jinping.

China's emphasis on regional supremacy and unity is not the result of malice but rather centuries of political continuity—patterns of rule that valued

isolation and stability as safeguards against external interference (Zhao, 2013). In contrast, the American political culture was built on immigration, pluralism, and openness (Golub, 2013). According to Philip Golub (2013), America's economic and imperial ascent is linked to a self-concept of global participation, expansion, and universality. While China values internal order and regional self-reliance, the United States operates with outward openness, aiming for an essential role in global leadership (Golub, 2013). China's inward focus consequently appears threatening to the United States as it interprets China through its own liberal worldview. To Beijing, centralization ensures survival; to Washington, it signals authoritarian danger (Zhao, 2013).

Economic dynamics between China and the United States further amplifies misunderstandings. Historically, the United States global dominance was a result of strong domestic manufacturing, propelled by post-World War Two industrial capacity (Golub, 2013). However, as the United States Gross Domestic Product (GDP) vastly surpassed other States, industries moved abroad, and factories relocated to China—economic production thus became concentrated in the very State that the United States presently views as its chief rival (Stevens, 2022). Scholars further mark this transition, Friso Stevens (2022) noting that China's modern economic ascent reflects its ongoing “march to national rejuvenation” and its enduring memory of humiliation from the Opium Wars, motivating an obsession with national

restoration. The United States perceives this as revisionism, while for China it is a return to historical equilibrium—a process of recovering its perceived rightful place in the regional order (Stevens, 2022).

Ideological divergence between capitalism and communism further complicates cooperation. The capitalist model followed by the United States prioritizes individualism and markets liberalism, whereas China's communist model emphasizes collectivism and a state-centered control model (Velez-Calle, 2015). As Andres Velez-Calle's (2015) study on cultural communication styles in international joint ventures finds, these contrasting ideologies make both political negotiations and business relations difficult. Velez-Calle's (2015) finds that significant cultural distance between collectivist and individualist societies leads to shortened contracts and heightened mistrust due to differing communication norms. The same principles are applicable to diplomacy, the two nations' opposing communication logic inhibits understanding (Velez-Calle, 2015).

Global alignments further mirror these cultural and ideological differences. Taiwan, South Korea and other liberal democracies maintain close partnerships with the United States. Conversely, China aligns with emerging powers like BRICS nations (Keukeleire & Hooijmaaijers, 2014). As Stephan Keukeleire and Bas Hooijmaaijers (2014) explain, such alliances promote alternative views of multilateralism that challenge Western norms of order and governance. China's growing influence in global cultural and heritage institutions

underscores its effort to project soft power through preservation rather than domination (Xiang, 2019). As Yunju Xiang (2019) notes, China's leadership in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage reflects its desire to contribute to global cooperation and cultural continuity.

Viewed through the defensive realist lens, these dynamics indicate that United States–China rivalry is not a Thucydidean trap—a power transition bound to result in war—but a complex interplay of internal and external balancing behaviors (Waltz, 1979; Jervis, 1978). Each state acts in accordance with its own identity and insecurity: China's centralization seeks to prevent collapse, while the United States reacts out of fear of relative decline (Beckley, 2018). A cycle of misperception is maintained as both perceive the other's defensive responses as aggressiveness (Jervis, 1978).

A War Never Fought: The Cold Peace of the Twenty-First Century

While popular discourse often frames U.S.–China relations as a Thucydidean Trap, defensive realism challenges the assumption that power transitions inevitably result in war. Unlike offensive realism, which posits that states seek maximum power to ensure survival, defensive realism argues that excessive expansion increases vulnerability by provoking counterbalancing coalitions (Waltz, 1979). Both the United States and China possess strong incentives to avoid direct confrontation, as the costs of war—economic disruption, alliance

fragmentation, and nuclear escalation—far outweigh potential gains (Zhou, 2023; Beckley, 2021). As a result, competition is more likely to stabilize into a pattern of rivalry without war, where both sides pursue relative security through economic, technological, and diplomatic means rather than military confrontation (Zeng, 2007; Hulvey & Vidyarthi, 2023).

A cold peace—a sustained period of strategic competition without direct conflict—is the most probable outcome of the U.S.-China rivalry (Zhou, 2023). As defensive realism contends, both States seek survival and stability rather than conquest (Waltz, 1979). Present day economic decoupling, technological isolation, and the restriction of cultural and academic exchanges already signal this trajectory (Zeng, 2020). Tariff disputes, reciprocal sanctions, and the construction of digital and informational walls are manifestations of mutual containment (BBC, 2024).

Recently BBC news has reported on China's growing indifference with the United States, reflecting an outlook that the nation can "look beyond Trump's America" and thrive through domestic self-sufficiency (BBC, 2024). Scholars have further noted how the United States and China are both building "digital walls," prioritizing information control and national technological autonomy over interdependence (Hulvey & Vidyarthi, 2021).

In a recent publication, Jinghao Zhou (2023) concludes that great-power competition is now the new normal of

international relations. Zhou argues that neither state can return to pre-2016 patterns of cooperation; instead, the future will consist of "strategic competition through limited cooperation," (Zhou, 2023, p. 211) where engagement persists in constrained, transactional ways. Ka Zeng (2020) further observes how China's foreign trade policy has evolved under domestic pressures that prioritize national protectionism and internal stability over liberal integration, highlighting an additional economic dimension. The consequence is a parallel economic order—two great powers sustaining separate, competing systems of production, finance, and digital governance (Zeng, 2020).

Despite western fears of China's global dominance, the balance of structural advantages still favours the United States. According to Michael Beckley (2018), robust institutions, favorable geography, and demographic vitality are key during shifts in global power. Even while the economic gap is narrowing between China and the United States, the United States continues to have long-standing advantages in geography, innovation, and demographic diversity, whereas China continues to face an aging population, regional inequalities, and heavy dependence on export-led manufacturing (Beckley, 2018). Paul Kennedy (1987) similarly underscores that internal stagnation and over-exertion explain why great powers decline, and by those standards, the United States maintains its institutional resilience.

China's ambitions are additionally moderated by Confucian principles that temper expansionism with moral restraint (Lahtinen, 2019). Anja Lahtien (2019) explains that Beijing's pursuit of global respectability draws from the Confucian concept of harmony and self-cultivation rather than domination. Therefore, Chinese foreign policy would seek recognition as a great power without necessarily displacing the United States (Lahtinen, 2019). The outcome, therefore, is not a Thucydidean trap, but a long-term balance of fear and stability—a cold peace in which both states coexist within defined spheres of influence (Waltz, 1979; Jervis, 1978).

From a defensive realist perspective, this state represents the inherent balance of anarchic international systems. To maintain sovereignty and autonomy, both states, motivated by insecurity rather than aggression, unite within themselves to preserve sovereignty and autonomy. The resulting dual rule system—distinct economic networks, competing institutions, and cautious diplomacy—demonstrates that rivalry does not always result in conflict. Instead, it ushers in a new era of coexistence characterized by competition without collapse, where fear maintains stability and survival supersedes ambition as the central logic of power behaviour.

The Fragility of Peace: Strategies for Preventing Great-Power Conflict

Restraint, transparency, and cultural literacy are essential for prevention (Waltz, 1979; Jervis, 1978). Defensive realism posits that states can only achieve stability

in the absence of a central authority through mutual recognition of limits and communication of objectives (Waltz, 1979). The United States and China must therefore establish formalized discussion methods that reduce uncertainty and prevent miscalculation—a condition Kenneth Waltz (1979) identifies as essential for minimizing the security dilemma. Clearing defensive postures and preventing escalation in areas like the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait can be achieved by confidence-building measures, including bilateral arms-control discussions, cyber rules, and maritime codes of conduct (Zhou, 2023).

Both states can seek limited structural cooperation in non-zero-sum fields, such as climate governance, global health, and disaster relief (Zeng, 2020). According to Robert Jervis's (1978) theory of the security dilemma, a State's ability to differentiate between offensive and defensive capabilities allows cooperation. Applying this logic, projects like collaborative research on clean energy or pandemic response can signal non-threatening intent while upholding core interests (Zhou, 2023). Even as strategic tensions rise, these "low-politics" exchanges can reduce hostility in "high-politics" domains and maintain open communication channels.

Furthermore, it is crucial for both states to acknowledge the impact historical and cultural influences have in shaping perceptions: the United States must recognize China's historical sensitivity to sovereignty, and China must realize that United States alliances in Asia are largely

economic opportunities and deterrents rather than encirclement strategies (Zhao, 2013). Mutual distrust is decreased by building channels for language learning, cross-cultural exchanges, and track-two diplomacy (Velez-Calle, 2015).

Defensive realism asserts that peace is not the product of trust, but fear and prudence (Waltz, 1979). Deterrence and prudence become self-reinforcing when both powers internalize that direct confrontation would jeopardize their own survival (Jervis, 1978). The goal, therefore, is not harmony but equilibrium—preserving competition within predictable boundaries (Waltz, 1979).

The Edge of Equilibrium: Reflections on Power and Restraint

The U.S.–China rivalry illustrates realism’s enduring truth: that fear, not aggression, sustains the rhythm of international politics (Waltz, 1979). The anarchic system in which both powers operate fosters vigilance and punishes gullibility (Waltz, 1979). Their actions—tariffs, alliances, military posturing—are not driven by conquest but by anxiety over survival (Jervis, 1978). The cold peace that results may seem tense and unyielding, but it represents stability in its most pragmatic sense (Zhou, 2023).

The U.S.–China case continues to offer key insight into understanding

great-power competition, as illustrated by the defensive realist lens. By foregrounding insecurity, misperception, and the limits of power accumulation, realism reveals why growing rivalry does not necessarily culminate into war. Rather than attributing conflict to ideological incompatibility or ambition, defensive realism locates its origins in structural conditions that shape rational State behavior (Waltz, 1979). This insight carries broader implications: preventing war among great powers depends less on trust or shared values than on managing incentives, clarifying intentions, and maintaining credible deterrence within an anarchic system (Zhou, 2023; Fong, 2024).

Ultimately, realism does not promise harmony—it promises endurance (Waltz, 1979). In this enduring balance lies the quiet possibility of peace: imperfect, uneasy, but lasting. The architecture of fear, if tempered by restraint, can sustain not conflict, but coexistence (Jervis, 1978; Waltz, 1979).

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