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BRAZILIAN CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

ASIA PROGRAM

XXVIII CHINA ANALYSIS GROUP MEETING

REPORT XXVIII, YEAR V

APRIL 8, 2022

Online discussion panel via Zoom

THE ROLE OF THE MIDDLE POWERS IN A GLOBAL ORDER MARKED BY THE CHINA-U.S. RIVALRY



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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.

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ASIA PROGRAM

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THE ROLE OF THE MIDDLE POWERS IN A GLOBAL ORDER MARKED BY THE CHINA-U.S. RIVALRY

Report by: Kamila Aben Athar

SUPPORT:



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Guiding Questions

During its 28th Meeting, the China Analysis Group focused on three main themes and questions:

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- 1.** How to define the current relations between China and the United States? How does China perceive the role of middle powers?
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- 2.** What are the recent developments in the Middle East region? How are the power interactions playing out in the Middle East?
-
- 3.** What are the possibilities for middle powers in a changing international system? Is a rigid geometry detrimental or favorable to middle powers? Will middle powers be able to position themselves between China and the United States if a political reality, instead of an economic reality, becomes the driving force?

XXVIII Meeting Report

1. How to define the current relations between China and the United States? How does China perceive the role of middle powers?

According to the speakers, it was beyond expectation that a serious deterioration in U.S.-China relations would occur in the past five years. Previously, both sides had experienced frictions such as the Taiwan strait crisis in 1995 and 1996, followed by the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, and the 2001 unexpected occlusion in the South China sea. Those three crises were mitigated relatively quickly because, at the time, the U.S.-China relationship was dominated by contracts and cooperation, and both governments took the overall situation as a priority. In 2012, with the escalation of the North Korean nuclear crisis and the maritime crisis between China and Japan, and China and the Philippines, the risk of Beijing and Washington getting involved in conflicts due to third party factors rose significantly; nonetheless, the risk of a direct military confrontation was not imminent. The speakers argued that the current situation is very different. The most striking factors are the trade war, technological war, diplomatic war, decoupling, and the possibility of an ideological dispute. The greatest risks of military security friction between the two countries, namely the Taiwan strait, the South China Sea, the Korean peninsula, and cyberspace, requires more crisis management from both sides.

It was underlined that there is a clear difference between China and the United States. On one hand, the logic of U.S. policy toward China is based on feeling threatened by a future world order led by China or simply losing, which leads Washington to see this escalation as strategic competition. On the other hand, Beijing does not share the same view; in fact, there is no significant consensus within China on how to position or defund the bilateral relations. Official statements highlight the need for peaceful coexistence and that China has no intention of overtaking or replacing the U.S., becoming the number one or only world leader. Meanwhile, Chinese academic circles have various opinions on this subject. The points that Fred Bergsten, founder of the Peterson Institute

for International Economics, made in his new book *The United States Versus China* were highlighted: *The Quest for Global Economic Leadership*. According to Bergsten, competition “will characterize much of their daily interaction through trade investments and financial exchanges but cooperation is essential to provide a foundation for stable and successful international economic order”. Thus, the U.S.-China dispute can be considered as an unbalanced competition-cooperation relationship, in which it does not matter how fierce and strategic the competition becomes, it cannot be completely derailed from the track of cooperation.

Despite the constant friction in U.S.-China relations, the bilateral relationship over the past year has been relatively stable and peaceful compared to the decline from 2018 to 2020. Notwithstanding the pandemic, participants evaluated that Beijing and Washington were able to hold several meaningful high-level talks, including three interactions between the two high leaders. Other reassuring information was the arrival of two experienced diplomats, Qin Gang, China’s new Ambassador to the United States, and Nicholas Burns, the new U.S. Ambassador to China, both reportedly trusted by the highest leadership of their countries. In addition, important agreements were reached during the recent virtual meetings between Biden and Xi, in which both dismissed the prospect of a new Cold War.

Participants affirmed that the biggest difference between the Biden Administration’s policy towards China and that of its predecessor Donald Trump is that Biden reduced the conflict to the level of competition and showed a willingness to cooperate in certain areas, such as climate change. Beijing and Washington have important domestic agendas in 2022, with the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in China and the midterm elections in the United States. According to participants, these agendas may contribute to ease the tensions between the two countries. Former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick expressed his concern about the possibility of Biden’s domestic opposition attacking any move to abandon the confrontation with China in the run-up to the 2022 U.S. midterm elections. In this case, Biden will have to choose between indulging in their affairs or achieving a positive outcome.

Likewise, China is expected to show greater determination to fend off any U.S., challengers to its legitimacy and authority in preparation for the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. From the Chinese side, the speakers argued that China’s reaction to U.S. policies is based on the premise that legitimacy and authority cannot be challenged. Therefore, Beijing must handle this competition very carefully because there are many traps, dangers, and risks ahead for China. In the case of overall competition, a widespread alignment with the U.S. would impose more pressure on the Chinese economic development perspective. China must, then, do more to avoid this scenario.

In an era of globalization, interacting forces, and checks and balances, the speakers affirmed that middle powers have a unique role to play in stabilizing the global system and shaping the hopes of the international community. Most third parties, including most middle powers, declared that they do not want to take sides between the United States and China and that it is rather in their interest to maintain a balance between the two countries. Hence, there is no shortage of middle powers in both the U.S. and China's respective networks of allies or partners. In this competition, although many middle powers are U.S. allies, almost no country can completely or willingly choose a side as the interests involved are multiple and intertwined.

Regarding the role of middle powers in the context of the current U.S.-China relations, the speakers argued that the Japanese case stands out. Japan is the world's third-largest economy and the escalation in the U.S.-China confrontation presents the Japanese government with the challenge of maintaining a complex strategic position in this triangle. While Japan strategically prefers a strong U.S. regional security commitment, it also wishes to preserve regional integration. China and Japan had two political confrontations around disputed islands in 2010 and 2012; however, relations between the two countries have been mended during the past few years. In response to the new reality, Japan strengthened its alliance with the United States in economic security and enhanced international cooperation to advance its preferred order while maintaining diplomatic relations with China. For instance, the Japanese government promoted international infrastructure development cooperation with China in third countries, supported RCEP's negotiations, and, despite not joining the China-led AIIB, recognized the value of its endeavors. Nonetheless, it was argued that Japan's influence on U.S.-China relations remains minimal, constrained by political, military, and economic powers. Yet, Japan is a regional power and still plays an important role in maintaining and shaping the future of the region, especially the East Asian order.

The role of other important middle powers was highlighted. First, India presents a strong dependency on Russia for military weapons and equipment, is more dependent on a growing U.S. role in the region, has territorial disputes with China, and has serious concerns about Pakistan and Afghanistan. In dealing with the rise of China, participants argued that India is likely to stand with the West at moments while maintaining operational independence on security issues. Second, although ASEAN member states have different interests, most would likely opt for a U.S.-led security order while also agreeing with a Chinese-led economic order. Third, Middle Eastern countries would likely support a U.S.-led security order while maintaining their independence to work with China to secure their interests. Fourth, some countries self-identified as big powers – or bigger middle powers – such as Germany, released foreign policy documents to play a leading role not just in Europe but also on the world stage. Some of these big powers – or bigger middle powers – might align with the United States and wage overall

competition with China, not just focusing on economic factors but they also highlighting political values, which could help them.

Although there are many unpredictable uncertainties ahead, the assessment made by Professor Wang Jisi, former Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, was underlined, in which he identified that there are patterns in the U.S.-China relations. According to Wang, their respective domestic politics, international environment, and contrast in power are decisive factors affecting where the relationship goes. In the current scenario, participants argued that, although there is little possibility of building an economic dialogue between China and the U.S., this does not mean it will not happen in the near future. After the U.S. midterm election and before the next presidential election, there will be a window of opportunity for both countries to work together and solve basic problems between them, including economic relations. According to participants, the most important factor is to understand that China is not a big power or big emerging power, and this competition is not good for both countries. Giving economic development another push and solving the health crisis and inequality issues are more important targets than the competition itself.

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2. What are the recent developments in the Middle East region? How are the power interactions playing out in the Middle East?

According to the speakers, the Middle East has historically reflected the macro tensions of the world on its own terms. The region presents historic relevance due to many factors, including its geographic features. It is a hub between three continents, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Nations have fought for dominance over the area for centuries and this was not different during the Cold War. The rivalry between the Soviet Union and the U.S. had an important impact on the region. At that time, China under the Mao Era was aligned with anti-Western countries and those following the so-called National Liberation Movement. For instance, China did not have diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, Israel, and other main U.S. allies in the region. Israel established diplomatic relations with China in 1992, after the Cold War, two years before China established diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, the last Arab country to keep ties with Taiwan.

Since then, the region became a focal point of U.S. diplomacy, mainly due to an interest in oil and the issue of terrorism. Nonetheless, with Obama Administration's Pivot to Asia, China became the main focus of U.S. foreign policy, and the Middle East became less important for Washington. In recent years, U.S. presence in the area decreased from political, economic, and military points of view, with the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, Syria, and even Afghanistan, which is in the borders of the region. In this context, the speakers argued that China gained more ground in the area, with its interests lying in the region's trade hub capacity, oil supply – with China getting almost half of its oil imports from the Middle East –, and infrastructure investment, with the Belt and Road Initiative.

The speakers argued that two pillars guide the Chinese action in the Middle East. The first pillar is the concept of developmental peace, promoted by China, instead of democracy peace, promoted by the U.S. Whereas U.S. administrations emphasized the political aspect of bilateral relations, China asserts that its main focus in the region is economic development.

The second pillar is the zero enemies policy. China is getting involved in the Middle East by successfully avoiding historical rivalries and struggles in the region. Despite the historical ethnic and religious tensions and disputes in the area, China develops relations with countries that are enemies among themselves. For example, China is developing a strategic relationship with Iran and, at the same time, with Saudi Arabia and Israel, the

main U.S. allies in the region. Recently, China signed a special comprehensive partnership agreement with Iran, and this scared many U.S. allies in the area; however, the Chinese government signed a similar agreement with Saudi Arabia a few years ago, and with Iraq, which is a country between the U.S. and Iranian areas of influence. China is developing a strategy of not getting involved in the historical disputes in the area. More recently, China offered to host negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis in Beijing. The possibility of China working as a mediator between Israel and Palestine was something new in this field.

China comes to the Middle East at a moment of deep structural changes in the region. Arab countries, especially the conservative monarchies of the Persian Gulf, have been witnessing a transformation in their economic model for the past few years as a result of their preparation for the so-called post-oil Era. It was affirmed that, from the 1950s and 1960s until recently, these nations worked with three levels. On the political level, the adoption of authoritarian regimes, regardless of the political system. On the economic level, the heavy dependency of their economies on oil generated income but not jobs. On the narrative level, the claim that the creation of the State of Israel was the main problem for the Arab world dominated official speeches and the media. The speakers stated that, for Palestinians, the creation of Israel is the main problem; however, for regimes in Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Syria, the idea of putting the Israeli-Palestinian dispute as the main point of the Arab agenda is a diversionist attitude. Therefore, in the 2010's Arab spring, the growing social pressure demanding jobs and a future perspective for the young generation showed that this three elements model was over. This wake-up call led to the end of the Mubarak regime in Egypt, the Qadhafi regime in Libya, the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, and others. For instance, Arab nations decided not to change the authoritarian aspect of their regimes, but they concluded that they had to change the economy and the narrative. Countries such as United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Egypt are now going from oil-dependent economies to service-oriented economies to promote economic dynamism and respond to the changes in the world energy scenario and the increasing need for new and renewable sources.

According to the speakers, China becomes an important investor in this change in the Middle East. The Chinese bilateral relations with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia show a vast flow of investments ranging from technology to military equipment. With Israel, the main U.S. ally in the area, there has been an unprecedented growth in bilateral cooperation, trade, and investments. The former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been a strong supporter of ties with China, ranging from investment, technology, and even military cooperation. In the case of Egypt, another major recipient of U.S. economic and military aid, China has become one of the main investors of "Egypt Vision 2030", a program of reforms announced in 2016 by the Egyptian President General Abdel El-Sisi, which aims to attract foreign investments in infrastructure and generate jobs. In addition, China is one of the main investors in the construction of the

new Egyptian capital, 45 kilometers east of Cairo. The total investment is around 40 to 50 billion U.S. dollars and China is responsible for providing one-third of the total amount. Considering the prospects of the Belt and Road Initiative and the importance of the Suez Canal to international trade, China is also heavily present in that area.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, China is the very first country in a position to threaten the U.S. hegemony. Although there is an asset in China's position, which is its ability to dialogue with democratic and autocratic governments, the U.S. also has deep relations with authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. This American approach is, in a way, selective. In the last years, the pressure from the White House has become stronger on Middle Eastern countries against their relations with China. Nonetheless, the current reality is marked by world economic interdependence, and economies are deeply intertwined, which leaves no space for choosing sides. The war in Ukraine also reminded the international community that the world still lives in a nuclear era, under the threat of nuclear weapons. In addition, the main current and future challenges are to be set on a global scale, such as pandemics and climate change. As a result, participants indicated that Middle Eastern countries are managing to keep a balance between Washington and Beijing.

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3. What are the possibilities for middle powers in a changing international system? Is a rigid geometry detrimental or favorable to middle powers? Will middle powers be able to position themselves between China and the United States if a political reality, instead of an economic reality, becomes the driving force?

Participants stated that the international community anticipated that a more globalized world would lead to a decentralization of power and a more resilient international system. Similarly, rapid advances in technology were supposed to mean that traditional constraints, such as geopolitics, would become less important. However, this is not how the reality unfolded. Traditional security power struggles have become more prominent nowadays, with people trying to find similarities between the U.S.-China rivalry and the Cold War. For instance, there is a widely accepted belief that a rigid geometry would reduce the room for maneuver of middle powers. Rigid world order is one in which alignment choices are determined by superpowers, and countries have no alternative but to follow the pull of gravity. According to participants, during the Cold War, the rigidity resulted from ideology and geography. Today, rigidity is derived from economic interests and technical standards. As an example, Brazil had a series of discussions around the 5G standards, and whether it would allow or not the participation of Chinese companies.

Nevertheless, participants argued that the current rigidity of the system could be favorable for middle powers because of three aspects. First, the level of interdependence between the two global powers is much higher today than it was in the Cold War. Second, China and the U.S. are economic powers, whereas, in the Cold War, only the U.S. was an economically and technologically advanced superpower. Third, this is not an ideological competition and China does not aim to export its values and political system. In addition, participants mentioned that geography was very determining; however, now it has a much lesser impact on the international system because of digital transition. Yan Xuetong's recent article approaches how the world is now facing a bipolar digital era, where there is an immense gap between the U.S. and China and the rest of the world in digital capabilities. Thus, to a large extent, the room for maneuver that middle powers have today is affected by the digital transition.

According to the participants, the competition between China and the United States takes place not only at the global level but also at the regional level, which results in China's foreign policy having different priorities. The first tier, with the highest priority, is the U.S. The second tier is composed of Japan, Korea, India, and Russia, countries that China regards as middle powers. China has a close relationship with Japan and the Korean Peninsula based on an economic alliance, human exchange, and cultural ties. In the case of India, the country has a potential role to play in joining efforts with the U.S. to contain China and to play a bigger role in the Indo-Pacific region. India also refused to join the Belt and Road Initiative. Although India benefits economically from its engagement with China, it is not clear which aspect is most important for India – security issues, border issues, or just containing China's power expansion. India has many factors in mind to consider its relationship with China and its involvement in this competition. In addition, the international community did not expect India's neutral position in the Russia-Ukraine war. Many scholars and experts on India in China have conflicting views about how China should foster its relationship with India. Participants affirmed that the biggest issue that lies in the China-India relations is the lack of trust in each other, which can bring more obstacles to establishing a frank dialogue.

Another neighbor country is Russia. On February 4th, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping mentioned the term "friendship without limits". The speakers stressed that this concept is not aligned with the vast history of confrontation over cooperation between Russia and China. Moreover, there is an ongoing debate among the Russian elite policymakers and decision-makers to determine whether China can be considered an ally in the next years. Currently, their alliance is based on the antagonism to the U.S.; however, in the future, the balance of power between China and Russia could tilt in a very strong way to Beijing. Territories in the Russian Far East are also a concern because they are underpopulated and parts of them previously belonged to China, which could lead to the Chinese government making historical claims over the region.

In the case of other regions, such as Latin America and Africa, participants argued that there is a small difference in the approach to dealing with these countries. China is increasing investments and trade volumes in Latin American countries, and many institutionalized arrangements may give some invisible pressure on the U.S.; however, they are not a priority in the Chinese foreign policy. Participants highlighted that China has deeper and longer engagements with Africa because of hot topics that emerged during the past two decades. The relatively long history of relations with African countries may confer more importance to this region than Latin America, but only to a certain extent. The structure of trading volume between China and Africa is similar to the one with Latin America. There are other similar factors, such as industrial levels, export patterns, and colonization legacies. For many years, China was one of the biggest factory centers in the world, and the need for raw materials shaped their economic engagement.

The next stage for the Chinese government is to try to upgrade its economic structures to another level of economic development. Like past relationships between Africa and Latin America with Europe, the U.S., and Japan, China has an unbalanced engagement with both regions, which will not continue to be unequal in the future.

Liberal democracies are in crisis because of their limited capacity to deliver public goods vis-à-vis what China is doing in this realm. Thus, it is difficult to place the discussion between economic discipline and political discipline in light of the legitimacy crisis that the Western countries are facing. According to participants, there is no clear border between political and economic issues, which are becoming more blurred. If in the Cold War issues were more political and in the post-Cold War, they were more economic, the world is currently somewhere in the middle. In this scenario, middle powers need to implement multi-directional diplomacy. It is not in their interests to repeat the policies implemented previously during the Cold War. The current reality is more complex for middle powers and imposes more challenges in the way they must formulate and carry out their policies. Lastly, participants highlighted that another relevant space for middle powers to maneuver is financial markets, considering the decline of the U.S. dollar and the rise of the renminbi and other currencies as global reserve currencies. In the case of Brazil, this could bring a larger space for regional cooperation, with the possibility of creating a regional currency for South America. Therefore, this is another space in that middle powers would gain more autonomy.



The current rigidity of the system could be favorable for middle powers because of three aspects. First, the level of interdependence between the two global powers is much higher today than it was in the Cold War. Second, China and the United States are economic powers, whereas, in the Cold War, only the U.S. was an economically and technologically advanced superpower. Third, this is not an ideological competition and China does not aim to export its values and political system. ”



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Participants



Guo Jie

Guo Jie is an associate professor at the School of International Studies, Peking University. Her research focuses mainly on Latin American studies, China-Latin America relations, and so on. GUO's publications include four monographs and dozens of academic articles. GUO holds a PhD in law from Peking University. From 2013 to 2016, she worked as Chinese fellow and visiting scholar with institutions such as the Kettering Foundation (US), Inter-American Dialogue (US), Universidad del Pacífico (Peru), Universidade de São Paulo (Brazil), Universidad de Buenos Aires (Argentina), Colegio de México (Mexico).



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Jaime Spitzcovsky is a columnist at Folha de São Paulo. He was an international editor and correspondent of the newspaper in Moscow and Beijing. He is a member of the member of the International Conuncture Analysis Group of the University of São Paulo. He covered more than 30 countries as a journalist, and frequently collaborated with news broadcasts such as TV Cultura, Band News FM, BBC, El Mercurio (Chile) and Diário de Notícias, amongst others.



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Philip Yang

Philip Yang is the founder of Urbem, an institution dedicated to the structuring of urban projects. He holds a Master's degree in Public Administration from Harvard Kennedy School. He was a diplomat in Brazil's foreign service between 1992 and 2002, having served in Geneva, Beijing, and Washington. He is/was a board member in the following institutions: MIT Corporation Visiting Committee of the Department of Urban Planning (2012-2016); Arq.Futuro, one of the main spaces for debate on architecture and urbanism in Brazil; the Symphonic Orchestra of the State of São Paulo (OSESP); the City Council of São Paulo Municipality (2013-2016); the Rio de Janeiro City Council (2013-2016); and the Harvard University Brazil Office Advisory Group.



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CCCC/Concremat	IBÁ	Shell
Consulado Geral da Irlanda em São Paulo	IBRAM	Siemens
Consulado Geral da Noruega no Rio de Janeiro	Icatu Seguros	Siemens Energy
Consulado Geral dos Países Baixos no Rio de Janeiro	Instituto Clima e Sociedade	SPIC Brasil
Consulado Geral do México no Rio de Janeiro	Itaú Unibanco	State Grid
CTG Brasil	JETRO	Suzano
EDP	Klabin	Tecnoil
Eletrobras	Lazard	Total E&P do Brasil
	Light	Unilever
	Machado Meyer	Vale
	Mattos Filho Advogados	Veirano Advogados
		Vinci Partners

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