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## EISAKU SATO ESSAY CONTEST-2015

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China and the United States in an Era of Nonpolarity: Balancing Role of the United Nations amidst Global Issues and the Struggle for Power

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Abstract

The leitmotif of this paper is how realistic it is for the United States and China to play a critical role in the present international system which is extremely becoming nonpolar in nature. At the outset this paper questions the rationality of identifying the two nations as ‘superpowers,’ because they are no longer the sole epicenters of power and influence, instead they have been challenged by plethora of other actors, irrespective of their capacities as the world’s first and second largest economies respectively. Given that, the central argument of this paper is, the two nations are (and will be) governed by ‘strategic mistrust’ and ‘unspoken competition’ in their bilateral relations. As a result—although they are relatively cordial in trade and economic concerns—their approach to pressing global issues/concerns such as transnational terrorism, failed states or post-2015 development agenda are extremely divided. This split consequently makes the global issues stagnant and endangers the very existence of humans and global commons. Therefore, a proper mechanism is necessary to ensure that the two nations are refraining from belligerence and their bilateral issues do not jeopardize peace, security and development of the entire world. Thus, this paper recognizes the United Nations system as a pragmatic solution, specifically considering the normative expectations on which it was founded 70 years ago. Although the world of 2015 is enormously different place from the world of the founders of the United Nations, its normative viability is still unchallenged. Yet, this paper substantively argues that some functions of the system should be redefined or reformed in order to ensure that American and Chinese power politics, opportunism and political/economic hypocrisy do not create deadlocks on negotiating tables where global issues are discussed. While identifying the pacific settlement of disputes through extensive dialogue as the central role of the United Nations, this paper also recognizes the need for several structural reforms. The logic behind that is, if the two giants are not reorganizing their national interest for the common good, and if their behavior undermines the very existence of the United Nations and blocks it from effectively addressing the global issues, in response the United Nations has to change and reform itself for the betterment of the of the whole world.

## 1. Introduction

During the Korean War, 17 American airmen were convicted as spies by the Chinese courts, but Washington had no communication with the Beijing government, and in the US congress there were even demands for a nuclear strike on the Chinese mainland. United Nations Secretary General at that time—Dag Hammarskjöld, after six months of intensive negotiations with Chou En-lai, finally got the airmen out.<sup>1</sup> This is one of the historical episodes that captures the triangular relationship between the United States (US), the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United Nations (UN). It is true that the world of 2015 is vastly a different place than that of 1950s. The international system has undergone enormous changes during last 70 years. Yet, the history quoted above is still applicable. It provides us a microcosm of the role played by the UN in between these two giants. Apart from the political role played by the UN Secretary General preventing a possible nuclear escalation, what it also proves is that the UN—as the world's premier organization established for world peace, security and development— possesses the ability to play a diverse and creative role in bringing contesting entities together for the betterment of humanity and global commons.

Nonetheless, unlike the situation during the Korean War, now both Washington and Beijing are having extraordinarily good communication. The world witnessed how the US President Barak Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping sat together in Beijing to watch a fireworks display during the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders' meeting in late 2014, in which both countries agreed and issued a joint announcement on their climate change contributions, launching a new era of climate diplomacy.<sup>2</sup> Yet, quite conversely, unlike during the Korean War, unfathomable nature of global affairs is increasing daily. The exact relationship between the US and China is controversial. They are neither allies nor enemies. This relationship is seen through skepticism rather than lucidity or certainty by most of the scholars and the governments of other countries. In such a context how can we position the UN in between the US and China? This is the fulcrum of this entire essay. Does the UN play an effective role in balancing these two giants? Does it manage and direct the two or has it been dominated and used instrumentally by the US and China to maximize their own national interests? Is there a link between the bilateral relationship of the US and China and the

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Urquhart, "Can the United Nations Adapt to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?" *International Journal*, Vol. 60, No.1 (Winter, 2004/2005), p. 232.

<sup>2</sup> Chatham House, "US and China Launch a New Era of Climate Diplomacy," <http://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/16249> (accessed February 21, 2015).

success/failure of the UN initiatives, and if so what can be done to minimize negative effects?

To find out answers to above questions, this paper attempts to uncover the complexities of the bilateral relationship between the US and China and secondly it concentrates on several key areas that the UN should focus on in handling the two states effectively while tackling global issues.

## **2. Current state of world affairs: A conceptual foundation**

In order to understand the Sino-US relations better, it is essential to understand the current state of world affairs. Many argue that the US is still the ‘hegemon’ and the world order as unipolar. Obliquely, this means that China and the US are not equals, one is almost a superpower and the other is still rising. Second alternative view is that China and the US are equal in power and influence, accordingly the international system is bipolar. There are some other factions that specify the increased importance of the BRICS countries, Japan, and the European Union (EU) besides the US and China. According to them the world is moving toward multipolarity. However, there is no right or wrong answer.

Arguably, this paper recognizes the current state of global order as a nonpolar system rather than bipolar or multipolar. Nonpolarity means, “a world dominated not by one or two or even several states but rather by dozens of actors possessing and exercising various kinds of power.”<sup>3</sup> Today’s world is neither dominated by these two giants, nor by any other single or a group of actor/s. “In contrast to multipolarity—which involves several distinct poles or concentrations of power—a nonpolar international system is characterized by numerous centers with meaningful power.”<sup>4</sup>

In a nutshell, as Richard N. Hass states, one of the cardinal features of the contemporary international system is that nation-states have lost their monopoly on power and in some domains their preeminence as well. States are being challenged from above, by regional organizations; from below, by militias; and from the side, by a variety of nongovernmental organizations and corporations.<sup>5</sup> The US and China are no longer exempted. Power is now found in numerous hands and in multiple places, not only in the

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<sup>3</sup> Richard N. Hass, “The Age of Nonpolarity: What Will Follow US Dominance,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No.3 (May-Jun., 2008), p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

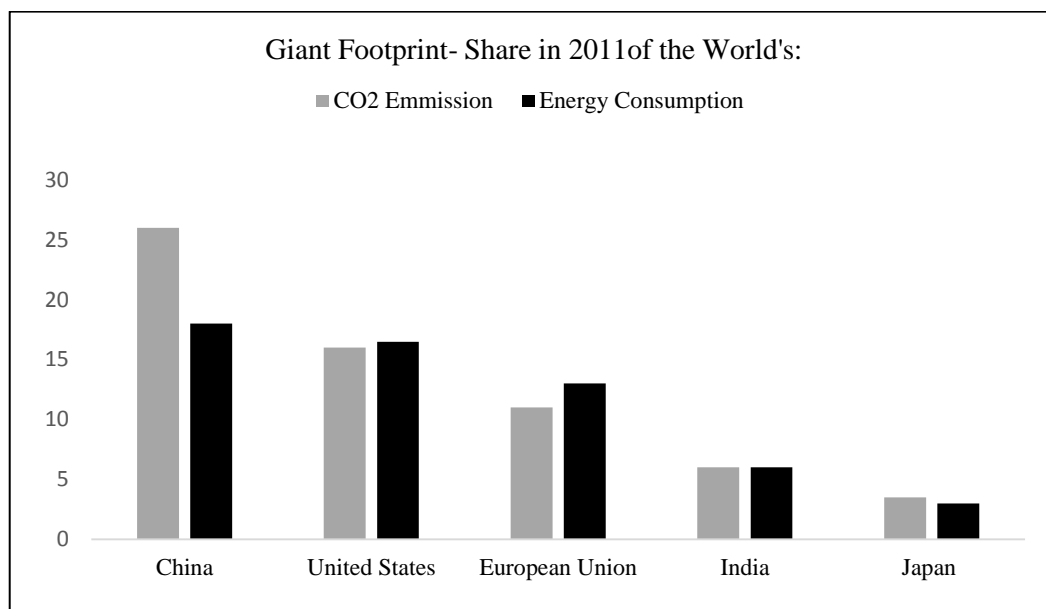
hands of the Chinese or the Americans. In that sense, it is quite misleading to identify them as ‘superpowers.’

## 2.1 Crisis of roles and identities

Still many hold the orthodox notion that either both of them are superpowers or the US is a superpower and China is at least a quasi-superpower. Numbers and statistics also support this notion. But numeric figures always do not uncover the reality. Therefore, this section argues that the roles each nation is willing to play are highly constrained by the natural restrictions emerging from the current nonpolar world order. Most of their roles in the current international system are governed by tactical opportunism and power politics or at times political/economic hypocrisy.

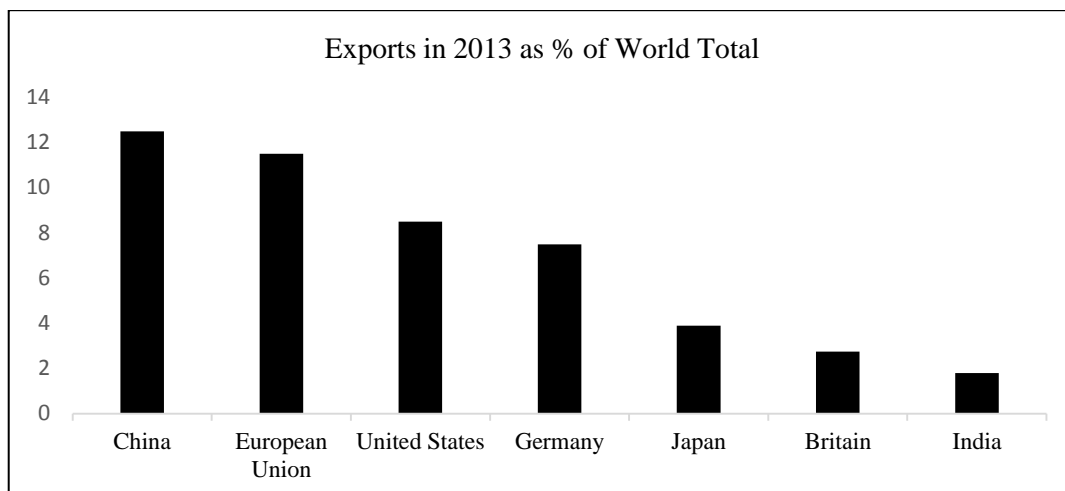
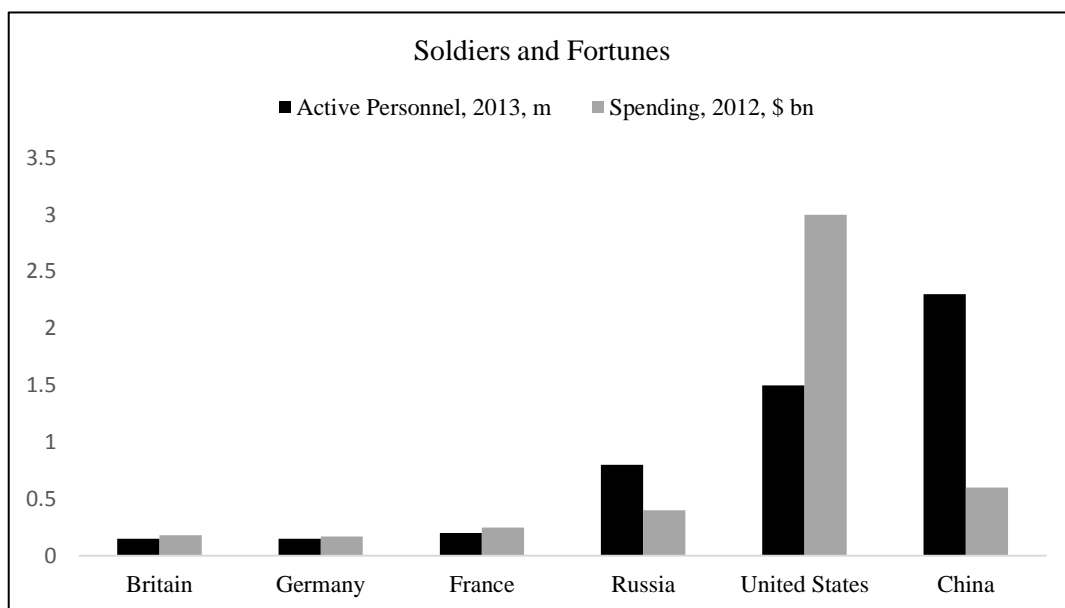
Following three charts promptly illustrate how the US and China hold the world’s top positions in energy consumption, trade and military capacities. Similarly, Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) suggests that China is on course to overtake the United States as the world’s biggest economy within the next couple of years.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1- Energy Consumption<sup>7</sup>



<sup>6</sup> Mark Beeson and Fujian Li, “What Consensus? Geopolitics and Policy Paradigms in China and the United States,” *International Affairs*, 91:1 (2015), p. 97.

<sup>7</sup> The Economist, “China’s Future,” *Economist Essays*, <http://www.economist.com/news/essays/21609649-china-becomes-again-worlds-largest-economy-it-wants-respect-it-enjoyed-centuries-past-it-does-not> (accessed March 20, 2015).

Figure 2- Gone Global<sup>8</sup>Figure 3- Military<sup>9</sup>

Yet, numbers are not necessarily realistic. For instance, both the US and China become extremely helpless without the oil provided by the Middle Eastern countries. The 9/11 attack proved the meaninglessness and the vulnerability of the US military supremacy. It is true that the US and China are the world's first and the second largest economies respectively, but that does not mean that they are currently at a position to

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

control the entire economy of the globe. Not only BRICS states, Japan or Germany but also regional integrations like the EU, multinational companies, and also international organizations such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are possible limiting factors of the economic autonomy of the US and China. Neither China nor the US are free from the threats of Ebola or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). None of them are able to stop the attacks of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Boko Haram. In such a context, it is quite deluding to consider them as superpowers. They are neither enjoying an unchallenged primacy in the world nor the sole epicenters of power and influence.

Current global order is a paradoxical mixture of anarchy through competition and order through cooperation. The very state of nonpolarity begets anarchy and the same nonpolarity begets corporation. This creates the current global order more complex than a bipolar or a multipolar system, where things can be predicted at least to a certain extent. Relationships, power and influence have become more selective and situational. Both China and the US have no permanent allies. Nature and composition of the temporary alliances depend on the nature of the issue. They are relatively cordial in trade negotiations, but adamant in relation to Iran or South China Sea issues. The liberal US is not reluctant in doing business with the illiberal China, but put sanctions on other illiberal nations such as Iran. The illiberal China is now a part of the World Trade Organization (WTO) or the IMF—the emblem of neoliberal economy traditions—but still opposes the UN Human Rights mandate.

This irony can be technically termed as tactical opportunism or political/economic hypocrisy. Complexity of their behavior, which does not essentially depend on ideologies or principles, confuses their roles in the international system. As a result, they tend to play different roles simultaneously. For example, the US occasionally takes unilateral actions such as threatening to invade Syria in 2013. This is also a part of nonpolarity. The same US then seeks multilateral ventures to discuss issues related to climate change, fuel scarcity or issues related to trade, which means unilateralism is situational, temporary and selective. Simultaneous existence/emergence of unilateral actions together with multilateral turns is the essence of nonpolarity. China on the other hand tends to behave as a developing nation/ an emerging power in some cases and in other cases—as in UN Security Council (UNSC)—plays the role of a great power. Thus,

both are in an ‘identity crisis,’<sup>10</sup> because rather than becoming hegemons, now they are preoccupied with matters of survival.

### 3. Bilateral relations of China and the United States

The most straightforward way to understand the bilateral relations of the US and China is to anticipate it in line with the paradox of anarchy and cooperation mentioned above. While there are many areas of interests where both work together, concurrently, places of divergence in their performance and opinion also exist. For example, “despite the different views concerning disputes in the China seas and maritime and air surveillance in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), China and the U.S. hold more than 90 institutionalized bilateral interactions annually, an unusually high number even by the standards of U.S. and its close allies.”<sup>11</sup> Given that, this section argues that among all the bilateral relations “Sino-US relations are the most consequential in the world today,”<sup>12</sup> while providing an account of recent trends (both cooperative and assertive), limiting its scope to President Barak Obama’s and President Xi Jinping’s period.

#### 3.1 Signs of cooperation

The disputes or policy divergences between the US and China are clear and well-known: Taiwan, South China Sea, ballistic missile and nuclear tests by North Korea, the US military bases and troops in Japan and South Korea, Sudan, Iran and even cyberspace and outer space. Yet, the beauty of this relationship is, despite all these incompatibilities the two countries continue their economic ties overwhelmingly. Are these economic ties a reliable assurance of harmony in the future? If not, are those economic ties only making the ideological, political and strategic incompatibilities dormant and temporarily invisible? Following sub sections are based on the above questions.

According to a recent White House report (issued in late 2014), President Obama and President Xi recognize the importance of economic relations as the core of the US-

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Summers, “China’s Global Personality,” *Chatham House-Asia program Research Paper*, June 2014, p.15, [http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field\\_document/20140617ChinaGlobalPersonalitySummers.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20140617ChinaGlobalPersonalitySummers.pdf) (accessed February 21, 2015). Summers only recognizes the identity crisis of China not the US.

<sup>11</sup> Wei Zongyou, “A New Model for China US Relations,” *The Diplomat*, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/a-new-model-for-china-us-relations/> (accessed March 15, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Felicia Schwartz, “Despite Divides, Kerry says, U.S.-China Cooperation is Essential,” *The Wall Street Journal*, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/despite-divides-kerry-says-u-s-china-cooperation-is-essential-1415133713> (accessed March 15, 2015).



China bilateral relationship. They are devoted to promote more open and market-driven bilateral and international trade and investment. Among some of the recent agreements of the two, the expansion of the WTO Information Technology Agreement, commitment to pursue Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT) negotiations, consensus to intensify science-based agricultural innovation for food security, and the joint leadership in the global trading system to launch multilateral negotiation on new international export credit guidelines in the International Working Group on Export Credits (IWG) in 2012, can be considered important.<sup>13</sup>

Statistics are also impressive. According to the foreign trade data issued by the US Census Bureau, US imports from China has increased than its exports to China and consequently the US trade deficit has increased in last few decades.<sup>14</sup> The trade deficit has risen from \$10 billion in 1990 to \$342 billion in 2014. For the past several years, the trade deficit with China has been significantly larger than that with any other US trading partner.<sup>15</sup> These data do not merely mean that the US is over dependent on Chinese goods and financially more vulnerable. Doing business excessively with the US means, China is also over dependent on the US markets and capital flows. Thus, whether the deficit is on the side of the US or China does not make much difference, both countries are extremely interdependent, mutually benefitting, and also exposed to each other's domestic vulnerabilities as a result of these trade ties.

Signs of cooperation can be seen in the political sphere as well. In 2010, Obama administration initiated what it called a 'pivot to Asia' policy, a shift in strategy aimed at bolstering the United States' defense ties with countries throughout the region and expanding the US naval presence there.<sup>16</sup> In 2011, former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton further elaborated the 'pivot to Asia' policy's emphasis on China as follows:

China represents one of the most challenging and consequential bilateral relationships the United States has ever had to manage.... Some in our country see China's progress as a threat to the United States; some in China worry that America seeks to constrain China's growth. We reject both those views. The fact is that a thriving America is good for China and a thriving China is good for America. We

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<sup>13</sup> White House, "Fact Sheet: U.S. - China Economic Relations," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/12/fact-sheet-us-china-economic-relations> (accessed March 8, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Foreign Trade," <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html> (accessed March 20, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Wayne M. Morrison, "China-U.S. Trade Issues," *Congressional Research Service*, March 17, 2015, p.3, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33536.pdf> (accessed February 28, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Robert S. Ross, "The Problem with the Pivot: Obama's New Asia Policy is Unnecessary and Counterproductive," *Foreign Affairs*, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138211/robert-s-ross/the-problem-with-the-pivot> (accessed March 4, 2015).

both have much more to gain from cooperation than from conflict. But you cannot build a relationship on aspirations alone.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Obama administration starts with an optimistic bend for engagement rather than assertiveness, and emphasizes that there are global obligations and responsibilities for both the US and China to achieve not unilaterally, but through engagement and genuine cooperation. According to Hilary Clinton's own words, "it is up to both of us to more consistently translate positive words into effective cooperation—and, crucially, to meet our respective global responsibilities and obligations."<sup>18</sup>

According to one of the distinguished Chinese scholars Wang Jisi, Chinese officials also are now prepared to work more closely with the United States in dealing with terrorist issues, North Korea's nuclear weapons program and related provocations.<sup>19</sup> Chinese media is less critical of the West,<sup>20</sup> and it is now engaged in Bretton Woods institutions that play a key role in the Washington Consensus.<sup>21</sup> In recent years China has refrained from identifying the US pejoratively as a 'hegemon.'<sup>22</sup> China has no interest either in allying itself strategically with countries seen as hostile to the United States or in proliferating Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs).<sup>23</sup> The two countries are excessively communicating in multilateral groupings such as the G8 or APEC. Further, according to Wang Jisi's positive anticipations, developments between the two are possible, "as China's reform agenda emphasizes the rule of law, democratic practices, and a market economy, and the Chinese government has accepted the concept of human rights, many political issues between the two nations can be discussed through dialogue."<sup>24</sup>

Similar to Obama's 'pivot to Asia' policy, China on the other hand initiated a new venture called 'new type of major-power relations' under the new leadership of Xi Jinping in 2012. The key concept here appears to be avoidance of conflict or full scale of confrontation, but pursuing mutual respect and win-win cooperation. Putting forward this

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<sup>17</sup> Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, [http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/?wp\\_login\\_redirect=0](http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/?wp_login_redirect=0) (accessed February 12, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Robert G. Sutter, *China's Rise in Asia* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p.78.

<sup>20</sup> Wang Jisi, "China's Changing Role in Asia," *The Rise of China and a Changing East Asian Order*; (ed. Kokubun Ryosei and Wang Jisi), Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2004, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Beeson and Li, "What Consensus?" p. 95.

<sup>22</sup> Wang Jisi, "China's Search for Stability with America," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No.5 (Sep. – Oct., 2005), P. 39.

<sup>23</sup> Jisi, "China's Changing Role in Asia," 18.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

concept has been considered as one of the major achievements of Chinese diplomacy and arguably this has enabled China to take more of a discursive lead in the US-Chinese relations.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, recent changes in China's US policy is not motivated by an anti-American agenda. Rather, it reflects China's desire for a more equal relationship as its power grows.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.2 Reality beneath cooperation

As per the positive policy declarations and empirical observations on the cooperative partnership between the two protagonists captured above, seemingly the air between the two are calm, symbiotic and mostly peaceful. Yet, there are some realities beneath this ostensible calmness. Those realities can neither be underestimated nor overlooked.

The first reality that should be admitted about Sino-US relations is that most of the cordial ties between the two are resulted not necessarily because of the traditional forms of state-to-state relations or diplomacy between Washington and Beijing, but because of the inextricably interwoven economic ties. Hailing this economic cooperation solely as a product of the foreign policy initiatives taken by the two governments is a misnomer. Rather, the credits should go to the invisible hands of globalization and visible hands of several hundreds of trade, financial or industrial companies and firms of both countries. With or without the political patronage of Washington and Beijing, and amidst still visible political and ideological deviations, these companies, firms and industries keep the two nations firmly attached to each other.

This is what Ferguson Schularick famously describes as '*Chimerica*.'<sup>27</sup> The idea is China exports goods to the United States (often via foreign-invested American companies), for which it is paid in American dollars, which it obligingly recycles into US debt, allowing another iteration of a process from which both sides benefit.<sup>28</sup> This cycle that requires cooperation, makes the two states exposed to each other's domestic vulnerabilities, devaluation of currencies and other financial fluctuations. In that sense cooperation does not essentially bring benefits, it has its own demerits. Thus, cooperation and security are not positively interlinked, nor are they mutually reinforcing always.

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<sup>25</sup> Summers, "China's Global Personality," p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Baohui Zhang, "Chinese Foreign Policy in Transition: Trends and Implications," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol.39, 2 (2010), p. 43.

<sup>27</sup> Beeson and Li, "What Consensus?" p. 99.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Arguably, they are paradoxical and create a dilemma. However, the resulting uncertainty is no longer a mere issue of the Americans and the Chinese. It is a global issue, because the far corners of Africa, Middle East, South or South East Asia and Latin America highly depend on the trade or political links between the US and China not only for luxurious industrial products but also for daily necessities. This is how the bilateral relations between them have become the most consequential in the world today.

Secondly, the political willingness for engagement between Washington and Beijing is more superficial and associated with increased strategic mistrust and competition. For example, China identifies the US's 'pivot to Asia' policy as an instrument of containing China in its own region, although the Obama administration intended cooperative engagement rather than assertiveness. The reason behind this mistrust is "in reality, Obama's Asia pivot has leaned heavily on military cooperation. His administration has focused on bolstering defense ties with countries throughout the region and expanding the U.S. naval presence there. As a result, the achievements of the pivot thus far have been primarily military in nature."<sup>29</sup> The US military presence in China's neighborhood has increased its apprehension. Increased US troops and warships in the region, US surveillance conducted in China's EEZ, military bases in Japan and North Korea are thus troubling China.

Chinese diplomatic innovation of 'new type of major-power relations' has not been embraced by the US with equal enthusiasm. One of the major reasons is the uncertainty of the details on how this new type of relationship can be achieved. Chinese assertive behavior by building airstrips on disputed islands in the South China Sea, moving oil rigs into disputed waters and redefining its airspace, recent moves to dominate the seas within the "first island chain" that runs from Okinawa through Taiwan to the Spratlys,<sup>30</sup> are some additional matters that trouble the US. While the US is increasing its naval and maritime partnerships with the Philippines, Australia, Japan and South Korea, China is also obsessed with building or investing in ports in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, which is well known as the 'string of pearls strategy.' Whether China is going to use these ports for commercial purposes or military purposes is still uncertain, yet one particular fact is clear. Both countries are maximizing

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<sup>29</sup> Jered Genser, "How to Measure the Success of Obama's Trip to Asia," *The Diplomat*, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/how-to-measure-the-success-of-obamas-trip-to-asia/> (accessed March 18, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> The Economist, "China's Future," *Economist Essays* (cited above).

their capacities in Asia generally and in East Asia in particular, and also both are engaged in an undeclared competition with each other.

Given all the above facts and details, it is not difficult to understand that a mixture of anarchy through competition and order through cooperation run behind the scene. We cannot be rosy optimistic about the US-China relations simply because of the seemingly healthy economic ties. Beneath them is the “lack of ‘strategic trust’, namely the failure to develop trust in the long-term intentions of each toward the other”<sup>31</sup> that reinforce the undeclared competition. Economic ties only make the political divergences dormant or temporarily invisible, but do not resolve them.

#### **4. Positioning the United Nations**

The leitmotif of the above analysis is how realistic it is for the US and China to work together against global issues amidst their unspoken competition and the strategic mistrust. Unlike in trade negotiations, when dealing with pressing global issues such as transnational terrorism, fragile or failed states, and nuclear proliferation or in designing the post-2015 development agenda, the strategic mistrust and competition make their stance extremely divided and mostly they end up in a stalemate. This split consequently makes the global issues stagnant and endangers the very existence of humans. Therefore, a proper mechanism is necessary to ensure that the two nations are refraining from belligerence and their bilateral issues do not jeopardize the peace, security and development of the entire world. To accomplish that intension, how the UN should be positioned in between the two? This is scrutinized comprehensively in the following sections.

##### **4.1 The United Nations: A qualified third party?**

Amidst the plethora of actors in this nonpolar world with meaningful power, why the UN is considered as the most qualified third party or the facilitator in between the US and China? A sound justification is necessary before detailing its role and position in improving the bilateral relations between the two. Normative grounds on which the UN is founded provide a scrupulous reasoning.

UN is the masterpiece of institutionalized multilateralism. According to Edward Newman, multilateralism brings stability, reciprocity in relationships, and regularity in

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<sup>31</sup> A concept developed by Kenneth Lieberthala and Wang Jisi in a joint work. Cited in Tim Summers, “China’s Global Personality,” p. 15.

behavior. It is necessary because all the states face mutual vulnerabilities, all share interdependence, and all need to benefit from —and thus support— public goods. Even the most powerful states cannot achieve security, environmental safety and economic prosperity in isolation or unilaterally, and so the international system rests upon a network of regimes, treaties and international organizations.<sup>32</sup>

Secondly, the fundamental purposes of the UN—to maintain international peace and security, to develop friendly relations among nations, to achieve international cooperation in solving international problems, to be a center for harmonizing the actions of nations<sup>33</sup>— ensure its fullest rights and capacities to abate impugns between the two nations.

Thirdly, the UN’s structure has been designed to mitigate unipolarity and unilateralism: in the General Assembly, the US and China are two of the multitude.<sup>34</sup> Even in the Security Council, they are equals, not hierarchical and they are just two out of five. On the other hand, the UN is a wonderful forum for discussion and provides the opportunity to pool sovereignty for better gains.

However, pragmatically speaking, in a nonpolar world where anarchy and order runs side by side, it is unrealistic to expect the UN to function fully on all these normative expectations. Yet, still it has capacities. Following are some of the key aspects/roles that the UN as an organization should consider when dealing with the two giants.

#### 4.2 Facilitating a ‘grand bargain’

It is clear that the world is not rigidly divided into two factions each headed by China and the US. Many areas of cooperation exist (for example trade or more recently climate change) together with some disputes (such as most of the global peace and security matters). In areas of cooperation, the UN can further increase its role “as a mediator and a meeting ground”<sup>35</sup> for better results. This will increase the international community’s trust on the UN system. The issue, however, is not in areas where the US

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<sup>32</sup> Edward Newman, *A Crisis of Global Institutions: Multilateralism and Global Security* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Charter of the United Nations, Article 1, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/ctc/uncharter.pdf> (accessed February 2, 2015).

<sup>34</sup> Michael Fullilove, “China and the United Nations: The Stakeholder Spectrum,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 34:3, p. 67.

<sup>35</sup> United Nations University, “Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Prime Minister Abe Spark Discussion on New Directions for the UN,” *News*, <http://unu.edu/news/news/secretary-general-ban-ki-moon-and-prime-minister-abe-spark-discussion-on-new-directions-for-the-un.html> (accessed March 20, 2015).

and China already work together but in areas where they are disputed. What is the proper role the UN should play in such contexts? The answer is simple. Even in areas of disagreement, still the option is to be a mediator and a meeting ground, because there is no other alternative instead of seeking solutions “by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means,”<sup>36</sup> in the UN terminology. Since it is utopian to expect a negotiating table without controversies, the only way out is enhancing dialogue without being discouraged.

For that purpose, encouraging both Washington and Beijing for a ‘grand bargain’ is a possible creative venture. By ‘grand bargain’ this paper recognizes the necessity for serious dialogue between the US and China, specifically in areas where the US and Chinese interests converge —“Korean peninsula, the Iran nuclear issue, Afghanistan, Sudan and bolstering peace and security in sub-Saharan Africa”<sup>37</sup> are such areas according to the US National Security Advisor Susan Rice. Specifically, the UN has the capacity to encourage and facilitate the US and China to seek commonly accepted international rules and guidelines in areas where they currently are lacking, including in regional maritime relations, cyberspace, outer space, and carbon emissions. Because, areas without shared guidelines are more likely to increase the strategic mistrust.<sup>38</sup> If a substantial consensus can be reached between the two on above matters, much of the effects of the global issues can be reduced.

#### 4.3 Managing US unilateralism

Inability to avoid occasional US unilateralism is one main criticism against the UN and also a fact that makes China uneasy. Unilateralism was not occasional but was the norm during George W. Bush’s tenure and culminated with the Iraq invasion in 2003. This has been widely considered as a humiliation of the UN Charter and as a result, “a broad consensus [emerged] that Washington posed a greater threat to the world than did Beijing.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Charter of the United Nations, Article 33.

<sup>37</sup> Summers, “China’s Global Personality,” p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> John Podesta, C.H. Tung, Samuel R. Berger, and Wang Jisi, “Towards a New Model of Major Power Relation,” *China ~ US Focus*, <http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/towards-a-new-model-of-major-power-relations/#sthash.7POU8PTW.dpuf> (accessed February 24, 2015).

<sup>39</sup> Warren I. Cohen, *America’s Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Colombia University Press, 2010), p. 289.

However, today, since the world is becoming more nonpolar, US unilateralism has become less frequent or more selective and temporary in nature. Yet, still some signs exist and the UN has to manage it in order to reduce the tension between the two. Ironically, President Obama who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, shifted his foreign policy from engagement to audacity by 2011 with the seven month air war in Libya. Afterwards, he proclaimed the power to use unilateral force for purely humanitarian ends without congressional, UN or NATO support by threatening to invade Syria in 2013. Also, in 2014 he announced a ramped-up war against the ISIS.<sup>40</sup> All these are unilateral initiatives, albeit the last two remained only threats without carrying out. As a result, the strategic mistrust was further increased and China was unsupportive in all the above cases.

US unilateralism, thus, reduces the trust and faith the international community has toward the UN. Specifically, when it comes to China, this might increase its detachment from the UN in other development related fields as well. Another oblique implication behind the US unilateralism is the absence of a shared decision accomplished through UN mechanisms on global issues. This questions the very existence of the UNSC and makes China (and the world) more uncertain. Unilateralist actions repeatedly imply the curse of relying solely on the Security Council to take action and maintaining other bodies such as the General Assembly or the Secretary General powerless. One possible method of avoiding US unilateralism is to accelerate the UN responses to global issues. Another necessity is to create more space for multilateral dialogue by giving more opportunities to regional players to share views and debate on pressing global issues such as terrorism, failed/fragile states or climate change. Currently, these issues are discussed inside closed doors of the UNSC. This indirectly ensures that emerging powers from the Global South are adequately represented in the UN system.

#### 4.4 Ensuring continuous Chinese engagement

It is important to realize that unlike the US's occasional unilateral moves, China has not yet exhibited any similar attempts to act unilaterally. Notwithstanding its opposition to expansion of the Security Council, China will continue to emphasize the UN as the primary international institution for addressing global security

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<sup>40</sup> Jack Goldsmith, "Obama's Breathtaking Expansion of a President's Power to Make War," *Time*, <http://time.com/3326689/obama-isis-war-powers-bush/> (accessed March 13, 2015).



issues,<sup>41</sup> because it recognizes the UN system as a strong soft weapon to contain the US's occasional overconfidence. Maintaining continuous Chinese interest and engagement in UN activities is important pragmatically. China is the second largest economy of the world and it is growing faster than the US and Japan-the first and second largest funding sources of the UN.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, increased Chinese contribution on balancing the UN's accounts will be essential in future.

Another complexity regarding China is that its foreign policy is still home bound, unlike the US's preoccupation in solving issues outside its political boundaries. "All of the [Chinese] leadership's top ten issues are domestic.... China is only preoccupied with other's issues only if those issues trespass on what they consider as domestic."<sup>43</sup> This is widely seen in issues with seemingly minimum direct effects on China, in matters such as Human Rights or climate change, albeit those have substantial spillover effects. Chinese aversion in Copenhagen in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change-2009, to the critical pledge that 'by 2050 rich countries would cut emissions by 80 percent compared to 1990 levels' (which is even not applicable to China directly)<sup>44</sup> is a very good example.

Quite straightforwardly, China is occasionally unresponsive, irresponsible or vehement in tackling some of the global issues. Now the UN has confronted a similar challenge: designing the post-2015 development agenda and managing China's positive partnership. Ostensibly, China's position on the post-2015 development agenda is incompatible with the position of the UN and the united West.

China is not in favour of replacing Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by Sustainable development Goals (SDGs) and even has reservations about the merger of the two concepts. The country is opposed to the inclusion of political factors like human rights, democracy and good governance and does not support linking peace and security issues to the post-2015 framework.<sup>45</sup>

Here, again China shows its ideological incompatibility (by opposing human rights for example) with the rest, which they do not show when doing business. This is a turning point and a testing point where the UN has to bargain carefully. It has to demand China to act the role of a responsible stakeholder, instead of being irresponsible.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "An Argument for Japan Becoming a Permanent Member," [http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/q\\_a/faq5.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/q_a/faq5.html) (accessed March 3, 2015).

<sup>43</sup> Fullilove, "China and the United Nations," p. 66.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Fues and Jiang Ye, eds., *The United Nations Post-2015 Agenda for Global Development: Perspectives from China and Europe* (Bonn: German Development institute, 2014), p. 17.

The bottom line is that the UN—as the chief guardian of global security— has to be careful that these two giant nations are neither dominating (through unilateralism) nor inactive (through irresponsibility or indifference) in the UN, but utilizing it for the common good.

#### 4.5 Reforming the UN

Since 2009, seven draft resolutions have been negatively vetoed by the permanent members of the UNSC. China has vetoed four of them which were brought in by the US (collaboratively) on an extremely important global security concern—the Syrian issue.<sup>46</sup> This reflects how power politics has paralyzed the UNSC from taking urgent decisions. One major argument that has been raised against the US and China is that they do business smoothly outside the UNSC irrespective of the ideological mismatch and strategic mistrust. Yet, they start considering all of them inside the UNSC whenever they are supposed to take an important decisions mostly about security matters outside their political boundaries. This can be understood as their political hypocrisy and tactical opportunisms. It is true that the Sino-US mistrust and competition is not the sole reason behind the Security Council's inability to take important decisions, it is only one of them. Yet, measures should be taken to minimize such behaviors.

There are two possible solutions. One is to play the role of the mediator/facilitator by further increasing the candid and comprehensive strategic conversations between the two, to reduce competition and strategic mistrust. Because, conversation is the best way to sink differences and work together for common ends. A pragmatist would definitely criticize this venture as a mere step of further lip service without any productive repercussions. The second option is to reform the UN itself, specifically the UNSC. Recommendation of this paper is to follow both options, although reforming the Security Council in terms of its composition and the use of veto power are highly controversial.

Increasing the number of permanent members might further complicate the Security Council's ability to reach consensus, but it is also pointless to replicate the 1950s' world order through the Security Council in 2015. Many new powers have arrived during the last 70 years. Limiting the permanent members' excessive freedom of blocking decisions in extremely important and specifically defined issue areas by

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<sup>46</sup> United Nations, "Veto List," Dag Hammarskjöld Library Research Guide, <http://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick/veto> (accessed March 4, 2015).

amending the UN charter, or giving more meaningful powers to the General Assembly and the Secretary General, or complete abolition of the veto power are some finely egalitarian options, though dubious in realization. Because, as Rosemary Foot notes, Beijing (not only Beijing but also the US) “values the status benefits it derives from permanent membership of the Security Council, and especially the influence that comes with the privilege of the veto.”<sup>47</sup>

While contemplating on reforming the Security Council, a redefinition is necessary on the role of the Secretary General. The opening lines of this paper recalled how the political role played by the Secretary General became crucial when the two countries were in a deadlock during the Korean War. The accepted political role of the Secretary General is given in the article 99 of the UN charter.<sup>48</sup> Without limiting the position’s role only in reporting cases of threats to world peace to the UNSC, the Secretary General’s capacity to initiate ‘ceaseless programs of quiet diplomacy’<sup>49</sup> in areas such as climate change, cyber security or other humanitarian issues would help to prevent the two countries from stalemates that consequently make the whole UN system proactive in pressing issues. The UN Secretary General is the best bureaucrat to initiate creative ventures, with the position’s reputation for objective and non-partisan nature.

However, the reformers have to make sure that the power should be dispersed from the ‘Big Five’ who are supposed to be the sole protectors of world peace and security (which is highly unrealistic today), because in the real world outside the UNSC power is extremely dispersed. To prevent the UN from considering as useless (due to deadlocks emerging from possible Sino-US rivalries) two strategies can be adopted: the UN has to increase broad dialogue between the other member states and their communication with the Secretary General; secondly, the UN doors should be widely open for non-state actors and the civil society. Negotiating tables should not be filled with state diplomats and officials but along with them relevant other actors should be invited. The simple reason behind this is the world is becoming more and more nonpolar in nature. Two companies from the US and China might agree on a particular matter or at least find ways for progress on which politicians or diplomats disagree.

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<sup>47</sup> Rosemary Foot, “Chinese strategies in a US-hegemonic global order: accommodating and hedging,” *International Affairs* 82, no. 1 (January 2006): p. 82.

<sup>48</sup> Charter of the United Nations, Article 99.

<sup>49</sup> Urquhart, “Can the United Nations Adapt to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?” p. 232.

## 5. Conclusion

The UN is now 70 years old and the current Secretary General stresses the “need to reform and reinforce the organization to maintain its relevance and effectiveness in a changing global security environment.”<sup>50</sup> Within last 70 years the world has evolved rapidly but the UN has been unable to catch up. That is the reason behind its inability to tackle many of the contemporary issues which exceed beyond state boundaries. Specifically, when it comes to bilateral relations as discussed above, although the UN can be a facilitator, mediator and a meeting ground, its bureaucrats cannot lecture the contesting nations on how to create the best foreign policy not only to satisfy the national interests, but also to benefit the whole world. States are always subjective to power politics, they are competitive, and always utility maximizing rather than sacrificing, and they become hypocrites and opportunists when necessary. In such a context, if the states are not ready to change their own policies for the better, the UN has to change itself to tackle all those absurdities and complexities. Technically speaking, the verdict is, if the global order has evolved from rigid bipolarity to unipolarity and then to nonpolarity, the UN has to reform itself accordingly to sustain its viability. This is splendidly expressed in the following words of a former UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld: the United Nations is “an experiment in progress towards an international community living in peace under the laws of justice.”<sup>51</sup> Many challenges might appear in the future as the ones discussed above. What matters is prompt recognition and right reforms, which is indirectly meant by ‘the experiment in progress.’

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<sup>50</sup> United Nations University, “Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Prime Minister Abe Spark Discussion on New Directions for the UN.” (Cited above).

<sup>51</sup> Urquhart, “Can the United Nations Adapt to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?” p. 228.

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