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BRAZILIAN CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

ASIA PROGRAM

CHINA ANALYSIS GROUP MEETING

SPECIAL REPORT, YEAR IV

JULY 23, 2021

Online discussion panel via Zoom

HAS CHINA WON?

THE CHINESE CHALLENGE TO AMERICAN SUPREMACY



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CEBRI prioritizes themes with the greatest potential to leverage the international insertion of Brazil into the global economy, proposing pragmatic solutions for the formulation of public policies. CEBRI's work was recognized by the University of Pennsylvania's top global think tank ranking, which considered the institution the 2nd best think tank in South and Central America in 2020.

The Asia Program is one of the twelve regional and thematic programs currently operating at CEBRI. The Program is coordinated by CEBRI's Trustee Anna Jaguaribe, CEBRI's International Advisory Board member Ambassador Marcos Caramuru, and by the Senior Fellow Phillip Yang. External experts can be invited to participate in ad hoc activities, projects, and seminars, according to the Program's agenda.

ASIA PROGRAM

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BRAZILIAN CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

ASIA PROGRAM

CHINA ANALYSIS GROUP MEETING

SPECIAL REPORT, YEAR IV

DECEMBER 2, 2021

Online discussion panel via Zoom

HAS CHINA WON?

THE CHINESE CHALLENGE TO AMERICAN SUPREMACY

Report by: Kamila Aben Athar

SUPPORT:



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In July 2021, CEBRI's China Group held a special meeting for the launch of the Brazilian edition of the book "*Has China won?: The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy*", which counted with the participation of its author, Professor Kishore Mahbubani, as keynote speaker. Notably, this was China Group meeting with the highest level of participation in 2021. During the event, Professor Mahbubani and other participants discussed the structuring forces surrounding the US-China dispute, as well as the future perspectives on the conflict, and how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected such relations. In addition, the participants discussed the positions of other actors around this dispute, especially Brazil's in this complex scenario. Given the format of the event, this report largely reflects Professor Mahbubani's opinion on the matter, while following the standard format for China Analysis Group reports.

Table of Contents

Guiding Questions 07

Meeting Report 08

Participants 17

Guiding Questions

To help us analyze these complex and dynamic issues, at its Meeting, the China Analysis Group proposes three themes and questions to our speakers and audience:

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- 1.** What are the structural forces that drive the U.S-China contest? What were the mistakes made by the United States and China that aggravated this contest?

 - 2.** Who will win the contest, the United States or China? How did Covid-19 impact U.S-China relations?

 - 3.** What do other countries of the world think of this contest? How to prevent worst-case scenarios and spillover effects emerging from this contest, especially in Brazil?

Meeting Report

1. What are the structural forces that drive the U.S-China contest? What were the mistakes made by the United States and China that aggravated this contest?

According to Professor Kishore Mahbubani, the U.S-China geopolitical contest will shake the world for the next 10 years. As stated in the first paragraph of the book, in some ways, Biden's election demonstrated that "although President Donald Trump launched the first round [of the dispute] in 2018, it will outlast his Administration". This demonstrates that the U.S-China dispute is driven by deep structural forces.

The first structural force reflects a 2000-year rule of power politics, in which whenever the world's number one emerging power – which today is China – is about to overtake the world's number one power – which today is the United States of America –, the most powerful nation always pushes down the emerging nation. Thus, Professor Mahbubani stressed that the U.S endeavor in preventing China from taking the lead is normal behavior, especially because Washington did not expect this to happen as fast. In 2000, the United States' GNP in nominal market terms was eight times the size of China's; today, it's only 1.5 times larger. Within 10 years, China will grow even more and is likely to surpass the United States. Therefore, it is normal for the United States to want to remain the number one power.

The second structural force relates to the fact that decisions are made not only through rationality but also through emotions. For the past nine hundred years, the Western imagination repressed the fear of the yellow peril; however, this emotional element has been present on several occasions. In 1882, the United States Congress passed the Chinese Racial Exclusion Act that prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers to the United States. Nowadays, yellow peril is a concept that is not considered to be politically correct in Western societies. Nevertheless, the United States' strong reaction to the return of China shows that this contest is driven by rational and emotional considerations, including the yellow peril perception, with a deep reluctance from the

West to accept a world in which a non-western power is number one. As a result, anti-Chinese incidents happen more frequently within the United States.

The third structural factor concerns the belief the United States had for China to open its economy and political system, becoming a liberal democracy. From the U.S perspective, a young country with less than 250 years of history and one-quarter of the Chinese population could transform China, which has four times the U.S population and four thousand years of history. However, China does not show any signs that it will become a democratic regime anytime soon or ever. This arrogant assumption of the United States being able to transform China has led Washington feeling a deep sense of disappointment with Beijing. The United States did not understand that their success in the last 130 years was exceptional. Now, the world is returning to normalcy. Over the last 2000 years, the two largest economies of the world were always China and India.

In addition, the U.S-China geopolitical contest is also driven by the mistakes made by both sides. Professor Mahbubani dedicated an entire chapter to approach how China wrongfully alienated the U.S business community. For a long time, this community was China's main advocate in Washington, making large amounts of profits in China. As an example, Boeing's second-largest customer is China, only after the United States. General Motors, the world's largest automobile company, and the U.S largest company, earns more profits from the Chinese market than it does from the U.S market. Apple is also very dependent on China. However, because of mandatory technology transfer in joint ventures, the losses of intellectual property in China, and unequal level playing field in the competition between a U.S company and a Chinese company, participants stressed that the complaints of U.S businesses were legitimate. Then, when Trump launched the trade war in 2018 against China, the U.S business community, which once would have intervened on China's behalf, became silent.

In the case of the United States, Professor Mahbubani argued that Washington inappropriately launched a geopolitical conscience against China without working out a comprehensive long-term strategy. In the year 2009, the size of the retail goods market in China was 1.8 trillion dollars, whereas the size of that same market in the United States was 4 trillion dollars. In 2019, two years after Trump's trade war and the imposition of tariffs, sanctions, restrictions to damage the Chinese economy, the size of China's retail goods market reached 6 trillion dollars, while the U.S market went from 4 trillion to 5.5 trillion. For exporters, the Chinese market became bigger than the U.S market, and this gap will grow further. Thus, the trade war launched against China did not harm the Chinese market; instead, the American workers, farmers, and consumers. As a result, the bipartisan consensus against China has not been upheld, and the Biden Administration still struggles to reverse the tariffs put in place by the Trump Administration, which reflects a lack of strategy towards China.

In addition, the contest was framed as “democracies versus autocracies” of the world, entering in a national security strategy launched in March 2021 by Washington, and in official statements, such as the G7 communiqué, which emphasized the spirit of the so-called “exclusive multilateralism” and explicitly mentioned core and sensitive issues to China, such as Xinjiang, Hong Kong, South China Sea, Taiwan, and other topics. Nevertheless, Professor Mahbubani highlighted that a democratic China could pose more challenges to U.S-China relations. The Chinese people still carry memories of the humiliation and destruction caused by Western powers in the 19th and 20th centuries. This would result in the election of a more nationalist leader in comparison to President Xi Jinping. Although criticized by U.S authorities and citizens, Xi delivers a global public good by containing the Chinese nationalism, bearing in mind China’s century of humiliation.



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2. Who will win the contest, the United States or China? How did Covid-19 impact U.S-China relations?

Professor Mahbubani mentioned that it is inconceivable for the United States to consider the possibility of losing the trade war against China. From the U.S perspective, this is a contest between a vibrant democracy in the United States and a rigid and inflexible communist party system in China. Thus, as it happened with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the United States will be victorious. Nevertheless, looking at the current U.S society, the United States is no longer a democracy; rather, it became a plutocracy. For the past 30 years, all the rewards of development have gone to the top 1% of the population, and the bottom 50% have not seen any improvement in their standard of living. As life expectancy in the United States declines and infant mortality increases, a “sea of despair” spreads among the white American working classes, which explains the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

In order to ease the tensions, participants argued that Biden must tackle the challenges faced by the bottom 50%, who largely voted for Trump. The U.S President should not pinpoint China as the number one enemy. Instead, it should be Donald Trump, whose re-election could pose more risks to the world. To prevent Trump from returning to the presidency, Biden should tone down the geopolitical contest with China, and focus on improving the economic development of the American people, lowering wage inequality. This also means decreasing its defense military expenditures. For example, the United States spends almost 10 billion dollars to build an aircraft carrier, which can be sunk by a hundred-thousand-dollar Chinese hypersonic missile. Thus, the United States needs to understand that it cannot treat China like the Soviet Union. Instead of investing massively in defense, it should spend more on improving the livelihood of its people, which will be good for Biden, the United States, and the world.

As stated in Chapter 6, unlike the rigid inflexible communist party that ran the Soviet Union, China became a meritocracy, selecting the most capable individuals to run the society. For decades, China could not harvest the best brains in the country. Now, the Chinese government can attract top professionals to work for the Chinese communist party. In a population of 1.4 billion people, only the number one student can join the Chinese communist party, and this demonstrates the quality of brainpower that the Chinese communist party accumulated. In addition, the successful case of China and the failed case of the United States while managing the Covid-19 shows the discrepancy in the competency level. Although the pandemic started in China, the Chinese government

efficiently mobilized efforts and managed to stop the total number of deaths in five thousand. If the U.S government had the same number of deaths per million as China, instead of having 600,000 deaths, the United States would have a total of 1,000 deaths. Thus, the United States wrongfully underestimates China.

In parallel, Professor Mahbubani stressed that China must not underestimate the United States. The United States continues to be the most successful society in world history. The amount of power the country accumulated across a wide range of areas is far greater than what most societies achieved. The United States still has the advantage of attracting the best experts from all around the world. For example, some of the biggest companies in the United States, such as Google and Microsoft, are run by foreigners. In addition, as a means of upholding the tech competition against China, the Biden administration is currently seeking approval for the largest long-term investment program in infrastructure, with a focus on clean technologies and power transportation. The U.S government made bold state-funded investments in science and technology and streaming to industrial policy, as seen in Chapter 5. Also, to counter back the Chinese dual circulation and the opening of China's financial market, the United States used a wide range of investments not only from the United States, but also from the whole investments in the portfolio, and increased the level of FDI.

According to participants, the pandemic caused enormous losses economically and socially. There was an increase in political uncertainties and polarization, despite all the significant efforts and the handling of the pandemic by China and other important examples in Asia. Nonetheless, participants argued that there was no leadership emerging from this in terms of the necessary strengthening for multilateralism and multilateral organizations.

Therefore, Professor Mahbubani pinpointed that the outcome depends on the ability of a nation in creating the impression of knowing what it wants, coping successfully with the problems of its internal life, coping with the responsibilities of world power, and having a spiritual vitality before the international community. Considering the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the former was ahead on all these points. Today, in the contest between Washington and Beijing, the latter may be ahead on all four points. In the last 40 years, the Chinese people witnessed a greater improvement in their standard of living and quality of life in 4,000 years of Chinese history. Yet, Americans still wonder the reasons why the Chinese people continue to support the Chinese communist party, whose support went from 86% in 2003 to 93% in 2016.

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3. What do other countries of the world think of this contest? How to prevent worst-case scenarios and spillover effects emerging from this contest, especially in Brazil?

During the Cold War, many countries sided with the United States against the Soviet Union. The U.S government counted on the support of European countries, East Asian nations, such as Japan, South Korea, and even China, as well as major third world countries, such as Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia. Currently, some countries concur with the notion of China further opening its markets, creating a more level playing field for business, and accepting additional norms internationally. Nonetheless, unlike the Cold War, very few countries enthusiastically endorse Washington in the geopolitical contest against Beijing. As an example, all QUAD members claim that the organism is not an anti-China alliance, especially because China is their number one trading partner. For this matter, they cannot afford to alienate China, which explains the motivations of not mentioning China in their final communiqué after their summit in March 2021.

According to Professor Mahbubani, Biden's strategy towards China is flawed because the United States cannot ask countries to choose sides since they want to do business with both powers. In Asia, there was the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which was an important step for the Asian economic space. In Europe, there was the EU-China investment agreement, and the carryout of the Russian-German pipeline, Nordstrom 2. In Latin America, China is now the main destination for Brazilian exports, accounting for around 34% of the total trade value, ahead of other important partners such as the United States, who take the share of 10%, and even local partners, such as Argentina. In addition, ASEAN became China's largest trading partner. In 2000, ASEAN trade with the United States was 130 billion dollars, whereas with China was only 40 billion dollars. However, similar to what happened to Brazil, ASEAN trade with China has grown, and by 2019, United States trade with ASEAN went from 130 billion to 300 billion, whereas ASEAN trade with China went up from 40 billion to 660 billion. Therefore, participants argued that most countries are not capable of choosing between the United States and China.

For instance, as argued in the last chapter of the book, Professor Mahbubani concluded that this contest is inevitable and avoidable. Thus, other countries must send a consistent message to Washington and Beijing so they can help avoid further damages. Indeed, structural forces are driving this contest. Nonetheless, human intervention can make

a difference at some point. There are 7.8 billion people in the world, with 1.4 billion living in China and 330 million living in the United States. Participants affirmed that it is important for the remaining six billion people around the world to speak out more on this U.S-China geopolitical contest. It is important for all other 191 countries collectively to tell the United States and China to stop this contest and focus on taking care of more important matters.

Regarding China, Professor Mahbubani stressed that, although Beijing has become more assertive, it did not become as aggressive as it could. Inevitably, China behaves according to the size of its economy. The Chinese GNP, which was 10% the size of U.S purchasing power parity terms in 1980, is now bigger than the U.S size. For instance, all great powers are going to have a greater impact on the world, and the international community must adjust to the arrival of a new great power such as China. Countries should persuade Beijing to accept that it is in China's best interest to support the rules-based order that the West created, advocate for the United Nations, and defend the international law, instead of criticizing China publicly as did by the Trump and Biden administrations.

Concerning the United States, Professor Mahbubani mentioned that it is not clear what Washington aims to accomplish recently with China – whether is trying to prevent China from becoming the number one economy in the world, isolate China, or overthrow the Chinese communist party –. The United States must understand what can or cannot be done. Participants affirmed that if partners such as Brazil emphasize the importance of China for its economy, this can have an impact on Washington. In the Brazilian case, the United States and China have been the most important trade partners of Brazil over the past decade. Since China was the country that reacted and responded more vividly to the pandemic, the consequences for the Chinese growth were diminished, as well in its trade partners. For this matter, even though the Brazilian labor market has not recovered because of its external sector, the partnership between China and Brazil resulted in weaker negative impacts. This declaration could make the U.S government adopt a more intelligent policy that will be better for the American and Chinese peoples.

Lastly, Professor Mahbubani highlighted that there are non-contradictions in the U.S-China relations, in which they have common interests that could reduce the tensions and promote further cooperation. The first area of mutual interest is improving the well-being of their people. Biden's priority should be to improve the living conditions of the American people by focusing on their economic development and not on the geopolitical contest. The United States has spent five to six trillion dollars fighting unnecessary wars. Reallocating those resources to the bottom 50% would result in each citizen receiving approximately 30,000 dollars. This could change the situation of several vulnerable families living in the United States, especially because 60% of the population does not

have access to 500 dollars in emergency cash. Instead of devoting efforts and assets to a geopolitical contest, participants highlighted that both countries should focus on improving the well-being of their citizens so they can collaborate, considering that the trade war is neither helping the United States nor damaging China. The second area where Washington and Beijing can collaborate is in tackling common global challenges, such as Covid-19 and climate change. As mentioned in the second last paragraph of the book, if the United States and China continue fighting while climate change is happening, historians will describe them as two tribes of apes that continued fighting each other while the forest around them was burning. With the advent of globalization, all nations are interdependent and, thus, there's a larger common interest in humanity that the United States and China should pay attention to.

“This contest is inevitable and avoidable. Thus, other countries must send a consistent message to Washington and Beijing so they can help avoid further damages. [...] If partners such as Brazil emphasize the importance of China for its economy, this can have an impact on Washington, [...] and make the U.S government adopt a more intelligent policy that will be better for the American and Chinese peoples.”

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Participants



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Kishore Mahbubani

Diplomat and author of eight books. Mahbubani is currently a Distinguished Fellow at the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore, and former President of the UN Security Council and the Founding Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. His books and articles in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Financial Times* and *Foreign Affairs* have earned him global recognition. He was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in October 2019.



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