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*Between contention and
engagement: US response to China's
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administrations*

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BETWEEN CONTENTION AND ENGAGEMENT: US RESPONSE TO CHINA'S RISE IN THE OBAMA AND TRUMP ADMINISTRATIONS¹

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Abstract: The article aims to assess how the United States has managed the rise of China over the last decade. This is achieved first by addressing the question in a theoretical framework and, second, by making an empirical account on the issue. Therefore, the article contrasts mainly realist and liberal accounts on contention and engagement and applies them to Obama and Trump administration's foreign policies to China. To do that, the paper analyzes the National Security Strategies of both administrations, using the method of content analysis. The research's main result is that the rise of China and the threats to the United States hegemony have been major concerns since the Obama administration. What has changed with Trump in power, though, is the means employed to address the problem, with a shift from engagement rhetoric to an open call for contention. Besides, the paper evidences how this shift is accompanied by a change in the conditions for China's rise.

Keywords: China's rise, Contention, Engagement, International Liberal Order.

ENTRE CONTENÇÃO E ENGAJAMENTO: A RESPOSTA DOS EUA À ASCENSÃO DA CHINA NAS ADMINISTRAÇÕES OBAMA E TRUMP

Resumo: O artigo objetiva avaliar como os Estados Unidos têm gerenciado a ascensão da China durante a última década. Isso é alcançado, primeiramente, tratando a questão em um quadro teórico e, a seguir, fazendo uma consideração empírica do problema. Para isso, o artigo contrasta principalmente abordagens realistas e liberais de contenção e de engajamento e as aplica às políticas externas das administrações Obama e Trump para a China. Para este fim, o artigo analisa as Estratégias Nacionais de Segurança de ambos os governos, utilizando o método de análise de conteúdo. O resultado principal da pesquisa é que a ascensão da China e as ameaças à hegemonia dos Estados Unidos têm sido preocupações prioritárias desde o governo Obama. O que mudou com Trump no poder, no entanto, foram os meios empregados para lidar

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com tais questões, com a mudança de uma retórica de engajamento para a reivindicação explícita pela contenção. Além disso, o artigo evidencia como essa mudança é acompanhada pela alteração nas condições para a ascensão da China.

Palavras-chave: Ascensão da China, Contenção, Engajamento, Ordem Liberal Internacional.

I. Introduction

An article published by Mearsheimer (2014, p. 3) at *The National Interest* in 2014 rose the question: “Can China rise peacefully?”. In fact, over the last two decades, several authors have discussed the matter (Buzan, 2010; Friedberg, 2005; Yue, 2008). The intricacy of this question is twofold: it involves the complexity of China’s rise and a wider process at the global level, marked by changes in the established order.

It is already common sense that global power is increasingly decentralizing and that China holds a growing share of it. Nevertheless, it remains controversial how the status quo states, and especially the United States, will behave in the context of such changes. Theoretically, from one side, realists usually claim for the contention of China, while liberal authors assert that the best way to deal with China is to accommodate it or engage it in the liberal world order. At the same time, that order has been facing several challenges with American hegemony and its institutions being increasingly questioned.

The main purpose of this article is to assess how the United States has managed the rise of China in the context of a changing international liberal order over the last decade. It assesses how the United States’ strategy to China has increasingly moved towards contention rather than engagement. The paper also intends to connect theoretical and empirical accounts on the issue. Therefore, it will compare realist and liberal approaches on contention and engagement and contrast them with Obama and Trump administration's foreign policies to China.

The article is divided into two parts, besides this introduction and a conclusion. The first one presents the theoretical debate behind contention and engagement. International Relations is a vast and encompassing discipline and there is certainly much more than realism and liberalism to explain this dynamic. Nevertheless, the paper focuses on these perspectives because they seem best suited to explain topics such as great power politics and power shifts, even though it is not our intention to generalize the two approaches. Besides, it is precisely in these theories that the debate over contention and engagement is located, which justifies the theoretical choice. It is also on purpose that the literature is mainly from American authors since the article focuses on the US and aims to assess the issue from that country's perspective. Thus, even though Chinese literature could contribute to the analysis by providing a different viewpoint, this is not part of the article's goals and scope. The second session will be dedicated to the empirical part of the article and will be based on the content analysis of the National Security Strategies (NSSs) of both Obama and Trump administrations, using the method of content analysis.

The justification for the paper lies mainly on the centrality of the actors involved and the impact their relations have on the entire world. The change in US-China relations is an ongoing process, with new actions being taken constantly. As such, the article analyzes the establishment of what seems to be a new normal in US-China relations as it occurs, which can contribute to the understanding of an issue still in progress.

II. Theoretical Accounts On Contention And Engagement

According to Mearsheimer (2014, p. 2), the interest in great-power politics has lowered since the demise of the threat presented by the Soviet Union, given that even great powers are not strong enough to challenge the United States. Nevertheless, the author points to the rise of China as a development with “the potential to fundamentally alter the architecture of the international system” (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 2). This is a major consideration since changes in the system's level are an important point of debate among structural realists.

Structuralism was mainly theorized by Waltz (1979, p. 40), for whom the purpose of systems theory is to predict the course of international systems, on the one hand, and how the system affects the units and how these affect the system, on the other. He is careful to stress that systems do not act, but their actions are affected by the structure of the system. So, while a structure does not determine outcomes, it affects behavior within the system, in an indirect way (Waltz 1979, p. 74).

Waltz (1979, p. 79) characterizes a system as composed by a structure and units in interaction. In his attempt to create his grand theory of international politics he separated these two components by abstracting the characteristics of the units and how they behave and interact in order to distinguish between variables at the units level and at the system's level. For him, the structure is not a collection of the parts of a system, but the arrangement of these parts. In turn, such an arrangement depends on the ordering principle of a system, on the differentiation of its parts and on their relative capabilities. In the particular case of international politics, the ordering principle is anarchy, its parts are the states, which are like units – that is, they have the same function – and the distribution of capabilities depends on the number of great powers in the system (Waltz, 1979, p. 88-99). It is precisely at this latter aspect that Waltz (1979, p. 97) identifies potential transformations in the system's structure and, consequently, if the structure changes, expectations about how units will behave and the results produced by their interaction will change accordingly.

Nevertheless, it is important to stress that Watz (1979) is theorizing on changes *in* the system rather than on changes *of* the system and, according to the author (2000) himself, only the latter would turn his theory obsolete, which is not the case. It could be drawn from that reasoning that such changes mainly occur when great powers rise or decline, a rationale that connects his theory with this article's problem.

Indeed, Waltz (2000, p. 32) recognizes that “the all-but-inevitable movement from unipolarity to multipolarity” is happening in Asia and that “China will emerge as a great power even without trying very hard so long as it remains politically united and competent”. In an interview to James Fearon in 2011, he states that only the United States could be classified as a great power and that China has the potential to become one as well: “that’s the situation we’re in, it’s a unipolar world, pending what happens in the future development of China” (Waltz and Fearon, 2012, p. 7). When asked about the stability of such a system, Waltz’s response seems to incline towards the possibility of returning to bipolarity:

Turns out to be stable in the sense that—stability in two senses. One is the stability of the system defined in terms of polarity, and unipolarity would seem to be the least stable because unipolarity in itself gives another state a strong incentive to raise itself to the level that would return the world to a bipolar condition. And that does not have to be a level in which the challenging state equals the polar state but develops enough strength so that it's a challenge. The Soviet Union by various measures had maybe half the capability of the United States, but that was enough to make the world bipolar. And we may be approaching that situation again with the development of the capabilities of China. So it's unipolar for the time being, but it's unstable in the sense that we can expect a second great power to emerge in the relatively near future. So the structure of the system is unstable (Waltz and Fearon, 2012, p. 7).

Waltz has suffered several critics since the publication of his book *Theory of International Politics*. Griffiths (2017), for example, exposes the limits of the Waltzian ordering principle and proposes the expansion of Waltz’s model towards a two-dimensional one. He criticizes the dichotomous appropriation of Durkheim’s thought made by Waltz, who equated anarchy and mechanical solidarity and hierarchy and organic solidarity. Based on that critique, Griffiths (2017, p. 2-3) constructs a two-dimensional model of international order that orthogonally organizes the anarchy-hierarchy and the mechanical-organic dimensions, which enables him to place four ideal types in his model: mechanical anarchy, organic hierarchy, mechanical hierarchy, and organic anarchy. Additionally, Griffiths (2017) uses this model to examine two processes of international change – the classical and the modern paths. In the former, organic hierarchy is produced by centralization of political power and, then, an increasing functional differentiation, while in the latter, organic anarchy is caused by increasing

functional differentiation in the international sphere. His contribution aims at providing another perspective on international order and change, moving beyond other critiques of Waltz's model that emphasize either heteronomy or hierarchy (Griffiths 2017, p. 3).

Griffith's (2017) expansion of the Waltzian model dialogues with Ruggie's critique that Waltz ignores differentiation among units and the Durkheimian concept of dynamic density, to which changes could result in systemic transformation (WALTZ, 2008, p. 38). In a 2008 response to his critics, Waltz addresses Ruggie's critique but maintains that in an anarchic system such as the international system, units – in this case, states – do not specialize and thus dynamic density – which could transform a mechanic system into an organic one – cannot be applied to the sphere of international politics (Waltz, 2008, p. 37-43).

Despite its critics, structuralism has had its followers and is continuously used to base assessments on international politics. On Mearsheimer's (2014, p. 3) question on whether China can rise peacefully, his answer is strongly rooted in structuralism and the balance of power, and seems in accordance with the instability predicted by Waltz (Waltz and Fearon 2012, p. 7)³. Mearsheimer (2014, p. 3) understands that the economic growth of China will lead it to try and dominate Asia, which, in turn, will generate a response by the United States, as Washington will make significant efforts to prevent a Chinese regional hegemony. Additionally, countries like India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, and Vietnam will join American efforts to contain China, leading to increased security competition with potential for war.

Nevertheless, Mearsheimer's account does not simply conclude that the system will create new balancing dynamics, but has also a normative component, as it criticizes the United States' behavior of engaging China instead of containing it (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 402). This normativity is, nonetheless, based on Offensive Realism, that is, it is grounded on a theory, which posits that a wealthy China would not become a status quo power, but that the country would rather assume an aggressive attitude and be determined to acquire regional hegemony. And this is because, still according to Offensive Realism, the best way for maximizing the chances of survival of any state is for it to be the hegemon in its region (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 402).

Nevertheless, trying to explain the rise of China from a classical realist perspective, Kirshner (2010) precisely criticizes structural realists for the emphasis on the static distribution of power and for focusing exclusively on the third image. Even though he admits that structure informs the background against which states act, he claims that states, and mainly great powers,

³ Despite the connections between the two authors' perspectives, it is worth noting that they differ in several aspects, especially in their understanding of the units' behavior.

can decide their actions. It is thus necessary to look to several other factors besides structure (Kirshner, 2010, p. 57).

In other words, Waltz's third image would not be enough to comprehend international politics and it would be necessary to also consider the second image. Snyder (2012) follows the same logic, but he is mostly concerned with political regimes. Illustratively, he sees China as "an illiberal challenger for the mantle of modernity" (Snyder, 2012, p. 293). Even though he is considered a realist, he claims that we need to integrate the realist logic of struggle for domination and security, that is, the logic of power, with the liberal logic of political development and change, that is, the logic of progress (Snyder, 2012, p. 1).

Moreover, Snyder (2012, p. 5) criticizes the logic of the security dilemma, which would trigger a pattern of security competition, given the anarchic character of the system. Such conditions would create a balance of power, in which weaker states would align to protect themselves from the stronger and more threatening one. Following that logic, Snyder (2012, p. 5) argues that states should be careful not to behave too aggressively in order not to precipitate a powerful coalition against them. A critic towards Offensive Realism can be inferred from that, especially considering what he terms as "Myths of Empire" (Snyder, 1991), that is, the overestimation of the advantages of offensive strategies:

The key myth of empire is the belief in security through further expansion. More specifically, expansionist great powers that blundered into quagmires on the periphery of their empires or provoked encircling enemy coalitions held several ideas about grand strategy that are rarely true: that attacking is easier than defending, that preventive war against rising powers pays off, and that threatening neighbors will make them compliant allies (Snyder, 2012, p. 6).

In criticizing Mearsheimer's (2001) offensive realism, in particular, and Waltzian structuralism more broadly, Kirshner (2010, p. 54; 65) turns to classical realism and argues that this approach holds the position of accommodating rising powers instead of containing them as the wisest strategy. According to him, this makes more sense since bidding for hegemony is irrational because it threatens the survival of the state that attempts it and thus it is not a path China will follow (Kirshner, 2010, p. 61). In other words, based on the assumption that China is a rational actor whose main goal is to survive, bidding for hegemony would not be a logical course of action (Kirshner, 2010, p. 64).

The rise of China is, per se, a challenging topic. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to place it within a bigger picture, as this process appears to be part of a wider one, marked by changes in the international liberal order. With the end of the Cold War, several attempts were made towards identifying and examining the emerging conjuncture. From assessments on the

“unipolar moment” (Krauthammer, 1990) and the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 2006) to the “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1993), many were the possible scenarios for the post-Cold War world. Against Carpenter’s (1991) “new world disorder”, Ikenberry (1996) pointed towards the “myth of post-Cold War chaos”, arguing that the end of the Cold War simply presented the end of bipolarity but not the end of the post-II World War order and the beginning of a new one. Nye (1992) affirmed that we were actually witnessing the “return of history” rather than its end, given the plurality of sources of international conflict.

Almost two decades after these assessments, the world is not in clash, but the end of history seems to chase the horizon. We might be living what Gramsci (1971, p. 276) called an interregnum, that is, a period in which “the old is dying and the new cannot be born” and in which “a great variety of morbid symptoms appear”. And as IR academic community struggles to explain why China has become a major defender of economic liberalism while Trump initiates a global trade war, one thing seems consensual: international liberal order as we know it is changing.

But what order was that after all? According to Ikenberry (2011, p. xi, emphasis added), it was a *hierarchical* political order marked by liberal characteristics, but it was not only liberal: it was a liberal *hegemonic* order, of which the United States was the hegemonic organizer and manager. Besides, the American political system, alliances, technology, currency, and markets were merged with this liberal order (Ikenberry, 2011, p. 2).

For Ikenberry (2011, p. 6), the crisis of such an order is one of authority, that is, “*within* the old hegemonic organization of liberal order, *not* a crisis in the deep principles of the order itself. It is a crisis of governance”. He attributes the origins of this crisis to the Bush administration's unilateralism, war on terror and the invasion of Iraq – to which a worldwide opposition arose, as the US coerced more than it led (2011, p. xii). In this context, Ikenberry (2011, p. 7) understands unipolarity and the disregard for norms related to sovereignty as the sources of the crisis, as they “have eroded the foundations of the old order and thrown the basic terms of order and rule of world politics into dispute”.

Despite the crisis of authority, the end of great power war and the growth and weight of geopolitics of liberal democracies are seen by the author as features reinforcing the maintenance of the liberal international order (Ikenberry, 2011, p. 9). This is the opposite of Layne’s (2012, p. 210-212) account that the ebbing of American hegemony, the Great Recession, the lack of necessary economic clout to provide public goods and the rise of China weaken the argument that the US can act to secure the institutions, rules, and norms of the Pax Americana. Especially regarding the rise of China, Layne argues that despite being integrated into the liberal order,

China is transforming wealth in hard power to challenge the geopolitical dominance of the United States. Also, he argues that while China is acting within the system to change the post-1945 order, Beijing is also constructing an alternative order that could dislocate the Pax Americana in the future (Layne, 2011, p. 211).

Layne is arguing the opposite of Ikenberry (2011, p. 9), to whom the liberal international order, hegemonic or not, is integrative, easy to join and hard to overturn – which prevents the chances of creating alternative global orders. T.V. Paul (2016, p. 3) also shares the perspective that accommodating rising powers is a necessary condition for a peaceful international order. He conceptualizes the accommodation of a rising power as simply implying

that the emerging power is given the status and perks associated with the rank of great power in the international system, which includes in many instances a recognition of its sphere of influence, or the decision not to challenge it militarily. It does not assume deep friendship or lack of competition (Paul, 2016, p. 5).

In the same direction goes Bader's (2018, p. 5) understanding that "[e]ngagement does not mean acquiescence. It should be the foundation for healthy and successful competition". Besides, the necessity to accommodate is also related to the emergence of different kinds of powers. According to T.V. Paul (2016, p. 3), it is not possible to know yet if today's rising powers will follow the historical path in which great economic strength led to great military strength which in turn led to the engagement of rising powers in armed contest with established powers. Nevertheless, "it is likely that in the twenty-first century different types of power resources may be vital to claiming global leadership roles" (Paul, 2016, p. 3).

Contention and engagement are well-differentiated in literature. In real politics, however, when it comes to the United States' foreign policy towards China, this division might be blurred. The next section will assess Obama and Trump's foreign policies regarding Beijing in order to try and identify the strategies that have prevailed in each administration.

III. Empirical Evidence On Contention And Engagement

Part of this article's aim is to evaluate both Obama and Trump administrations to assess how the United States has managed the rise of China within the spectrum contention-engagement. This, in turn, raises some methodological challenges regarding what kind of empirical data should be considered to assess reality and what parts of the whole should be contemplated in the analysis for it to be representative of an entire administration.

The National Security Strategy (NSS) is an official document issued by the executive, in which security concerns are mapped and a strategy regarding how to address them is elaborated. Besides being an encompassing document, it is released by the White House – and thus reflects the opinions of the administration in power. Even though this document is not enough to assess American foreign policy, it is indicative of how the US understands and conducts its foreign relations and can be thus a basis for analysis. This section will evaluate three National Security Strategies, two of them from the Obama administration (2010 and 2015) and the latest one, released by Donald Trump in 2017.

Basic quantitative analysis shows the different weights of China for both administrations. The number of times China is mentioned in the documents basically triples in Trump's NSS in comparison to Obama's. Besides, and more strikingly, such a rapid assessment indicates significant changes in the proportional number of times China is mentioned in a context marked by explicit suspicion, from 20% of the time in 2010 to about 36% in 2015 and then to about 85% in 2017, as can be assessed from Table 1.

Table 1. Quantitative Analysis of Obama and Trump National Security Strategies regarding China

US President	NSS's Year	Times China is mentioned	Times China is mentioned in a context of cooperation ⁴	Times China is mentioned in a context of suspicion ⁵
Obama	2010	10	7	2
	2015	11	6	4
Trump	2017	33	1	28

Source: Own elaboration based on 2010, 2015 and 2017 NSSs (The White House, 2010, 2015 and 2017).

In May 2010, a little more than one year after Obama started his first mandate, the White House released a new National Security Strategy. The document begins by claiming for change, referring to the moment as one of transition. Terrorism is the first challenge presented and one of the most cited as well. China is mentioned ten times in the document, most of the time together with words related to cooperation.

In the 2010 NSS (The White House, 2010), China is viewed as a key center of influence, together with India and Russia, and the document explicitly recognizes power as no longer being a zero-sum game. It states that the United States will intensify cooperation with these

⁴ A context of cooperation is considered when "China" is accompanied by the following words: partnerships, cooperation, positive, constructive, comprehensive, welcome(s), encourage, pragmatic, effective, commitment, agreement, stable, peaceful, prosperous and cooperate.

⁵ A context of suspicion is considered when "China" is accompanied by the following words: monitor, not agree, differ, alert, reject, tensions, competition, challenge, threaten, competitors, revisionist, antithetical, displace, at the expense of, authoritarian system, reassert, adversaries, fight, competitive game, compete, endanger, undermine, limit, risks, contest, restrict, unfair, alternative, against and influence.

countries based on mutual interest and respect. Regarding Asia, the document claims US alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand to be the foundation of security in the region.

Obama's first NSS also refers to the continuation of a relationship with China that is positive, constructive and comprehensive. It welcomes a responsible leadership role by China, working together with the United States and the international community in issues like economic recovery, climate change, and nonproliferation. Nevertheless, when it comes to China's military modernization, it states that the US will monitor this process and prepare to guarantee that its interests and allies are not negatively affected. It also mentions the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, a mechanism for discussion created by Obama and Hu Jintao. Despite recognizing the potential disagreements, such as those related to human rights concerns, the document affirms they should not preclude cooperation, since "a pragmatic and effective relationship between the United States and China is essential to address the major challenges of the 21st century" (The White House, 2010, p. 43).

In fact, "pragmatic" seems an appropriate qualification to the treatment addressed to China in Obama's 2010 NSS. It recognizes China, together with Russia and India, as important centers of influence. It tries to signal that the United States is opened to welcoming a responsible Chinese leadership in some though, it might be argued, secondary issues of the international agenda. In the dyad contention-engagement, it seems safe to assert that the strategy is closer to the latter.

Contrary to the 2010 NSS, which puts China together with Russia and India most of the time, the 2015 document (The White House, 2015), released in February, addresses these countries mainly separately, referring to "India's potential, China's rise and Russia's aggression" and their potential to impact major power relations. The latter is treated in a much more hostile tone primarily because of the annexation of Crimea.

While the document recognizes the scope of US-China cooperation as unprecedented, it maintains a wary tone regarding China's military modernization, explicitly rejecting intimidation as a means to resolve territorial disputes. It also mentions tensions in the East and South China Seas and the risks of escalation they pose. The Strategy reaffirms US interest in freedom of navigation and supports the establishment of a code of conduct between China and the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) regarding the South China Sea. On the other hand, bilateral cooperation concerning energy and climate change is praised.

The main strategy for Asia-Pacific is centered on the policy of Rebalance, to which the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – that would be signed later that year – is part. The 2015 NSS

reaffirms the United States as a Pacific power and its leadership as essential to the region's stability and security. To that end, it claims to be diversifying its security and defense relationships by updating alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines, as well as reinforcing regional institutions like ASEAN, the East Asia Summit and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation.

In that context, a China that is "stable, peaceful and prosperous" (The White House, 2015, p. 24) is welcomed by the administration and bilateral cooperation is sought especially in issues such as climate change, health, and economic issues and the denuclearization of Korea. Although it recognizes that there will be competition, the document rejects the idea of confrontation as inevitable. The strategy for managing competition is maintaining a position of strength and at the same time requesting that China supports international rules and norms (The White House, 2015).

The 2015 NSS shows a much more fuzzy frontier between contention and engagement strategies. At the same time that it tries to bring China to the international rules-based system and even welcomes its leadership in selected issues, the Rebalance strategy towards the Asia-Pacific region seems closer to a contention attitude that reflects Washington's concerns regarding the rise of China.

Even though some change can be perceived when comparing Obama's two NSSs, this is not as explicit as it is when assessing Trump's 2017 NSS, which is a systematization and formalization of its "America First foreign policy" (The White House, 2017, p. 1). The document criticizes the complacency that has marked American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, motivated by the belief that US power would be unchallenged and self-sustaining: "As we took our political, economic, and military advantages for granted, other actors steadily implemented their long-term plans to challenge America and to advance agendas opposed to the United States, our allies, and our partners" (The White House, 2017, p. 2).

Trump's NSS perceives the world as being competitive and claims that the United States will respond to increasing competition in political, economic and military realms (The White House, 2017, p. 2). In this context, China is seen, together with Russia, as a challenger of US power, influence, and interests. The Strategy thus calls for the United States to rethink its two-decade long policies based on engagement, since the idea that including rivals in international institutions and global commerce in the hope they would become trustworthy turned out to be false. Instead, the NSS affirms that the United States "will compete with all tools of national power to ensure that regions of the world are not dominated by one power" (The White House,

2017, p. 4). This clearly marks an abrupt change in strategy, away from engagement and accommodation and towards contention.

A strong emphasis is put on regional contexts, as the White House views changes in regional balances against the United States as threats to the country's security. In the Indo-Pacific region, the first to be mentioned, the competition is, according to the document, between free and repressive ideas about world order. The priority the document gives to the region was later backed by the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of December 2018, which specifies the American strategy for the region. Even though the NSS states that Washington seeks to cooperate with China, it questions Chinese geopolitical aspirations in the region. The country's military modernization is viewed as aimed at limiting US access to the region. Chinese stealing of intellectual property, the difference of values between the US and China and China's unfair trade and economic practices are also mentioned (The White House, 2017).

Another difference between the two administrations is about China and Taiwan. In the 2010 NSS, the White House asserted that the United States would encourage the waning of tensions between the two parts, while in the 2017 version of the document the Trump administration explicitly states its "One China" policy and its intention to maintain strong ties with Taiwan (The White House, 2017).

By comparing the last three National Security Strategies of the United States, it is possible to identify the strategies towards China adopted by the last two administrations and thus have an assessment of Washington's policy over the last decade. Despite its rhetoric of engagement, Obama's Rebalance strategy reflects preoccupation with China's rise and holds elements of contention. Nevertheless, it still presents attempts to accommodate China within the international order. This changes abruptly with Trump's 2017 NSS, which openly criticizes the engagement strategy of his predecessor and sees the world as being a competitive arena in which China should be contained.

Such change is also perceived by Bader (2018, p. 3), who identifies evident signs of disengagement, such as the current trade war, more controls on China's investments in the US and of dual-use technologies exports to China, restricting access to Chinese students in American universities, propositions to limit Chinese media in the US and the curtailment and suspension of joint military exercises. This conjuncture, according to the author, constitutes "a fundamental abandonment of large-scale interaction and engagement, a change in the long-term foundation of the relationship [...]" (Bader, 2018, p. 4).

Jones (2019) indicates the year 2018 as a turning point in bilateral relations after a period of increasing cooperation since China entered the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001.

The ongoing trade war between the US and China is perhaps the most illustrative empirical evidence of the dramatic change in the White House policy towards the Asian country. Part of the “America First foreign policy”, it is intended to reduce the trade deficit with Beijing. Besides, Trump’s rationale also involves protecting American technology and intellectual property from China and encouraging Americans to buy products made in the US. In this context, the fact that China has resorted to the WTO while Trump has criticized it is also symbolic of the changes presented in this article, since the institution is integral to the liberal order that the United States helped to forge and that has been intrinsic to American hegemony since the end of World War II.

Another evidence of contention is the executive order that created the “American AI Initiative” signed by Trump in February 2019. The initiative, which is aimed at boosting the development of artificial intelligence in the United States, together with the arrest of Huawei CFO in late 2018, can be located in what has been framed as a technology cold war between China and the United States.

It must be noticed that the changes also happened on the Chinese side, with an increase in military spending and initiatives that expand Chinese presence abroad, such as One Belt One Road. Also, against West’s expectations, China’s economic growth and economic liberalization were not accompanied by political liberalization. In fact, Trump’s foreign policy responds to several stakeholders in the US, who perceive China as an existential threat. Following this reasoning, the American president is not simply an irrational actor acting against the liberal order⁶.

It is not possible to predict the results of the US change of policy towards China. Indeed, while the disengagement is part of the efforts to contain China and to "make America great again", it could, on the other hand, backfire. Bader (2018) reminds us that, for decades, US relations with China were established to advance Washington’s interests. While he recognizes the need to retaliate certain Chinese conduct, he argues that disengagement is not the most logical pathway, since it leads to hostility and will, in fact, weaken US capacity to influence Beijing's behavior. Nevertheless, regardless of the results of Trump’s contention policy, the circumstances of China’s ascent have indeed changed and are no longer favorable. The idea that China's rise might not be that peaceful started in the Obama administration but the environment has been increasingly hostile since Trump's term.

⁶ From another perspective, however, Haass argues that it is precisely in the change of US attitude that resides the waning of such order, as “‘America First’ and the liberal world order seem incompatible” (Haass, 2018).

IV. Conclusion

This article aimed to assess the US response to the rise of China in the context of increasing changes in the international liberal order. It has done so by establishing a connection between, on the one hand, theoretical accounts on contention and engagement and, on the other, an empirical analysis of the two most recent US administrations through their National Security Strategies.

As a result, the research found that both Obama's NSSs attempted mostly to accommodate China within world order, even as the 2015 version of the document presents elements of contention, mainly encompassed by the Rebalance strategy, which reflects concerns over China's rise. Also, results showed an abrupt change with Trump's 2017 NSS, which openly criticizes Obama's engagement policy and holds a more competitive view, arguing that China should be contained.

What can be concluded from the analysis is twofold. First, the idea of contention and engagement might be better assessed as a continuum with a fuzzy frontier, since the two strategies are sometimes intertwined, such as in Obama's 2015 NSS. Second, even though the consequences of the US recent shift of posture and deepen of China's contention cannot be predicted, the conditions for China's rise have clearly changed. The idea, assumed by the West for some time, that China would inevitably liberalize its political system at some point proved false. In fact, with economic liberalization and growth, the political realm took the opposite way. This influenced the US policy towards that country and today the environment for China's rise is no longer favorable but rather increasingly hostile.

The article contributes to wider academic discussions on US-China relations by connecting theoretical perspectives to an empirical account of US policies and their consequences. It might serve as a basis for further comparison with future foreign policy initiatives of the Trump administration towards China.

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