



Research Paper

The Rise of China in the Decline of United States Hegemonic Power: A Threat to International Security?

Christian NzubechiAkubueze

Political Science Department, University of New Brunswick

ABSTRACT

For over half a century, the United States has been the most powerful state globally, dominating key global issues stemming from global politics, geoeconomics, and geostrategy. Following the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the international system moved from bipolarity to unipolarity, with the United States becoming the global hegemon. Since the early 1980s, China has emerged as a global power, challenging the longstanding hegemony of the United States. China's rise has coincided with a period of relative decline of the U.S., marking for the first time in decades sustained opposition to its interests, primarily from China. This paper therefore seeks to examine the rise of China amid the decline of U.S. hegemonic power and its implications for international security. The study relies on qualitative data predicated on secondary sources, employing offensive realism as its theoretical framework. The paper reveals a measurable decline in the United States hegemonic power, preventing it from single-handedly dictating global affairs. Also, internal, and external factors contribute to the decline of the U.S. hegemonic status. The research recommends that China prioritize forming alliances with more powerful countries to enhance its ability to challenge the United States. Additionally, it suggests that both countries should critically assess the risks involved in their respective strategies to balance each other.

KEYWORDS: Hegemony; Power; Polarity; International Security

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I. INTRODUCTION

The United States assumed the position of the most powerful state globally for over half a century by dominating and determining key global issues stemming from global politics, geoeconomics, and geostrategy. Hence, the United States elevated into the position of a hegemonic power. The emergence of the United States as a global hegemon resulted from the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union. As submitted by Mearsheimer (2018), the bipolar international system disintegrated after the Cold War and the United States attained the position of a global hegemon leading to the emergence of a unipolar international system and the preservation of a liberal international order.

During the Cold War, The United States effectively asserted its global dominance beyond the Soviet Union's influence, especially in the transatlantic, Far East, and Middle East regions. The main pillars of this US-dominated international system were rooted in the country's ideological appeal and the wide-ranging structure of US-led international organizations founded in the post-WWII era (Layne, 2012). The Cold War period (1945-1991) ushered in a new global order characterized by bipolar order with the United States and the Soviet Union balancing each other. However, this bipolar order ended with the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union and the victory of capitalism over communism, thus emerging unipolar international order that existed before the re-emergence of China (Chigozie&Oyinmiebi, 2018).

Since the early 1980s, China has been on the rise, and this has been manifested in the growth of its economy. Yazdani described the rise of China as one of the most consequential developments that the international system has witnessed in the last few decades, noting that "through more than four decades of sustained efforts, China has transformed its economy from low-cost 'factory of the world' into a leading innovator in advanced technologies" (Yazdani, 2020: 452). It is a result of the rapid rise of China as a global power that scholars and experts in global politics have questioned the global supremacy of the United States. Hence, Renic (2020) posits that contemporary China is being reconceptualized as a realistic economic, political, and military counterbalance to US hegemony. Furthermore, China has increased its military spending and has

been committed to modernizing its military capabilities. Similarly, evidenced by China's growing surface and subsurface force and experience in expeditionary missions, its navy now can conduct some out-of-area operations. To assert Chinese claims over the South and East China Sea, China's air force is fielding new generations of advanced fighters and attack aircraft (Shifrinson, 2018). Other aggressive behaviours of China in its foreign policy decisions can be seen in China's treatment of Taiwan and the building of a military base abroad in Djibouti. According to a Pentagon report on China's military power, "Beijing is exceeding previous projections of how quickly it is building up its nuclear weapons arsenal and is almost certainly learning lessons from Russia's war in Ukraine about what a conflict over Taiwan might look like" (The Guardian, 2023). This action of China has been cited by many as clear evidence of China's potential to threaten international order and security (Renic, 2020).

The rise of China and the relative decline of the United States hegemonic power has led to examining the potential implications this will have on the future trajectory of international politics, especially regarding international order and security (Can & Chan, 2020). Thus, as the US hegemonic power declines, China has emerged as a great power thereby ushering in a multipolar international system. Toje (2018) described the rise of China as one grand event of international geopolitics in the early twenty-first century. Some scholars have argued that the new era should be defined as one of bipolarity instead of multipolarity considering the power gap between China and Russia (Tunsjo, 2019; Xuotong, 2019). Considering the above, this paper set out to examine the rise of China in the decline of the United States hegemonic power and its implications on international security.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

This paper adopts offensive realism as its theoretical framework. Offensive realism is a variant of the structural or neorealist school of thought. Structural realism itself is a variant of the realist school of thought which was first outlined by Kenneth Waltz in his 1979 book *Theory of International Politics* (Waltz, 1979). Offensive realism is associated with John Mearsheimer who offered a more competitive version of structural realism. He argued that states should not only worry about the uncertainty of the intentions of other states but in addition, should assume the worst about these intentions (Mearsheimer, 2001). As a result, the capabilities of other states become the sole focus of states: they compete for power, aiming to increase it whenever feasible (Glaser, 2022). According to offensive realism, the reason for this is simple: "the more powerful a state is, the better its prospects for defending itself if attacked. A state would be most secure if it were the dominant, hegemonic power; states will pursue competitive policies to achieve this position if they have a reasonable probability of success" (Glaser, 2022:20).

There are several competing theories within structural realism, and they provide a range of views on China's rise to global power and its implication on international order and security. This stems from the lack of generalization by structural realist theorists over the potential impact of China's ascent on international order, with offensive realists sharing a different perspective from other realists. How the balance of power plays out is the central focus of structural realism variants. For two decades following the end of the Cold War, Glaser (2022) notes that little security competition existed between the world's major powers as the United States dominated the world economically and militarily. This, however, is no longer the case because of the declining hegemonic power of the United States and the rise of China. A potential challenge to America's dominance is the military and economic growth of China. China is already a major regional power and will rise to become as powerful, or more powerful, than the USA if the success in its growth continues (Glaser, 2022).

States, according to offensive realists should whenever it appears feasible, strive for opportunities to gain more power. Hence, states should maximize power, and their ultimate goal should be hegemony because there is no other better way to guarantee survival (Mearsheimer, 2007). Going by this perspective, China's rise will lead to serious instability. Offensive realism sees China striving to become the hegemonic power in its region (Glaser, 2022). Going by offensive realism, expectedly, China will imitate the United States and strive to become a regional hegemon in Asia, meaning it will seek to maximize the power gap between itself and its neighbours, particularly Japan and Russia. The end goal for China would be to ensure that it becomes so powerful to the point where it cannot be threatened or confronted by any Asian state (Mearsheimer, 2010; Mearsheimer, 2007). The requirements of regional hegemony mean China will build military forces capable of defeating its neighbours, gaining enormous political influence in the process (Glaser, 2022). Furthermore, the ambition of China would most likely be to push the USA out of the Asian region because the continuous influence of the United States in the Asian region would prevent China from acquiring the influence and security provided by hegemony (Glaser, 2022; Mearsheimer, 2010).

III. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

A key concept under realism is the international distribution of power known as system polarity. Polarity refers to the number of blocs of states that exert power in an international system. Chigozie and Oyinmiebi (2018) describe it as any of the several ways in which power is distributed within the international system. There exist three types of polarity in the international system namely multipolarity, unipolarity and bipolarity. At any given period, the international system can be multipolar, unipolar, or bipolar (Chigozie&Oyinmiebi, 2018). Under a multipolar system, three or more major powers exercise most of the cultural, economic, and military influence; unipolar systems contain a single major power; while bipolar systems have two major powers (Glaser, 2022). To further clarify polarity, Glaser (2022) explains that the international system witnessed a bipolar system during the Cold War period between the USA and the Soviet Union. The system metamorphosed into a unipolar system with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. However, much of the international system according to Glaser (2022), has been multipolar, an example being the periods before WWI and II.

Non-state actors are equally worthy of consideration in the discussion of polarity for several reasons. The first is to highlight the fact that power dynamics in the international system can go beyond the state-centric system. Secondly, the non-state actors have grown to wield significant power and influence in international politics, thereby challenging the conventional notion of polarity. As noted by Tella (2015), the influence of non-state actors such as intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and terrorist organizations is increasingly significant in global politics.

Hegemony is another key concept in global politics. It is about raw, hard power. Mearsheimer (2001) describes a hegemon as possessing capacities that surpass those of any other state, leaving them unable to put up a significant challenge. Stiles (2009: 2-3) defines hegemony as “predominance of one state over its peers.” Also, in the international system, a hegemon commands superiority over material resources (Gamble, 2002). It means, therefore, that hegemony is an aggregate of certain attributes, and states must possess those attributes for it to rise to hegemonic status. Political strength, military force, and superior national power are some of the key capabilities a hegemonic state must acquire. Also, when it comes to military force, a standing defensive army is not sufficient, a superior navy and air force is also required in addition to a large and growing economy. A hegemon is therefore a self-interested actor concerned with safeguarding its security, economic, and ideological interests (Gilpin, 1981). Hegemony is also about polarity. Comparatively, in terms of relative military and economic power, a hegemon enjoys overwhelming dominance over other states in the international system. Given that a hegemon is the only great power in the system, it is, by definition, unipolar (Mearsheimer, 2001). Hegemonic power is then, as conceptualized by Keohane (1989), an actor powerful enough to establish an international rule, ensure compliance, and have the will to do so.

The concept of power is central to politics and international relations. Weber (1947) defines power as the probability that one actor in social interaction can enforce their own will despite resistance, irrespective of the underlying reasons for which this capability exists. While Dahl (1957) defines power from capability and relational dimension. He views power as the ability of ‘A’ to get ‘B’ to do something whether ‘B’ likes it or not. According to Glaser (2022), realism views power as a defining feature of the international environment that states face. He went further to state that power is adequately understood as the resources available to a state for building military forces with central components of power being a state's wealth, population, and technological sophistication. The absence of an international authority to protect states in the international system makes it essential that states acquire power because they will rely on their power capabilities to achieve their international goals (Glaser, 2022). Mearsheimer (2001) Shares a similar view, contending that calculations about power lie at the heart of how states think about the world around them. Mearsheimer equates power to the currency of great-power politics, stating that what money is to economics, power is to international relations. Consequently, states compete for power among themselves.

IV. THE DECLINE OF UNITED STATES HEGEMONY IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM: REASONS AND THE EMERGING CHANGES

The United States hegemony in the international system has been declining for a while now, leading to a shift away from the unipolar international system that came into existence by the end of the Cold War and the subsequent disintegration of the bipolar international system. On this note, Shiffrinson (2018: 65) described the United States as “a great power in relative decline,” although he concedes that this decline is not similar to the former Soviet Union; nor is it akin to ancient Rome with the Goths at the gates. Rather, a new great power competition is at hand and the United States' “unipolar era” is over. However, the decline of the United States hegemonic power and the re-emergence of multipolarity result from certain changes that have emerged over the years in the international system. According to Chigozie and Oyinmiebi (2018), these changes transverse areas of military/defence, economic/trade, and technological advancement.

The rapidly rising China is challenging the United States hegemonic dominance and is closing the superpower disparity between China and the United States. Farooq, Khan, and Uzzaman (2020) argued that global exports, foreign direct investment, and socioeconomic assistance are numerous areas where China has either equated or surpassed the United States. According to these authors, although the United States is the most commanding player militarily in the world system, China and Russia are aggressively stretching their muscles to mark their peripheral influences; consequently, the United States can face numerous challenges in various regions of the world. Foot, MacFarlane, and Mastanduno (2003) emphasized how the rising China is challenging the United States liberal hegemonic institutions. The United States has used its comprehensive system of international political, security, and economic institutions; including the United Nations, the UN Security Council, NATO, the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO to establish its dominance of the international system. However, these multinational organizations are being challenged by their Chinese counterparts such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organizations (SCO), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Foot, MacFarlane & Mastanduno, 2003). Just as Murad (2023: 17-18) noted, “China’s willingness to rise to a global leadership role is manifested in its power-convening initiatives ranging from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Its power political strategies through the BRI and the SCO indicate that China is summoning power to undertake global leadership.” Kocamaz (2019) argued that China uses the SCO as an instrument to pursue its soft-balancing policies against the United States.

Internally, the 2008 Great Recession also played a part in the hegemonic decline of the United States. Farooq, Khan, and Uzzaman (2020) pointed out how the dollar, as the international currency reserve, has been facing critical challenges since the 2008 recession. It has encountered competition from other currencies of major economic players such as China and Europe. China aims to challenge Wall Street, while Europe, unlike in the past, no longer relies on the United States protection from the Soviet threat. The dollar also faces an uncertain future as doubts persist over its global value (Farooq, Khan, & Uzzaman, 2020). The uncertain future of the dollar has been a concern for the last decade. In 2011, the World Bank indicated that the dollar would lose its position as the primary reserve currency by 2025 with the euro and renminbi (RMB) establishing themselves on an equal footing in a new multi-currency monetary system (Politi, 2011). Babones (2015) notes that the hegemonic power of the United States is being undercut by numerous challenges facing it such as the devaluation of the US dollar and its being replaced by other currencies (Euro, Yuan, and Ruble), military overstretch, a rapidly rising China, and highly integrated East-Asia.

According to Jacques (2012), an examination of the external drivers of the US decline suggests that the rise of new global powers, particularly China and Russia, has contributed to the weakening of the US global hegemony. These two Eurasian giants had previously held positions of superpowers: China till the mid-seventeenth and Russia till the late 20th century. Beijing and Moscow may be according to Farooq, Khan, and Uzzaman (2020) asserting to regain what they perceive as their natural, or rightful place in the hierarchy of great powers. China has expanded its global reach beyond East Asia to places where the United States used to have overwhelming influence.

V. PLACING CHINA’S RISE IN PERSPECTIVE: CAN CHINA RISE PEACEFULLY?

Since the early 1980s, China has been on a rise that Shifrinson (2018) described as meteoric. He went further to state that the United States economy about a quarter ago was 800 percent that of China, but now it is barely 170 percent. In the early 1990s, the per capita GDP income of China was only just \$1,000 annually, it is now about \$7,500 per year and significantly higher still in China’s coastal provinces ahead of actors such as Russia and nearly half that in some US states, Shifrinson (2018) notes. Historically, the rapid pace at which China has undergone its societal transformation is without comparison. Furthermore, it is referenced by many that the subsequent increase in Chinese military spending, in addition to its devotion to modernizing its military capabilities, is a clear confirmation of China’s growing potential to threaten international security (Renic, 2020). Additionally, Blij (2005) noted that alongside China’s military advancements, its economic growth has proceeded without equality in the last 25 years, consequently reshaping regional and international power dynamics.

According to Blij (2005), China’s economy has experienced remarkable growth over the past 25 years, fundamentally transforming regional and international power dynamics. The author asserts that China has ascended to become the world’s second-largest economy and a major trading partner of the United States. Some international relations scholars declared that China would overtake the United States and become the world’s largest economy before 2035 (Lau, 2019). The Price Waterhouse Coopers forecast (PWC 2009) expects China to surpass the United States as the single largest economy by 2050. Choi (2018) posits that China has already become a great power and is the main candidate for a new global hegemon in the future. Choi’s argument is a result of how China has, for the past three decades, recorded phenomenal economic ascent in addition to its current economic and political status, not neglecting its large population of more than 1.3 billion.

While China frequently maintains that its rise will be peaceful, abundant evidence suggests that it has adopted aggressive and non-peaceful foreign policy stances aimed at asserting its influence. Similarly, Farooq, Khan, and Uzzaman (2022) doubt whether China's claim of peaceful rise will be as simple as being portrayed considering the growing tensions between China and its smaller neighbouring states in the Far East that are looking for their security towards the United States. Explaining the pattern of politics emerging great powers adopt to rise to the status of great powers, Layne (2012) focuses on the conflicting environment between China (the emerging great power) and the declining hegemon, the United States. The author notes that great powers, predominantly, engage in hard competition for power hence fortifying security, elevating status, enhancing prestige, and multiplying their influence. Certainly, the emerging great powers attempt to rise to the top of the elite club of great powers. The successful efforts will follow the attempt by great powers to materialize their influence of wealth and power to alter the existing international order. Clearly in this newly altered arrangement, the new great powers seek privileges for their national interests. In the end, the new great powers aim to become a leading power, firstly in their regions and then worldwide (Layne, 2012).

According to Mearsheimer (2007), states that gain regional hegemony have more desire which is to attempt to prevent great powers in other geographical regions from matching their feat. Mearsheimer noted how the United States, after achieving regional dominance, ensured that other great powers did not control Asia and Europe. Mearsheimer (2007), through the lens of offensive realism, argued that a rising China is expected to imitate the USA and attempt to become a regional hegemon in Asia. Concerning Chinese regional aspirations, Bowring (2010: 2) notes that China ultimately wished to assert a "Monroe Doctrine" throughout East Asia, excluding non-regional powers. The Monroe Doctrine was a policy the US laid out for the first time in 1823 under President James Monroe to push the European great powers out of the Western Hemisphere (Mearsheimer, 2006). To achieve this, China will seek to maximize the power gap between itself and its neighbours. An increasingly powerful China will ensure that it is so powerful that no Asian state has the means to threaten it and try to push US military forces out of Asia (Mearsheimer, 2007). Cordesman (2018: 1) asserts in his commentary on the rise of China that "China's emergence as at least an Asian superpower does pose challenges to an existing superpower such as the United States." Additionally, China is focused on establishing military hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region, which runs counter to the interests of the United States. Furthermore, China harbours ambitions to weaken the primacy of the United States.

China's rise has not been peaceful because its rise has already presented a structural shift in contemporary global politics. For example, Duggan (2020) points out that traditional global influencers in global trade and financial exchange such as the US and the UK, are industrialized market-led economies. However, China, with its hybrid market system (centrally controlled and market-led) and one-party Leninist political structure as an emerging economy, ascending to a leadership position in global economic governance, raises questions about its role. Moreover, great powers such as the United States would want to halt Chinese power and prevent the rise of a new potential hegemon in the system leading to conflicts. Just as Can and Soto (2020) noted, China is no longer concealing its capabilities as it was during the Deng era when it bided its time, instead, China has taken center stage in international politics and is striving to achieve a community of common destiny for humankind during the era of Xi Jinping. This further reinforces Mearsheimer's conclusion that China's evolving capabilities will shape its priorities. As China's capacities grow disproportionately to its current position, the intricate interplay of its internal drivers such as population growth and resource capabilities will converge, manifesting in external behaviours (Vincent, 2013). China's treatment of Taiwan, the building of military bases abroad in Djibouti, the advancement of its blue water navy build-up, and the intensification of its military relations with many developing countries are examples of instances where the external behaviour has manifested itself.

The Taiwan issue is often cited by offensive realists as a sign of China's desire for hegemony and an example of China's aggressive policies. According to Lin, Wu and Yeh (2022), China's continued wish to unite Taiwan back as part of the PRC is the main reason Taiwan has not been recognized despite having the components of the state specified at the 1933 Montevideo Conference. Concerning the construction of a military base in Djibouti by China, Dutton, Kardon, and Kennedy (2020) notes that it enables China to operate even beyond the Indian Ocean in addition to making the African continent safer to trade. Cardona and Diego (2019) noted China's aggressive act in the South China Sea dispute. Furthermore, China has directly challenged the status quo in the Asia-Pacific region by building artificial islands in that region in addition to arming these islands (Cardona & Diego, 2019).

VI. SHOULD THE UNITED STATES FEAR CHINA'S RISE?

As noted earlier in the paper, China's ascent into a global and influential player in the international system has been astronomical, resulting in the alteration and weakening of the United States stronghold on the international system. However, the nature of China's rise coupled with some of its assertiveness and foreign policy actions both regionally and globally has necessitated examining whether the United States should fear

China's rise. Currently, China is not on par with the United States, but as Beckeley (2018) notes, economically and militarily China is not yet at the same level as the United States, but it is on its way. Already China would present the United States as a challenger on par with and on some levels ahead of the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The United States by its large and diverse economy, educated population, vibrant military, and industrial base, still maintains its position as the most powerful state in the international system. This notwithstanding, Shifrinson (2018) maintains that China's rise signifies the end of the era of US unipolarity, a defining feature of global politics since the post-Cold War period. He notes that, for the first time in a quarter century, the United States is seriously concerned with another state's capacity to offer sustained opposition to its interests through diverse policy tools and the ability to garner support from other actors. This concern was shared by a former Obama administration official, Ely Ratner who warned about how China is rising with confidence and ambition targeted at global leadership, supported by greater economic, military, and ideological power (Ratner, 2018).

Nye (2020) presents an optimistic viewpoint, contending that it is highly unlikely that there will be a hegemonic war between China and the United States due to the economic interdependence between both countries. Analysis of the implications of any major disruption to their economic relationship shows that the costs would far exceed the benefits and would devastate China and the US. Chun (2020) further highlights that together, China and the United States are responsible for about 40% of the global economy, and over 30% of global exports and imports, and maintain important trading relationships with each other. Additionally, China happens to be the single largest holder of US treasury bonds. The trade between the US and China has grown enormously in recent decades and is crucial for both countries. One of the largest export markets for US goods and services today is China. Also, the United States is among the top export markets for China. For example, from 2001 to 2022, the value of US goods imports from China rose from about \$100 billion to more than \$500 billion in 2022 (Siripurapu & Berman, 2023), while exports rose 1.6 percent to \$153.8 billion (Cutler et al., 2023). Also, Cutler et al (2023) note that despite the tensions between the United States and China, goods trade between both countries hit a record high of \$690.6 billion in 2022.

As Can and Chan (2020) note, the decline of the United States hegemonic power does not mean that it is retreating from its superpower position and its role as a global leader. As things stand, China would likely want to avoid the "Thucydides Trap." Although the weakening of the US hegemonic power has created a vacuum in global governance, the United States remains the most powerful country in the world so China would want to tread carefully so as not to miscalculate and enter a war with the United States while trying to replace it as a new hegemonic power. Going by the Thucydides trap analysis, war is likely to occur when a rising power threatens to displace a great power. Also, the argument of China replacing the United States as the global hegemon is often exaggerated, and going by available evidence, this prediction is still far from happening any time soon. Zaidi (2021) argues that going by critical indicators such as the United States still occupying the position of the biggest economy with nearly seven trillion dollars more than the Chinese economy, or the United States dominating in the innovation and design of products, whereas China predominantly mass produces products. In the economic realm, the United States is still ahead of China, and in the military, political/diplomatic, and soft power domains, the US still leads. This, according to Zaidi (2021), strengthens the argument that the predominance of the United States is under no grave danger.

According to Ahmad (2012), national power is the amalgamation of power and capability of a state to use these tools to achieve its national interests and goals. However, realists argue that military preparedness contributes the most to the national power of a state. On military might, the United States is the most powerful state in the world, and it spends more than any other country on its military. In terms of China's nuclear capability, despite witnessing growth, China's nuclear strength remains relatively modest and vulnerable compared to the formidable nuclear arsenal of the United States. The stark contrast is underscored by the revelation that China's nuclear stockpile is between a tenth and a hundredth the size of the US arsenal (Glaser, 2011).

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper examined the rise of China in the decline of the United States hegemonic power and its implication for international security. The study has shown that the hegemonic power of the United States has measurably declined, ushering in an era where it no longer single-handedly dictates global affairs. The research identified various factors, both internal and external, such as the rise of new global powers, notably China, the US military overstretch, and the uncertain future of the dollar, contributing to the decline of the US hegemonic status. The rapid rise of China to great power status through the growth of its economy and military has coincided with the period of the declining US dominant position in the international system, prompting considerable questions by experts about its impact on the US and international order in general. Furthermore, China's rise has been unpeaceful as it is already presenting a structural shift in contemporary global politics.

The US is attempting to halt China's rise as a new hegemon, resulting in conflicts within the international system. Additionally, while evidence shows both the US decline and China's meteoric rise, the shift towards multipolarity does not mean that the United States has lost its status as a world power. The paper has shown that the United States is still ahead of China in numerous strategic aspects of global politics, backed by its large economy, vibrant military, and more powerful allies. Importantly, economic interdependence between both countries suggests a cautious approach in their efforts to balance power, considering their important roles as each other's most important partners. Lastly, Given the amount of trade between China and the United States, cooperation could serve well for both economies, also, opting for conflict over cooperation carries the financial burden of military and security spending, diverting resources that could have been used to improve living conditions and alleviate poverty.

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